

# KEN SLEIGHT at the MILLENNIUM

*FOR SELDOM SEEN, TILTING WINDMILLS HAS ALWAYS BEEN A WAY OF LIFE*

BY JIM STILES

*EDITOR'S NOTE: I penned this piece about my dear friend Ken Sleight more than a decade ago. We've all grown older since then--more cynical perhaps, but hopefully wiser. This is how life was playing with Ken at the turn of the century; for an update, see the postscript at the end of this story and Take it or Leave It on page 2....JS*

So here's the way it is with Ken Sleight. On Saturday evening Ken arrives home at his beloved Pack Creek Ranch after a five day pack trip into the depths of Dark Canyon with a bunch of greenhorn tourists from back east. It's been a grueling week. One of the paying guests walked off the edge of a cliff and shattered his arm and Ken and the rest of the group spent part of a day carrying the groaning man to a pickup point and a waiting ambulance. "I wish he hadn't done that," Sleight says, shaking his head. "I don't really even know how he did it."

On Sunday, he leads another small cluster of German Cowboy Wannabees on an evening ride into the pines above the ranch. It is a beautiful sunset and the guests are seeing country they had once only dreamed could exist. One of the men on horseback shouts something to Ken who is riding in the lead. The man looks distressed, but Ken just grins and keeps going. They all arrive back at the stables in one piece and the Germans head for the dining room. Ken grabs a bag of tortilla chips, a jar of salsa, and a beer, settles down in front of his computer and calls me on the phone.

"Stiles! This is Ken."

"Ken where are you? How's your story coming along?" I ask. His next column for the Zephyr is due on Monday and I haven't heard from him all week.

"I'm working on it right now; it's about the waste dump in Blanding," he explains. "I should have it finished by morning. If it's okay I'll just leave the disk in the usual place on the porch."

"Sounds good. What time are you coming by? Maybe we can get coffee."

"Oh...sometime around three or four."

"What? Three in the morning? Again?"

"Yeah...I've got to be in Salt Lake by ten. I'm going to a meeting on draining Lake Foul."

"Okay...but when are you going to sleep?"

"I'll sleep later."

Ken Sleight will be 70 years old on August 16.

Ken (Seldom Seen) Sleight.

That is the way it is with Ken Sleight. It's the way Ken has always been. He has tilted more windmills than Don Quixote could assault in ten lifetimes. He never gives up. Hell...he never stops moving. And he rarely loses his sense of humor along the way. Ken Sleight truly takes a licking and keeps on ticking.

His passion for the canyons and mesas and mountains and desert skies of



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southern Utah is unquestionable; his devotion to protecting those wild places, unshakable. You might think by now, after decades of fighting government bureaucrats, close-minded conservative rural Utah politicians and bickering cross-purposed environmentalists, he might just throw up his arms and give up. Just turn the sword over to someone else. But Sleight is not ready to relinquish the sabre yet...not yet.

Ken was hardly raised in a radical environment. He grew up Mormon in conservative Bear Lake, Idaho near the Utah border. He served two years in the army and saw combat in Korea with the 48th Field Artillery Battalion. When he was discharged from the service, he returned to the West, graduated from the University of Utah in 1955, got married and took a job with the Firestone Tire and Rubber Company in the accounting department. Ken showed such promise, Firestone sent him to Logan as a Manager/Trainee. He wore a bow tie almost every day.

But he was faking it. He may have looked like manager material to the big shots at Firestone, but Sleight's destiny had already been sealed four years earlier, even if Ken didn't fully know it yet. In the summer of 1951, just before his induction into the army, Ken took a float trip through Lodore Canyon on the Green River. With him on the boat was Blaine Buzenbark, a nephew of the great river runner Bert Loper, and Jim Dean, who had rafted with Loper before his death in the Grand Canyon in 1949.

The experience on the water was like nothing Ken had ever known. And as the current carried them downstream, he and his friends spoke of a special place that Ken had never seen---a place called Glen Canyon on the Colorado River.

From that moment Sleight was determined to go there and be a part of it. In 1955 Ken bought three rubber boats for \$50 each and began taking private trips through Desolation Canyon and, for the first time--the first of many times--into Glen Canyon. Although the Firestone people hadn't been told, this place, he knew with absolute conviction, would be the soulful center of his life. He could already imagine no other.

