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**‘OLD MOAB’ vs ‘NEW MOAB’—
Ed Abbey, Chilled Red Wine &
When to Clap at the Symphony.**

In 1952, when Charlie Steen discovered uranium and turned Moab from a sleepy little village to the most famous Boom Town in America, many residents were not happy about its sudden transformation. Moab was tucked away in one of the most remote corners of the country and was better known for its wind and dust and heat and mosquitoes than anything else. The uranium boom changed all that.

Maxine Newell was born in Dove Creek but came to Moab with the boom; she remembers the animosity of the old Moabites. “Every time I gripe about bikers,” she recalled in a 1995 Zephyr interview, “it reminds me of what people said about us. The old timers were just furious.”



Maxine noted that when thousands of fortune seekers descended on Moab, there were only four or five telephones in the entire town. People stood in line for hours just to make a call to their families. Water was only available every other day. Trailers sprung up in backyards to accommodate the overflow.

But eventually, Newell, notes, the changes were for the better. Better services, improved schools. More substantial infrastructure, paved roads. Moab would never be the remote pastoral community it had once been.

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In 2012, the Moab of mid-20th Century is rarely recalled, much less missed or revered. With a few exceptions, even the ‘Old Moab’ of 1980 fails to stir much interest for many of its new residents.

My own memories of my old hometown of almost 30 years go back to the late 70s, when Moab’s energy boom was on the wane and its tourist economy had not quite taken off. To coin a phrase from the title of a wonderful book about Jackson, Wyoming in the 50s, my early time in Moab was its “cocktail hour”—the town was still reeling from the collapse of the uranium industry and its more entrepreneurial elements had not yet geared up in earnest for a future that would take Moab, for better or worse, to the place it has become.

Is Moab a better place to live in 2012 than it was 60 years ago? Or 30? It was certainly a more provincial town back then, less diverse, less cultured. I will always remember a few

months in 1980, when its most famous—or perhaps most notorious—resident prepared to sell his home and move south to Arizona.

Ed Abbey called Moab home for seven or eight years in the 70s, when he and his wife bought a ranch-style house on Spanish Valley Drive. I met him soon after my own arrival. Abbey, always trying to lend a hand to young artists, convinced his publisher to use some of my cartoons in a book he was working on (ultimately called ‘The Journey Home’) and I saw him occasionally for the next five years, usually at the post office or at the Westerner Grill.

But by Spring 1980, Abbey was ready for a move. I heard he’d bought a home in Tucson and in early May, a friend told me that Ed was loading up a U-Haul truck and planned to be gone by the end of the week. I figured it was my last chance to say goodbye, so I drove out to his home, expecting half the town and a cluster of Abbey Groupies to be there helping out. Instead, I was surprised to find him alone, trying to wrestle a large wood dresser out the door.

I spent most of the afternoon there as we grappled with the rest of the furniture. Most of it fit, but he pointed to an impressive cache of timber in his garage, 2 x 12 lumber that must have been 20 feet long.

“Damn,” he muttered. “I’ll have to leave the beams behind. They’ll never fit in the truck.”

I asked him what he planned to do with them. Abbey grinned.

“You know...for the houseboat on Lake Powell...the adobe houseboat. That part of the story was true.”



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Later he invited me to dinner at the Sundowner (now Buck’s Grill). He asked me what kind of wine I preferred and I suggested he choose. I was loathe to admit that my knowledge of wine then was limited to Boone’s Farm and Cella Lambrusco (it’s only improved marginally since). He ordered a red wine and a big sirloin steak and we talked about Moab and the future.

A year earlier, the accident at the Three Mile

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Island nuclear power plant in Pennsylvania had cast a dark and ominous cloud over the industry and the price of uranium ore started to plummet. Layoffs at the Atlas mill were forthcoming and some thought Moab might just dry up and blow away. Abbey fancied the idea of a small self-sustaining “artist community.” How he thought such a community might escape the commercialism and hype that goes with such a self-proclaimed designation---well, he hadn’t figured that part out yet.

The wine came. I’ll take a guess and say it was a good merlot. But the staff at the Sundowner had seen fit to place the bottle in a bucket of ice cubes. Abbey was gracious enough not to embarrass the waitress but when she’d left, Ed grabbed the bottle by the neck and pulled it from the bucket.

“For Christ’s sake,” Abbey moaned. “Typical Moab. Doesn’t anyone in this town know that you DON’T chill a red?”

He dried off the bottle and put it under his jacket, hoping he could at least take the chill off. Then he realized that trying to warm the wine by wedging it in an armpit might be just as offensive to some as its temperature. He decided he was too thirsty for the merlot to await its return to 63 degrees.

As we sipped our icy drinks, Abbey recalled another recent Moab faux pas.

In those days, the Utah Symphony made an annual trip to some of the smaller southern Utah communities, usually in February and the dead of winter, and performed for the locals. In 1980, a visit to Moab by the orchestra was an event. Moab was still a working man’s town then. And yet, Moab music lovers turned out each year in record numbers.

