

The Great Tide Pool

TALES OF PACIFIC GROVE, CALIFORNIA

by local award-winning author, Brad Herzog

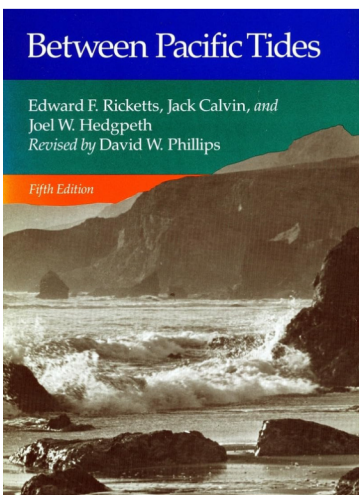
STEINBECK'S MUSE

June 15, 2026



This month represents the 129th anniversary of the birth of Ed Ricketts, the marine biologist celebrated fictionally by his good pal John Steinbeck as simply "Doc" in *Cannery Row* and *Sweet Thursday*, his two novels about the quirky denizens of the Monterey Peninsula. This month also marks the 78th anniversary of Ricketts's tragic death after being struck by a Del Monte Express passenger train while driving across the tracks... near Cannery Row. So I have Doc on my mind.

Publication of Steinbeck's books turned Ricketts into something resembling a literary luminary, and the passing years have elevated both of them to iconic status in Pacific Grove, where they spent a good portion of their lives. But while the writer made the biologist famous, Ricketts also made Steinbeck - in the sense that he was in many ways his muse. Various biographies describe him as a "catalyst" for Steinbeck's writing, a "model," a "major influence." Gwyn Steinbeck, the author's second wife, called him "the source of the Steinbeck Nile."



It might be argued that the persona of Doc and the periphery of his adventures played a large role in putting Pacific Grove on the map. But there's a whole world of information that most people don't know about Ed Ricketts. Here are 10 examples:

THE LAB: Alongside the Monterey Bay Aquarium, a blink-and-you-miss-it building at 800 Cannery Row is revered by Steinbeck fans as the location of Ricketts's Pacific Biological Laboratories (called Western Biological Laboratories in Cannery Row). But he actually launched the marine biology supply house in 1923 in Pacific Grove - at the corner of Fountain Avenue and High Street.

THE BOOK: Ricketts famously co-authored (with Jack Calvin) a book several years before Steinbeck wrote about him. *Between Pacific Tides* (1939) was a pioneering study of intertidal ecology, so much so that the fifth edition is still often used as a college textbook.



THE FIRE: On November 25, 1936, his Cannery Row lab was destroyed by a fire. Ricketts lost priceless treasures, from his manuscripts to his extensive library to his collection of poetry. But fortunately, the manuscript for his famous book had already been sent to the publisher. Steinbeck funded the reconstruction of his friend's lab.

THE MUSE: Beyond Cannery Row and Sweet Thursday, Ricketts was said to have been an inspiration for several other characters in Steinbeck's books, including Doc Burton (*In Dubious Battle*), Doctor Winters (*The Moon is Down*), Doctor Edwards (*East of Eden*), Slim (*Of Mice and Men*), and Jim Casy (*The Grapes of Wrath*).

THE SOJOURN: During the spring of 1940, Ricketts and Steinbeck took their famous journey to the Gulf of California aboard the *Western Flyer*. Their goal: collect and catalog invertebrates. The result: The collaborative book *The Sea of Cortez*. Steinbeck kept no journal, relying instead on his pal's extensive notes.

THE ADVENTURER: After dropping out of the University of Chicago, Ricketts spent several months walking through the American south, from Indiana to Florida, which eventually resulted in an article in *Travel* magazine titled "Vagabonding Through Dixie."

THE SOLDIER: Ricketts was drafted into the Army twice - during both world wars. He served in the Army Medical Corps during WWI and at the Presidio in Monterey during WWII.

THE PHILOSOPHER: Combining metaphysics with scientific method, Ricketts attempted to examine life as a holistic and interconnected entirety, a whole-is-greater-than-the-sum-of-its-parts philosophy that he called the "toto picture." *The Outer Shores*, a two-volume collection of his scientific and philosophical essays, was published in 1978.

THE MAN: In his cross-country travel narrative *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare*, Henry Miller wrote about his friend Ed Ricketts, describing him as "a most exceptional individual in character and temperament, a man radiating peace, joy and wisdom" and a man "satisfied with his lot, adjusted to his environment, happy in his work, and representative of all that is best in the American tradition."

THE NAMESAKE: In 1979, Moss Landing Marine Laboratory christened their research vessel, a 35-foot lobster boat, the *RV Ed Ricketts*. A 12-foot-long robotic undersea rover operated by the Monterey Bay Aquarium Research Institute is known as the *Doc Ricketts*. The Edward F. Ricketts State Marine Conservation Area is a small reserve located directly offshore from the Monterey Bay Aquarium and Cannery Row. And more than a dozen sea creatures have been named after the marine biologist, from the sea slug (*Aclesia rickettsia*) to the opossum shrimp (*Mysidium rickettsia*) to the sand flea (*Panoploea rickettsia*).

But my favorite homage - other than the *Doc Ricketts' Lab Saloon* that used to exist along Cannery Row - is a tribute that keeps Doc forever in Pacific Grove. In 1994, the city renamed High Street where his laboratory once stood, calling it *Ricketts Row*.

