



Long Way Home: On the Trail of Steinbeck's America

Bill Barich

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"We do not take a trip; a trip takes us," John Steinbeck noted in his 1962 classic, *Travels with Charley*. In the summer of 2008, Bill Barich stumbled upon a used copy of *Travels in Ireland*, where he has lived for the past eight years, and it inspired him to explore the mood of the United States as Steinbeck had done almost a half century before. With a hotly contested election looming, and in the shadow of an economic meltdown, Barich set off on a 5,943-mile cross-country drive from New York to his old hometown in San Francisco via Route 50, a road twisting through the American heartland.

Long Way Home is

the stunning result of his pilgrimage, an illuminating and perceptive portrait of America at a dramatic point in its history. Where Steinbeck returned from the road depressed about the country's soul, Barich-while not uncritical of the narrow-mindedness and incivility of our present culture-finds brightness among the dark and rekindles his belief in the long view, as exemplified by the unbridled optimism of some high school kids in Hutchinson, Kansas, and by the undaunted spirit of an eighty-year-old barber he chanced upon in Jefferson City, Missouri. "The world truly does renew itself while we're looking the other way," he observes.

From the Eastern Shore of Maryland to the spectacular landscape of Moab, Utah, to Steinbeck's own Salinas Valley, filled with memorable encounters and redolent with history and local color, *Long Way Home* is a truthful, inspiring account of the country at a social and political crossroad. "The highway snakes into a tunnel," Barich writes about a stretch of Route 50 in West Virginia, "then erupts into the light with the force of revelation."

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