

Quiet Times at Arches National Monument

with Lloyd Pierson & Lyle Jamison: March 1989

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Arches National Monument was created on April 12, 1929, when President Hoover affixed his signature to an official proclamation. Since then the size, status, and popularity of Arches has increased drastically, from a meager 5,000 acres then, to over 70,000 acres today. Only a handful of intrepid and adventurous souls braved quicksand, blow-sand, and jagged rocks on the old unimproved entrance road to see the arches and slick-rock sentinels in those early days. In 1996 more than 800,000 visitors came to Arches.

Today, of course, the park is accessible by 28 miles of paved roads and made increasingly convenient by a "modern" fully equipped campground, running water, flush toilets, and an air conditioned visitor center, museum, and book store. Arches National Park has in many ways become a business, with its own mega-budget, computer room, and burgeoning management problems. The tourists swarm to the park seeking peace and quiet and often find long lines at the entrance station, waiting lists for park walks, bumper to bumper traffic, and a campground that fills by noon. And the rangers are slowly going nuts.

It wasn't always like this, of course. Arches National Park has led two lives--from its creation in 1929 as a national monument, the first 30 years were lazy, quiet times, with low visitation and primitive facilities (an "inadequate infrastructure" would be the term used today to describe the old dirt roads and shacks that passed as offices). The watershed year of 1956, marked the beginning of the end of those times. It's been getting busier, and more frenetic ever since.

Lloyd Pierson was the Chief Ranger at Arches from 1956 to 1961; Lyle Jamison worked as the administrative officer from 1959 to 1960. Lyle later returned to Canyonlands National Park in the early 70's. Lloyd and Lyle retired from government service many years ago; in January 1989, I coerced both of these guys to take a ride with me through Arches to remember and recall the "good old days," and observe the changes that have occurred over the years.

For Lyle and Lloyd, it's the road. "None of this was here of course," pointed out Lloyd as we rolled through the Entrance Station. "The paved road, the visitor center, all of it except Bates' house (former superintendent Bates Wilson who lived in the stone house



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now adjacent to the visitor center), was a part of Mission 66, the big nationwide construction project to improve the facilities at parks and monuments. Actually, the first section, where it switch-backs up the cliffs was begun by the C.C.C.s (Civilian Conservation Corps) in 1939 or 1940. Lloyd remembers that the first C.C.C. camp was set up on the site of the Atlas pond, "but they must not have been here long because they didn't get very much done." And for good reason. In December 1941, the United States entered the war and everything got put on hold for fifteen years.

"Before this road was finished, we had to go up the main highway several miles to a turnoff just beyond Seven Mile; then it was eight or nine miles up a dirt road over Courthouse Wash and past Willow Springs to the Wayside Exhibit, about the only interpretive visitor center we had."

The staff at Arches in the late 50's consisted of a superintendent, a chief ranger, an administrative officer and a maintenance foreman. In addition, the National Park Ser-

vice hired two seasonal rangers each summer, one at Arches, the other to be stationed at Natural Bridges National Monument in San Juan County.

The residential area at Arches looked something like a shanty town -- a remnant Hooverville from the Depression. Lloyd and his wife Marian had two kids, and when the Jamisons showed up with their four, the housing problem became critical. To remedy Lyle's problem, the park managed to procure a couple of trailers from Coronado National Monument. They situated the trailers face to face and built a "lovely patio" as Lyle called it in between. Lloyd lived "in an old shack. Bates tied a dilapidated haybarn to the side of it as the kids' bedroom. It was adequate."

The work that employees at Arches National Monument performed thirty years ago has changed some. It would be unfair to say their responsibilities were specialized. In fact, it would be ridiculous to say that. "Each of us took our turn," recalls Lyle, "at patrolling the road, cleaning the outhouses, picking up garbage and talking to the tourists."

Lloyd recalled the trail building projects that were one of Bates Wilson's specialties. "Bates really had my tail dragging on that trail work. He was a wiry kind of guy and

could work me right into the ground. I remember once, not long after I got here, Bates hauled me out to the Devils Garden to do some trail work. He said we wouldn't need to take water, that there'd be plenty of pothole water out there from the recent rains. Well, he was right, but the potholes were full of good stuff like deer turds and larvae, and algae, all kinds of interesting things floating in the water real good drinking.

As for law enforcement responsibilities: "Law enforcement? What law enforcement?" Lloyd chuckled.

"We had a gun, I think," speculated Lloyd.

"I think that's right," agreed Lyle. "But I don't think I ever issued you guys any bullets."

So much for crime.