The turnout in 1980 surely exceeded a thousand. Wives dragged their cowboy or miner husbands to the high school gymnasium where the symphony performed and even forced them to dress for the occasion. The number of uncomfortable males that night who spent much of the evening jerking nervously on their neck tie knots cannot be overestimated. Still, everyone, even the reluctant prospectors, seemed to enjoy themselves.

But we rural Utahns were all novices to this. Abbey recalled the moment when the symphony came to the end of the first movement and the audience broke into applause...

“How can these people not understand? You do...not...applaud...between... movements!”

I nodded solemnly. I didn’t want to tell Abbey that I’d only learned the error of my ways a couple years earlier, when I committed the same sin and my ranger buddy Jim Martin practically snapped off my hands at the wrists.

But finally, Abbey shrugged and laughed. “I guess it doesn’t really matter if they drink iced red wine and clap between movements. If they’ll just leave our canyons alone, Stiles.”

Years later, in a mild put down to the gentrification of camping, Abbey would write, “We don’t go into the wilderness to exhibit our skills at gourmet cooking. We go into the wilderness to get away from people who think gourmet cooking is important.”

Barely a year before he died, Abbey spent his last summer in Moab. I took him up to the Sand Flats one day to see the recently re-discovered “Slickrock Bike Trail.” Moab was on the verge of being transformed once again. Soon we would become the “Mountain Bicycle Capital of the World” and the old “Uranium Capital...” sign would be relegated to Woody’s bar.



New Moabites.. will someday find themselves waxing nostalgic for the things they’ve lost, as the world continues to turn over, again and again. Each generation loses something and gains something. A never ending trade-off.

But Ed had once promoted the idea of replacing cars with bicycles and was annoyed at first by my lack of enthusiasm.

“Hell, Stiles,” he complained. “You’re more negative than I am!”

“Well,” I defended myself. “Have a look first.”

Abbey and I drove his old Ford truck up the switchbacks above the town and he saw the hordes of pedaling recreationists who had made the pilgrimage to Moab. We watched the crowds fill the parking lot as the bikes fanned out over the vast expanse of sandstone; Abbey noted some of the cars and license plates—lots of BMWs and Saabs and Audis. Many California plates...Marin County. A rash of yupstermobiles from Crested Butte. Ed flashed back to our conversation of almost a decade earlier.

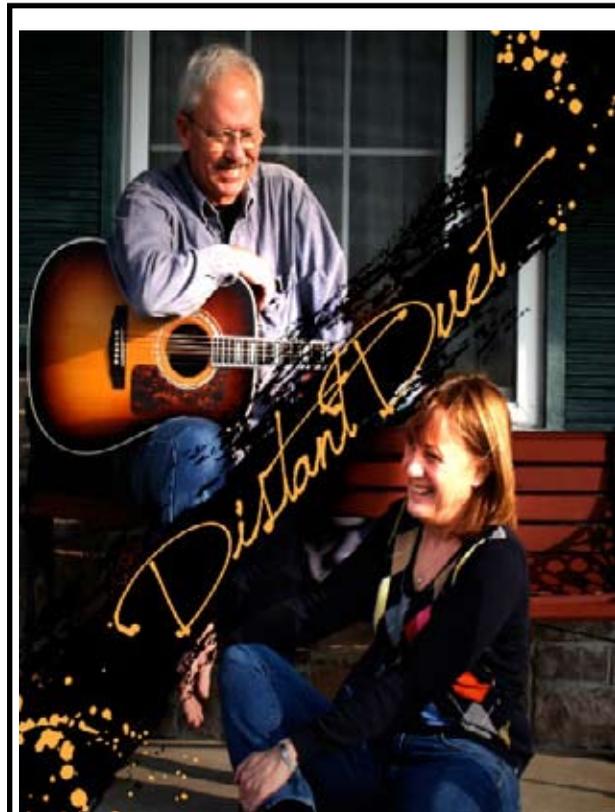
“One thing’s for certain,” Ed said. “When these people drink a red, they know not to chill it.”

Moab’s not the town that it once was, nor is it the town it will become---New Moabites, bewildered and amused at the sentimentality of people like me, will someday find themselves waxing nostalgic for the things they’ve lost, as the world continues to turn over, again and again. Each generation loses something and gains something. A never ending trade-off.

Is it worth the pain to lament what’s gone forever? Is it even worth remembering? For me, remembering is what keeps the fire alive. Without it, in many ways, I don’t even know what the point of all this is. Still the world lurches forward.

I finally gave up ‘clinging hopelessly to the past.’ My own life is beyond excellent these days as we try to create our own reality and blot out those parts of the ‘real world’ that are too overwhelming to contemplate on a daily basis.

But I can’t help but bask from time to time in the fond memories of Days that no longer exist. Someday, I think you’ll understand.



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