

“LONELY ARE THE BRAVE”...REVISITED #1

BASED ON EDWARD ABBEY'S BOOK, 'BRAVE COWBOY,' WE RETURNED TO THE ORIGINAL NEW MEXICO FILM LOCATIONS, TO SEE HOW MUCH HAS CHANGED IN 'DUKE CITY.'

NOTE: This is a story about the film 'Lonely are the Brave,' based on the book, 'Brave Cowboy,' by Edward Abbey and my efforts to find, in 2014, the original film locations from the 1961 production. In searching for those sites, I did not initially seek additional information from other sources; I wanted to find these locations—or at least attempt to—on my own. In most cases I was successful, but other scenes stumped me. If you know the Albuquerque area and can offer additional information, or corrections, I welcome your observations. Finally, this story will only have meaning to you if you've seen the film. If you haven't...stop. Rent or buy the DVD and watch it. Then come back here for the rest of the story---volume one.....JS

I was a kid, maybe ten or eleven and at home alone one evening with a bowl of popcorn and the tv. I'd turned the channel to NBC to catch that week's presentation of "Saturday Night at the Movies." It was a western, a film I'd never heard of, 'Lonely Are The Brave,' starring Kirk Douglas and Walter Matthau. As the opening scene played out, I assumed it was set in the Old West, that it was another 'Wyatt Earp/Gunsmoke' kind of movie. But when Douglas, as 'Jack

Burns,' leans back to savor his hand rolled smoke and offer a few soothing words to his horse Whiskey, the desert silence is disrupted by something out of place. Burns reluctantly lifts his eyes to the sky, not out of surprise but bitter resignation, to the sight of a squadron of screaming jet aircraft, their contrails fouling a faultless New Mexico sky.



This story wasn't taking place in 1882...this was 1962---the "Modern West," and Jack Burns was trapped in it. The film was about a world he loved—his beloved West—but a world that was fast spinning out of control. Early in the film, Burns tries to explain himself:

“Basically you're still an easterner...A Westerner likes open country so he has to hate fences and the more fences there are, the more he hates them...It's true. You ever notice how many fences there are getting to be? And the signs they got in 'em...No hunting. No fishing. Private property. Closed area. Get moving. Go away. Get lost. Drop dead...And they got those fences that say: 'This side's jail and that's the street.' Or 'here's Arizona and that's Nevada.' Or 'this is us and that's Mexico.'”



But Jeri Bondi, the wife of the man Burns hopes to break from jail, sees Jack as an anachronism in a society that discourages anything resembling individualism...

“Jack, the world you and Paul live in doesn't exist...maybe it never did. Out there is the real world and it has real borders and real fences, real laws and real trouble. If you don't go by the rules you lose...you lose everything.”

Jack replies, “A fella can always keep something.” In the rest of the film, Jack Burns tries to do just that.

Why, as a ten year old, did all this resonate so deeply with me? For the next two hours, I sat transfixed by the story, by Burns' loathing of a society hellbent on destroying everything he held sacred, and his solitary escape attempt over the mountain, by the film's disturbing last scene. Somehow, for reasons I still can't explain—except that maybe this is how my DNA was wired from birth—I came to identify with the film and Jack Burns in a profound way—it would shape my life.

More revelations lay ahead...

A decade later, I had finally seen the West, first with my family, and later on my own. As a young adult, it was my obsession. I knew it would become my home. Along the way, I discovered the author Edward Ab-

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bey, and I read 'Desert Solitaire' again and again. Trapped for the time being in Kentucky, I still kept my watch on mountain time. And I sought out other Abbey books; I learned of a recent collaboration with the great photographer Philip Hyde.

I was as broke as I've ever been but somehow found the \$23 I needed to buy Abbey and Hyde's 'Slickrock.' I opened the large format book to the end piece, to the author biographies. There was a photo of Ed, the first I'd ever seen...I thought, 'yep, that's just how I thought he'd look.' I scrolled down the text, which cited some of his novels. I read, “including 'Brave Cowboy, upon which the film 'Lonely Are The Brave' was based.” Of course...the complete circle. It was perfect.

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In the years following that first viewing of ‘Lonely are the Brave,’ the only way to see it again was to keep a close eye on the tv movie listings; there was no chance then, that the film would re-appear in theaters. Even after the Age of VCRs brought films into our living rooms, it wasn’t until 1992 that Universal finally released the film as a video cassette, modified of course, to fit the small screen. ‘Lonely are the Brave’ was finally released on DVD in 2009, in its original wide-screen format.

Once I could watch the film on demand, the landscape of that film became as familiar to me as my own backyard. I had learned years earlier that the setting of the film, in and around Duke City, New Mexico, was and always has been, in fact, a moniker for Albuquerque and environs. But I always had to remind myself that the ‘West’ Jack Burns longed for, and the changes that had chased him up the side of the Sandia Peak occurred years ago. I first laid eyes on the American Southwest years after Burns lamented its death. If Burns feared all was lost in 1962, what would he think of the land now in 2014? And more specifically, what had happened to the very ground Burns had sought refuge in, and even employed as his ‘escape route’ from civilization and the long arm of the law, so many years ago?

I decided to go back to New Mexico and have a look.

LONELY ARE THE BRAVE...SCENE 1...Camp

The opening scene of the film unfolds on the scrub desert below The Volcanoes, or the Three Sisters, on the far west edge of town. Finding them is easy—they’re visible from practically any point in the valley. Finding the exact location is more difficult.

For years, I’ve been photographing ‘Then & Now’ or ‘Before & After’ images. It’s always a matter of finding two or more geographic features, at varying distances from your vantage point, and aligning them in relation to each other and to the photographer. This scene led us north of the Three Sisters, up Unser Blvd to Rainbow Blvd and the Volcano Vista high School complex.

Just beyond the parking lot, Tonya and I spotted a very old dirt road. At a point a quarter mile west of the pavement, we found a junk yard of sorts. It was near here that the first scene of the film was shot. The view to the Volcanoes is still remarkably the same. It is perhaps the only part of the landscape, however, that is still intact. On all sides, housing projects are moving in, getting closer by the month. Our Google street view map, in fact, failed to show some of the new paved roads that have been added in just the past couple of years. Soon jack Burns’ campsite will be lost to suburbia...



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SCENE 2...the Volcanoes.

Still just east of The Volcanoes, this film location lies within the boundaries of Petroglyph National Monument, a 12,000 acre federally protected area on the west side of Albuquerque and south of the opening scene by a couple of miles. We parked at the Monument parking lot and followed a heavily marked designated trail that, in fact, was edged by a steel barrier. The trail clung to the bottom of a rocky talus slope and seemed determined to keep us from getting on top of the mesa where we needed to be. We had no choice but to duck under the railing and pick our way through the rocks to the mesa above. As we faced the Volcanoes, it became apparent that the film site we sought was on the far side of the mesa, on the other side of the horseshoe, as it were. An hour later, as we studied images from the film that I’d printed before we left, we finally came within inches of the spot. On this day, Tonya filled in for Kirk Douglas.



We made our way back to the road via the far side of the horseshoe mesa. When we ducked under the fence on the park boundary we realized we’d been in a ‘CLOSED AREA,’ and that entering the monument at this point was restricted by the National Park Service. We couldn’t miss