

Of myths and men in Monterey

'Ed Heads' see Doc Ricketts as a cult figure

- Eric Enno Tamm

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He is the Jerry Garcia of American science -- a beer-drinking, bearded guru who ignored the social and scientific orthodoxies of his time, a progenitor of the counterculture, an enigmatic ecologist whose pioneering work was initially rejected by the scientific establishment.

He's probably the only scientist in history to have 15 animal species and a nightclub named after him. He was larger-than-life and died tragically, as legends usually do.

His name was Edward F. Ricketts, and his devotees are known as "Ed Heads." Earlier this month, many former residents, Steinbeck enthusiasts, historians and Ed Heads held a reunion on Cannery Row about 60 years after the sardine fishery experienced its first major collapse before disappearing in the 1950s.

Not only had Ricketts forewarned that Cannery Row could become a "ghost town" if conservation were not heeded, but he was the first scientist to provide a credible explanation of why the sardine disappeared.

"Ricketts is like a cult figure," says Joseph Taylor, professor of environmental history at Simon Fraser University in Burnaby, B.C. Of all the scientists who ran marine research stations along the Pacific Coast, Taylor says, "he was by far the most colorful."

Scientists at the University of Victoria on Vancouver Island have erected a small shrine to Ricketts, a glass-enclosed cabinet crammed with pickled seashore specimens collected by him along with his portrait. I've met park wardens, biologists, oceanographers and many others who profess, with zeal, that Ed Ricketts is their hero.

Joseph Campbell, the renowned mythologist and a close friend of Ricketts, once toyed with the idea of writing a novel based on Ricketts as the archetype of a hero.

Some Ricketts fans even go on the requisite pilgrimage, traveling to the steps of his former laboratory in Monterey, where they crack open a beer, at dawn or dusk, and quietly reflect in "the hour of the pearl" on Cannery Row.

In 1945, John Steinbeck published "Cannery Row," which fictionalized his best friend as "Doc," the beer-drinking philosopher-scientist who presides over the "whores, pimps, gamblers and sons of bitches" of Monterey's sardine industry. The best-selling novel turned Ricketts into an instant celebrity.

Yet it is the legend of beer drinking, sexual indulgence and propensity for misadventure, as lionized and fictionalized by Steinbeck, and not Ricketts' scientific legacy, that looms larger than life today.

In May, scientists, literary scholars, writers and assorted Ed Heads gathered in Monterey for the first symposium on Ricketts. One of the goals, says Dennis Copeland, a historian with the Monterey Public Library and symposium organizer, is to rectify the myth of Ricketts as simply the playboy-scientist in Steinbeck's novels.

"There's this almost underground following dedicated to Ed Ricketts," says Katie Rodger, a literary scholar at UC Davis, who spoke at the symposium. That changed in 2002, she says, when the country celebrated Steinbeck's centennial, and an NPR Radio program on Ed Ricketts aired over two days changed his image from Steinbeck's eccentric sidekick into a significant scientific figure in his own right.

BBC Radio followed with its own program about Ricketts. Rodger published "Renaissance Man of Cannery Row: The Life and Letters of Edward F. Ricketts" that year.

In 2003, a writer and scientists at Stanford's Hopkins Marine Station retraced Steinbeck and Ricketts' 1940 trip to the Gulf of California that became immortalized in "Sea of Cortez." My own book, "Beyond the Outer Shores," a focused biography on Ricketts' expeditions to British Columbia, was published in 2004.

Now there's talk of turning Ricketts' life story into a documentary or feature film. (Imagine Johnny Depp as a bohemian scientist with a taste for Mexican beer and women with big lips.)

"There's something for everyone to relate to in Ed Ricketts," says Rodger. "He had this magnetism that attracted people. It seems that power has transcended his death."

Ed Ricketts was a lone, largely marginalized scientist -- an outcast to academia, with no

degrees, no honors, no memberships in learned societies. Despite his meager means and at times threadbare poverty, he conducted pioneering work in seashore and fisheries ecology from his ramshackle lab on Cannery Row.

His 1939 treatise, "Between Pacific Tides," was the first book to take an ecological approach to understanding seashore animals. It is considered the bible of marine biology.

"I've been an admirer of Ricketts for a long time," says John Pearse, professor emeritus of ecology and evolutionary biology at UC Santa Cruz. "Ed Ricketts was way ahead of people. It wasn't until the 1980s that scientists started to look at the intertidal the way Ricketts did."

