

Steinbeck's Roads were Made for an Airstream

By Tom Bentley



PHOTO: BRADLY J. BONER

In 1960, an aging (and admittedly cranky) John Steinbeck took off in an improvised camper truck with Charley, his Standard Poodle, to taste the flavor of the country he'd been writing about for so long, but which then seemed too elusive and too diffuse to capture. Though there were moments when he grappled with America's dark heart—notably, incidents of vile racism in the deep south—his 11,000 miles on the road were ultimately redemptive, and renewed his appreciation for the gritty, caring genuineness of the country and its people. "Travels with Charley," the tale of his trek, was published to acclaim soon after.

In 2007, Greg Zeigler, a retired high- and middle-school educator, reflected that the 50th anniversary of Steinbeck's odyssey was near, and that he had a unique opportunity to revisit the fabled writer's journey, and offer educational forums to students along the way. No Standard Poodle necessary: his trusty Maltese, Max, stood in. And instead of Steinbeck's 1960 GMC camper truck—dubbed "Rocinante" after Don Quixote's horse—Zeigler piloted his Toyota 4Runner towing a 2004 Airstream Bambi in a 15,000-mile, 68-day recreation of Steinbeck's travels. He named the Bambi "Winnie," after his mother Winifred, who loved to camp.

"I honestly never thought twice about the Bambi: The quiet, cozy, well-designed, well-lit interior, and the phenomenal tracking on the road were wonderful over 15,000 miles and nine weeks. Far and away, our favorite feature, apart from the iconic aluminum gleam, is the wrap-around windows fore and aft. In Rockford, IL, on a rainy October night I had a line of eight people backed up outside the door waiting for their turn to 'tour' the Bambi," says Zeigler.

Zeigler visited the National Steinbeck Center in Salinas, California where a restored Rocinante is on display. He talked about epic travels with Thomas Steinbeck, John's son, who pronounced Max and his rig fit for the journey, saying, "To quote my dad 'You don't take a trip, a trip takes you'."

Zeigler summarizes his experience this way: "Steinbeck set out to determine what Americans are like today. I took that as my guide. It may seem obvious, but television does not accurately reflect who we are as a people. I spoke with hundreds of Americans in towns and cities, I saw hundreds more interacting. I never heard an angry word, or witnessed an angry gesture. I fully believe if I were to do this again (and I may) the same would be true. What Americans are like today is: respectful, civil, caring, helpful, diverse, still dreaming the American dream."

Zeigler and his wife Dimmie take the Bambi on at least two one-week summer trips to different lakes, and he takes at least one additional one-week trip, but when his wife retires from her librarian job, it's going to be wide open. Max, who as Zeigler says, "fits perfectly into the interior," is delighted to camp under the Bambi's table.

In the meantime, there's plenty of work to be done on Zeigler's recounting of his journey in his forthcoming book, "Travels with Steinbeck: In Search of America 50 Years Later." He is also working on a documentary film of the project. You can see more information about Greg Zeigler and his odyssey on his site at <http://travelswithsteinbeck.wordpress.com/>. •••