

ZEPHYR CHRONICLES..pt2

continued

It was called 'Cloudrock.' Though I still can't identify my 'deep throats' after all these years, a Moab couple had surreptitiously discovered and then copied a remarkable document. We subsequently obtained a copy of the Mesa Land Company's Development Proposal to the State Institutional Trust Lands Administration. It was amazing and, in their own words...

The Proposal.

"Our intention is to create a world-class wilderness destination resort community in the American Southwest for people who enjoy the natural beauty and cultural legacy of this region...The centerpiece of this community is Cloudrock Desert Lodge, an intimate luxury wilderness lodge that will set the tone and standard for the entire development. Our initial marketing efforts will focus on establishing an international awareness of Cloudrock and its location in Southeastern Utah...We expect our guests to return time and time again, finally deciding that this is they want to own a second or third home (sic). The high-end positioning of the lodge and its associated service amenities will serve to deliver top prices for the homesites and condominiums...We plan to spend the time, money and creative energy necessary from the inception to create real estate development that will deliver top prices."

The developer promised that Cloudrock, "will be marketed as a vacation community for affluent families and individuals. The Moab real estate market does not currently serve this segment well, with most developments targeted to a somewhat lower economic bracket."

They added, "the client base of Butterfield & Robinson represents an impressive cross-section of high-net-worth individuals, including corporate CEOs and executives, lawyers, bankers, entrepreneurs, entertainment executives and a growing number of Silicon Valley professionals."

I was so eager to get this information out there that I bought a full-page ad in the weekly 'Advertiser,' and called it a 'Zephyr Extra.' It would be weeks before I could pen anything in my own paper. But I was happy to spend the money and inform my fellow citizens what was happening behind their backs.

LINKS TO ZEPHYR CLOUDROCK STORIES

<http://www.canyoncountryzephyr.com/oldzephyr/dec2000-jan2001/takeit-jim-dec2000-jan2001.html>

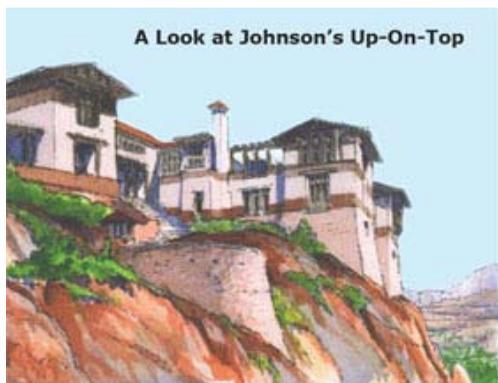
<http://www.canyoncountryzephyr.com/oldzephyr/dec2000-jan2001/cloudrot-advertiser-proposal.html>

<http://www.canyoncountryzephyr.com/oldzephyr/dec2000-jan2001/moab-junk-cloudrot.html>

<http://www.canyoncountryzephyr.com/oldzephyr/feb-march2001/takeitorleaveit.htm>

<http://www.canyoncountryzephyr.com/oldzephyr/dec2000-jan2001/takeit-jim-dec2000-jan2001.html>

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For once, the response of the community was loud and passionate. Many Moabites expressed concern about the project and what it might do to property taxes. A group of mostly young and relatively new Grand County residents formed the Moab Citizens' Alliance. They were particularly comforting to me. I still remember going to their first meeting. I think Howard Trenholme, the owner of the Red Rock Bakery, was moderator. Other leaders included Mark Sundeen and Matt Gross. Matt especially assumed the role of spokes-

person for the group and I had high hopes. I sat quietly in my seat, watching these new young activists; it was like looking at the future, I thought. I was encouraged and later several of the MCAers commented that they'd never seen me smile before. One insisted that previous to that evening, he never knew I had teeth.

For the most part, I felt it would be better if I stayed out of the process they were working their way through. My job was (and still is) to provide information and sometimes offer an opinion. How that information is used...that's completely up to the readers. But I was grateful for their enthusiasm and their intelligence and hopefully, their persistence. It was one piece of advice I offered freely: Be ready for the long haul. This issue wasn't going to be resolved overnight.

