

The Circuitous Journey of an Extraordinary American Family

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Introduction

Here and there down the ages, possessed of the restless spirit for adventure and moved by zealous religious enthusiasm, have various representatives of the Aryan race sought to turn the hands upon the dial-plate of time backward as they have ever pointed the dominant races of the world westward. To such enthusiasts the Orient, especially the Holy Land, rich in sacred historical associations and supposed to be literally "flowing with milk and honey," seemed to offer the greatest inducement of any land for permanent possession. ¹

Thus, begins the incredible story of one German and one American family, who unbeknownst to each other and driven by deep religious fervor and the belief that their actions will hasten the Second Coming of Jesus Christ, journey from their homelands to Palestine in the mid-19th century. The idea was to settle the badly governed, largely rural, sparsely populated backward province of the Ottoman Empire² and through hard, manual agricultural labor create a place that would entice Jews from the four corners of the earth to return to their ancestral homeland and take up farming. "This belief tied in with the hope that when the return came about, the Israelites would recognize Jesus as the Messiah, and that the return to Zion and the rebuilding of the Temple would herald the Second Coming of Jesus."³

The 19th century saw an upsurge in Christian millenarism in Europe and in the United States. "Millenarism is the cosmology of eschatology, a chronology of future events compared to a historical record of the past. In the Christian tradition, all millennial theologies involve the triumph of Christ, the vindication of the suffering saints, and the eventual reign of Christ on the earth."⁴

¹ Chamberlain, G.W. "A New England Crusade" p. 195

² Kark, Ruth. "Millenarian and Agricultural Settlement in the Holy Land in the Nineteenth Century p.47

³ Kark, Ruth p.50

⁴ Kark, Ruth p. 48

The Grossteinbeck and Dickson families were deeply rooted in Millenarism, the expectation of the Second Advent of Christ and the soon to come establishment of the one-thousand yearlong kingdom of God on earth.⁵ They believed they had a part in facilitating the return of Jesus Christ to Zion. This adventure would unite them in marriage, hope, tragedy, despair and the eventual rebuilding of their lives in the American West.

This paper will trace the journeys of both families from Germany and Massachusetts respectively, then to Palestine, Florida and Boston and finally Hollister and Salinas, California. It is there, in the Salinas Valley, that their most famous descendent, Nobel prize winning author John E. Steinbeck would be born.

The Grossteinbecks

The upheavals of the Napoleonic Wars and the French Revolution convinced many believers in Europe that the end of times was near. "In Germany, millenarism grew out of the Pietist movement, whose founder J.A. Bengel predicted in the eighteenth century that the year 1837 would see the return of Jesus on earth and the inception of the thousand-year kingdom."⁶

Some of the Germans influenced by this rising movement were the Grossteinbeck family of Elberfeld, near Barmen-Wuppertal. Friedrich Wilhelm (1821-1858), his sister Maria Katharina (1826-1862) and their younger brother Johann Adolf (1832-1913) each received a few hundred dollars from their father, many blessings from family and friends and departed by train on their

⁵ Kark, Ruth p. 48

⁶ Kark, Ruth p.49

way to the Holy Land on November 29, 1849.⁷ The traveling group comprised several more members, including Maria's husband Gustav Thiel. Explaining why they left everything behind and set out to the Holy Land, Friedrich wrote in an impassioned letter to fellow millenarists in the United States:

JERUSALEM, November 29, 1850. Dear and Beloved Brother in the Lord.-Hearing of your faith and hope in the Lord Jesus, and of your love, toward the people of the old covenant, we were highly rejoiced, and that you in common with us, feel such a deep interest in seeing that the inheritance of the despised seed of Abraham, is again cultivated by believers. I was so fortunate, as to read your dear letter, to your friend Mr. Meshullam, which he gave me to peruse, so that I am enabled now to write to you, and give the beloved ones in America a few facts concerning us here. Who will not be exceedingly glad to hear the good tidings that the children of Zion, flock hither again, from the north, south, east, and west. Also, how others, who cannot see as we do, and who do not YET feel as we did HOMESICK for the Holy Land, how even these, begin to look with a wishful eye, towards the land of divine Revelation. We may count ourselves happy, to have lived to see these days, and manifestations, how the Lord HAS TURNED towards his land, and people, in grace and loving kindness, and has COMMENCED to chastise, LUKEWARM backslidden Christendom, and to let loose among them the evil spirits of rebellion and anarchy.⁸

