



# TAKE IT OR LEAVE IT

by Jim Stiles

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**THANKS to Tom McCourt & the Tibbetts Family.**

For years, I have been watching Moab move farther and farther away from its roots, to the point where it seems few people even know the history of the place anymore. Some of them don't know OR care, but I think there are still many who have a respect for the past (I hope so, at least).

Last winter I read Tom McCourt's book on Bill Tibbetts and think it's his finest work. I knew a bit about Bill, but the story was told so beautifully and I felt it was a very moving tribute, not just to Bill, but to those far off times.

I see Moab as some alien world now--I haven't lived in Moab in years---and I feel the most significant contribution I can make with the Zephyr these days, is to try and preserve the past in some fashion, or at least make it available for those readers who are interested. With Tom's permission, the Canyonlands Natural History Association who published it, and with the good wishes and approval of Bill Tibbetts' son Ray and the Tibbetts Family, we are pleased and honored to offer, over the next few months, excerpts from Tom's excellent portrayal of 'the Last Robbers Roost Outlaw.'

**What Isn't Racism in Moab, Utah ...and What Is?**

For the last couple of years, a 'place name' debate has raged in Moab, mostly via the letters column in the weekly Times-Independent. Some Grand County citizens think the name 'Negro Bill Canyon,' is racist and offensive and should be changed. Others think the name is part of the area's history, and should be left alone. Now Grand County Councilperson Mary McGann plans to ask her fellow council members to support a name change with the U.S. Board of Geographic Names, perhaps by August 4.

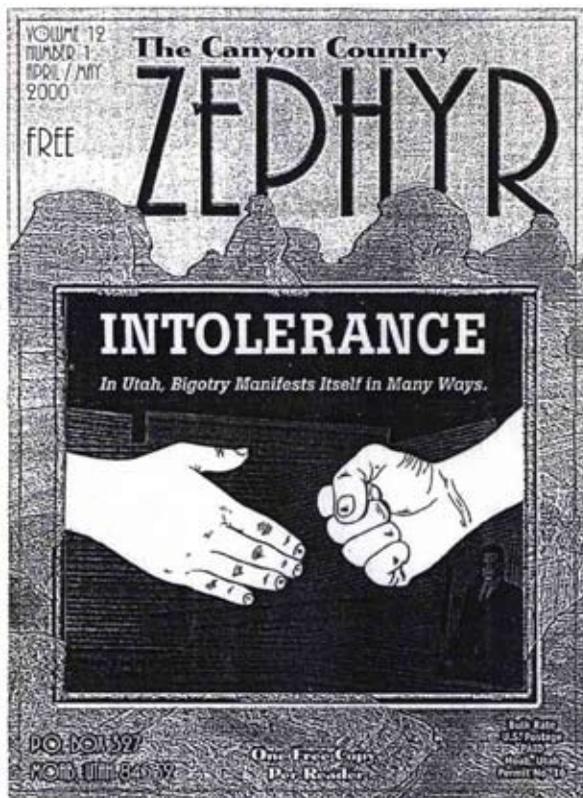
I was raised in the South, in Kentucky, and experienced childhood through the most turbulent and profoundly disturbing times of the civil rights movement. To their credit, my parents were, at least back then, sensitive to the issues of race relations and equality under the law, and instilled in me some values that I might otherwise have never learned. I can remember, on the night Martin Luther King was assassinated, being called a "nigger lover" because I dared to show grief at the announcement of his

death. It was that bad, back then.

As a kid, I recall the night President Kennedy went on television to address the nation. He said, in part, "We preach freedom around the world, and we mean it, and we cherish our freedom here at home; but are we to say to the world, and, much more importantly, for each other, that this is a land of the free except for the Negroes; that we have no second-class citizens except Negroes; that we have no class or caste system, no ghettos, no master race, except with respect to Negroes?"

He was assassinated less than six months later.

