

# 'CHASING the URANIUM DREAM'

## 1955 Moab Remembered

Brett Huelen

*EDITOR'S NOTE: While researching the internet about former Grand County Sheriff Hector Bowman, Mr. Bret Huelen ran across The Zephyr website. Bret and I exchanged several emails and I knew I needed to share some of his wonderful tales. Here are Bret Huelen's recollections of Moab and southeast Utah, in a different time and a different world...JS*

We moved to Moab in 1955 chasing the uranium dream with a brand new 1955 Dodge Power Wagon pulling a 24' Boles Aero travel trailer, and a 1951 Willys CJ3 with a little military jeep trailer. We initially prospected in the Circle Cliffs area where my Mother discovered a small deposit of carnotite. She was using a Geiger Counter or scintillator and watched the needle practically bend in two when it pegged out!

We moved in off the desert in the fall of 1955 when my brother Jeff and I were forced to begin school. We initially lived in the old P&W trailer park adjacent to the Apache Motel. My father Bradley also worked as a real estate broker in town and owned the old one horse Maverik gas station. As I recall he later sold it to Carl and Patsy Tangren.



Main Street in Moab looking north. 1955



Downtown Moab circa 1955. I believe that is Dads' 1955 Oldsmobile making the turn

My brother was working at Arches National Monument, for Bates Wilson, and was dating his daughter Cindy. As I grew up I worked at many of the surrounding ranches in Castle Valley (for the McComicks and Shumways), Fisher Valley (D.L. Taylor had just gotten out of the Army) and lastly on the Dugout Ranch for the Redds until such a time I began to realize that the rear-end of a shapely young girl was enormously more attractive than the same afore mentioned part of a cow.

Henceforth I decided to pursue other interests! I graduated with honors from Grand County High School in 1967. Okay that's a bit of a stretch, actually I was honored to have made it through the 12 years with a solid C+ average!

Unfortunately with my budding driving career being challenged frequently by the local Moab police department and the State Patrol I was encouraged by Judge Crist to seek employment in the United States Army. I presented my

draft notice to Judge Crist and he was gracious enough to return my drivers license as I left town in 1968.

Shortly before this happened a friend and I decided to go to the Grand View Drive Inn to watch a double feature presentation. We had persuaded an older (over 21) friend of ours to buy a couple of cases of long neck (3.2) Coors Beer for us which we proceeded to dedicate our best effort at polishing off before the end of the second movie. We were somewhat conscious at the end of the movies and decided to drive around a bit to sober up.

At that time I had an old 1960 Oldsmobile and after rolling down all the windows we took off down the river passing Mountain View Subdivision. Some-



A little south of town where we "squatted" until we were forced to move into town because of the cold weather.

We relocated into P&W Trailer Park adjacent to the old Apache Motel. We didn't even know what trailer trash was! Later on we moved onto a small lot across the street from the old Westerner Grill. I used to pick asparagus along the irrigation ditches and bring home for Mother to eat. I could look across the field and see Musselman's Rock Shop from our trailer.



where after that I ran off the left side of the road, overcorrected and launched off the right side of the road like....wait for it....a rocket! Perhaps in a likeness to the cherished Oldsmobile? I recall in extremely slow motion the jarring, crashing, engine over revving and drifting out over my buddies lap as I was ejected out the passenger window space.

Luckily neither one of us was injured seriously and we made it back to town, showered and after calling another friend we went to the Westerner Grill to drink coffee, sober up, and have some of their great chili.

We knew that Sheriff Bowman always stopped there for coffee and had rehearsed a somewhat believable story of being run off the road by an undescribed vehicle. When Heck came in I screwed up the courage to approach him and tell him what by now we had all come to believe! We all piled into his cruiser and drove out to the scene. After a short look Heck asked if we had been drinking and of course we vigorously denied it. Heck turned around and looked at me, asked me if I had learned my lesson to which I replied, "I sure have Sheriff Bowman". He said he wasn't going to cite me and my fine would

be whatever it cost to have the vehicle towed. I sold the car back to Van's body shop for the cost of the tow which curiously enough was who I bought the car from in the first place. Van couldn't believe what had happened to his prized Olds.