The Grossteinbeck family's two-month journey to Palestine began in Berlin. From there they travelled to Vienna, Trieste and Izmir, then across the Mediterranean to Beirut, and then to Jaffa. On the very day of their arrival they set out for Jerusalem.⁹

Friedrich was a devoted farmer, while his brother Johann was a skilled carpenter and woodcarver. In his attempt to encourage the Americans to join them near Jerusalem, he wrote another letter where he described finding accommodations and employment.

We arrived in health and safety in Jerusalem, and went of course to the Brethren's House, where we were received with great kindness. We found employment almost immediately. Moller and John (*Johann, his brother*) found work in their trades (as mason and joiner) and Steinborn became a laborer. Gustav and his wife (*Maria, his sister*) were appointed to the New English

⁷ Minor, Clorinda S., *Meshullam! Or Tidings from Jerusalem* p. 121

⁸ Minor, Clorinda S., p. 127

⁹ Perry, Yaron, "John Steinbeck's Roots in Nineteenth-Century Palestine" p.49

Churchyard, where they have a large fine garden, free lodgings, and a considerable annual income.¹⁰

As per Friedrich's letter, Johann found employment as a carpenter and a wood joiner at Christ Church, the New English Churchyard built right inside the Jaffa Gate in the Old City of Jerusalem. Friedrich soon joined an experimental agricultural farm on the outskirts of Bethlehem, near the village of Artas and worked as a farmer.

On his farm, Friedrich boasted in the letters, he had eleven beehives, although the bees were smaller than those back in Germany. The wheat and barley, he wrote, grew very well in the poor soil. Potatoes were not to be found at the present moment, while onions, carrots, beans peas celery and turnips were hard to find.¹¹ Nevertheless, he encouraged his fellow American millenarists to support their efforts:

"If, therefore, you have a mind to visit us in spirit, you will, after having come from Jerusalem to Bethlehem, past the grave of Rachael and the well of Elijah, through fig and olive gardens and vineyards, until you arrive in our beautiful valley, find Moller employed on Masonry, Steinborn in digging, his wife in making butter, and myself, perhaps in milking-as I am the best hand at the latter, it becomes part of my occupation. Is it not sweet to have to do with milk and honey in the Holy Land!"¹²

In November of 1851, the Grossteinbecks moved back to Jerusalem, then they leased a plot near Jaffa and eventually bought eight acres of tree covered land, a two storied house and stalls for animals.¹³ It was two years later when the Dickson family would join them at their farm on the outskirts of Jaffa.

The Dicksons

In America, millenarian movements also arose influenced by European thought. One of the most influential leaders was William Miller, who in 1831 declared that the Second Advent of Jesus Christ would occur in 1843. Miller lectured extensively on the East Coast and especially in

¹⁰ Minor, Clorinda S., p. 121

¹¹ Minor, Clorinda S., p. 122

¹² Minor, Clorinda S., p. 122

¹³ Perry, Yaron, p. 50

New England, known as fertile ground for new ideas. In 1844, Ralph Waldo Emerson said: "Whoever has had an opportunity of acquaintance with society in New England during the last twenty-five years, with those middle and with those leading sections that may constitute any just representation of the character and aim of the community, will have been struck with the great activity of thought and experimenting."¹⁴ Even though Miller's interpretation of the scriptures was not in accord with the generally accepted beliefs and relied on prophecies of the Old and New testaments¹⁵, he developed a large following who called themselves Advents, or Millerites.