Yet with the exception of "Between Pacific Tides," citations of Ricketts' pioneering research are few and far between, since he was never published in scholarly journals.

In an odd twist of fate, there's probably more of Ed Ricketts in John Steinbeck's canon than all the scientific journals of the 20th century. A man who dedicated his life to collecting facts about the natural world has become, himself, a fiction.

"Ed Ricketts has not left us a written legacy of publications and scientific citations as much as a philosophy," says Bill Gilly, a professor at Stanford's Hopkins Marine Station and chief scientist of the Sea of Cortez Expedition in 2004. "He was the first to put together a philosophy of ecology on the Pacific Coast."

Gilly used this philosophy as the basis for a class on "biological holism" at Stanford, which explored the thinking of Ricketts and Steinbeck.

Lesser known is Ricketts' fisheries research and his attempts to save the sardine. By the end of 1945, the sardine had disappeared from Monterey's waters. The following season, fishermen began using sonar, a wartime invention, to find the elusive fish. The sonar experiment was declared a flop.

In reality, however, there weren't any sardines for the sonar to find.

"I don't think scientists are aware of Ricketts' research," says Daniel Pauly, director of the Fisheries Centre at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver. "That's probably due to the fact that his stuff isn't widely available. I have never found him cited."

Pauly, who has earned international renown for his research on "fishing down" marine food webs, was first introduced to Ricketts in Steinbeck's novel. In 1969, he began spending time on the Monterey Peninsula and soon learned about the real-life Doc.

Much of "Cannery Row" is true -- the parties, the brothel across the street, the Chinese grocer and the winos who collected specimens for Doc.

The part Steinbeck left out, however, was the fact that Ricketts was also a serious scientist whose contributions to Pacific Coast ecology were enormous.

In 1947, Ricketts published an article in the Monterey Peninsula Herald's annual "Sardine Edition" on the sardine's disappearance. It was a seminal paper in applying ecology to fisheries science.

Like a detective, Ricketts tried to "piece together some sort of picture puzzle" through keen observation, some basic data on plankton levels and sea temperatures, and intuition.

Ricketts figured he could predict fish-stock fluctuations by environmental conditions in the ocean, particularly sea-surface temperatures. During warm-water years, Ricketts argued, sardine catches should have been curtailed, since the stock wasn't very productive.

It was the same conclusion reached by an army of scientists involved in the California Cooperative Oceanic Fisheries Investigation in 1955. An article in the journal *Science* in 2003 also attributed the decline of the sardine to "regime shifts" in the marine ecosystem.

Ricketts' research is remarkable for trying to bring ecology into fisheries science, a field dominated by population biologists and statisticians.

"This is strange," says Pauly, "but fisheries scientists, so far as they are trained, do extraordinarily little ecology." Which is why, explains Pauly, Ricketts isn't noticed by "hard-core" fisheries scientists.

Ricketts almost completed his research in 1948. On May 8, however, he was poring over sardine statistics in his lab on Cannery Row. Shortly before 7:30 p.m., he decided to jump into his car to fetch steaks and salad for dinner. He drove his old Buick down Cannery Row, making a right turn on Drake Avenue up a hill.

In a rush to meet the wartime demand and feed the troops, a massive cannery and warehouse had been built on the corner of Drake Avenue, obscuring the right of way of a railway crossing. That cannery spelled the end of Ed Ricketts and ultimately, the sardine.

As Ricketts crossed the tracks, the Del Monte Express suddenly swung around the blind corner and crashed into his Buick, pinning him inside. The scientist died three days later in a hospital.

Already in its death throes, the sardine fishery finally collapsed in 1952. With the

disappearance of the sardine and its legendary scientist, Cannery Row became a ghost town.

The sardine did bounce back, as Ricketts predicted, although he never imagined it would take half a century. In the late 1990s, the sardine started to reappear in great numbers off the Pacific Coast.

Now with interest in his life and scientific research growing, Ed Ricketts, it seems, is bouncing back with the sardine.

Eric Enno Tamm is the author of "Beyond the Outer Shores: The Untold Odyssey of Ed Ricketts, the Pioneering Ecologist Who Inspired John Steinbeck and Joseph Campbell." Contact us at insight@sfchronicle.com.

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