I recall when the two fuel tankers caught fire and burned to the ground in front of the old Phillips 66 Bulk Plant. We lived on the top of the hill directly behind the plant. Dad always got quite a kick joking about the fact that we were higher in elevation than Charlie Steen's house.

I still remember Tex McClatchy who began the jet boat cruises on the Colorado. Tex was one of my teachers in Junior High School on Center Street. I later worked for Tex and generally helped around the landing and with whatever maintenance on his boats he would allow me to do. As I recall his smaller boats were running single 389 Pontiac engines, the next larger ones were running twin 327 Chevrolets and the big boat boasted three 409 Chevrolets.

What a thrill it was for me when he would let me "man the helm" on the cruises down river. I can't think of a better place to grow up than in Moab back in those days. I will always cherish that time in my life and the experiences I had. Dark Canyon Lake was always a favorite place. I used to hang out at Musselmans Rock Shop and museum quite a bit. Still remember the tragedy at TGS. We sat outside our house and watched all the emergency vehicles running back and forth that night.

Mother worked for awhile at the Uranium Mill as a receptionist in the leaner times. I returned once in 1987 when I first came out of Alaska. It was in July and I recall hustling to try and hurry to get the power connected so I could turn the AC on in our trailer, we stayed at the RV park across from the Dairy Queen. After a short walk around town that evening after it cooled down it didn't take long to see how much had changed.

At daylight we were back on the road again and haven't looked back. I do want to make one more trip and show my new wife where I grew up. I know that Castle Valley is now overrun with ranchettes and a far cry from what it used to be. It looks as though Fisher Valley remains undisturbed and that is a good thing.

When I worked for the Taylors, D.L. had me out there with a little Ford tractor trying to dig irrigation ditches in the sagebrush. I never seemed to be able to get it through his head that water generally wouldn't run uphill. Being a teenager might have had a little to do with that assumption and mindset. I proceeded to get the Ford stuck in a mud bog, walked back to the ranch and fired up his brand new air conditioned John Deere, got that stuck as well and finally D.L. had to come out with a bulldozer to extricate both of them.

We parted ways shortly afterward and I went to work for the Redds where it seemed they had a better understanding of irrigation! I always check in on the Moab website from time to time simply to reminisce. After living so many years in Alaska and now in the Northwest I could no longer take the desert heat but I still have a soft spot for the red rocks. It amuses me that four wheeling has become a sport over there. We did all of that as a matter of necessity back in the day.

We had some "mining" operations over near Hanksville.. I recall we had stopped there on the way and filled up our water tanks and bags. Dad picked up a little gray kitten for us we promptly named Hank. My brother Jeff and I were teetering back and forth on a rock out near our claim and we didn't realize that Hank had come over to keep us company and crawled beneath the rock and we crushed the poor little thing.



Hanksville General Store. 1955

Dad had built an outhouse out of pinion boughs so Mother could have a little privacy. One afternoon she had gone in there and seconds later came screaming out the door. A fairly good sized rattlesnake had crawled in there to escape the summer heat. Dad killed the snake with a shovel and henceforth Mother always entered the outhouse with great trepidation.

When Mother found the petrified log loaded with carnite Dad drove back into town to buy some supplies. They were hoping there was a forest of buried trees loaded with uranium but as things turned out it was only one huge tree. Dad mined it all by hand, built an ore chute from 2x12's to get it down the hill so he could load it into the Power Wagon and military Jeep trailer, then we hauled it over to a ferry and crossed the river to an AEC collection site and sold it.

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Another fellow I remember from back then went by the name of Lloyd Smith. He was truly the old cowboy out at Dugout Ranch and kind of took me under his wing and taught me a lot. It used to amuse me that we would ride up to the top of a hill to look for strays and Lloyd would take his glasses off to see better. At the time it didn't make much sense to me but now that I'm about what his age must have been I understand all too well!

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