

'Toots' McDougald & the Summer of 1940

Jim Stiles

In the summer of 1940, Toots McDougald was a blissfully married young woman, living at the end of the world. When Dick Wright asked her to the Junior Prom in 1932, she fell instantly and forever in love. They'd both grown up poor and remarkably happy in a remote and forgotten corner of the American Southwest and that suited Toots just fine. In many ways she could not have asked for a more idyllic life.

She was born Marilee McDougald, but her Uncle Ab always called her his "little Tootsie" and the name stuck. Seven decades later she was still listed as "Toots" in the Moab phone directory. Whether Time sweetened Toots' memories or she just loved Life that much, only she can say for sure. But at 80, she could find little fault with her childhood.

"It was wonderful. We went on hikes and picnics and chicken fries. We had great watermelon busts; in fact, a man named Ollie Reardon planted a field of watermelons, just for us kids to steal. He said we could steal from that patch all we wanted, if we left his other patch alone...Everything was so free and easy. No pressures. No traffic. We didn't know anything about drugs. We thought we were pretty wild if we got a sip of homemade beer. My father's friend was a bootlegger...I'd tell you who it is, but they've still got family here."

The Big Cottonwood Tree on First South was, by 1940, already a local landmark. Toots could see it from the far side of the rodeo grounds which in those days was in the heart of town. Years earlier a circus had pitched its big top there and she and her friends had been amazed to see elephants and camels coming down Main Street. But a few weeks later, a strange and noxious weed began to sprout on the lawns of nearby homes. It looked like a green wagon wheel, she said, with "yokes" stretching for ten feet or more. Each vine produced hundreds of spiny seeds that stuck in the soles of Toots' bare feet and even punched leaks in her bicycle tires. Moabites called them goatheads and later it was decided that these nasty weeds were left behind by the circus. "Well the damn things must have been mixed up with the hay, because pretty soon those nasty little goatheads were popping up everywhere. I've got no use for goatheads at all." By 1940, goatheads were a plague on Moab's lawns and gardens and its citizens would still be fighting them a half century later, with Toots their most ardent foe.



hands until it was all blended. Then he could just pinch off a piece to bake... there never was a single lump in those biscuits."

Toots and the family stayed at the cabin for weeks at a time, just down the trail from what would someday become the most famous natural stone arch in the world. Most locals called it "The School Marm's Bloomers" but Toots had her own name. "I called it the 'Old Man's Pants' because it looked like they cut the top off a man and just left his feet and legs." Later the Park Service named it Delicate Arch. "We used to horseback up to the arch. We never saw anyone except other cattlemen from time to time. Jim Westwood had some cattle out here and a man named Frank Graham did too." When the National Park Service hired her step-dad as the monument's first custodian the pay was not too lucrative. "In those days, they called them 'dollar-a-year men.' You sure couldn't make a living on that."

By 1940, Toots had set aside her riding jeans for a dress and domesticity. But the real world seemed very far away. It was hard to imagine, standing at the corner of Main and Center Streets that much of the "civilized world" was embroiled in yet another world war. Radio reached Moab, even in the 1930s, and Toots remembered hearing her first broadcast on Bish Taylor's old Crosley radio. They could hear the news—Hitler's Blitzkrieg had crushed most of Europe that spring and in June, the Nazis marched through Paris. Roosevelt was preparing the nation for war, but it all seemed so abstract in this remote rock outpost.

The November elections were approaching and Roosevelt faced Republican Wendell Willkie. South of Moab, sculptor Albert Christensen was so impressed with both candidates that he proposed to build a massive Rushmoresque bas relief tribute to the two candidates. He completed a working model near his "Hole n' the Rock" home and Toots and Dick drove out for a look. It was the last time anyone in Utah felt compelled to honor both a Republican and a Democrat in such a fashion. Later, when the government land agency obliterated his work because it was on public land, Albert reluctantly gave up his plans for a giant sculpture and hated the federal

government thereafter.

President Roosevelt had won Utah's votes in 1932 and 1936 and most Utahns felt safe and secure under his leadership. But a few years earlier, FDR

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In 1940 Toots had fond memories of her summers at Turnbow Cabin, in what would become Arches National Monument. Her stepdad, Marv Turnbow, a prominent rancher in the 20s and 30s and the first custodian of Arches when it became a monument in 1927, filed the first homestead papers on the ranch around 1915.