It was wintertime and I was on my hiatus, away from all things Moab. But I left town with high spirits. When I returned, something felt different. The MCA leaders spoke cautiously, warily, and without the kind of fire I had seen two months before.

On a web site called 'believermag,' MCA activist Mark Sundeen describes the work he and Gross did to fight Cloudrock. They had been involved in the 2000 presidential campaign but with Bush in the White House, they wondered where they might next exercise their skills. Here are a couple excerpts:

"...a New York company announced plans to build a thousand-dollar-per-night luxury hotel on a mesa just outside of Moab. The developers were allied with rich investors and with the state of Utah, and they arrived in town with a team of powerful lawyers... It was to be called Cloudrock, a name that dripped with fake Native American spirituality and back-to-the-earth opulence. Here was Big Money incarnate.

"In a small town like Moab, Utah, the levers of power are within the grasp of just about anyone willing to reach for them. Matt and I got ourselves appointed to something called the County Board of Adjustments...Matt discovered that the Board of Adjustments existed to hear appeals of land-use code decisions. For instance: the Cloudrock decision...We formed the Moab Citizens Alliance. We held meetings and hung fliers....We were a team. Matt had the ideas, and I had the words. Our press releases were picked up by papers in Salt Lake City and Colorado. Cloudrock was mentioned unfavorably in the New York Times. Matt was interviewed on the local news. We had an audience. My vanity, wounded by the tiny readership of my book, sprang to life. We fancied ourselves like Robert Kennedy or César Chávez, standing up for the little guy, staring power in the face and giving it the finger...But the town elders did not applaud our civic enthusiasm. The Moab Citizens Alliance was roundly denounced....

"We were defeated. (But) Matt quickly moved past our Cloudrock bruises."

'THE CLOUDROCK ANGER REDIRECT

http://www.believermag.com/issues/200710/?read=article_sundeen

I never doubted their passion, while it lasted, but their persistence failed them early on. And my memories of the early MCA Cloudrock Days differ from Sundeen's. To me, by April, it seemed the fire was waning for the new activists; I sat at a public meeting one evening, to hear Gross explain again and again, in effect, 'It's not that we are against this project. We just want to be sure it's done properly and according to the law.' I think the MCA folks were intimidated by the opposition and failed to understand what a long fight this would be. Had the MCA movement caught on, I believe it might (might!) have altered the direction of the town. The problem with Cloudrock was, it would be all or nothing. Often there is some room for compromise, but here, either you supported this massive development or you didn't. It was that simple. They were not going to down-

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scale the project to reach out to the middle income people. This was supposed to be an exclusive high-end resort community and, if built, that's what we would get.

A Great Debate, of sorts, was planned for the public radio station in Moab, KZMU, between Matt Gross and pro-Cloudrock (and anything else that can be promoted) supporter Rex Tanner. The program was moderated by fellow MCA supporter Howard Trenholme. I had just pulled into my driveway when the program came on the air. For the next 30 minutes, I sat quietly in my car, with my head and arms draped around and buried over the steering wheel, as Gross and Tanner somehow managed to agree on practically every aspect of the Cloudrock plan. It was all very civil and cordial.

Even Trenholme was surprised and I can still recall his words. Howard said, "Well, I expected there to be a lot of fireworks for this interview today, but you have both managed to find far more common ground than I would have imagined."

It sounded as if he was congratulating them.

As Sundeen notes in his narrative, "Matt quickly moved past our Cloudrock bruises," but the issue lingered for years. MCA, as a broad-based citizens group faded into history, almost as quickly as it came. But the group name was adapted by a handful of Moabites, mostly from the environmental group Living Rivers, and including Sundeen, who pursued Cloudrock in court. MCA lost its bid to stop the annexation of the state owned lands into the Spanish Valley Water and Sewer Improvement District in 2005. But efforts to thwart the project continued into 2008. Finally, the Great Recession of 2009 did what no one else could accomplish: it stopped Cloudrock in its tracks. For now, at least.

