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AN INTERVIEW WITH CORINNE COOKE

CONDUCTED BY PAUL DOUGLASS FOR *THE STEINBECK REVIEW*

The Steinbeck Review: What led you to contact us about your memories of meeting John Steinbeck, Mrs. Cooke?

CORINNE COOK: I'm retired from the main library of the University of California at Davis, and knew about the Center for Steinbeck Studies. I hope that what I have to tell you could be useful to some future Steinbeck scholar. Also, I'd like to say that since I was known as Corinne Eby for eleven of the twelve years I lived on the Monterey Peninsula and not many people will remember the name of Cooke from my second marriage, would you feel free to call me by my first name.

SR: Certainly, Corinne. You have more than one Steinbeck connection, don't you?

CORINNE: Yes, I married Terry Eby, a well-known actor in community theatre, in the Episcopal Church of the Wayfarer in Carmel in 1948. We were divorced a couple of years later. Terry's mother was Grace Scott from Bakersfield, and her uncle was Thomas Scott, district attorney of Kern County. Tom was fond of holding aloft a copy of *The Grapes of Wrath* and saying "I'm in there," pointing to a page where one of Steinbeck's characters refers to Thomas Scott as that "SOB district attorney" who authorized the tearing down of galvanized shacks of the "Hooverilles" where the "Oakies" lived.

SR: Could you tell us about your recollections of meeting John Steinbeck?

CORINNE: It was around May of 1949. I was pregnant with my first child. John Steinbeck and James Neale came to the Monterey Airport—a small airport where I worked as a secretary-bookkeeper. I was employed by Del Monte Aviation, which was owned by two brothers, Tirey Ford and Byron Ford, plus Robert Clampett, was a well known golfer. The company was a flight school where a number of men on the GI Bill were coming to get training to fly small airplanes, some hoping to become crop dusters.

SR: How many people did Del Monte Aviation employ?

CORINNE: Two part-time flight instructors and one full-time. Bob Sanchez was full-time, a well-known pilot, and a good one. He had piloted for Lawrence Welk in the Midwest. Bob was the office manager too, as well as the main flight instructor. The company had an office inside the main hangar, set off in a corner. I had my area for work, and there was a counter between that and a larger room, which was used by customers waiting, or for doing business and for talking to the boss. I had worked there for several months.

SR: And one day John Steinbeck just walked through the door?

CORINNE: Well, I had heard he was coming. He had Neale with him, who was African American. Steinbeck apparently had in mind that he wanted to get Neale trained to fly. He was

even contemplating buying an airplane. The company had two Cessnas, a Stinson, and an Aronca aircraft.

SR: What happened then?

CORINNE: Steinbeck and Neale talked to the owners about the lessons, and then they left. Once they had gone, one of the part-time instructors, a guy from Bakersfield, said, “You can’t teach a nigger how to fly,” and the other part-time instructor agreed. But Bob Sanchez said, “Well, I’ll take him on.”

SR: And did Neale take lessons from Sanchez?

CORINNE: Yes. Neale was trained two times a week for six weeks in one of the Cessnas. While Neale was taking lessons, Steinbeck sat behind the counter in my office. I remember feeling very unsure of myself. How do you approach a famous author? I was very intimidated, and he appeared big and rough—unapproachable. Eventually I worked up the courage to tell him I had read and owned his *Pastures of Heaven*. He said, “You bring it in and I’ll autograph it.” We chatted. He was big and gruff and overwhelming, and yet not difficult to relate to, very easy to talk to. Occasionally he would go over to the airport tower café and get coffee, and occasionally he brought some back to me.

SR: So he waited each day that Neale took his training?

CORINNE: Yes. He would be sitting there reading a magazine and I would be typing. I remember one day he came over and leaned on the counter and said, “How fast do you type?” I replied, “I don’t know.” He said, “I have been looking for someone to type for me.” I said, “I don’t have a typewriter at home,” and Steinbeck said “I can get you one. I have been sending my writing to someone in New York.” And then he said, “But there’s a drawback,” and he wrote some sentences on a piece of paper and showed it to me. I couldn’t read a word. He said he was not surprised, because the woman in New York was the only one who could read his writing.

SR: What was James Neale like?

CORINNE: Neale was handsome, a very nice man. His position seemed to be a general assistant to Steinbeck. It appeared to be an equal relationship, not as if he were just a driver or errand-runner. Sanchez would also talk to Neale very naturally, but not the other two instructors.

SR: And you knew why that was, obviously.

CORINNE: I never told Steinbeck what those men had said after he left that first day. He would sit and read. He never wrote. Occasionally he would go over to the tower to the café and get coffee, and occasionally he brought me back some. I am sorry to say that I lost my copy of *Pastures of Heaven* somewhere along the way. I love books. I also have a copy of Robinson Jeffers’ book *The Double Axe*, which was published in 1948. That one is autographed.

SR: Did Neale finish his training?

CORINNE: Yes. James Neale got his license, and I remember the day he soloed. I delivered my son Scott on July 15 in the old Monterey hospital.

SR: Where is your son now, Corinne?

CORINNE: Scott is in the financial records office at Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo. I have two other children with my second husband. I have two other children with my second husband, Jay Cooke, whom I married in Pacific Grove in 1960. My other son, Bradley, lives in Chico and teaches part-time at a school for Indian children and part-time in the Outdoor Education program at Butte Community College. My daughter works in Sacramento.

