

REFLECTING ON ED ABBEY & 'DESERT SOLITAIRE'

---LLOYD PIERSON, *National Park Service Ranger, retired* (photographs by the author)

EDITOR'S NOTE: Over 20 years ago, Ed Abbey's old boss, Lloyd Pierson, offered his unvarnished and unabashed views on his seasonal ranger and we printed them. Now, two decades later, since we offer them again...JS

The late great Edward Abbey wrote, as most effective writers do, from personal experiences. He did change the names and events to suit his story line, a literary cop-out which avoided many things: historical truth, law suits, aggravated friends and relatives, belligerent bureaucrats and sadistic politicians.

In many of his works, self-identified as "novels," he used a park naturalist's approach to his descriptions of the natural scene, its plants and animals. All are set in the real southwest—Colorado, Utah, New Mexico, Arizona, and West Texas, which he continued to view and appreciate with the same wonder and dewy eyes that many newcomers, at first at least, have upon their encounters with the expansive elbow room of the southwest desert. Ed's love affair with the southwest lasted until the end, in spite of sojourns to Hoboken, the Everglades, and other nefarious and decadent places. Somewhere, out in the Arizona desert, under a pile of rock, his body lies for eternity and perhaps eventually the total confusion of some poor innocent archeologist who will get blamed for digging up a Native American. I can hope that he left an identifying note with the body.

Desert Solitaire, first published in 1968 by McGraw Hill, was Ed Abbey's sky rocket burst into literary and environmental fame and glory and, incidentally, money. He had written other things, but this one put him on a golden plateau from which he never had to come down. He became a guru of the college and Sierra Club earth protector cult.

So much for adulation. The purpose of this missive is to straighten out some of Ed's fiction which is based on facts or at least to present these facts as actually happened and as we knew them. Future analysis of Ed's writings need these facts so they many better understand his approach to writing. This is not to say that this will be a psychological, sociological, cultural or any other deep mind-penetrating analysis and tearing apart of his writings—only and attempt to set some details in their proper place in time and history lest someone use his writings as pure history.

Desert Solitaire was written about a time Ed spent in southeastern Utah. He presents it as one year. In actuality, he spent two summers at Arches National Monument (now park) in the years 1956 and 1957, plus other time before and after this period up until *Desert Solitaire* was published and after it reached the public. In the original *Desert Solitaire*, he compressed the characters of several people who worked with him at Arches into two characters: Merle McRae and Floyd Bence, the superintendent and chief ranger. But these characters were primarily, as he admitted to me and was obvious to anyone who knew us, Bates

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Wilson and myself. The "Merle" probably came from Merle Winbourn, our independent and ultra-competent maintenance man and road foreman. "Floyd," most likely, a frequent corruption of Lloyd and a natural transposition of my name most frequently found on the junk mail I received at the time and still do.

In the latest edition of *Desert Solitaire*, the twentieth anniversary volume put out by the University of Arizona Press in 1988, (apparently unafraid that Bates and I would sue, or perhaps thinking that I, like Bates, had passed on,) he used our real names for his original McRae and Bence characters. I don't know about Bates—he died in 1983—but I was somewhat flattered. On the other hand, it's a hell-of-a-way to achieve a celebrity status—a character in a book!

Which brings us to the point of this friendly exposition. Once real, live people

are introduced into a work of this type, some of the writings will be presumed to be historic documentation in some literary and historical circles. At the risk of taking the bloom off the good writings of dear Abbey, Ed that is, I feel I must tell "the rest of the story" as that noon-time radio commentator says, so that our progeny may better understand the workings of Ed's mind, if at all possible, or at least the truth of the matter, if they are still indeed interested. The real stories are almost as interesting, though hardly as well-written as Ed's.

The chapter in *Desert Solitaire* entitled "The Dead Man at Grand View Point" was based on a real traumatic and sad event. A gentleman from Stockton, CA, 69-year-old Clinton Kjar, parked his car off the road near Upheaval Dome so that he could take photographs of the dramatic scenery there. H.R. Joesting, a U.S. Geological Survey geologist working in the area, noticed the parked car on Sunday, August 11, 1957. It was still there on Tuesday, so Joesting notified Bates Wilson who notified Sheriff John Stocks and a search began that afternoon.

Kjar apparently had wandered along the rims of Holman Springs Basin and Trail Canyon, a branch of Taylor Canyon, taking photographs. Feeling ill, he sat down under a shady pinyon tree along the rim, placed his camera in his lap, and quietly died in one of God's more beautiful pieces of real estate.

In 1957, although this was San Juan County, The Grand County Sheriff had the responsibility for law enforcement. It was isolated country, with dirt roads and no signs, as the Bureau of Land Management, who administered the area, had yet to assume any responsibility for anything but cows, sheep, and grass. The world was reading about the beauties of the area through articles in *National Geographic* and *Desert Magazine* and the restless lovers of the great out-of-doors were starting to explore a land that not many of them understood, let alone were prepared to enter and a community that was not ready to handle their type of reaction. For example, Mr. Kjar left his water supply in his car.

