

from May 2010

KEN SLEIGHT...In His Own Words

The Legendary 'Seldom Seen' speaks his mind...

It's almost looking like Spring at Pack Creek Ranch. The lawns are greening up. The horses are looking like they're feeling their oats after a long hard winter. Splashes of color—flowers! Dot the landscape. But where's Sleight? I check the house but he's not where he said he would be. Sleight on the move. I wander the grounds for few minutes, hoping to catch a glimpse of him wrestling with an irrigation sprinkler. No sign of him.

Finally I get back in the car and drive up the road to the incongruous sight of a steel Quonset hut set back in the trees. I see his truck, then I hear "Seldom Seen," even with my windows rolled up.

"Goddamn computer!"

I know how he feels.

There's my old friend of almost 35 years. He had been hunched over his desktop, frozen by frustration. But now, he unwinds his legs, props them across the desk and leans back in his ragged chair. Ken cups his hands behind his head and grins, "Stiles! How the hell are you?"

I met Ken Sleight at the Arches National Park visitor center almost 35 years ago. In the intervening years, I don't think he has ever failed to greet me in just that way. And incredibly, always with a hint of enthusiasm.

"How you doing Ken?"

"I've been sitting at this damn computer. I don't like all this computer shit but I have to learn how to do it. I don't really want to learn how to do 'new stuff' anymore. They tell you there's all this new stuff that a computer or whatever will do. But then you get it and you have to learn HOW to use it! I'm sick of updates! And the damn computer is always freezing up and I have to turn the whole damn thing off. You either have to be a computer whiz or have somebody around who is...and the money to pay them. And then you're broke so what's the point?"

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Ken isn't too pleased with the state of the world these days. Ken spent most of his life running rivers and leading pack trips. He never hesitates to note that he was a small businessman. It's BIG business that gives him heartburn that leads to heartache. He liked being 'small.'

"I used to think I could do it all myself. Even when I was running the river, I wanted to do it all myself. I never liked to spend a lot of money and if it all got too big, then I wasn't really in a business that I wanted to be in. I didn't like to send out pack trips or river trips when I couldn't go myself. What's the point if I can't go? So I kept it real low level...I'd hire an assistant or two but that's about it. If you're a small outfit, you get to be the creator. It's like The Zephyr. If there was anybody to blame it was you!

Ken did it all back then. He was the marketing man. He put together hand-made brochures that he printed on an old mimeograph machine. He did the folding and stuffing, he licked the stamps. On trips, he drove the truck, led

the horses, cooked the meals. Ken didn't really want any "assistance" when he cooked. The more his customers tried to "help" the less likely they were to eat. Ken used to take a stick and draw a circle around him as he prepared the meals.

"This is my kitchen!" he hollered, pointing out the crude circle to his customers. "Don't dare step inside it!"

Pack trips were no more complicated than that—stay outside Ken's circle!

"The biggest problem in the world today is that everything is so complicated. You have to go through so many things. There's just too many damn people and as a result, you have to be so organized it takes the fun out of living. Abbey and

I used to talk about where we'd go once this place is totally ruined. We'd just close our eyes to the changes and figured we'd go where we want. We talked about going to the Yukon once. Just keep moving. Keep moving.

"But really I don't know that that's the answer. I have Jane and my family and I couldn't just drag everybody along. But just me talking? I wouldn't be here.

"But I am here and I like it. I'll stick it out to the end, whether there are parts of it I don't like or not. We can still...maybe...protect some of it...eliminate some of the stuff we've screwed up. Maybe restore some of it. I always felt we could

restore Glen Canyon. The older I get, the less I feel we have much impact. It bothers me to no end to know you can fight like hell, we can organize little groups of activists, you put all your heart and soul into that, then here comes other mainstream groups who can overrule you."

In the late 1990s Ken Sleight and others tried to organize a "Glen Canyon Group" of the Sierra Club. Its sole purpose was to advocate the decommissioning of Glen Canyon Dam, a subject dear to Ken's heart. But Sierra Clubbers from the Utah Chapter hierarchy took issue with the groups's goal, even though the national organization had passed a resolution in support of decommissioning. Ultimately Sleight was drummed out of the group. It was the last time he would actively involve himself in a "mainstream" environmental organization. Here's Ken...

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"That Sierra Club deal really taught me a lot. One of the basic goals was to restore Glen Canyon. Our little group fought like hell to get established. But here comes the powers-that-be from Salt Lake that opposed our group. Then the national people say, 'Let's do it another way.' The group pulled away from serious Glen Canyon restoration...they thought going after restoration looked silly.

"Nowadays, there's no major project. They do clean ups and things. They did a fine job on moving the tailings at Atlas, but I don't see the green fighters in it that there used to be. It's a feel-good deal, the Sierra Club.

"What the large environmental groups don't want to get into is that they load



their boards of directors with people with lots of money and those people with lots of money seem different than we are. Some of them are doing good jobs... not letting their interests get in the way. But others...how in the world can they NOT let their interests get in the way? So as a result, some of these groups, like the Grand Canyon Trust..SUWA...I think they pull their punches. They won't take on some issues. White Mesa. Nuclear waste. Glen Canyon... Anyway I think it is legitimate to question the big money on these boards.