Other environmental opposition was negligible. Early on, as the Cloudrock development became better known and was required to submit itself to governmental and public scrutiny, my old friends at Glen Canyon Group of the Sierra Club weighed in on the issue.

On behalf of the group, Jean Binyon addressed its concerns to Michael Liss in a February 2001 letter. Binyon made it clear that, "It is our consensus that the best thing for Johnson's is no development at all."

Having said that, however, it was also obvious the Sierra Club had no intention of putting up a fight. "We realize you are making efforts to ensure that Cloudrock meets standards above and beyond Grand County's.... We realize you are well on your way to completing the preliminary plan, and incorporating changes becomes more difficult with the passage of time. Nevertheless, we hope you will be receptive to our concerns..."

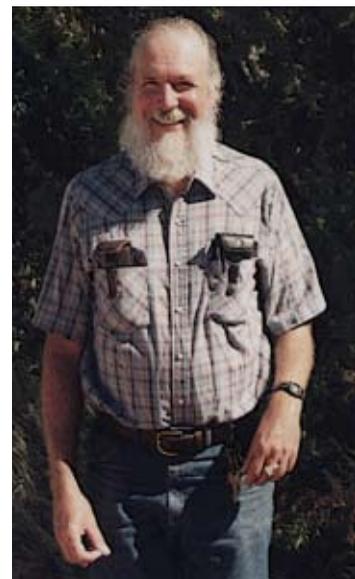
What kind of concerns did the Sierra Club have and what were their requests? Besides setting structures farther back from the rim of the canyon, Binyon made the following demands: "coloring roads to match the surrounding soil...parking lots colored to match the surrounding soil...utilizing medium to darker earth-tones, and non-reflective materials on all structures...outdoor lighting should be kept to a minimum..." They were literally cosmetic in nature.

Binyon also encouraged restrictions on OHVs..."Next to cows, (this is) the most damaging thing currently happening on the mesa. Please be explicit in not permitting their use on the mesa." Apparently, keeping out cows and OHVs was an acceptable trade-off for a massive multi-million dollar "wilderness" resort lodge and scores of condos and homes built on \$600,000 lots.

Liss's reply could not have been more accommodating, "I would be happy to discuss our project with you and members of your Chapter," and added enthusiastically, "I am a member of the Sierra Club and greatly respect the work being done around the country." No other environmental group in Utah even chose to express an opinion.

I was grateful that eventually Cloudrock faded from view, hopefully forever, and whether it was due to the Recession or the work of a handful of devoted Moabites, well, you can argue amongst yourselves. What discouraged me was the lack of wide-spread, broad-based participation in the process. The 'Moab Citizens' Alliance' failed to live up to its own expectations. Its young leaders discovered how difficult it was to rub against the grain of conventional thought. Difficult and time consuming. And discouraging.

Moab had dodged a bullet, but years later, longtime resident Lance Christie and sometime Zephyr contributor noted the changes that had occurred in five years without Cloudrock. In a letter to the Times-Independent, Lance wrote, "People who opposed Cloudrock have had their fears about land and housing price inflation come true without



any help from Cloudrock. In 1998, there were an estimated 399 houses in the county which were not owned by or occupied by Grand County residents. By 2005 we added 1,199 residences in the county, an average rate of increase of 4.6 percent per year, 55 times as fast as the county resident population and number of households, both of which increased by 0.84 percent per year. In 2005, about 1,029 residences, 20.8 percent of our total housing stock, is not owned or occupied by Grand County residents."

In the same letter, Lance praised Cloudrock's point man Michael Liss and suggested, "we should invite Mr. Liss and his associates to help us address the moderate-income housing problem in Grand County. They might well turn out to be able and willing to help us address a housing affordability problem they did not cause but which Cloudrock could make worse."

