

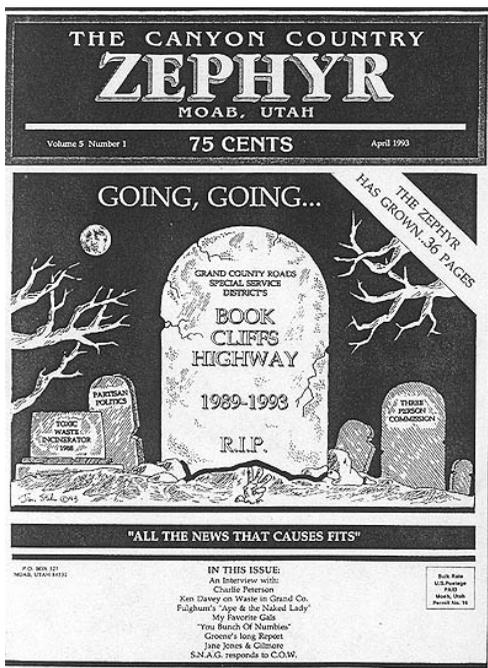
THE ZEPHYR CHRONICLES PART 1 CONTINUED

distance. He has to face his topics. That's how it was with David. In the 1990 county elections, David faced opponent Dave Bierscheid, another longtime Moabite and also a good guy. Bierscheid also opposed the highway, so naturally my vote went with him. On election night, Knutson won handily and the returns were interpreted to mean a clear victory for the Book Cliffs Highway as well. But when he asked me who I'd voted for and I told him 'the other guy,' I sensed that I'd really hurt his feelings—that I'd somehow betrayed our friendship. And as strongly as I opposed the highway, I felt bad as well. Had it not been for the highway issue, I might have voted differently.

In the aftermath of the election, Knutson and the other winner, Manuel Torres, took their victory as an absolute mandate. Some, including me, thought they'd allowed the win to go to their heads, and my friendship with Dave cooled. The Zephyr interviews ended and, in the next two years, as local opposition grew, David and Manuel became more intractable.

My greatest frustration was the commission's continued support of the Book Cliffs Highway. The Road District board continued to push forward and it began to have an inevitability about it, even as more and more people doubted that the project could be constructed for the price they were claiming. Still David Knutson was convinced he'd prevail and laughed at his adversaries. He reminded opponents that the Utah constitution offered no recourse if you didn't like an elected official. There was no recall process, no impeachment protocol. "All you can do," he said, "is shoot us." But, as it turned out, he was wrong.

Somebody, I don't recall who, gave the Utah State Code a close read and discovered a loophole. It was true that the state offered no process for removing a person from office. What the counties' citizens could do was change their entire form of government. The idea was stunning; it required the collection of signatures on a petition to force such a change. But once the movement gained momentum, it seemed impossible to stop.



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What few remember though is why the referendum was really initiated and what the driving force behind it was. It was not the Book Cliffs Highway. Before 1990, all counties in Utah were composed of three commissioners. Two of them were elected to four year terms but one commissioner term lasted only two years. In that way, two of the three commission seats, and the balance of power, were up for election every two years. No one could ever hold absolute power for longer than that without approval of the voters. But the state legislature changed that in 1990, making the length of all three seats four years. So when Knutson and Torres won, there would no longer be the option of waiting just two years to vote again.

As to motive, while opposition to the road grew, it was the commission's decision to appoint a friend as head of the Grand County tourist office that actually pushed many of the edge—but not me. It was a strange irony that the 'change of government' vote had nothing to do with the highway; it was about appointing Robbie Swazey. Some thought she would be ineffective in that position, which would have delighted me, and as the growing number of 'New Moabites' clamored for more professional tourist promotion, I found myself once again at odds with my own priorities—do I want the Book Cliffs road stopped? But at what cost?

I was surprised as voices of opposition to the Book Cliffs Highway grew. In 1989, virtually nobody seemed interested in stopping this project. At a public informational meeting, proponents easily swayed most of the audience and when Times-Independent editor Sam Taylor gave the highway his blessing, it almost felt like a done deal. But in the next four years, as the costs grew and as ethical questions arose, more people in Grand County began to question its feasibility.

