

# John Steinbeck vs Charles Kuralt Who Said It First?

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## John Steinbeck vs Charles Kuralt

### Who Said It First?

The novelist John Steinbeck and CBS Newscaster Charles Kuralt knew and wrote about roads. Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, published in 1939, is a classic of road literature; its description of Dust Bowl refugees driving to California along U.S. 66 has given the route an enduring nickname ("The Mother Road"). Kuralt, in his CBS news feature "On the Road" and books, sought the off-beat along the country's back roads.

Steinbeck and Kuralt are sometimes cited as sources of similar quotes about the Interstate System, and the Rambler wishes to set the record straight.

In 1960, John Steinbeck made a 10,000-mile, 38-State circuit of the country in a homemade camper, nicknamed Rocinante (after the deluded knight errant Don Quixote's worn out horse), in the company of a poodle nicknamed Charley. Steinbeck described his journey in *Travels With Charley: In Search of America* (The Viking Press, 1962). Having dawdled through New England, Steinbeck became concerned that he might get stuck in the snows of North Dakota. So he decided to speed his trip by temporarily putting aside his plan to avoid "the great high speed slashes of concrete and tar called 'thruways,' or 'super-highways.'" Leaving Erie, Pennsylvania, he commented:

I sought out U.S. 90 [actually, I-90], a wide gash of a super-highway, multiple-lane carrier of the nation's goods. Rocinante bucketed along. The minimum speed on this road was greater than any I had previously driven. I drove into a wind quartering in from my starboard bow and felt the buffeting, sometimes staggering blows of the gale I helped to make . . . . Instructions screamed at me from the road: "Do not stop! No stopping. Maintain speed." Trucks as long as freighters went roaring by, delivering a wind like the blow of a fist. These great roads are wonderful for moving goods but not for inspection of a countryside. You are bound to the wheel and your eyes to the car ahead and to the rear-view mirror for the car behind and the side mirror for the car or truck about to pass, and at the same time you must read all the signs for fear you may miss some instructions or orders. No roadside stands selling squash juice, no antique stores, no farm products or factory outlets. When we get these thruways across the whole country, as we will and must, **it will be possible to drive from New York to California without seeing a single thing.** [Emphasis added.]

This latter comment has often been quoted by critics who want to compare the evils of the Interstate System with the beauties of the old roads, such as the roads William Least Heat-Moon traveled in *Blue Highways: A Journey Into America* (Little, Brown and Company, 1982).

Alternatively, critics sometimes cite a similar statement by Charles Kuralt. In *A Life on the Road* (G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1990) he explained why he preferred the back roads:

If the traveler expects the highway to be safe and well graded, he may as well stay home. The little roads without numbers are the ones I have liked the best, the bumpy ones that lead over the hills toward vicinities unknown . . . . I keep thinking I will find something wonderful just around the next bend.

As for the Interstate System, he said:

The interstate highway system is a wonderful thing. **It makes it possible to go from coast to coast without seeing anything or meeting anybody.** If the United States interests you, stay off the

interstates. [Emphasis added.]

This comment was undoubtedly original for Kuralt. But Steinbeck expressed the thought first, and it was the stretch of I-90 from Erie to Chicago that made him say it.

The Rambler encourages critics to keep the two straight. Thank you.

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