Lance was right about the price rise and the growing number of absentee owners, but I began to wonder if just the idea of Cloudrock with its promise of \$600,000 lots and \$5 million homes had created its own pork belly boom effect. It was in that short period, from 2000 and 2007, that housing prices in Moab went insane. If Cloudrock wanted to come here, others would too. And they would pay whatever price. It would become a purely speculative market. Moab was for sale to the highest bidders.

AND FINALLY...CANYONEERED

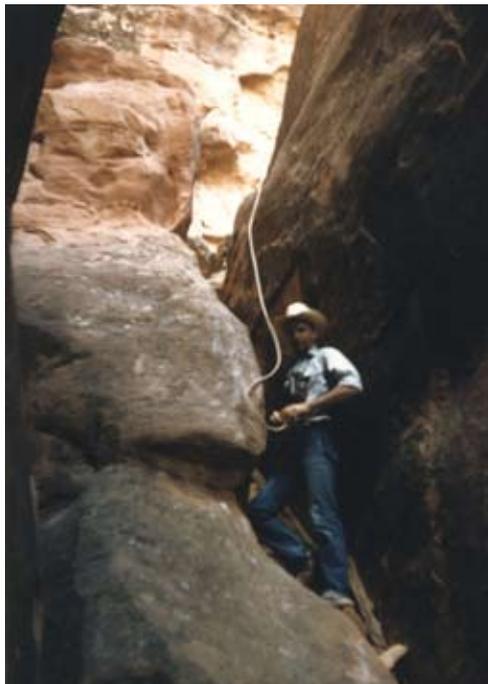
Just a month before the Cloudrock development plans came to my attention, I was having coffee with a friend of mine at the Red Rock Bakery. She'd just been on a complimentary 'canyoneering tour, a commercial cross-country outing at my old stomping grounds in Arches National Park. She told me that a new business in town was offering one day tours into the Arches, to a remote part of the park and the edge of a deep narrow canyon. The trip leader had then set up belay points and the group rappelled to the canyon floor. Arches had been my home for a decade and I knew its backcountry like an old friend's smile; what she was describing sounded familiar. Was there also an arch there, right on the edge of this canyon? Yes! She said.



Stiles near Abbey's Arch in the late-70s.

My heart sank. I knew instantly she was referring to one of those 'secret places' that a few of us knew of, but had pledged an oath of silence to protect. All the official protective designations the government can place on a cherished natural feature can help, but if nobody knows it exists at all...well, that's the best protection of all (and thus I also loathe backcountry guide books).

This was the arch that Ed Abbey had discovered in 1957. He had even referred to it in the old monthly reports and had named it. Twenty years later, my friend Reuben Scolnik and I would find it again. For the next 20 years we did our best to keep it as anonymous as this little corner of Arches had been before. But a book listing all the arches in the park went to press in the late 1980s and we knew, sooner or later, that our secret canyon



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would be visited by others. Still, as late as 1989, Abbey's arch was untouched. A couple months after Ed Abbey died, we put together a memorial service on the mesa above the park's west boundary. Among the speakers was Earth First! Founder Dave Foreman. After the service, I took Dave to the arch and we spent a long hour on the canyon's edge, remembering Abbey and wondering what was coming next to our beloved West. The canyon was as pristine and untouched as it had been a decade earlier. Not a footprint.

Foreman's life would change dramatically. Just two weeks later, he and other Earth First! leaders were busted in a long-planned FBI sting. Lawyers and long trials and plea bargains and prison awaited them. The timing could not have been more chilling—the end of an era in so many ways.

But I was sure Abbey's Arch would stay safe. That its remoteness would at least spare it from the crass world of commercialism. I turned out, yet again, to be very wrong. And none of my allies saw a problem. The strategy for 'saving' wilderness was changing...

NEXT TIME: "The Fork in the Wilderness Road"

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