

# Cactus Ed's Last Joke...

## (continued)

*"Except for the far-scattered towns and cities, most of the border could be easily 'sealed,' a force of 20,000, or ten men per mile, properly armed and equipped, would have no difficulty—short of a military attack—in keeping out unwelcome intruders."* 12/17/81

He wrote frequently about the subject closest to his heart and loins—his sex life. He offered these guidelines for finding the perfect female (from Confessions, Sept 14, 1966)

*What does feminine beauty consist of?*

1) *YOUTH; between 15 and 30—ideal childbearing age, and most normally found in conjunction with...*

2) *GOOD HEALTH; bright eyes, glossy hair, clear skin, sweet breath, full and normal body development, strength, agility, sexual appetite, good disposition and attractive figure...and...*

3) *GENETIC FITNESS: a corollary of the second, above, usually implying straight and regular features (at least in the European races), intelligence, good health, shapely (meaning healthy) limbs, absence of any physical or mental deformities*

*Taken altogether, these three attributes make up the sexual attractiveness of the human female.*

**That's the kind of comment that would bring much of his fan base to its feet, because the assumption was always that he's talking about somebody else. He must be talking about conservative Republicans. But as he approached the last years of his life, Abbey expanded his aim.**

For those women who loathe being stared at by their male counterparts, Abbey had this to say, to the *Arizona Daily Star*:

*Men enjoy looking at beautiful women—always have enjoyed it and always will. What of it? Most women enjoy being admired by men....This form of sexism is as normal, natural and wholesome as sex itself.* 6/15/83

In 1966, he offered in his journal "A Modest Proposal...that honorific prostitution should be viewed as a plausible stepping-stone toward the ideal utopian society of free love, liberty, personal fulfillment and the most human, humane world now imaginable."

He proposed, in part, "apprenticeships for young girls—professional training in the finest arts of love...all fees paid directly to the girls...and most important of all: that 'whore' becomes a laudable, respectable, honorific term, equivalent to courtesan, geisha, mistress, artist."

While Ed loved to talk about sex, he devoted a fair amount of his journal entries to the rest of the world. In 1972, he wrote, "I am utterly disgusted with this country, with this fat smug brutal people. I hope and pray that the wrath of God, if there is a God, will destroy this nation soon. We deserve it, just as the Germans deserved it.."

That's the kind of comment that would bring much of his fan base to its feet, because the assumption was always that he's talking about somebody else. He must be talking about conservative Republicans. But as he approached the last years of his life, Abbey expanded his aim.

He was often quoted for saying, "The only thing worse than a kneejerk liberal is a kneepad conservative." But in 1988 he devoted a page in his journal to "Yuppie Liberalism." In part he noted:

*They love Negroes, Mexicans and Indians (our official minorities), but prefer not to live near them or send their children to their schools.*

*They support feminist fantasies but ignore discrimination against young white working class males (affirmative action).*

*They support civil rights but seem unaware of or indifferent to the concentration of wealth and power in America (i.e. one percent of the population controls thirty-four percent of the country's wealth, while ten percent controls sixty-eight percent) as a threat to democracy. (NOTE: Abbey wrote that 24 years ago!)*

*They promote economic Growth while ignoring the effects of Growth upon our air, water, soil, wildlife, open space, wilderness, etc.*

*Neo-racism, yupster liberalism, New Age liberalism.*

And just two months before his death, when his last novel, *Fool's Progress*, was reviewed unfavorably in the *National Review*, Abbey wrote in his journal,

*Never thought I'd be attacked in the National Review from the point of view of the most standard, doctrinaire, conventional chickenshit liberalism—but this is it. Exactly the kind of cant and sham and hypocrisy, intellectual dishonesty and moral cowardice, that has turned me finally against 'liberalism' in general.*

His last salvo. Two months later, Abbey was gone. In the almost 20 years since their publication, it's rare to see any of these "Abbey at his most Candid" quotes appear anywhere in the social media or in any popular reviews of his work. For those who think it's somehow disrespectful to include Abbey comments that fail to mesh with the PC image that's been created for him, or that cause the reader to feel uncomfortable, keep in mind it was Abbey himself who allowed his journals and letters to be published. He wanted them to be read and discussed. He did not want them sanitized. That's who Edward Abbey was.