It was in New England where the Dickson family joined the Advent movement. In Groton, Massachusetts, where they lived, Advents would meet on the upper floor of an old barn built for Mrs. Weston.¹⁶ Mr. Hall was the leader of the Groton Advents who believed in establishing the New Jerusalem in Groton itself, while Deacon Walter Dickson believed "that the Kingdom of God was to be set up in Palestine, the sacred land of Bible history."¹⁷

The story of the Dicksons in Groton began when Walter Dickson (1799-1860) and his son Walter, Jr. move to town from Cambridge in 1795. Walter Dickson III was born on the family farm in 1799. He was "an exceedingly pious man and was known as 'Deacon'. He lived here until 1853, when he sold out and went to Palestine..."¹⁸ One of Deacon Dickson's sons, named Philip, had gone to Palestine with his wife in 1852 "as a missionary to the Turks and ... died in Jerusalem April 25, 1853, and was buried on the Mount of Olives at that city. His widow returned alone from Beirut

¹⁴ Richardson, Edward Adams, "The Story of a Neighborhood." p.6

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Ibid

by sailing vessel in the same year and died September 24, 1863 and is buried in the Mason lot in Ayer.”¹⁹

“Infused with the zeal of the missionary cause, the father, Deacon Walter Dickson, his wife and three daughters and son Henry sailed October 11, 1853, aboard the bark, *John Winthrop*, for Smyrna, thence to Jaffa.”²⁰ The Americans joined the Grossteinbeck family near Jaffa on an agricultural farm called Mount Hope. Soon after, in 1855, Johann Adolf Steinbeck married one of Walter Dickson’s daughters, Almira Anne (1828 – 1923) and in 1856 they welcomed the birth of a son named Charles. Friedrich married another daughter Mary E. (1833 – 1867). Friedrich renounced his Prussian citizenship and requested the protection of the United States Consulate in Jerusalem,²¹ a decision that would become crucial for the future of the now united Grossteinbeck-Dickson family. The two families were now one and worked the Mount Hope farm until the tragic events of January 1858.

“The Outrages in Jaffa”

In the years following the arrival of the Germans and the Americans to Mount Hope, they endured many challenges. Not only was there trouble with the winter flooding and ineffective draining, malaria, failed crops, and the hot Mediterranean weather, but also occasional violent assaults by Arab marauders. The Protestant Bishop of Jerusalem, Samuel Gobat, reported that the Americans and Germans living on Mount Hope relied on donations sent to them from supporters in the United States.²² As the Dicksons and Grossteinbecks were under American

¹⁹ Ibid, p.7

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ Perry, Yaron, p. 53

²² Ibid

protection, “and in order to deter the local population from acts of aggression against the settlers and to make a show of strength, the *Levant*— an American warship under the command of Captain Carl C. Turner—was sent to Palestine in 1854... There was a practical outcome of the visit since Turner provided the settlers with firearms from his armory with which they could defend themselves.”²³ However, the violent incidents and harassment continued.

The toil and tribulations suffered by the Mount Hope settlers were well known among Americans visiting the Holy Land. Herman Melville, the famous author, interviewed the farmers on his nineteen-day journey to the Holy Land in January of 1857 and wrote about their dismal and desperate conditions. Walter Dickson, he wrote was a “thorough Yankee, about 60, with a long oriental beard, blue Yankee coat, & Shaker waistcoat”²⁴ Several families had joined and eventually left the farming community of Mount Hope and by the end of 1857, there were three families left. Johann Grossteinbeck and his wife Almira lived in one building, nearby lived Walter Dickson, his wife, Sarah and their two children, Henry and Caroline. Next door to them were Friedrich Grossteinbeck, his wife, Mary, and their two young children.²⁵

Tragedy struck during the night of January 11, 1858 when five Arab marauders broke into the Dickson home, murdered Friedrich Grossteinbeck, raped his wife Mary and his mother in law Sarah Dickson, injured Walter and looted many of their belongings. The ‘Outrages in Jaffa’, as this violent assault would be called, made headlines all over the world.

