

Tales of John Steinbeck through eyes of his best friend's son

Ed Ricketts Jr. full of stories of times he spent at home on Cannery Row with famed novelist, other luminaries

By [Julian Guthrie](#) Updated 3:01 am PDT, Monday, April 21, 2014



Ed Ricketts Jr. grew up in his father's laboratory in Monterey surrounded by specimens both alive and embalmed - pans full of snails for study, plankton to chart, sardines to track for their decline and sharks to bring in for analysis.

Parties at Ricketts' lab on Cannery Row went on for days and drew writers, mystics, painters and musicians, including Henry Miller, Joseph Campbell, Ellwood Graham and John Cage. Sundays were filled with books and music, with his father smoking cigars and listening to symphonies on his phonograph.



Through it all was his father's best friend, American novelist John Steinbeck. "John was a big man who scared some people," recalled Ricketts Jr., now 90 and living in Mill Valley. "He had a big nose. Big feet. A gruff, baritone voice. But a funny thing happened when John had a little bit to drink. He giggled with a high-pitch, tee-hee-hee giggle."

Ricketts is the son of marine biologist and author Edward F. Ricketts, a polymath who loved music, philosophy, books and poetry, and was the inspiration for some of Steinbeck's great literary characters, including Doc in "Cannery Row," Slim in "Of Mice and Men," Lee in "East of Eden" and preacher Jim Casy in "The Grapes of Wrath," published 75 years ago this month.

Ricketts, a retired mechanical engineer, described his dad as an "unconventional father" and the "most complicated man" he's ever known. He remembered Steinbeck as a "real neat guy." He shared stories of the friendship forged between the two, and made personal the lives of two iconic men.

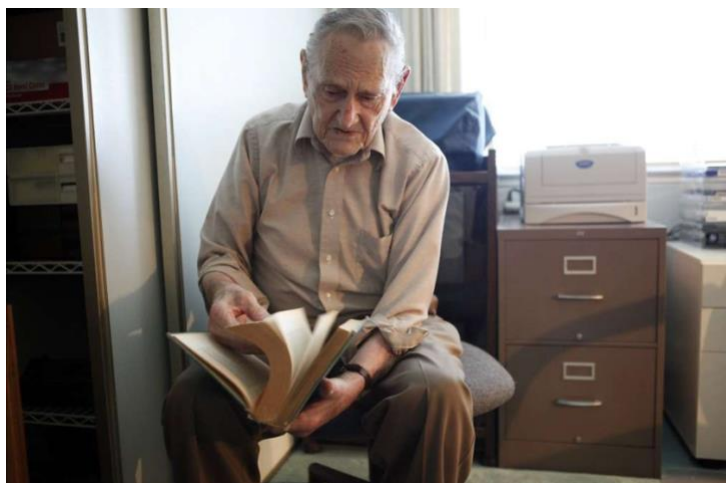
"They were interested in the same things," Ricketts said, sitting at his desk in his town house, where he has a cat named Chaucer and neighboring streets are named after poets. "John had a keen interest in biology, an interest that predated my father. And my father was interested in everything."



Collaborated on a book

The two who made Monterey Bay famous with the publication in 1945 of "Cannery Row" collaborated a few years later on the "The Log From the Sea of Cortez," a book that was part narrative and part catalog of specimens collected during their excursions to the Gulf of California. Ricketts Sr. also published a number of books on his own, including the seminal biology text, "Between Pacific Tides."

His son looked up at a black-and-white photograph he'd taken decades earlier that now hangs on the wall behind his desk. "See that starfish? I was in the lab when they were putting 'The Sea of Cortez' together. You'd be surprised by how much went into the process."



Ricketts Jr. said he loved his father's lab, the weathered wooden building where the family lived and the scientist worked.

"I loved the feeling of independence I had there," Ricketts said. "There were always interesting things going on. We had aquariums. We were raising sea anemones." He also remembers the sounds in the lab, especially of his father's favorite piece of music, Mozart's piano concerto No. 20, and of the late-into-the-night "tap tap tap" of his father on his typewriter.

Ricketts Jr., with a lifelong love of jazz, received his first musical instrument, a cornet, from Steinbeck, who told him not to take any formal lessons at school. Instead, the young Ricketts was to listen to jazz and swing music on the phonograph and try to imitate the artists he admired.

"He had made a little bit of money on 'Tortilla Flats' and 'Of Mice and Men,' " Ricketts said of Steinbeck. "I was a teenager and had a burning desire to play the trumpet. He bought me the cornet first, and later a real trumpet." His interest in jazz and swing music was shared by Steinbeck's first wife, Carol. "She was not a common woman," Ricketts said. "She swore a lot, and argued. And she climbed trees, both oak and Monterey pine."

He smiled remembering his days at Monterey Union High School, where the teachers failed to

engage him - his father would hand him books he thought were more important - and he skipped out at lunchtime to browse the local record store.

"In June 1941, on the afternoon of my high school graduation, I went to a restaurant with my dad, John and the bacteriologist Paul de Kruif," Ricketts said. "We were all going to go to my graduation ceremony, but we ended up at an Italian restaurant. We sat there talking and drinking and I never made it to graduation."

Father, son drafted in WWII

A year later, his father was drafted into World War II and served in the dispensary at the Presidio of Monterey. He was able to return home to his lab at night. Ricketts Jr. was drafted in March 1943, and sent to Brisbane, Australia, before landing in Papua New Guinea. He served in the Signal Corps, coding top secret messages.

Ricketts Jr. returned to San Francisco in December 1945 and enrolled at UC Berkeley. Weekends were spent in Monterey helping his father with various research projects. Over summer break, father and son traveled by train to Seattle and by ferry to the outer coast of Vancouver Island.

"We spent the whole trip investigating tide pools," Ricketts Jr. said of the work that was to become a new book, "The Outer Shores," which his father and Steinbeck planned to write together.

Early in the evening of May 8, 1948, Ricketts Jr. was working in the lab when a policeman appeared. His father's car had been hit by a Del Monte express train just up from Cannery Row.

"We went to the hospital, I gave blood," Ricketts Jr. said. His dad died May 11 at the age of 50. Steinbeck, who had been in New York, arrived too late.

"The greatest man in the world is dying and there is nothing I can do," Steinbeck later wrote. "No one who knew him will deny the force and influence of Ed Ricketts. Everyone near him was influenced by him, deeply and permanently."

Outlived dad by 40 years

Ricketts Jr., who has three children and six grandchildren of his own, has now outlived his father by 40 years. "My dad never wanted to grow old," he said. "He had a thing about old age. All of his close friends were younger than he was."

Ricketts Jr. eyed the bookshelves behind him. Several sections were filled with works by his father and by Steinbeck.

"My memory of them is alive," he said. "It's interesting because I don't even think of books when I think of Steinbeck. I think of him as being a close personal friend of my father's. Yes, he loved to tell stories. But he was a neat guy with an awfully good sense of humor - almost as good as my father's."