

(from the 1989 Zephyr Archives)

Toots McDougald's HISTORY OF MOAB

by Jim Stiles

For the last four years, I've been Toots McDougald's next door neighbor. On the day I signed away my life to First Security Bank, I drove over to Locust Lane to survey the ruins. As I walked around my dilapidated house, wondering if I'd truly lost my mind, a gravelly voice interrupted my doubting thoughts.

"Are you buying this place, or just renting it?"

It was Toots McDougald, standing shirtsleeved in the March weather, a cigarette dangling from the corner of her mouth.

"Well," I replied, "I may be crazy but I just bought it."

"I hope you paint that roof," she replied, pointing to the bare aluminum shingles. "The glare off that thing into my kitchen in the late afternoon is terrible."

The next week I bought five gallons of aluminum paint and covered all that glaring aluminum. Toots and I have been good friends ever since.



Toots knows a lot about Moab. She should; she was born here in 1915, in the same house on First North that Ron Pierce lives in today. Her grandfather, M.R. Walker, built that house around the turn of the century.

Toots knows a lot about Moab. She should; she was born here in 1915, in the same house on First North that Ron Pierce lives in today. Her grandfather, M.R. Walker, built that house around the turn of the century. She grew up in and around Moab, spending some time in Thompson and Cisco, where her mother cooked at the hotel.

For all those who have wondered why my neighbor is called Toots, here at last is the explanation. She was born Marilee. A man by the name of Albert "Ab" Wats, whose sister was married to Bish Taylor (Sam's dad,) said for some unknown reason to little Marilee, "You'll always be my little tootsie-wootsie." The first part stayed with her, and by the time Toots was in school, nobody knew who Marilee was anymore.

Two teachers at her grade school, Miss Penfield and Miss Peterson, insisted on calling her by her proper name and she sometimes got in trouble for failing to respond. But, like Toots says now, "Hell, I didn't know they were calling me. I only responded to

Toots." Even today, the Grand County phone book lists: Marilee Toots McDougald. "Without the 'Toots' in there," she explains, "I'd never get any calls."

So, what was it like to grow up in Moab in the 1920s?

"It was wonderful. We went on picnics, and hikes and chicken fries. And after we got older, we stole chickens and had chicken fries. We had great watermelon busts; in fact, a man named Olie Reardon planted a field of watermelons, just for us kids to steal. He said we could steal from that patch all we wanted, if we left his other patch alone."

"We'd go up and over the Lion's Back, clear to the river. We jumped a crack once, and we decided to come back the same way. When we got back to the crack, it had become twice as wide as before. Some fisherman across the river kept yelling, 'Don't jump!' But we did it anyway. That was Madge Duncan and Maxine Foster and me.

"Everything was so free and easy, no pressures, no traffic. We didn't know anything about drugs. We thought we were pretty wild if we got us a sip of homemade beer. My friend's father was a bootlegger."

And who was that?

"I'm not saying."

Moab looked a lot different then than it does now. Main Street, beyond Center, didn't exist. The road south turned left on Center to 4th East and Mill Creek Drive. "City Park," remembers Toots, "was the Grand County Fairgrounds. There were grandstands, and corrals and bucking shoots. Before that, the whole area was a swamp. Just a grassy, murky area. The first fairgrounds were where the baseball park is today, across from the Middle School."



"Everything was so free and easy, no pressures, no traffic. We didn't know anything about drugs. We thought we were pretty wild if we got us a sip of home made beer. My friend's father was a bootlegger." And who was that?

"I'm not saying."

And here, according to Toots, is where Moab's dreaded plague of goatheads first established a beachhead. "As I recall, we'd get circuses in here and rodeos, and a lot of the time, these people would bring their own hay and feed for their animals. Well, that stuff must've been mixed up with the hay, because pretty soon those nasty little goatheads were popping up everywhere. I've got no use for goatheads at all."