"We used to leave Moab in the morning on our horses and ride up Courthouse Wash for five or six miles. There was a good horse trail that would lead up to Balanced Rock and down into Salt Valley and the cabin...and we'd bring most of our food. We'd bring canned milk, and to this day, I can drink canned milk right out of the can. And flour and salt and coffee. And things Mother canned. We couldn't keep chickens out there or the coyotes would get them."

"And Dad used to make flour sack biscuits. He never used a pan. He'd roll up the sleeves of his long-handled underwear which he wore year-round. He'd scrub his hands and he'd get this sack full of flour and roll the edges back. Then he'd form a hole in the flour...just smooth it out like a big bowl. Then he'd put in some baking powder, some salt and some shortening and mix it all around. Then he'd start adding water, a little at a time and just keep working it with his

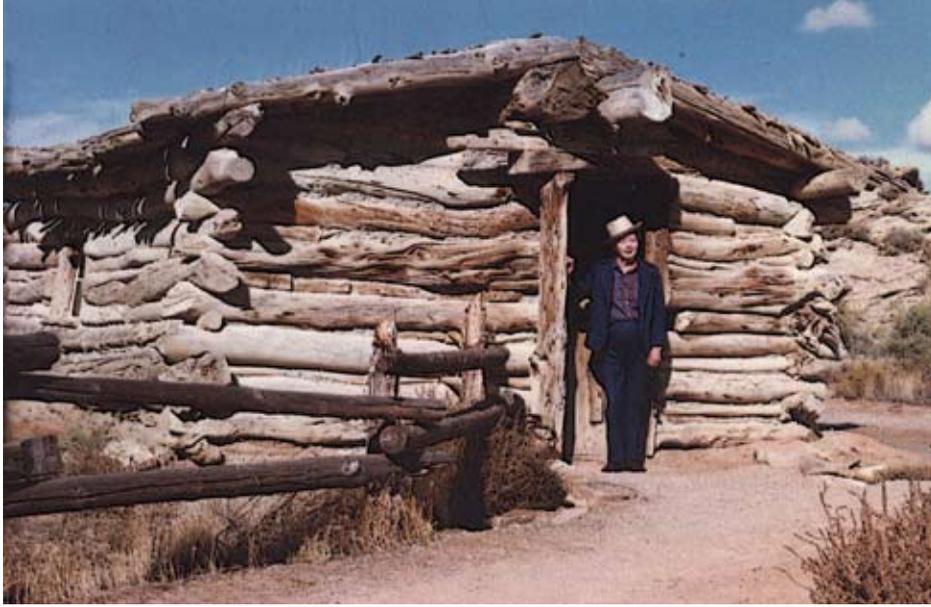
had created some animosities with southern Utahns that would last for decades. His Secretary of Interior, Harold Ickes, proposed a vast 4.5 million acres national monument in the heart of the Colorado Plateau. It was to be called "Escalante National Monument" and would have straddled the Colorado River for more than 200 miles, from Moab all the way to Lee's Ferry. Its boundaries would have encompassed all of what is today's Canyonlands National Park, Grand Staircase/Escalante NM and Glen Canyon National Recreation Area—all that and with one significant difference: the 1936 monument would probably have stopped any serious consideration of a dam at Glen Canyon.

The issue dragged on for years, with Utah officials like Governor Henry Blood fearing a behind-the-scenes maneuver by the federal government. Blood would sound a prophetic note when he warned the Utah congressional delegation in 1939: "Some morning we may wake up and find that the Escalante National Monument has been created...and then it will be too late to forestall what we in Utah think would be a calamity."

Elsewhere few Americans thought the new monument would be a calamity.

Very few Americans spent much time thinking of southeast Utah at all. Most had never heard of it. The 1940 census showed that Moab was home to 883 residents and was the seat of government in Grand County. Roosevelt's Works Progress Administration put unemployed writers and photographers to work, compiling travel guides to all 48 states. Among their observations in the Utah Writers' Guide:

"Moab is the commercial center of an extensive sheep and cattle country, and since 1930 has achieved importance as a point of departure for scenic attractions in southeastern Utah. Though isolated, it has a small business district, selling everything from hay to gasoline to malted milk and liquor---the only 'legal' liquor in the county. Squat red adobe houses stand neighbor to more



TOOTS McDOUGALD in 1987

pretentious firebrick houses. In the evening, neon lights illuminate the business district, but after midnight, except on Saturdays, the town does a complete 'blackout.'"