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In November, the referendum prevailed. The 'old government' lost their jobs and in

February, a special election created the first seven-person "Grand County Council." It was supposed to be the beginning of a new era, and for a while it was. The following spring, the new council voted to dissolve the Special Roads Service District and re-allocated its funding to other county service districts that could use a revenue boost. It was--we thought--the end, once and for all, of the Book Cliffs Highway.

'OLD WEST & 'NEW WEST'---LOCKING HORNS in MOAB

Those first seven years, when we put out a paper every four weeks, were the hardest I've ever worked and were the most gratifying. I spent a week out of every month walking Moab's streets, talking to advertisers and whoever else I bumped into...actually, I can't say I always walked. Once my buddy Anthony from Poison Spider caught me driving from the post office to Back of Beyond Books, a distance of 50 feet. Actually I'd forgotten I was supposed to visit the book store and swerved at the last moment to park. But I admit...it looked BAD. Later the Poison Spider people gave me my own vintage one-speed Schwinn bike with a coaster brake.



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The monthly interviews were difficult but productive. I enjoyed the meetings and the conversations, but who wants to listen to politicians twice? That was what I had to do, of course, to transcribe them. The interviews lasted 45 minutes; the transcriptions five times that long.

I met many new interesting people who would write for The Zephyr, like Jack Campbell and Jane S. Jones and Rachel Shumway and Lance Christie. Even the ultra-capitalist Hank Rutter found a place in The Z. And in 1991, a fellow named Scott Groene introduced himself. He was the new SUWA (Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance) staff attorney and asked if he could contribute articles to the "canyon country watchdog" page. As you'll read elsewhere in this narrative, Groene and I became friends and shared very similar concerns for southeast Utah, at least back then.

When we finally got computers in 1992 and I was trying to learn how to use the evil contraption, it was usually Groene who calmed me down when I couldn't get a file to open and I thought I was on the precipice of the End of the World. "Calm down," he'd say. "Hit Control D...better now"

If Scott and I had one difference of opinion, it was my un-shared fondness for at least aspects of the Old West...AND 'Old Westerners.' In July 1989, I'd written about wilderness and the rural west:

'For instance, how could anyone dislike Lilly Mae Norlander? I don't care if she is against wilderness. She'll never be an enemy of mine.'

from 1991 Zephyr essay

"I support wilderness in Grand County and Southeast Utah and that declaration alone can get a guy on more residents' "enemies list" than anything else I can think of. There is no group more vehemently opposed to wilderness than the Western Association of Land Users. They oppose wilderness at all costs....With a few exceptions, WALU has no use for the likes of me.

"There was a time for me when the feeling was quite mutual. I regarded the anti-wilderness crowd scornfully. I had no use whatsoever for Ray Tibbetts who led the wilderness protest parade on July 4, 1980. Issues to me were very well-defined...very black and white. I was right and they were wrong.

"But during many of those years, I worked at Arches, lived at the park and really didn't know the people who lived and worked in this town. All that changed six years ago when I turned in my badge and bought a house and eventually started this paper.

"And what I discovered, as I set up interviews, and researched stories, and walked Main Street looking for advertisers, was that many of the "enemies" I'd regarded warily all these years were (gasp!) kind, decent, honest people just trying to get by in this world. They were likewise shocked to see that I had no horns beneath my fedora either. I realized that they too long for quiet Sunday afternoons on Main Street.