I can personally attest to Toots' lack of fondness for goat-

heads. Periodically, I'll get a phone call from Toots in the afternoon. She'll say, "Do you like chocolate cake? Meet me at the fence." Toots will be there waiting with the cake, but there's a catch..."Now Jim, before I give you this, reach down there and pull up those goatheads, there by the fence. Here's some more over there"...But it's worth it for the cake.

As slow and peaceful as Moab could be, it had its traumatic moments as well. Toots got caught in the middle of a particularly dangerous situation when she was just ten or twelve.

"I was living on Center Street then, across from Starr Hall. One day, I was out on the front porch, when I heard these shots coming from the jail. I thought for sure that it was a breakout, and that they'd shot the lock off the door. I saw a guy running, and so I ran over to the jail. I found the sheriff, Dick Westwood, dead. My friend Helen Foster was walking along the other side of the street at the time, and the man who shot Dick Westwood ran right past her, with the gun in his hand.



"For the Prom, and other dances too, we'd have a band. They'd play jazz and waltzes. We had great Charleston contests. I still remember the parade of the Junior Class... the promenade of the Juniors. I marched with Jim Winbourn. It was really something to get dressed up in a prom dress.

"There was quite a search. Albert Beech was coming from Monticello when he spotted him. He captured him and hauled him into town, holding an unloaded .22 rifle on the guy the whole time...of course, the guy didn't know it was unloaded."

Mostly though, life in Moab was peaceful, beautiful and simple. Toots' stepfather, Marv Turnbow, ran the ranch that is now in Arches National Park and named for its original owner—John Wesley Wolfe. She would spend a week to ten days at a time up there. "We'd ride our horses up Courthouse Wash and then along the cliffs to Balanced Rock and then down to Turnbow Cabin. We had a great time up there. We did some riding, a little branding...I never cared much for that part. I just couldn't stand to hear those little calves cry."

She spent summers at the ranch until she decided she "was too big to be cowboyin' anymore." Toots still vividly recalls her Junior Prom of 1932. "We decorated a hall where the Energy Building is now. I burned down a long time ago. But back then, they had movies in there, and after the movie was over, we'd push back the benches and have a dance.

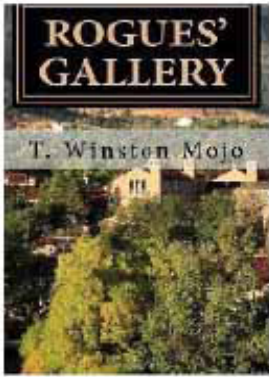
"For the Prom, and other dances too, we'd have a band. They'd play jazz and waltzes. We had great Charleston contests. I still remember the parade of the Junior Class...the promenade of the Juniors. I marched with Jim Winbourn. It was really something to get dressed up in a prom dress. In fact, we thought we were really something if we had store bought clothes. My Aunt Ida made most of my clothes. I had one pair of overalls made out of Cretone, a drapery material."

How do you spell that, Toots?

"C-r-e-t-o-n-e; I think. I haven't had to spell that in about a hundred and fifty years."

That was 57 years ago and Toots remembers every detail and a few more she won't reveal. I still can't get her to tell me who the bootlegger was, and she refuses to admit whose chickens she stole. I've advised her that the statute of limitations has run out on a chicken theft in 1925, but Toots is not convinced. Maybe someday I'll get the details along the backyard fence line—Toots telling the story, while I pull goatheads. The truth always comes at a price.

Toots died in 2001




ROGUES' GALLERY


My 27 years at Rocky Mountain University...

T. WINSTON MOJO

In the tradition of literary bureaucrats Kafka, Bukowski and Miller, T. Winston Mojo takes the reader on a journey into the abyss of institutional smallness. Everybody knows that politics at the university are so vicious because the stakes are so small. Mojo's real-life gauntlet of villains at Rocky Mountain University in Big Rock, Colorado, is an exploration into just how small those stakes can be.



AVAILABLE FROM









CARNIVORES! HERBIVORES! OMNIVORES!!

We offer ethnic and traditional cuisine and emphasize the use of high-quality, organic ingredients and fresh seasonal produce.

ALL MENU ITEMS TO GO
352 N MAIN ST 259.6896

and we're on facebook!!!