He spent weeks on the Green and Colorado, learning the trade of river running. "I never worked for another outfit. I learned by trial and error until I thought I was ready to hang my shingle." He started taking Boy Scouts down Glen in the summer of 1955 and in 1957, Ken Sleight's "Wonderland Expeditions" went fulltime. He quit selling tires forever.

The next seven years were in many ways the most idyllic and beautiful times of Ken's life. Year after year he floated Glen Canyon, taking hundreds of passengers along at thirty-five bucks a piece for a week's worth of adventure and indescribable loveliness. "I ran about 15 trips a year. In those days we just loaded everybody in an open pickup truck and hauled them down to the river. Of course none of the roads were paved back then. The road from Hanksville to Hite was always...interesting.

"We launched from the old Hite Ferry. We didn't need permits...we just went. But then there weren't too many people on the river in 1956 either."

There was hardly anyone on the river in the 1950s. Glen Canyon was one of the most remote

places in the continental United States. It "belonged" to a handful of original river runners who shared a special love for the river and for each other. They were a family--Harry Aleson, Al Quist, Moki Mac Ellingson, Buzz Hatch, Jim Dean, Blaine Buzenbark, Katie Lee...Ken. The river was quiet. There was no scramble for campsites. When they met up on the river, they threw their groups together.

The Family could have gone on like this forever. But like a bad memory that sits in the back of your brain and refuses to leave, even on the most glorious of days, the very sight of those magnificent tapestried sandstone walls could cause a dull ache in Sleight's heart. There was not a moment during those seven blissful years on Glen that Ken could gaze at the shimmering river and forget it was doomed.

Downstream, 150 from Hite, construction of Glen Canyon Dam began in 1956.

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**a place called Glen Canyon...**

When completed, the 700 foot concrete dam would block the flow of the river and a reservoir, Lake Powell, would rise behind it. The dam was insanity. Utter madness. And the work proceeded with methodical precision.

"For a long time, I just didn't think it would happen. I was young and it didn't sink in. A few of us organized against the dam and called ourselves Friends of Glen Canyon. But it was too late."

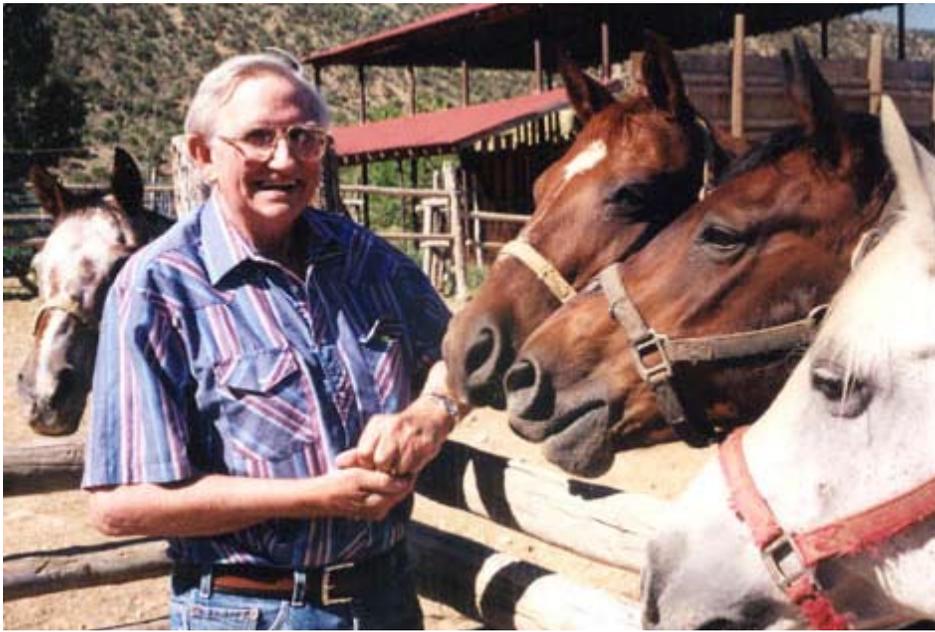
In the spring of 1963, the twenty ton steel gate on the west diversion tunnel was closed and the flow of the Colorado River was choked down to a trickle. The river in Glen Canyon began to die.