When the uranium boom reached its peak, Lloyd and Lyle spent a lot of time chasing prospectors out of the park. "These guys never seemed to know where the boundary was," remembered Lyle. "They'd come out here with spray paint and little red flags, spraying the rocks and setting the flags to mark the claim. Sometimes, we'd be right behind them, pulling the little pennants and rolling over the spray-painted stones."



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It almost sounded like something Ed Abbey would do. The question naturally arose; what was Abbey like?

"When I got here in August of 1956, Bates had already hired Ed for the season. He lived by himself up at the trailer near Balanced Rock. When he came back the next season, Ed had a beard. Bates took one look at those whiskers and pulled me aside, wondering what we should do. I checked the manual and there was nothing in there that said he couldn't grow a beard. Bates figured we'd just have to live with it, and then Ed came along and shaved it off himself."

But the beard wasn't nearly as much of a problem as the "subversive" risk Abbey apparently presented to more conservative elements of the Park Service. "In the spring, a memo came down to us from the Regional Office, saying before you hire this man, check

with us. This was the McCarthy Era, and there was a whole list of organizations thought to be Communist or subversive by the House Un-American Activities Committee.

“Bates and I discussed it, and decided that when Abbey showed up, we’d show him



Marian and Lloyd Pierson, Park Service archeologist at Tonto, with Dale Fred Pierson, probably the first baby born in the area in 500 years.

the memo. When Ed saw it, he went straight to Santa Fe (the Regional Office) to set the record straight. I guess he did because he kept his job.”

Lloyd also recalled the size of Abbey’s head. “We couldn’t find an official NPS Smoky hat to fit him and for a while he wore a black cowboy hat. But Bates didn’t like the look of it and finally he made Ed start wearing a pith helmet with an NPS emblem. Abbey didn’t think much of that pith helmet.”

By 1958, Mission 66 funds started to roll in and the road and visitor center construction projects were underway. It was hard getting used to all that money after so many lean years.

According to Pierson, “Arches survived on surplus materials from World War II and later the A.E.C. (Atomic Energy Commission). That’s how we finally got a jeep. Until



then we’d use Tug’s jeep (Bates’ son) to get into rough country.

“Bates got into some trouble, because he had so much of this surplus stuff. He’d been poor for so long, that he just couldn’t resist all this stuff. I think the epitome of Bates’ habit of latching onto surplus, is when he came in one day with four or five sheets of quarter-inch thick stainless steel. He was going to make grills, until we found out that nobody knew how to weld stainless steel. That stuff was worth a small fortune, but I don’t know what they ever did with it.”

With the new construction came new problems, a taste of things to come. For starters, Bates, Lloyd and Lyle found themselves in the middle of a labor dispute. During the summer after work began on the visitor center, Bates and his son Tug were laying water line, when a large Cadillac rolled up. Dressed to the nines, the car’s occupants asked to see these two guys’ union card. Bates bristled -- “I’m the superintendent of this park, this is my son, he’s working for nothing and we’ll do what we want.” The union men retreated.

Later the Cadillac made a second appearance. According to Lyle, “these guys looked

like they came from the Mafia. They represented the Iron Workers Union from Salt Lake City. One of them was about six foot four and three hundred pounds. The contractors were using non-union labor to place the steel beams and the labor bosses weren’t too happy.”

By 1959, the first nine miles of paved road were completed to Balanced Rock, and a short time later, the new visitor center opened for business. Visitation began to climb and has never stopped. By 1961, over a hundred thousand tourists came to Arches. Today annual visitation approaches a million. With all that success, perhaps it was inevitable that bureaucratization of the park would follow. Still, both Lloyd and Lyle take a dim view of today’s Park Service

According to Jamison, “the Park Service is bloated, overextended. Everybody has office jobs, and nobody is in the park. It’s just a big bureaucracy, and that’s a shame. It used to be we knew everybody in the Park Service; we were like a big family, and our paths crossed all the time. Now, it’s a faceless organization.”

Lloyd Pierson sees the day when the Park Service will have to split itself up into smaller units before it sinks under its own weight. “They need to break it up into Natural Areas, Historic Areas, and then these damn Recreation Areas. And stop transferring people back and forth between them. Pick your field of interest and stay in it. None of us who wanted to be in a natural area felt that working in some horrible place like Lake Powell was anything like a National Park.

“The other problem with the Park Service is their management attitude. They want to manage everything, and sometimes the best way to manage is to leave it alone. Sometimes you’ve just got to sit on your butt and not do a damn thing. Let Nature take its course ... the Park Service doesn’t understand this. Mother Nature has been doing the job for four billion years. Sure, the Park Service can and should protect these places, but Nature really doesn’t need a helping hand. Only Time.”



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