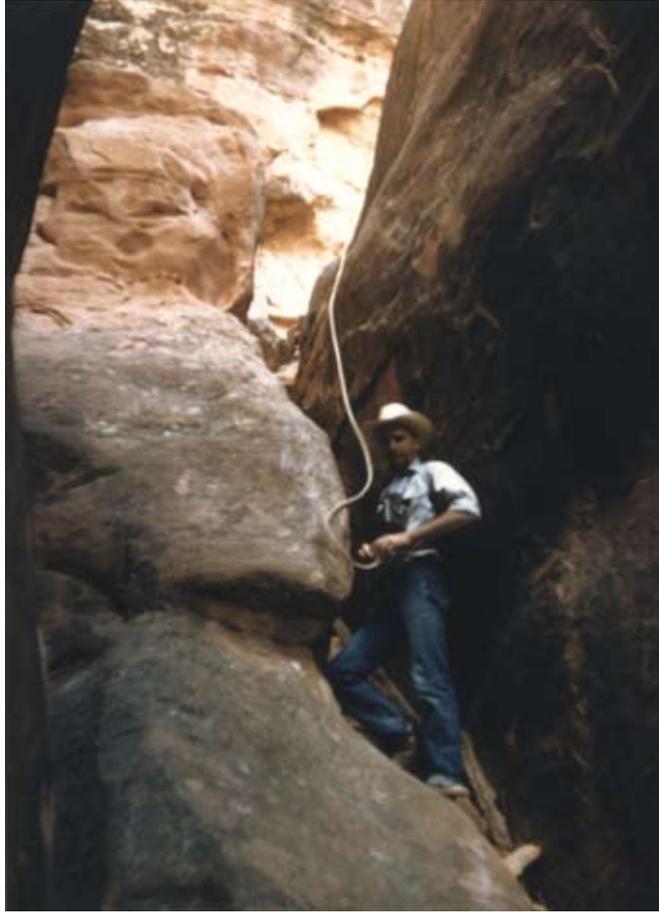
Sheriff John Stocks was hardly more prepared than his visitors, as he had no real search and rescue organization. So he called upon Bates Wilson to provide help. This meant over two days of search, using Ed Abbey, his brother John, who was a seasonal ranger at Natural Bridges that year and in Moab on business, Bates' son Allan or "Tug" as he was known, and myself. Tug was a volunteer college student, as were Harold Barton and Johnny Stocks of Moab. Deputy Wesley Barton, Lewis Kjar, the son of the dead man, Mrs. Lewis Kjar, Mr. and Mrs. Ben Bagley of Midvale, UT were also in the party. Most of the people were there the second day, the day of discovery. Tuesday, the party consisted mostly of the Sheriff, Bates, Ed, Tug and myself, with perhaps one or two volunteers. Wednesday I remained at the office, while John Abbey took my place.

The Tuesday party spent the day searching up and down the rim near the vicinity of the car. Tug repelled down a fifty-foot cliff to the ledge below, seeking what we were almost certain was a corpse rather than a live, but wounded, human being. The high temperatures and elapsed time cruelly indicated this to be the case.

Tug Wilson's dangerous cliff-hanging was in vain, as were all our efforts that afternoon. Late in the day, I did smell a strange, sweet, rotten odor I hadn't, in retrospect, encountered since the bull dozer accidentally dug up the dead Japanese soldier near our mess hall on Okinawa back in 1945. I was too tired out at Upheaval Dome to make any sense out of the strange scent at the time. Only later did it fall into place.

The next afternoon at 1:30, John Abbey found the body on the rim of Trail Canyon, two miles from the man's car. The sheriff notified the county coroner, who drove out in his hearse. Eve with a liquid-proof body bag, it is a most unpleasant task to put a body in a bag and carry it, in this case, a half mile to a waiting vehicle. The desert heat and internal microbes quickly bloat and blacken a body beyond anything recognizably human. I am certain the tension of the occasion was relieved by gallows humor as Ed indicated in his version of the episode. But I wasn't there and my feet aren't that big—shoe size 10 1/2—is that big?

The dead man's son was quite philosophical about his father's passing. The old gentleman died doing what he liked to, taking photographs in a place of beauty, although I suppose he really didn't want to cause all the trouble he did. At least Ed got an inspiration and a good piece of literature out of it.



In Ed's version, he mentions being called from headquarters by radio to go on the search. I don't believe we had the luxury of a park radio communication system at that time. He had a radio out at the Balanced Rock, where he resided in a small trailer with his wife, Rita and one-year-old son, Joshua, but it only played commercial stuff and not National Park Service jargon. The only radio we had was for communication with the general superintendent in Santa Fe or Globe, AZ, or wherever he had his office at that time. It was an old Navy crystal operated set, obtained from surplus property, like much of our equipment at the time. The Antenna was an aluminum pole stuck on a Coke bottle for a base insulator and guyed with other insulation.

