Weeks on McKibben, 'Salinas: A History of Race and Resilience in an Agricultural City'

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Historians familiar with Salinas are likely to think of it as either the setting for several novels by John Steinbeck or as a site where the United Farm Workers merged civil and labor rights in agricultural fields during the 1970s. As I grew up in the Bay Area during the 1980s, Salinas came up in conversations when talking about crime and gang activity. In her recent book on the history of Salinas, Carol Lynn McKibben engages each of these subjects while asking us to rethink what we know of this central California city.

In McKibben’s optimistic social and cultural history of Salinas from the late nineteenth century to the present, she argues that the city’s dependence on agriculture and the labor of its racially diverse residents supported socioeconomic mobility while dulling class conflict and papering over existing inequalities. In the first third of the book, which examines Salinas from its founding in the late nineteenth century through the 1920s, McKibben argues that “Salinas merged what was defined as rural and what was defined as urban, becoming both” (p. 30). While the city developed the same inequalities as larger California cities such as Los Angeles and San Francisco, its dependence on the wealth created by agriculture pushed back against the most virulent kinds of racism and segregation in larger cities, where Anglo residents could more easily erect social and geographic barriers against immigrants and minorities. To make her argument, McKibben examines the opportunities created by beet sugar, lettuce, and strawberry production, showing how these supported economic mobility for ethnic minorities and wealth for Anglos.

In part 2, which roughly covers the next forty years of Salinas history, McKibben exposes racial tensions between growers, shippers, laborers, and the larger community. In a particularly engaging section, she analyzes how the entire city came together annually for a celebration of Filipino nationalist Jose Rizal. McKibben argues that this simultaneously exemplified cultural acceptance of racially excluded groups even as it papered over “a system of white supremacy” (p. 126). Chapter 5 should be of particular interest to scholars and fans of John Steinbeck. McKibben shows how local growers despised the Salinas author for characterizing them as greedy oppressors while laborers complained that they were not mere victims of industrial agriculture, as Steinbeck intimates. While not entirely agreeing with these sentiments, McKibben argues that locals supported unions whose politics were not viewed as radical and supported migrant laborers and Dust Bowl refugees who arrived in Salinas during the 1930s as long as they actively contributed to the community. She concludes that Salinas residents were far more welcoming to migrants in the 1930s than Steinbeck
suggests.

Throughout the first two-thirds of the book, McKibben reiterates that Salinas functioned effectively as a city because agricultural opportunities supported the upward mobility of laborers while not challenging the status of Anglo elites who controlled industry and the levers of city power. This comity cracked in the 1960s and 1970s for several reasons. She gives some credit to the efforts of Cesar Chavez and the United Farmworkers Union (UFW), who focused attention on Salinas beginning in 1970. Unlike previous unions, UFW activists addressed larger civil rights issues such as the Anglo-dominated political power structure, educational inequities, and poor housing. As Salinas became a majority Latino/a city during the 1980s, these activists were able to wrest political power from Anglo elites.

In her analysis of Salinas’s recent history, McKibben examines how the city faced the challenges of dramatic population growth and uneven development. Initiatives at the state level eroded the city’s tax base and eliminated bilingual education, contributing to poverty, the growth of gangs, increased crime, and the erosion of social services. In response, the city pioneered community policing, implemented job training programs that cut down on gang violence, and partnered with the local community college to support targeted educational pathways for at-risk youth.

As someone who grew up near Salinas, I appreciate McKibben’s lucid and thoughtful history of the area. Her use of interviews and oral histories is especially strong and fits seamlessly into the narrative. The book also possesses a very strong sense of Salinas’s various neighborhoods and its outlying fields. With this in mind, the book could use more detailed reference maps to accompany her place descriptions. It also seems that some of McKibben’s argumentative threads about the city’s long-standing dependence on agriculture are lost near the end, leaving me to question whether the city’s modern challenges are tied to its agricultural past or independent of it. This critique, however, must be taken with a grain of salt since the majority of the book is well argued and convincing. While McKibben does not shy away from critiquing Salinas’s past, she ends with optimism, stating that the city is “a model of what a functional, communal city might look like when it embraces diversity rather than recoils from it” (p. 348).


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