In a letter to his son in Massachusetts, published in the *New York Times* on March 10, 1858, Walter Dickson wrote: “Dear Sir: With indescribable feeling I am under the necessity of

²³ Ibid, pp. 53-54

²⁴ Oren, Michael B. *Power, Faith and Fantasy: America in the Middle East: 1776 to the Present*

²⁵ Perry, Yaron p.55

addressing you at this time. An occurrence has taken place with us at which human nature shrinks with horror. On the night of the 11th, about 10 o'clock, three Arabs called at the front gate..." Dickson described in detail the violent assault his family suffered, how Friedrich was murdered, the women assaulted and how the aggressors stole all their belongings. He continued: "Our farming operations are, for the present, at an end, and we shall move into the city as soon as possible. Thorough measures are being taken to bring this matter before the Sultan and our Government. All foreigners here are equally interested. What the result must be we must wait and see."

The Dickson – Grossteinbeck family, who were under the protectorate of the American consulate, decided to return to the United States and rebuild their lives. On June 12, 1858, the survivors embarked on a ship in Jaffa and headed to Alexandria, Egypt. "Here the party separated, and Walter Dickson and son Henry went to Constantinople to consult with the United States minister as to indemnity, then sailing via Malta, London and Liverpool to New York and Boston. The others sailed direct from Alexandria on bark Champion via Spain to Boston, and a remarkable coincidence happened. Both parties arrived in Boston on the same day, September 16, 1858, not having heard from each other since parting at Alexandria and ailing by different routes on a voyage of more than three months' duration."²⁶

²⁶ Richardson, Edward Adams, p. 7

Rebuilding Their Lives

The family settled in Harvard, Massachusetts, where Deacon Walter Dickson died at the age of 60 about a year after the family's return. His two surviving sons enlisted in the Union Army during the Civil War and afterwards lived in the Groton, Massachusetts area.²⁷

Johann Adolph Grossteinbeck (now with the Americanized name of John A. Steinbeck), Almira and their young son, Charles, spent the cold winter of 1858 in Harvard. A year later they moved to St. Augustine, Florida, where two more boys were born, Herbert and Frankie. When the American Civil War broke out in 1861, John was recruited against his will into the Confederate Army while Almira left Florida and took the three boys back to her family's home in Massachusetts. John had been a missionary in the Holy Land and did not agree with the ideology of the Southern states, so he eventually deserted by trading clothes with a dead man. John made his way back to Massachusetts on foot and when he arrived at the family home, Almira answered the door and upon seeing him exclaimed, "John Steinbeck, how you look!"²⁸

The Steinbecks lived on the East Coast for ten more years while John worked as a carpenter and piano maker and in the meantime had three more sons: John Ernst, Wilhelm Peta and Harry Eugene.

California as the Promised Land

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ Gilroy Dispatch, "John Steinbeck's Roots Not Only in Salinas, but Hollister Too"

John and Almira grew weary of the winters in Massachusetts and in 1873 John headed westward by train to see about finding a new home for the family. When he arrived in California, he heard of a new farming community being planned in San Benito County, a little south of the San Francisco Bay and north of the gorgeous Salinas Valley. The new community was looking for craftsmen, especially carpenters and John quickly found a job. He telegraphed Almira to pack up the boys and move west. He met his family at the Hollister train depot on November 25th, 1874.²⁹

Four years after arrival, the Steinbecks purchased a Victorian home on ten acres at the corners of South and Line Streets, where John started a dairy farm and grew it into a successful business.³⁰ The family also owned an apricot orchard where the “indomitable Almira canned fruit into her nineties.”³¹ Eventually, Almira’s younger sister Caroline, moved west to live with them.³² After all the boys were grown and had families of their own, John and Almira moved to Monterey Street in downtown Hollister.