I went to a racially mixed school in Louisville, Kentucky,



later worked in the school system as a social worker, and enjoyed the company of good friends, both black and white. And then I moved out West, to Moab, Utah, and hardly ever saw an African-American again. In my eleven years at Arches National Park, I encountered exactly two black people. The issue of race relations rarely even came up in Moab.

But it did happen, and in 1999 and *The Zephyr* reported it:

"If you do not live in Moab, and certainly if you reside outside of Utah, you are probably unaware of an ugly incident that occurred here on New Year's Eve. Two young local men allegedly assaulted an interracial couple with racist epithets and one of them was charged with a third degree felony, based on Utah's new hate crime law.

"Whether the man is found guilty of the alleged crime is up to a jury of his peers to decide. The fact that the incident underscores a nasty racist and bigoted underside to this community is undeniable. A few weeks after the incident, stories of an underground white supremacist subculture in Moab persist. They are fueled in part by a circular that recently made its way around town... In part the inflammatory rhetoric from the National Alliance in Hillsboro, West Virginia proclaimed: 'Only you, collectively and individually, can prevent the Winter slaughter of our race. You CAN prevent it. You must prevent it! WE MUST SECURE THE EXISTENCE OF OUR PEOPLE AND THE FUTURE FOR WHITE CHILDREN.'"

<http://www.canyoncountryzephyr.com/oldzephyr/archives/takeit-april-may00.html>

We dedicated an entire issue of *The Zephyr* to intolerance, in all its manifestations, including a story called "Being Gay in Utah," which we have re-posted in this issue.

But...for all the different forms of racism and bigotry that can still boil my blood, calling a canyon along the Colorado River "Negro Bill" just isn't one of them. Imagine if the same upper middle class white people who predominantly persist in making this argument channeled their energies in a more productive direction. Because there is racism in Grand County and Moab, but consuming time on a non-issue like this is not only a waste, it's counter-productive, and distracts everyone from real issues of discrimination.

First, just to review, we know that the canyon was named for a black man, William Grandstaff, who called himself and was referred to as "Nigger Bill." He was one of Moab's early settlers, arriving in the late 1870s; Bill is still considered one of southeast Utah's most interesting



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characters.

In the 1960s, as the word 'nigger' became more repugnant and despicable to most Americans, the name was properly changed to "Negro Bill." The word "Negro" was

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the common and correct word to describe a person of African-American descent. It had never been regarded as a racial slur. While it has fallen out of favor in the last few decades, it is still regarded as proper when used in a "historical context."

When I review the videos of President Kennedy's 1963 civil rights speech, no one has bleeped out his use of the word 'Negro.' Nor has anyone edited or changed the



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transcriptions of his speech. Nor has anyone altered the speeches of Robert Kennedy, who was perhaps an even more passionate defender of civil rights than his brother. And finally, no one has censored Martin Luther King himself.

It was King who noted, "The Negro needs the white man to free him from his fears. The white man needs the Negro to free him from his guilt." He, of course, was shot to death in 1968.

When King spoke of the "white man's guilt," do we really believe that expending all this energy to change the name of a Utah canyon is what he had in mind? Even the NAACP wants to keep the name in place. In one news story, "Jeanetta Williams, president of the Salt Lake City office, told the Associated Press she opposes changing the name because the history of the canyon would be lost."

But apparently, the predominantly white "progressive" population of Moab/Grand County knows better. What could be more arrogant than that?

Utah has never exactly been a haven for Black Americans. The state is dominated by the LDS Church (The Mormons) and, in fact, African-American men weren't even allowed to become part of the church Priesthood until 1976, when the Church Prophet, Spencer Kimball, had a revelation that removed that barrier.

**While, in much of the country, racial diversity is improving, places like Moab seem more firmly entrenched than ever. The most recent statistics are revealing--- Moab's 2013 population was 5,130-- - 84.2% were white. According to the data there were 18 Black residents living in the city, or 0.3% of the total population.**

Moab, however, has always been different. Unlike most communities in southern Utah, it was not established by Mormon settlers. An early attempt by the Elk Mountain mission failed in 1855 and a quarter century would pass before whites moved into the area. This time, the migration came from the east, from ranchers searching for free grazing lands. Consequently, the area now called Grand County has always been represented by a more diverse

population.

