

# The Steinbeck Collectors Gazette

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## **Bonhams and Butterfield's Auction of the *Elizabeth Ainsworth Collection* By James M. Dourgarian, SCC #20**

I like to refer to myself as a working class bookseller. My offices are the antithesis of sumptuous. I don't have a staff. I have only one employee (me), and he's underpaid. And while I'm not old, yet, I'm not as young as I once was, and thus exhibiting at book fairs isn't as easy as it was in my youth. That being said, I wasn't about to miss the 40th California International Antiquarian Book Fair sponsored by the Antiquarian Booksellers Association of America (ABAA) this past Feb. 16-18. It was a very good fair, but I had to work it alone. My daughter usually helps me, but she made me a grandfather for the first time in early December and was busy with the baby. Her husband often helps me, but he was producing a play that weekend. One of my nieces has helped me a few times, but she couldn't make it this time. While I am usually able to dash off quickly to the bathroom or run over to where the food concession is to bring back lunch to my unoccupied booth without missing too much, there was one BIG problem. Bonhams and Butterfield was to conduct a book auction on the last day of the fair, and within their large catalogue of items to be auctioned were the last remaining close family copies of John Steinbeck first editions. These were the books owned by his older sister, Elizabeth Ainsworth. She died in 1992. The family decided to sell the books as a way to raise money to renovate the Steinbeck home in Pacific Grove. Of the 45 Steinbeck items, 40 were from Mrs. Ainsworth's estate, virtually a complete Steinbeck collection. A side note: Mrs. Ainsworth's daughter used to live in Walnut Creek, which is where I live. I spoke with her more than 20 years ago about the books. I asked if she had all of John's books. She did, except one, *Saint Katy the Virgin*. It seems that "mother" was so appalled by that title that John didn't dare present her with that title. He didn't, which she rued later in life, but that's another story.

In this story my problem was how was I going to bid on the books in the auction and run my booth at the same time. In short, I simply could not. I also had a few choice words for Bonhams and Butterfield for their timing. It turns out that the auction house actually planned their sale to coincide with the ABAA book fair, a hideous decision in my opinion. While there are a number of bookselling firms that have large staffs, there are also a large number like me without staffs. How were any of us to run our booths and bid at the same time? If the auction sale had been a week earlier, let's say, wouldn't that have been better for all concerned? It would have meant that any books purchased at the auction could then have been brought to the book fair to be offered to the general public. I know I would have preferred that sort of timing to the one that faced me.

In the end, I hired a friend who must have needed the money to stand in my booth while I bid on the books by phone for a good half hour. I should add quickly that I'm not important enough to own a cell phone, and there are very few pay phones in the building where the book fair was taking place. So, as inexperienced as I am with cell phones, I borrowed my daughter's cell. Turns out that I could make calls to the auction house, but they couldn't call me. Great. Now I had to plan my call to them so that I was ahead of schedule so that I could make sure not to miss any of the books. Sometimes life seems so difficult. I wandered away from my booth at the fair in order to make my call at the appointed time. I decided to stand near a pay phone I found inside our building so that I

could use that phone as a back up, just in case. As I walked over I grabbed a folding chair at a nearby exhibit that wasn't being used so I could sit with the catalogue laid over my knees, phone to my ear, pen ready to take notes. As soon as I got through to the auction house, the chair collapsed. Down I went. Up flew the catalogue. I managed to hold onto the phone, but it closed and I lost my connection to the auction house. With a few more choice words about the chair, cell phones, auction house timing, and whatever else I felt like cursing, I finally decided to stand and use the pay phone. Luckily, I didn't miss any of the books. And I managed to buy the very first item offered, *Cup of Gold*. In a dust jacket! Inscribed to his sister! And for less money than I saw a similar copy at the fair that wasn't inscribed at all, much less to his sister. I went on to buy four more books. I really wanted to buy a number of other items. I used to visit Steinbeck's life-long friend and former Stanford roommate, Carlton Sheffield, years ago. He had a drawing in his kitchen by Thomas Hart Benton from the Limited Editions Club edition of *The Grapes of Wrath*. It was a drawing of Rose of Sharon. That image has always haunted me. At the sale was a lithograph of this same drawing presented from Benton to Steinbeck. I bid as high as I could, but it went to someone else. I was also the underbidder on the copy of *The Grapes of Wrath* that set a world record price for the book, nearly \$50,000. When I returned home that night, I was happy with the results of my sales at the book fair. I was thrilled to have made the purchases I did at the auction, but you always remember the ones that got away. I really wanted that lithograph of Rose of Sharon. I really wanted that copy of *The Grapes of Wrath*, despite its condition flaws (overlooked, as happened so often in the catalogue descriptions).

When I did return home that night, I had a call from a reporter for the *Los Angeles Times*. She had done a story in anticipation of the auction event, and was then doing another as a follow-up. She had been referred to me as a Steinbeck expert, but she really paid attention to what I had to say when she learned that I had purchased five of the books. No one else was known to have been a buyer, including whomever it was that purchased *The Grapes of Wrath* for a world record price. Wire services then picked up the story from the Times. The next day I was called for interviews by a TV station in Salinas, a daily newspaper in Watsonville, and by the *San Francisco Chronicle* (whose story referred to Steinbeck as "James"). I also heard from a number of civilians with copies of *The Grapes of Wrath* that they wanted to sell, copies that they were sure were first editions. Hey, who wouldn't want to make a quick 50 grand? Just about all the copies were P. F. Collier reprints or seventh printing without dust jackets and the like. On the other hand, my 15 minutes of fame also resulted in a conversation with a woman whose father worked with Steinbeck in the early days of TV. She has about 80 autographed lettered signed by Steinbeck to her father. They may end up at auction in the near future. Another woman who called was married to a Broadway producer who worked with Steinbeck, too. It is she who owns the hand-written manuscript for *Sweet Thursday* that will be auctioned later this year. She also has a number of letters from Steinbeck, and a few books, too. Fame has its fleeting moments of glory, but on the whole, I learned quickly how celebrity closes in on a person making your personal space and freedom smaller and smaller. I didn't like my brief taste. One wonders how Steinbeck managed with his overwhelming true celebrity. It was an experience.