John Ernst, the third of the five Steinbeck sons, grew up in Hollister but as a young man moved to the Salinas Valley, a day’s ride south of his parents’ home. There, in the rural community of King City, he met and married a bright, young schoolteacher named Olive Hamilton. They lived in the county seat of Salinas, in a lovely Victorian home in the center of town where on February 27th, 1902, their eldest son John E. Steinbeck Jr. was born. This little boy,

²⁹ Ibid

³⁰ Ibid

³¹ Shillinglaw, *Susan Carol and John Steinbeck: Portrait of a Marriage*

³² “Hollister, California, the San Benito County Town where the Other Steinbecks Lived”
Steinbeck Now

grandson of the Prussian missionary Johann Grossteinbeck, who carved olivewood souvenirs at Christ Church in Jerusalem and grandnephew of Friedrich Grossteinbeck, murdered by Arab marauders on his family farm near Jaffa, grew to be one of the most popular authors in America, winner of the 1962 Nobel Prize for Literature.

In Search of Mount Hope

John E. Steinbeck Jr. grew up in Salinas and spent many childhood summers and vacations at his grandparents' homes, both on the Hamilton ranch in King City and at the Steinbeck farm in Hollister. "The future novelist was familiar with the family's story of violence and flight from Palestine to America, and he admired his father's hardworking people, from whom he inherited hands that liked to garden, fabricate, and repair things."³³

Many commentators and analysts have tried to find traces of the fascinating Steinbeck family history in the famous author's writings. "Indeed, the iron will and visionary in all of Steinbeck's westering males- the grandfather in *The Red Pony*, monomaniacal Joseph Way in *To a God Unknown*, Adam Trask in *East of Eden*, as well as the Joads in *The Grapes of Wrath* and the upstanding Whitesides in *Pastures of Heaven* – have roots in the author's paternal line."³⁴

John Steinbeck, always curious about his family's roots in the Holy Land, eventually decided to visit Israel. In the early 1950's, John and his wife Elaine had planned a trip to visit several countries. "John had been furiously putting the final touches on the semi-genealogical

³³ Ibid

³⁴ Shillinglaw, Susan

East of Eden while planning his own voyage to retrace his family's history during the Israel leg of the tour."³⁵ But it would be several more years before the Israel visit would happen.

In 1966, the visit materialized:

John Steinbeck, noted American Author, Arrives in Israel

Tel Aviv, Jan 31 (JTA) – John Steinbeck, the Nobel Prize winning American author, arrived in Israel today and told newsmen at Lydda Airport "I want to see everything in Israel." Mrs. Steinbeck, who was with him, said they would stay in the country several weeks, maybe a month.³⁶

The Israeli press prepared for the famous author's arrival. On February 1st, 1966, the *Ma'ariv* newspaper published a letter Steinbeck wrote to the *Daily Mail* newspaper in London, explaining the reasons for his Israel visit. In this letter, Steinbeck describes some interesting details and insights passed on in family lore for the past one hundred years. He writes:

"Several times I set out for Israel, but until now I did not reach her. Maybe its because of the unknown, maybe it's because of what my grandmother's father, whose name was Dickson, tried to do in the Holy Land in the 1840's..." Steinbeck recalls that he heard the story from his grandmother and her sister, who were both participants in this venture. "My great grandfather's name was Dickson and he was a typical 'Yankee' farmer in Massachusetts. One day he decided to set out for the Holy Land in order to convert the Jews: first by teaching them farming techniques to give them financial stability and that hopefully will influence them to convert to Christianity."

"Dickson sold all his belongings" – writes Steinbeck – "his neighbors held a sale for him. He bought some new plows and blacksmithing tools in order to make farming implements and in the 1840's set out for the Land of Israel with his wife, three daughters and his brother Charles (*this is actually inaccurate, Steinbeck confuses family members, but interesting as it was explained this way by Steinbeck himself*). After many travails they reached the Holy Land and here the troubles continued. The Turks were not at all keen on selling him any land..."

"Once he had some land, he did not find Jews who agreed to work on it. They had enough trouble from the Turks for being Jews and they did not want to add to their troubles by creating relationships with Christians, who were hated even more... Without converts it was hard to cultivate the land, and he didn't find hired help either. Apparently, one could buy slaves to work, but this Yankee hated slavery. In the end, he leased a few workers from a local Turk but they were very lazy, especially since they saw the Dickson did not have a whip. They stole as much as they could and disappeared."