"It was probably foolish and masochistic of me to have hung around and

watched it happen. But I just had to. At first it would rise a foot overnight, and you saw things you loved go under. First it was Music Temple. Then it was Gregory Natural Bridge. Then Cathedral in the Desert. I'd think of those fools that said this was a good thing, that we needed this dam. Then I'd see Hidden Passage or some other lovely spot with no name go under...it was unbearable.

"And I'll always remember the sign at Rainbow Bridge. There was a Park Service sign along the trail and it read: 'God's Work. Tread Lightly.' The next week, the lake came up and buried the sign and the trail." By late 1964, the reservoir had reached Hite and Glen Canyon was gone...for now.

Ken Sleight was never the same after the drowning of Glen Canyon. Before



**And sometimes...sometimes Ken wishes he could just let go. Let somebody else fight the good fight... and let the world go hang..**

Lake Foul (he never calls it anything else), Ken had convinced himself that the common sense and decency of his fellow man would ultimately prevail and stop such idiotic and destructive follies as Glen Canyon Dam. He hasn't felt that way since. He became vigilante, the sentinel on guard...the first to throw himself in front of any scheme or project that threatened the red rock wilderness.

In 1963, Ken moved his family to the small southern Utah community of Escalante, in Garfield County. He set up his river company there and started taking land trips to the canyons and mountains as well. Although he wasn't much of a church-goer, his Mormon roots allowed him a certain degree of acceptance from the town. "After all, I must have been related to a third of the people who live there. The cowboys worked with me...rented me horses for my pack trips. I got along pretty well with everyone for about two years."

But in 1965, the proposed Trans-Escalante Highway, a multi-million dollar road project, drove a deep and permanent wedge between Ken and the people of Escalante. The proposed paved road would have connected Bullfrog Marina on Lake Powell with Page, Arizona, near the dam. The highway would have cut across the heart of the Escalante wilderness and the Waterpocket Fold--wild and lonely country.

Sleight was adamantly against the road from the get-go, and the town showed its ugliest side to him. He was threatened by anonymous callers and sometimes not so anonymous callers. He once found his old truck pushed off the road and into a ditch. The strain began to show on his family. By 1966, Ken's wife had endured enough and convinced Ken to pack up and move back to Bountiful. So the Sleights returned to suburbia and Ken supplemented the family income teaching school in the winter. But, as hostile as Escalante may have been, living in urban Utah was unbearable for Ken. He couldn't handle "the sameness of it all...I just didn't fit in." And so, in 1969, Ken left Bountiful, re-located to Green River, Utah and opened a bookstore in the old bank building. It also marked the end of his 14 year marriage.

Many of the friendships that would carry him to this day were solidified during those Green River days. Moki Mac Ellingson was there, working at Green River State Park, the Quists were often in Green River. He met and befriended Joe and Pearl Baker. It was a re-kindling of the family that had taken root in Glen Canyon more than a decade before. They were good times.

But there was another friendship born two years earlier, a couple hundred miles downstream at Lee's Ferry. Sleight was rigging his boats for a trip down the Grand. Ken's swamper noticed a man in uniform approaching the boat and she whispered to Ken, "...ranger's coming." The ranger extended his hand and introduced himself. "I'm Ed Abbey. Do you need some help?"

Ed and Ken spent the day together, loading the boats, and most of the night drinking beer and speculating how to get rid of that dam. It was a friendship that would last more than 20 years, to the day of Ed's death in 1989. A few years after their first meeting, Abbey brought Ken the manuscript of a book that was about to go to press. One of the characters, the longtime river runner with an attitude about Glen Canyon Dam, bore an uncanny appearance, both physical and metaphysical, to Abbey's good friend. Sleight never asked Ed, and Abbey never confirmed it. But ask anybody who Seldom Seen Smith in *The Monkey Wrench Gang* is, and they'll point to Ken Sleight.

Ken pleads the fifth.