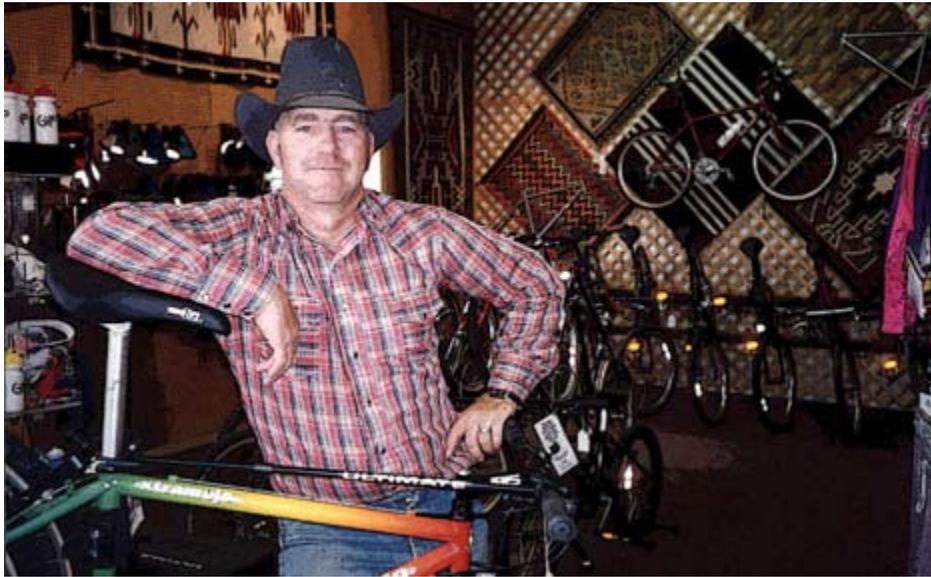
"Since then, I've had to take another look at WALU, not for their political or environmental philosophy, but for who they are. For instance, how could anyone dislike Lilly Mae Norlander? I don't care if she is against wilderness. She'll never be an enemy of mine. Or Ray Tibbetts. We still don't agree on development and wilderness, but we can

talk for hours about the country we both love.”

In 1993, I wrote my first editorial that openly questioned the wisdom of a “New West.” I called it ‘New West Blues,’ and it resonated enough with editor Betsy Marston at ‘High Country News’ that she asked if HCN could re-print it. In the essay I wrote:

“This is not just another complaint about our changing town— the New Moab. What’s happening here is happening elsewhere. And what’s coming may be bigger than even we doomsayers would dare predict. Barring a miracle, we are about to enter a new phase, the last phase, in the taming of the West. When it’s over it won’t be “the West” anymore. We all know “how the West was won.” What we are about to see is “how the West was done.” To use a recently popular expression, pretty soon, you can stick a fork in it. And all of us, no matter how much we love the country bear responsibility.’

For the first time, after wading through the hordes of tourists, I noted, “we came around a corner and saw local rancher Don Holyoak with a couple dozen cows. Smelly, stupid, fly-ridden cows...’stinking bovines,’ Abbey used to call them...I was glad to see them.”



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Many shared my conflicted feelings; others were not amused. My environmentalist friends loathed public lands ranching and the rural lifestyle, in general. It was a subject that Groene and I avoided most of the time.

Link to NEW WEST BLUES: <http://www.canyoncountryzephyr.com/2013/12/02/new-west-blues-by-jim-stiles/>

I never changed in that regard; nor did Scott. He saw rural westerners as an impediment to his designated goal—to create a vast Congressionally-mandated wilderness for southern Utah, and in that regard, he was probably right. Early on, I could see a strategy just beginning to form in the minds of ‘progressive’ environmentalists in Utah—if you could change the demographics of these rural towns, you can change the attitudes. If you can create a new community that supports wilderness legislation, you can get the votes to do it. From a political and strategic standpoint, it was a completely logical, even brilliant idea.



“You know what bothers me? It’s that what we really want is for all these ‘anti-wilderness’ types to leave. To give up their own towns.”

Still it bothered me. One day, after talking to Lilly Mae, I expressed my worries to Scott.

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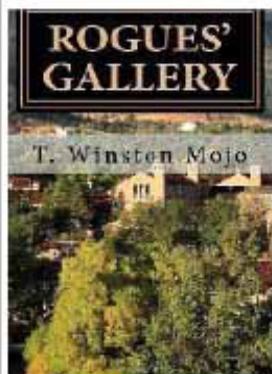
Groene stared out the window at the hummingbird nest that had been constructed on a nearby tree branch. Watching the young hummers was often preferable to arguing.

“The thing is,” I continued, “These are nice people, even if they don’t agree with us.”

Groene looked at me like I was Donald Duck. “What’s ‘nice’ got to do with anything? Our job is to create wilderness.”

“New Moab,” in my heart of hearts, was already an inevitability. For Scott and me,

next page...



ROGUES' GALLERY

My 27 years at Rocky Mountain University...

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