I entered on duty at Arches in August of 1956. Ed had been hired early that summer. I replaced Robert Morris and I never loaned Ed one of my park service shirts. Couldn't have, as I didn't have that many of those expensive, self-purchased, National Park Service uniform shirts by Frechhelmer.

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The final paragraphs in *Desert Solitaire* indicate that Morris took him to the train at Thompson. Contrived, for Morris wasn't at Arches the end of the summer of 1957, I was. Besides, Ed had a car, a wife, and a child to move, but it did make a good ending for a good book.

The summer of 1957 must have been too traumatic for Ed, for it was his last. Other than the search for the dead man, he suffered the indignation of seeing the start of the road building into Arches. His peace and tranquility were interrupted by rescuing a man with a broken hip not a week after the search for the dead man. Several other incidents must have convinced Ed that Arches was too civilized and accident-prone for his lifestyle.

As he wrote in the introduction to the first edition, Ed apparently was not aware of how much input the superintendent in the small National Park Service areas had in the 1950s and 60s in the all-inspiring Master Plan. Superintendents, like Bates, had the time and the interest in exploring the areas they administered and becoming intimately acquainted with every hill and canyon and problem that might occur. Consequently, they wrote the Master Plan based on a few vague constrictions set by Washington and the regional office. When planners were involved, they not only wrote the Master Plan, but stirred up enough local and state support to get the money to carry it out.

By the time of the publishing of the latest edition of *Desert Solitaire*, Ed must have wised up to the fact that Bates and I, and others before us, had actually done the planning for the roads and developments he so hated and objected to. He eliminated the introduction which was so kindly towards the "working rangers in the field" and substituted a preface in which he further decried the "industrial tourism," told the history of the writing of the book, and made a lot of self-explanatory remarks.

Ed was a good ranger. He did pick up garbage, clean outhouses, patrol the roads picking up trash and talked to tourists in his own inimitable manner. We never had a complaint from the visitors on him. He did show up the second summer with a beard, but cut it off, perhaps because Bates asked him. I had told Bates there was nothing against beards in the regulations. He was black-balled by the regional office in a subtle manner that next spring when they issued a directive that anyone thinking of hiring Ed should contact them first. He must have joined some suspect organization (Sierra Club?) in those days of Senator McCarthy and his communist-hating paranoia.

There were no specialists in the small monuments in those days. Everyone did the basics. Ever see a superintendent clean out a pit toilet today, or a ranger, or even an administrative type? No way!

Those were marvelous, carefree days in the 1950s, but it would have been presumptuous and bitter-hearted to have kept it all to ourselves. There were and are other almost no less spectacular places to enjoy that were not developed or on the tourist-oriented maps. People need parks, else we all get a little crazier than we already are. Lots of rangers, Ed included, felt like the park area they worked in was theirs alone and that the tourists who visited them were a public nuisance. Some of us never felt that way, even though some tourists can be a real pain at times. We tended to emphasize the "service" in National Park Service. My management philosophy was always, if the park people are not smart enough to stay ahead of the Neaderthal or nonthinking, uneducated-about-the-outdoors tourist, then he/she/it doesn't belong on the job.

Ed, in reality, was part of the problem. By writing about the wonders of Southeastern Utah, he stimulated a whole horde of nature-lovers, real and self-styled, who would love Southeastern Utah to death and other who would like to take it back to the Pleistocene. He did a better job of advertising than the local Chamber of Commerce ever did, but if Ed hadn't done it, someone else would have; someone no so eloquently persuasive or understanding of the problems in desert environmentalism. Fortunately, some of his outdoor philosophy has stuck and struck a chord among certain segments of our population. Unfortunately, he has stimulated others who consider themselves "protectors of mother earth," but ain't.

Ed was not a demonstrative person when he worked at the Arches. He always struck me as somewhat quiet and reserved with an ironic sense of humor. He loved to gig us about paving the entire monument and calling it Arches National Moneymint. His remarks in *Desert Solitaire* about my dreading my transfer to the cannonball circuit resulted from his finding me at Appomatox Courthouse one day and was a way of kidding me about being there. I actually somewhat enjoyed the appointment, although I did plan to get back to the southwest one way or the other.

Some of his characterization of Bates was not accurate either. Bates did have a real ulcer and I don't think he ever attended the University of Virginia.

Ed always told us he was a writer and a poet, but he never bragged about his work, although one of his early works had been made into a movie. We took his writer talk with a grain of salt. If we had known the power of his pen, we would have had Ed writing our usually dry governmental reports rather than picking up garbage. Wouldn't that have set the regional office on its collective ear?

Former Park Ranger, Archeologist, and Curmudgeon, Lloyd Pierson, still resides in Moab, Utah. The Zephyr publisher estimates Lloyd is now about 240 years old...give or take. And somewhere, Cactus Ed is either grinning or grimacing---it was always so damn hard to tell the difference...JS

For more photos of Arches NM in 1957, view the WordPress version of this story...

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