In the second decade of the 21st Century, Abbey Lives.

He lives in his books. He lives on YouTube and on Facebook. His fans adore him, or who they *think* he is. But is this the world and the West that he cherished and loved? Is the New West compatible with his vision of wilderness and wide open spaces?

In *Desert Solitaire*, Abbey offered a unique reason for establishing wilderness. "We may need wilderness someday," he proposed, "not only as a refuge from excessive industrialism but also as a refuge from authoritarian government, from political oppression. He warned that "technology adds a new dimension to the process," and believed (then) that the wilderness would provide escape from those kinds of Big Brother controls. For Abbey, wilderness was meant to be the one vast "blank spot on the map," as Aldo Leopold longed for.

He also wrote, "A man could be a lover and defender of the wilderness without ever in his lifetime leaving the boundaries of asphalt, powerlines, and right-angled surfaces. We need wilderness whether or not we ever set foot in it. We need a refuge even though we may never need to set foot in it."

In 2012, he would not recognize the wilderness he sought to protect (though in his journals, in 1987, he had already complained, "Too many tourists in the backcountry now.>").

Environmental groups, once dedicated to saving the wilderness that Abbey envisioned, now look at wilderness as a commodity to be marketed. What is



the economic value of wilderness? Environmentalists promote the notion of a swarming tourist economy. They've taken a favorite Abbey line: "The idea of wilderness needs no defense; it needs more defenders," and turned it into a Chamber of Commerce promo....the more money that can be made from the product, the greater the chance, in their estimation, of passing wilderness legislation. Nevermind what gets destroyed in the process.

Even grassroots groups, who once worked for the protection of the land and the satisfaction that they were honest participants in "the good fight," now parse their battle cries and make a \$100K a year. Their boards of directors are filled with wealthy fat cat industrialists that would have had Abbey deported if they could have found a way. Together, they support a massive recreation/amenities economy that brings millions of tourists to the once remote rural West and with it, untold quantities of money and environmental devastation.

Adrenaline junkies from the far corners of the planet descend on the canyon country to string slacklines, and rock climb and ride bikes off cliffs and BASE

jump and 'do' the river..

Abbey used to talk about "a loveliness and quiet exultation." Nowadays exultation makes a lot of noise.

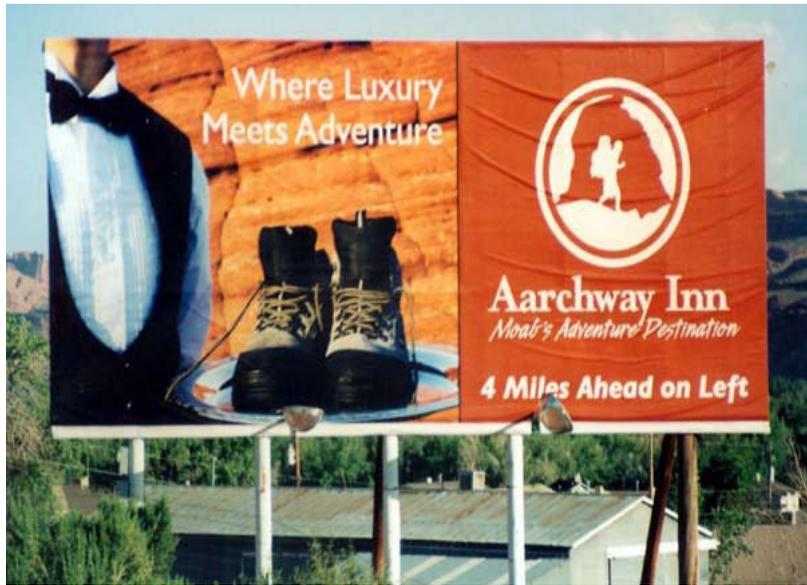
He admonished us, "to walk, better yet crawl, on hands and knees, over the sandstone and through the thornbush and cactus. When traces of blood begin to mark your trail you'll see something, maybe." When he talked about riding bicycles, he imagined them as a replacement for cars, not feet. He did not envision luxury "adventure tours" and hand-held guided hikes to "remote locations," barely a mile from their cars.