SR: Did you ever meet Steinbeck again?

CORINNE: No, although I heard quite a bit about him through people like Tal and Rich Lovejoy, who were active in politics. While I was working in politics, I also met Steinbeck's sister, "Maude," with whom he occasionally stayed.

SR: So you were an acquaintance of the Lovejoys?

CORINNE: I was close friends with them, actually. Rich Lovejoy was a close friend of Steinbeck and of Ed Ricketts. The character of "Soc" in *Cannery Row* was based on Ed. Rich did line drawings to illustrate *Between Pacific Tides*. He was a very well-liked reporter for the *Monterey Peninsula Herald*. I met him and Natalia (Tal) through the Monterey Democratic Club. I had lost my babysitter, and after I told Tal, and she offered to help by taking Scott into her family while I worked. She was my babysitter for Scott for four or five years. I moved closer to them in Pacific Grove. They lived on Walnut and I lived on Maple—or it might be the other way around—I've forgotten! After I awhile I found out how close they were to John Steinbeck. The Lovejoys had occasionally taken care of Thom Steinbeck, who left a knitted brown hat at their home. Scott wore it often. Tal was fiery—the daughter of a Russian Priest in Sitka, Alaska. She played the piano well. Rich developed a brain tumor in his fifties and died, which was a deep sorrow for Scott and me, along with many people on the Monterey peninsula. I've read and was told that Steinbeck once gave Rich some of his own prize money because Rich had a novel in mind, and Steinbeck believed in him. But Rich never produced a novel. Perhaps it was a fear of success or lack of discipline. In any case, Rich didn't do it and never paid the money back.

SR: Yes, that's true about the money. It must have been hard for Rich.

CORINNE: Rich and Tal became alienated from John Steinbeck in later years. I would go after work and sit and have a glass of red wine. Beth Ingalls—a writer for the *Carmel Pinecone* and a friend of Carol Steinbeck's—would sometimes be there and would rave about how badly Steinbeck had treated Carol. Tal and Rich's son was named John after John Steinbeck. When John Lovejoy was thirteen, Steinbeck sent him a beautifully wrapped razor from Tiffany's because John was becoming a man. John Lovejoy is now retired and lives in Lebanon, Oregon. Last year he wrote a letter to the Food Section of the *San Francisco Chronicle* about how his mother got her groceries delivered to the door. I wrote to John and later talked to him about my

memories of taking groceries and wine to Tal after Rich died because she had never learned to drive a car.

EDITOR'S NOTE

Details from Steinbeck's correspondence corroborate Corinne Cooke's recollections. On June 7, 1949, John Steinbeck wrote to Elaine Scott: "[James] Neale is flying a twin engine Cessna to New York on the 15th. He'll have a little vacation and bring back my kids on the 1st." (*Steinbeck: A Life in Letters* 358). On June 8 he wrote John O'Hara, "My boys will be with me in another two weeks and I will be glad" (*Steinbeck: A Life in Letters* 360). Steinbeck visited L.A. soon after this, seeing Elaine, then came back to Pacific Grove, having arranged to write her in care of Max and Jack Wagner at their Hollywood house as a subterfuge to prevent Gwyn from discovering their relationship, addressing the letters to "Belle Hamilton," using his mother's surname. The address was "the hollow oak." He had used the same address to write Gwyn earlier (see *Steinbeck: A Life in Letters* 361).

Steinbeck wrote on June 21 that he had bought a "cute little trailer house for the boys and their nurse to live in" (*Steinbeck: A Life in Letters* 362). The trailer had two rooms, kitchen, toilet, ice box, and he suggested to Elaine that "when the boys are not here, it could have other uses—couldn't it, dear?" (*Steinbeck: A Life in Letters* 362). "Shortly after Neale had flown the two Steinbeck boys back from New York to California, Elaine Scott suggested the possibility of visiting him. . . [and] arrangements were made for her to come to Del Monte Lodge at Pebble Beach with her friend Joan Crawford" (*Steinbeck: A Life in Letters* 365). It appears Neale did return around or after July 1. On July 10 Steinbeck wrote to Elaine: "I wish I knew what time you would be likely to call tomorrow. I—well, damn it, I will wait for it. The boys can just play in the street or Neale can take them someplace" (*Steinbeck: A Life in Letters* 366). On July 12 he wrote, "I did a bad thing. The nurse just told me. John didn't even have cake on his birthday" That birthday, John Jr.'s third, should have been celebrated in New York on June 12. There had been no cake because John Jr. had a cold—this appears to be a knock on Gwyn. So Steinbeck planned to throw a big party for both boys on Thom's fifth birthday, which fell on August 2, with two cakes (*Steinbeck: A Life in Letters* 366). Neale is further mentioned in Steinbeck's letter to Elaine Scott dated July 25, 1949: ". . . Going to bed now darling. Neale changed the sheets, damn him. Some time with sleep—huh? That's the only thing we've not had—sleep and breakfast" (*Steinbeck: A Life in Letters* 372).

WORK CITED

Steinbeck, John. *Steinbeck : A Life in Letters*. Ed. Elaine Steinbeck and Robert Wallsten. New York : Viking P, 1975.