

Heroes ... or Villains? End Notes

More people-on-stamps could be jammed into this fascinating category than you or I have time for. The stories are all interesting, though, full of ironies and truths about our country and ourselves. So let's examine a few more before we wrap up.



Take **John Steinbeck** (1902-68). Today he is celebrated as the author of classics like "Grapes of Wrath," "East of Eden," "Of Mice and Men" and "Travels with Charlie." He won the Nobel Prize as well as a Pulitzer, and has long been ranked high in the canon of American writers.

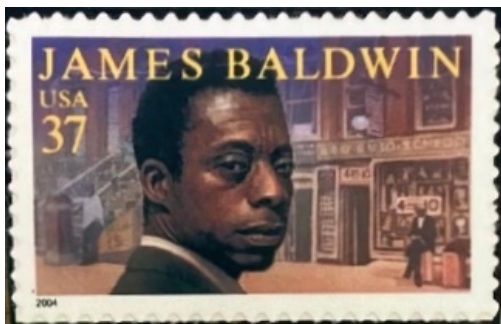
You should know, though, at one time Steinbeck was cursed and reviled as unpatriotic, un-American, even treasonous. The controversy swirled around "Grapes of Wrath," published in 1939, which presented in blunt and poignant terms the plight of workers battling the Dust Bowl and the Depression. Capitalism did not come off looking good, and there was a backlash from chambers of commerce — though the book was an instant best seller. Steinbeck began getting threats, particularly around Salinas, California, where he was from. The county supervisors banned his book from schools and public libraries for two years. Things got so

bad, Steinbeck bought a pistol for protection.

Steinbeck had this to say about the furor: "The vilification of me out here from the large landowners and bankers is pretty bad. The latest is a rumor started by them that the [Okies](#) hate me and have threatened to kill me for lying about them. I'm frightened at the rolling might of this damned thing. It is completely out of hand; I mean a kind of hysteria about the book is growing that is not healthy."

Most everyone soon got over it. Then-first lady Eleanor Roosevelt helped with a book review in her syndicated newspaper column, calling it "an unforgettable experience in reading ... (It) both repels and attracts you. The horrors of the picture, so well drawn, make you dread sometimes to begin the next chapter, and yet you cannot lay the book down or even skip a page." Asked later if she thought Steinbeck had distorted the picture, Roosevelt, who had visited labor camps in California, replied, "I have never believed 'The Grapes of Wrath' was exaggerated." The movie version, starring Henry Fonda as Tom Joad, was a box office hit in 1940, winning two Oscars.

Steinbeck had a knack for writing commercially successful novels that made it to the screen, including "East of Eden," "Viva Zapata," "Cannery Row" and "Of Mice and Men."



James Baldwin (1924-87) is a tough guy to pin down — novelist, playwright, essayist and more. It's hard to get a clear focus on his life's work. (I admit he's one of those great literary figures I've never read.)

Baldwin lived amid paradoxes. He was known for his incisive, abrasive indictment of white racism; but he also worried that the civil rights movement was doomed to be nothing more than "another slave rebellion." He was American to the core, but lived much of his adult life in France. He argued passionately for racial equality, was friends with Medgar Evers, Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr, but was held at arms' length by civil rights leaders, including King, because he was gay. (He was with King at the 1963 March on Washington, but not on the speakers list.) With his uncompromising views on racism, socialism, black power, gay rights and Vietnam, Baldwin was a lightning rod for J. Edgar Hoover, whose FBI compiled an 1,884-page dossier on him. Never could pin anything on him, though.

Here are a few pungent James Baldwin quotations. Remember, this is the man we finally got around to honoring on a U.S. postage stamp (see above). Is this a great country or what? Full of love, hate, invention, contradiction, hypocrisy, irony, brilliant falsehood and brutal honesty.

"To be a negro in this country and to be relatively conscious is to be in a rage almost all the time."

"It is certain, in any case, that ignorance, allied with power, is the most ferocious enemy justice can have."

"Whatever white people do not know about Negroes reveals, precisely and inexorably, what they do not know about themselves."

"I imagine one of the reasons people cling to their hates so stubbornly is because they sense, once hate is gone, they will be forced to deal with pain."

"If one really wishes to know how justice is administered ... one goes to the unprotected — those, precisely, who need the law's protection most! — and listens to their testimony."

"I love America more than any other country in the world, and, exactly for this reason, I insist on the right to criticize her perpetually."

Close to the edge

Here are a couple of examples of U.S. stamps that came right to the edge of honoring villainy. **Example No. 1:** In 1929 the postal service marked the 150th anniversary of the Sullivan Expedition by issuing this stamp honoring **Major General John Sullivan**. In 1779, during the Revolutionary War, Gen. George Washington ordered Sullivan and his men to central New York, where they soundly defeated the



Haudenosaunee Indians, some of whom were British allies. Then Sullivan's troops laid waste to the region, resulting in deaths from hunger and cold that have been cited as genocide.

