“Growing Up on the Steinbeck and Hamilton Ranches

in the 1920s and 1930s”

An Interview Thomas Steinbeck

Thomas Steinbeck, the son of John Steinbeck, provided the following information about his father and the family ranch.

John Steinbeck’s grandparents owned ranches in the King City area and in Hollister. Samuel and Eliza Hamilton, his mother’s parents, owned a ranch in the hills east of King City, the southern part of the Salinas Valley. John Steinbeck spent a part of every summer at this ranch, doing chores, taking care of the animals, and exploring the land—just like Jody from *The Red Pony.* In his book *East of Eden*, John Steinbeck wrote that his grandfather “built his house with his own hands, and he built a barn and a blacksmith shop.”

A typical day for ranch children began at 5:00 AM. Certain chores needed to be completed before the family and ranch hands had breakfast, including hauling water from the well, feeding the horses, and collecting wood for the stove. The children then walked to school. Some attended a one-room schoolhouse with a teacher, while others gathered at a neighboring ranch to be taught by mothers and relatives. The children were at school for about four hours before returning home to work on the ranch. The younger children fed and cared for the chickens, goats, or pigs. Older children, about 14 years or older, worked with the adults to harvest the crops or herd the cows. Older girls usually took care of their younger siblings while the adults worked in the fields or with the livestock.

Ranch families would travel to the nearest town to purchase supplies and tools, go to church, and visit family members. The frequency of these trips depended on how far away they were from town. For example, ranchers in Big Sur would only go to town once every three to six months, depending on the weather and their needs. For many families, this trip took an entire day or longer. Ranchers also received supplies from traveling salesman, livestock traders, migrant labor, and veterinarians. John Steinbeck wrote about a traveling salesman in his short story, “Chrysanthemums.”

According to Thomas Steinbeck, his father used to call the Hamilton ranch “old starvation ranch” because of the hard work involved in making enough money to feed the family. When the ranchers did not make enough money, the men worked in town for a few months while the wives ran the ranch. John Steinbeck’s parents left their family ranches to work in town where the job opportunities were more stable. His father had a variety of jobs in Salinas. He worked as a sugar beet factory worker, flour mill manager, and, later, the treasurer of Monterey County. Steinbeck’s mother became a teacher. Despite the hardships, it was important to keep the ranches in the family because only male landowners could vote*.*

When Steinbeck visited his grandfather’s ranch near King City, he must have learned about the hardships of running a family ranch and caring for livestock. He used this experience to write *The Red Pony* and bring the characters in the book to life.

“The Ranching Life”

There were two types of ranches that existed in the Salinas Valley in the 1920s/30s. These ranches could be distinguished from each other by their location in the valley. The first type was located low on the green fertile valley floor. Hill ranches, the second type, were usually nestled up higher in the rocky and dusty terrain of the foothills of the surrounding mountains.

The ranches on the valley floor were characteristically agricultural since they had more water. The rich soil and mild year-round climate lent itself to raising the lettuce and vegetables that the Salinas Valley is famous for. The ranch in *The Red Pony* was modeled after the second type of ranch, the hill ranch. Hill ranches were primarily interested in the cattle industry. Since there was often a shortage of water at the higher elevations, the hill-ranchers raised cattle instead of the thirsty crops that lined the valley floor. These ranches were usually quite a bit further from town than the valley floor ranches, and this added to the hardships brought on by drought years and supply shortages.

The families living on these hill ranches were very resourceful. Though raising cattle was their main source of income, they would also engage in a great amount of subsistence farming in order to put food on their tables. These families usually had their own blacksmith shop to shoe horses, fix wagons, and fabricate random necessary parts around the ranch. Many of them also had a milk cow or two, some chickens and hens for eggs, pigs for pork, and a small vegetable garden. These were all things that would minimize the need for traveling into town for supplies, tools and other necessities. In fact, someone living on a hill ranch in the 1920s might not make the journey into town more than once a month since the trip would take the entire day. A hill-rancher would need to begin the journey at 5 a.m. just to make it back home by 10 p.m. Families living on hill ranches were reliant on supplies that could only be acquired in town, so they had to carefully plan what items to buy—and when—in order to make ends meet and maximize their infrequent journeys into town.