"I've thought a lot about this. After they got all their money in the first place, whether it's by oil or gas or uranium or plastics, they've created these monsters. Then they come back and want to donate. Are they trying to make amends? How are they making amends? If these big outfits and people want to make amends, then REALLY make amends. From a standpoint of conscience, if they say, 'I want to do everything I can to atone for my past sins,' then okay. But most of it is, 'I give so much to charity,' and it makes them look great. But if they are really repentant, they ought to get their shovels and go right to work."



"Pack Creek Ranch and Moab will be plastic," Ken says sadly. "Nothing but plastic, and Pack Creek with it. Civilization is already headed that way. It IS that way. Plastic is a good word. Plastic individuals. Not really individuals anymore. People will go where they've been trained and taught. Control. Wilderness is supposed to be having the space to be free."

More than anything, Ken worries about too many people. When Sleight was running tourists down Glen Canyon in the 1950s, he never dreamed the recreation industry sleight2010-cwould become what it is today. And if it's this bad now, what will it be like in another 20 years?

"They keep trying to bring more people here. That spells doom for wilderness. More people. More people. How many times have we talked about that? More parking lots. More of everything. We keep building and building. Down at Zion they're about to build a bigger tunnel for the east entrance road. 'Improving' it! Adapting to handle ever increased numbers, all for the comfort of the people. Now everybody associates that with preservation. We've got to 'improve' it so we can get more people in. And that's what even Obama is saying. I'm an Obama fan in a lot of ways but not this. And look at the offshore drilling now! It's too much compromise. And nobody is talking about reducing the number of people."

And what about wilderness? It is the biggest environmental battle in Utah and has been for 20 years. Why do we save wilderness? Ken has some opinions...

"Now its how can we use IT...wilderness that is. Not wilderness for its own merits. I've got an idea for wilderness. Lets carve up a big section and NOBODY goes in there. Leave it to the animals and nature. NOBODY! Goes in there. I admit I'd be the first to want to go in there and I'd probably get caught. Why not just have places on the earth where nobody can go in. Not even scientists! They're not going to allow that. I always like Dave Foreman's idea to even take wilderness off the maps. Big blank spots. JUST LEAVE IT LONE! That sounds good to me."

If there's one subject that riles Ken more than anything else these days, it's the case of Tim DeChristopher. In December 2008, DeChristopher attended a federal oil and gas lease auction in Salt Lake City. He found himself bidding on

the leases though he had no money to pay for them. In effect, he successfully killed the sale and a month later, the Obama administration voided any future sales of those lands near Moab. But DeChristopher was charged with two felony counts anyway. On June 21, DeChristopher goes to trial.

Ken gets hot just thinking about Tim...

"Here is a case of an unjust action..the oil and gas leases...and they've shown it was the LEASES that are unjust. The government itself has said it was wrong. The law suit from SUWA shows part of this. But here was a young guy who saw all this and said, 'nobody is doing anything...this is unjust,' and rightfully he did something about it.

"What a glorious thing, acting against an unjust action. Then the BLM and the Justice Department takes him to task. He acted. What a wonderful thing for him to do.

"It's haunting to me that nobody, no environmental group is commenting on it. I talked to Groene (executive director of SUWA) and to Liz Thomas and I said, 'Where's your support?' No support. QUIET! They said, 'Well he was doing all these things and we were doing this thing and his actions interfered with our actions..in the name of the environment. And I said, 'where is the grassroots.' I know that SUWA's lawsuits were beneficial but SO WERE HIS ACTIONS!

In the same way. The same fervor. Law suits are so slow and DeChristopher accomplished his purpose. He won!

"But I don't think any of these big outfits like SUWA will even send a delegation to the trial to protest. Groene says he's not going to do anything or make a statement. They're afraid it makes them look like they condone that kind of stuff. But for me, the most important thing to realize is an unjust law. That's what this is about."

Ken gets frustrated at times. He blames his age more than anything else. The fire is still there, but...

"The older you get, the less sharp you are. You feel all your aches and pains and you don't quite have it like you used to. I can blame it on people not listening to me. Well maybe the problem is, I'm not putting the word out appropriately. Maybe there comes a time like ol' Governor Lamm said a long time ago, that it's time to let the ranch go...I think there might be something to it. I'm still going to fight to the end, but I was much better at fighting for things in a younger era than I am now."

Ken stands up. "Let's get out of this damn office and breathe some real air."

For once we have a breeze not a gale as we walk into the Springtime and the trees and gaze across the horse pasture to the old Pack Creek lodge, now Ken and Jane's home. It looks much the same to me as it did 25 years ago, but change is underway. The ranch is administered by a homeowners association and all the owners, including the Sleights, share the commons. Ken ponders the future...what will it be like, Ken?

"Pack Creek Ranch and Moab will be plastic," Ken says sadly. "Nothing but plastic, and Pack Creek with it. Civilization is already headed that way. It IS that way. Plastic is a good word. Plastic individuals. Not really individuals anymore. People will go where they've been trained and taught. Control. Wilderness is supposed to be having the space to be free. When we fought for wilderness, we thought it meant big empty places. I really don't want to be around for what's coming and I won't of course. I'm 80 years old. I've turned the corner I guess."

Ken stares down the valley to the towering red wall on the far side of Spanish valley and beyond to the tablelands and mesas and cliffs that have been his home for a lifetime.

"Sometimes the fever goes out....But not all the time. It comes back. I may not change the course of anything but I feel better about it when I try."