Here is Washington's chilling order to Sullivan: "The Expedition you are appointed to command is to be directed against the hostile tribes of the Six Nations of Indians, with their associates and adherents. The immediate objects are the total destruction and devastation of their settlements, and the capture of as many prisoners of every age and sex as possible. It will be essential to ruin their crops now in the ground and prevent their planting more."

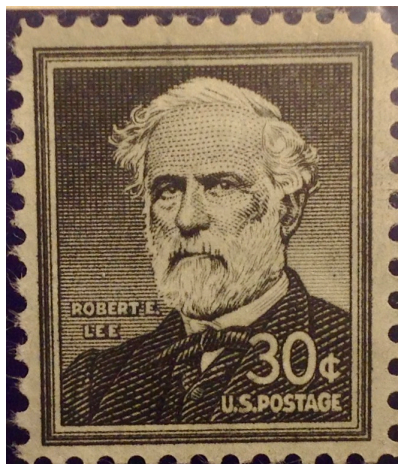
Example No. 2: Surely no secessionist military leader in the history of philately has been honored on as many stamps as **Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee** — four, right up there behind Washington, Franklin and Lincoln. Why is this so? Makes you wonder ...



From 1939, here's a commemorative honoring both Lee and fellow confederate Gen. Stonewall Jackson.



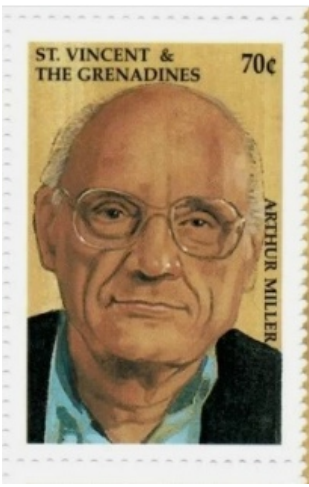
Washington and Lee share this commemorative in 1949 honoring their eponymous university.



Robert E. Lee was a familiar face in the 1950s and '60s, on the 30-cent value of the regular issue.



Then there's this commemorative from 1970 to mark the opening of the immense bas relief carved into Stone Mountain, Ga. (see above), honoring (from left) CSA President Jefferson Davis, Gens. Lee and Jackson.



Arthur Miller did make it onto a stamp — from St. Vincent.

As we have seen, the U.S. postal service eventually gets around to issuing stamps in tribute to most notable Americans, even if they sometimes are controversial. Which raises the question: Why have we ignored so many others? **Arthur Miller**, for example, was a great provocative American playwright — yet he has no U.S. philatelic tribute.

There have been stamps honoring a few people in show business who were unfairly blacklisted amid the anticommunist hysteria of the McCarthy Era. (Jose Ferrer, Pete Seeger). Many other talented and creative artists whose careers suffered remain unrecognized. Let's have a special sheet of stamps recognizing more victims of the blacklist: **Jack Gilford, John Garfield, Zero Mostel, Philip Loeb, Canada**

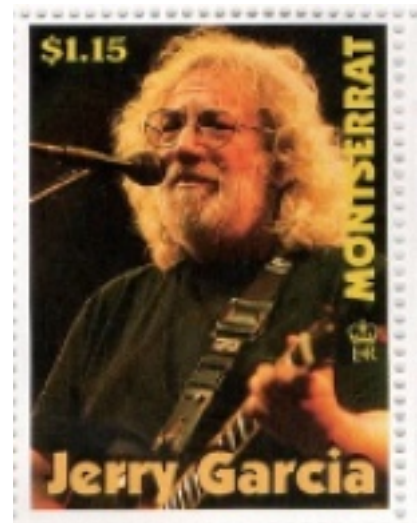
Lee, Judy Holliday, Dalton Trumbo, Ring Lardner, Artie Shaw, Larry Adler (there are many more). Maybe they weren't heroes, but they certainly weren't villains. Each of them made a unique contribution to American culture.

What about **Pee Wee Herman**? OK, he got caught with his pants down, literally. But he will never be forgotten as a major creative force in children's television and beyond.

Speaking of the blacklist, why not a stamp for **Joe McCarthy**? He may have been a flawed human being (aren't we all?), but the movement that carries his name touched something deep in the American psyche. Though "McCarthyism" has negative connotations today, for a half-dozen years in the 1950s it was a dominant force in American politics and culture. McCarthy's influence is still felt in modern campaigns to root out domestic subversion, real or imagined.

The purpose of "tribute" postage stamps is not to place notable Americans on a pedestal, but rather to bestow philatelic recognition on people who made a difference; people who provoked us, charmed us, changed us. We won't all agree this one is a hero, that one a villain. Most likely the irreplaceable people who helped make this crazy country we love, were somewhere in between.

THE FMF STAMP PROJECT CONTINUES



There's no USA stamp for the Grateful Dead's Jerry Garcia — but here's one from Montserrat.