At Arches, Custodian Hank Schmidt filed his monthly reports to Southwest Monuments Superintendent Hugh Miller, whether anybody noticed or not. Southeast Utah's "importance as a point of departure for scenic attractions" was sometimes lost on Hank. "The majority of our visitors are of the hardy variety and don't seem to mind desert roads," Hank noted. "It is possible that with the help of the CCC maintenance crews (Civilian Conservation Corps, another FDR-invented agency), we will be able to keep the sand dunes from causing the visitors too much trouble...The Salt Valley road, to Delicate Arch and the Devils Garden sections, is passable but very rough."

Still, to Hank, it looked like business was picking up. In late May 1940, Hank announced, "Two of our previous visitor records were broken this month. The total number of visitors, 553, is greater than that for any month on record, and the number of people, totaling 224, who visited the Windows Section on May 11th, set a new record for a single day's travel into the area."

A half century later, 553 visitors might enter the park in 30 minutes, if they could pay their \$10 entrance fee fast enough.

The Depression had reduced mining to a trickle but occasional stories in Bish Taylor's always optimistic Times-Independent suggested that a mining boom lay just ahead. Oil exploration picked up some as the threat of war seemed more likely. In 1940, Howard Balsley still managed to eek out a living, selling uranium to Vitro Manufacturing Company, which used pigments derived from Balsley's product in ceramics and pottery. Nobody else was interested in competing with Balsley for the uranium market. A decade later, all that

would change.

In 1940, the road to Moab from Crescent Junction was still dirt and gravel and was "still slicker than snot on a glass door knob" when it rained. Plans to improve and pave the highway had been announced in 1939, but the coming war put everything on hold for "the duration." Nobody went to Moab for the weekend. It took a weekend to get there, even if they only lived in Salt Lake City. Kids rode their bicycles but the bikes only had one gear and coaster brakes and the frames were not made from titanium alloys. They didn't cost \$3000.

As Toots cut through backyards and orchards to Ollie Reardon's melons, she would not have seen men and women on the streets wearing skin-tight biking outfits of Lycra or Spandex. Toots was grateful to have anything to wear at all. Usually faded overalls and a cotton shirt were good enough.

Nobody did the Slickrock Trail except for the cattle that roamed the Sand Flats and the occasional rancher who was rounding them up. Nobody did The Daily but a few of Toots' friends who fell in to the Colorado River when they got too close to the eddies that swirl near Moose Park. More fishing poles than can be counted lie in the deep holes near the old stone picnic tables. And nobody did Satan's Throne except for the ravens that floated effortlessly by it and built nests in its crevices and watched the world below with casual scorn.

Backyard hot tubs with super-turbo-power jets were nowhere to be seen, but by late summer, the potholes in the slickrock above town that still held water could feel very warm. Toots was glad to share the potholes with the thousands of frogs that hatched each summer and sang her to sleep at night.

A fairly decent cup of coffee could be had at the Club 66, but skinny-double-decaf-mocha-lattes were unheard of and unpronounceable anyway---still are. Beer was available and it might have been home-brewed but it wasn't micro-brewed. And it was usually served cold but regular power failures drew occasional complaints from Moabites.

Hardly anyone in Moab owned a new car in 1940. The Depression made sure of that. Old cars and trucks limped along, held together with baling wire (Duct tape had not been invented) and horses still provided conveyance for many. Toots depended on her feet to get her just about anywhere her heart desired. Hummers and SUVs and ATVs and ORVs and even Jeep 4WDs were beyond the realm of Toots' imagination.

Toots McDougald's summer nights were unfettered by credit card debt and staggering mortgage payments or time-share condo schemes. Or late night indigestion from a Big Mac, or a Whopper, or a Soft Taco Supreme, or a Lean Cuisine frozen dinner. Her evenings were spent with Dick, watching the twilight fall over their little town, listening to the croaking and humming of frogs in Mill Creek or the rustle of a summer breeze through the towering branches of a cottonwood tree and believing that it would be this way forever. Her life was a quiet adventure in the best sense of the word and the experience didn't cost her a penny extra. She was blissfully ignorant of a future she would live to see and it would all happen within the span of her remarkable life.

CHRIS HELFRICH
Salt Lake City, UT

STEVE LESJAK



BECKY
MORTON
Oakland,

JOHN
DINSMORE
The Other
Side



TOM PATTON
Lawnchair Point, UT

JOHN
HARRINGTON
SLC, UT

JUDY MULLER
Pacific Palisades, CA