³⁵ Kannard, Brian *Steinbeck: Citizen Spy* p. 220

³⁶ Jewish Telegraphic Agency

Steinbeck continues and describes the violent, tragic events that occurred in 1858. “When my great grandfather turned to the Turks for help, they gave him some great advice: Since the Bedouins killed your brother (*really his son in law*), go out and kill a Bedouin in return... The American Consul in Jaffa lent him the money needed to sail back to America and that was the end of the “Dicksonian mission to the Jews” Steinbeck concludes.³⁷

Steinbeck’s wishes to see actual remains of his family’s Mount Hope farm did not materialize, since after the tragic and violent episode of January 1858, the farm was abandoned and forgotten. The city of Tel Aviv was founded in 1909 and gradually expanded to encompass the lands around Mount Hope. In 1935 a new Tel Aviv neighborhood for day-laborers was built and someone remembered there was once a farm called Mount Hope close by and suggested the new neighborhood be called “Neighborhood of Hope” (Shchunat HaTikva).³⁸ Today the Shevach Mofet High School sits on the grounds of the 19th century missionary farm and aside from an old tree in the courtyard, nothing above ground remains to indicate the story of the place.

John Steinbeck and his wife Elaine stayed in Israel for a few weeks. In an interview in *Ma’ariv* on February 2, 1966 he said, “Yesterday I walked around the streets, in the noisy and quiet places. I want to see the land, especially the men and women and how they buy in the market and the shops. In every place I want to see the simple people. What do they look like at first glance? Are they energetic? Do they have the vitality so lacking in other people today?”³⁹

John Ernst Steinbeck Jr., great grandson and grandson of Advent Christian missionaries to the Holy Land and winner of the 1962 Nobel Prize for Literature, died in New York City, on December 20th, 1968 at the age of 66, leaving behind a rich body of literary works.

³⁷ *Ma’ariv*, *Steinbeck’s Great Grandfather Came to Settle in the Land of Israel in the 19th Century*

³⁸ Noy, Yitzhak, “The Grapes of Wrath”

³⁹ Har Gil, Shraga, “I Write 2000 Words per Day”

Conclusion

The circuitous journey of two families, one German Prussian and one American, uprooting their lives, moving halfway across the world to fulfil their religious dreams in aiding in the coming of their Messiah, is not so unusual, considering their times. The pull between Christian Europe, Christian America and the Holy Land grew stronger in the 19th century, both religiously, culturally and politically. “Important parallels can be traced between the activist communitarianism of the Mount Hope group and the larger, equally fervid, expansionist ethos prevalent in mid-nineteenth-century America, an ethos grounded in biblical and millennialist views of America's role in the world.”⁴⁰ The British, the French, Germans, Italians, Austrians, Russians, and Americans, among other Christian nations, all vied to claim and purchase a foothold in the Ottoman controlled Holy Land, to save it, to Christianize it, to wrest Jerusalem from the hands of the infidel.

This eastward pull toward the Holy Land was also paralleled in the westward expansion of the United States. ‘Manifest Destiny’, the mission of all Christian Americans to go west and settle in the ‘empty lands’ west of the Mississippi River and to control the land from ‘sea to shining sea’ brought thousands of Americans to the West Coast. First they came as explorers in the 18th century, then as 49ers in the Gold Rush and eventually in the settling of recently ‘purchased lands’ from Mexico. “The discovery of gold in California, the safety valve of the frontier, the vast spaces of the American continent waiting for successive waves of settlers and immigrants”⁴¹ were all key in the move west.

⁴⁰ Meyer, Kinereth. “John Steinbeck’s Promised Lands”

⁴¹ Ibid

In this historical context it is likely no coincidence, that Johann Grossteinbeck, in his constant search for a land of hope and redemption, a land of 'milk and honey', a land similar in its physical features to the Mediterranean topography of the Jerusalem hills, finally built his dairy farm and found peace in the 'Promised Land' of central California.

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