Abbey wrote, "We don't go into the wilderness to exhibit our skills at gourmet cooking. We go into the wilderness to get away from the kind of people who think gourmet cooking is important."

And he didn't envision a wilderness experience that included cell phones, smart phones, GPS units, or daily uploads to Facebook ("Here's what our sunset looked like tonight! Here in the WILDERNESS!" -----126 'LIKES')

Yet, many of these recreationists convince themselves they are the latter day disciples of a man they know practically nothing about, or bother to know.

About a year ago, an essay appeared in *High Country News* called, "What Would Edward Abbey Do?" The author and a group of friends had come across



a huge boulder, perched on the rim of a mountain valley. Michael Branch felt an urge to knock the rock from its resting place and send it tumbling to the tranquil scene below. It was an absurd notion and the damage it would cause was incalculable. But one member of the group spoke up.

*"Whenever I am uncertain," replied Francois in a thick French accent so utterly authentic that it sounded hilariously fake, "I abide by this principle: WWEAD." When he had finished pronouncing each letter with meticulous emphasis, the three of us looked at him quizzically. "What would Edward Abbey do?" he explained coolly.*

(The link: <http://www.hcn.org/blogs/range/rants-from-the-hill-what-would-edward-abbey-do>)

*What would Edward Abbey do?* Based on that rhetorical question and, I guess, the vague recollection that Abbey claimed he rolled something into the Grand Canyon—an old tire—more than 50 years ago, the guys decided it was a good idea. Branch exclaimed, "I was Sisyphus unbound, and I had a Frenchman's love of Cactus Ed to thank for it."

### **Abbey spoke of a "nation of bleating sheep and braying jackasses." He longed for a people with dignity and courage and he loathed the mindless "bleating" that he found even in his own readers**

I doubt Abbey would have felt comfortable being an accomplice from the grave, but he shouldn't have felt responsible either for their vandalism. Clearly, they'd learned nothing at all from Cactus Ed.

What Abbey always hoped we'd take away from his writing and from his life was a sense of ourselves as individuals, as men and women who could take control of our own lives and our own destinies. Abbey spoke of a "nation of bleating sheep and braying jackasses." He longed for a people with dignity and courage and he loathed the mindless "bleating" that he found even in his own readers.

He said, "If America could be, once again, a nation of self-reliant farmers, craftsmen, hunters, ranchers and artists, then the rich would have little power to dominate others. Neither to serve nor to rule. That was the American Dream." Most New Westerners love Ed Abbey and have no idea what that means. They've read all his books and they follow and "LIKE" his quotes on Facebook, but they understand far less than they realize.

Recently, I saw a string of comments about Abbey on the Facebook page devoted to his life.

A debate broke out of sorts—another one of those tedious comment threads-- as to whether Abbey would have liked the internet. One man was sure he'd have nothing to do with it; another wrote, "He would have found much to admire in the expression of democracy it affords." That was a fair point.

What Ed would have loathed is the idea that his most loyal fans might spend their days in front of a laptop computer, week after week, clicking the "like" button each time one of his EA crowd pleaser quotes got posted, when they could be outside, chopping down a billboard or taking a good long walk, or just watching a nice sunset.

Abbey may have hoped, when he left this world, that his time and effort here might make a small difference, might alter the future for the better in some way. But probably not. More than likely, he saw all this coming, just as he predicted so much that has already, sadly, come to pass.

But whether the world really does go to hell or not, or whether it's already there, for godsake remember who Ed Abbey was. Who he REALLY was. And don't just sit there, staring at your screen.

As Cactus Ed pleaded, "Throw a rock at something big and glassy..what have you got to lose?"