In the late 1970s, Ken met Jane Hunter on a trip down the Grand. "She seduced me!" He still claims. "She moved to Green River with her horses, and later we decided to throw together and make the move to Moab." In 1983, Ken and Jane were married. Together they took one of the greatest gambles of their lives; in 1985 the Sleights became the owners of the spectacular Pack Creek Ranch, nestled in the foothills of the La Sal Mountains. It was touch-and-go for years. The financing was tricky and difficult and neither of them could be sure that the ranch would pay for itself. But 15 years later, the Sleights are still there and Pack Creek Ranch is known around the West for its quiet and peaceful beauty.

And from one of the little cabins that lie adjacent to the horse barns, Sleight continues to wage war on those bastards that would foul and despoil his canyon country. He does battle on the phone and on his computer. He's in Monticello one day giving Bill Redd and the rest of the San Juan county commissioners fits over nuclear waste and he's in Salt Lake City the next day, plotting strategy on Lake Foul. He's been a regular contributor to this publication since it first went to press in 1989.

But sometimes written appeals and appearances before politicians just can't take the place of direct action. In 1991, the BLM was chaining several hundred acres of pinion/juniper forest on Amassa Back mesa with huge D-9 Caterpillars, not far from the ranch. All of Ken's appeals to reason had fallen on bureaucratic deaf ears, and finally Sleight chose the road of last resort. Ken saddled his horse Knothead, rode to the top of the mesa and attacked the bulldozers. He and his horse pulled up just short of the blade and for a few precious moments, stood the big machinery down. The event got full coverage on the Salt Lake television stations and the publicity it generated led eventually to a moratorium on chaining.

Now what? What fires up Ken Sleight in 2000? For the last decade he has been a high-profile champion of Native American rights in San Juan County, although the some of its citizens haven't been too enthusiastic about Sleight's protestations on behalf of the Navajos. "Why doesn't Sleight keep his nose out of here?" a few grumble. "Why is he riling up the Indians all the time?" Why? Because Ken Sleight likes to rile things up. *That's* why.

Recently the movement of nuclear waste to the uranium mill south of Blanding has been a particular sore point with Ken. "It's an atrocity. They've done no studies to ascertain liability or the danger that the waste poses. It's a travesty. We ask for more information and all we get back is lies and more lies."

He stands foursquare behind the Utah Wilderness Coalition's proposal and hopes that "more enlightened minds" will make it a reality. But number one on his list never changes: the removal of Glen Canyon Dam. "It's an optimistic view, but I'd like to see it happen in my lifetime. Maybe that won't happen, but it will come down. One day the decision will be made and the guys with the jackhammers will go to work."

And sometimes...sometimes Ken wishes he could just let go. Let somebody else fight the good fight. He thinks it might be nice to just sit back and write his book and let the world go hang..."But then here comes another issue. There's always another issue. Those issues always catch up with me. And you have to remember that one voice can make a difference. Your voice is heard and then joined by other voices. And pretty soon you have a chorus of voices."

Gripped by a light and fitful sleep, I turn in my bed and hear the outside porch door creep open. Then footsteps on the concrete just outside my window. It's Sleight. I roll over and check the clock...4:16 am. I smile dreamily and think to myself, He's late...Ken should have been here sixteen minutes ago. But as I hear his retreating footsteps and the door close behind him I know I can sleep assured: With Seldom Seen on the warpath at 4:16 in the morning, Glen Canyon Dam doesn't stand a chance.

*POSTSCRIPT: That was a decade ago. Since then, Ken has become a bit disillusioned with mainstream environmentalism. He lost a long battle with the Utah Chapter of the Sierra Club to actively pursue the decommissioning of Glen Canyon Dam and now worries that environmentalists have lost their passion. (see page 2 and Take It or Leave It) Ken has also dealt with some health issues--he successfully waged a war against cancer; then just a few months later, Ken was seriously injured when a horse fell on top of him. Still Ken carries on. Whether you agree with Ken Sleight or not, you cannot help but admire his passion and his dedication to the things he believes in...JS*



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**My friend Ken Sleight and me...we're survivors. We're too ornery to shut up...**

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**Email: what are you...nuts?**