Still, no one could possibly claim that Moab has ever been a culturally or racially diverse community. Until recently, Moab's politics have traditionally leaned to the Right and Blacks have probably, with good reason, stayed clear. There was the perception, at least, that any African-American moving to Utah would arrive with an automatic race-based disadvantage. Now in the last 20 years, as Moab embraced and supported and promoted a tourist/recreation dominated "amenities economy," the demographic has allegedly moved to the Left. But if anything,

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Moab has become a population center more resistant to diversity than it was before.

While, in much of the country, racial diversity is improving, places like Moab seem more firmly entrenched than ever. The most recent statistics are revealing--- Moab's 2013 population was 5,130--- 84.2% were white. According to the data there were 18 Black residents living in the city, or 0.3% of the total population. In the larger area of Grand County, its population of 9,328 didn't include enough residents of African-American descent to even register as a race. Blacks fell into the "other" category.

For two decades, Moab's "Green/Progressive" community has pushed for a tourist dominated economy and it has been wildly successful. But it also created the kind of structural racism that dominates "New West" communities like Moab. The "Negro Bill" debate may have become their latest *cause celebre*, but one would be hard pressed to find those same activists doing anything to honestly resolve the outrageous wealth disparity that their ameni-

ties economy has brought to town.

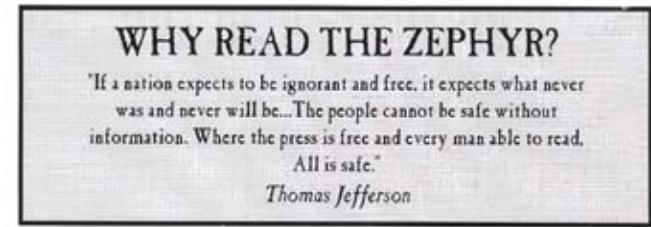
I don't mean to suggest that the "amenities migration" was a deliberate planned effort to seek out a White Utopia. I doubt many of Moab's New West residents ever gave the subject of diversity much thought. And that's what's so troubling---it never occurred to them that creating this kind of community was a problem because most of them never looked further than their own self-interests and the 'noble causes' many of them came to pursue.

To find the true heart and soul of the issue, the problem goes beyond race---it's about 'institutional elitism,' the deliberate, planned creation of a culture and an economy that excludes everyone, of any race, who lacks the financial assets to be a part of the newly transformed community.

For years, liberal/environmentalists insisted that the "amenities economy" would somehow create a more progressive political atmosphere, one that would allow the election of a progressive government and create an opportunity to find solutions for issues like affordable housing and income disparities. In reality, it was the amenities economy that created the crisis in the first place.

Yet progressive politicians continue to talk about affordable housing problems and low wage jobs as if they're as shocked and dismayed as everyone else. And they display their "liberal" credentials, by diverting attention away from the real inequities in their "New Moab" community by ranting about a canyon called "Negro Bill."

**For more "Take It or Leave It" articles, visit this issue's HOME PAGE.**

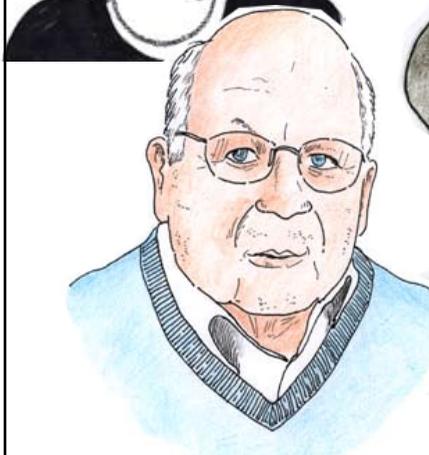


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