

'THE MONKEY WRENCH GANG' MOVIE?

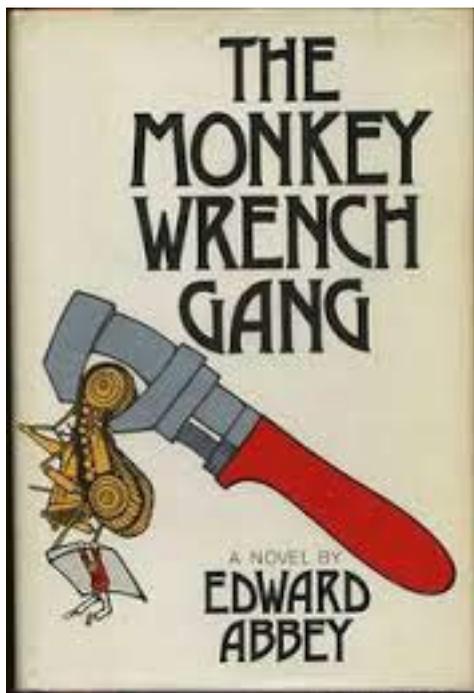
Forty Years Later, Would the 'New West' of 2016 even 'get' Ed Abbey's Classic Novel?

Jim Stiles

There's a new "Monkey Wrench Gang" MOVIE rumor circulating on the internet. A web site called "NewWorldOdor.com" reports that Leonardo DiCaprio is secretly producing the film version of Edward Abbey's 1975 masterpiece, somewhere in Arizona. Leo himself is reportedly playing the role of 'Seldom Seen' Smith.

According to the web site, DiCaprio's project takes his "environmental activism to a new level advocating for direct action and monkey-wrenching to protect the planet from climate change related disaster." They also include this alleged direct quote from DiCaprio:

"I've been working with many of the big environmental groups for a long time. I realize now the NGOs are worthless...The only option left is direct action and militant underground tactics. I hope my movie plays a part in promoting that level of resistance."



The first trade paperback version of 'The Monkey Wrench Gang' carried its share of glowing testimonials and I still recall one reviewer who warned, "Don't wait for the movie. Read the book." It wasn't, we thought, a question of *if*; it was a matter of *when*.

But nothing happened.

NewWorldOdor claims that actress Olivia Munn will play Bonnie Abzug and Jack Black is cast as Hayduke. The story has not been picked up anywhere else in the media and friends close to the late Edward Abbey--he died in 1989--have not heard a word about secret film productions with Mr. DiCaprio.

<https://newworldodor.info/rumors-swirl-leo-dicaprio-secretly-filming-monkey-wrench-gang-movie/>

After 40 years of speculation, it's difficult to take this seriously. And yet, almost from the day it was published, making the transition from the page to film seemed inevitable. The first trade paperback version of MWG carried its share of glowing testimonials and I still recall one reviewer who warned, "Don't wait for the movie. Read the book." It wasn't, we thought, a question of *if*; it was a matter of *when*.

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Some said the book was too controversial to ever become a movie---that corporate America would never tolerate a film that advocated blowing up its assets, but rumors, nonetheless, ran rampant.

At one time or another, Robert Redford was going to produce the film and play Seldom Seen. Later gossip claimed he wanted to play Bishop Love...Shortly after Abbey's death in 1989, it was rumored that Carroll Ballard, the director of the acclaimed film, "Never Cry Wolf," was set to direct. But it went nowhere. Over the years and decades, tales of other productions came and went.

Then in 2007, something more substantial than gossip made the local headlines. Even *The Deseret News* in Salt Lake City, reported that at long last, Abbey's novel was coming to the screen. The film would star Matthew McConaughey, Jack Nicholson, Richard Dreyfuss, John Goodman, and Elizabeth Shue, and would be directed by Catherine Hardwicke, then noted for her work with the film series, "Twilight."

<http://www.deseretnews.com/article/655191418/Adventure-set-in-Utah-heading-to-big-screen.html?pg=all>



That winter, Moab's then-economic development director Ken Davey invited me to meet Hardwicke as she scouted film locations in southeast Utah. We met at the Center Cafe in Moab, along with Larry Campbell of the Moab Film Commission and other members of Hardwicke's staff. It was an enlightening evening. The food, as always, was excellent and by the time I headed home, I was convinced that making a movie version of Abbey's novel would be an unqualified disaster.

Whether Hardwicke's planned film interpretation of the MWG was a consequence of studio pressures and corporate demands, or if she was just *that* politically correct, I'll never know. But the 'Monkey Wrench Gang' movie was going to be a much tamer critter. I could feel Abbey starting to rustle uncomfortably in his unmarked

desert grave.

Oddly, much of the "eco-tage" described in the book survived the edits; it was a handful of social issues that gave her pause. For starters, according to Hardwicke, Seldom Seen's days as a Mormon polygamist were over. He could maintain his LDS faith, of course, but multiple wives was not going to fly. He'd have one wife, one set of kids and why he'd continue to be called "Seldom Seen" by his sole surviving spouse was not clear.

And there was the Hayduke problem. First his use of the F-word had to go. Apparently, a PG film can only use the F-word once; this must have been Hardwicke's motivation when she explained that in the film version, Hayduke would be roundly criticized by other members of "The Gang" for his vulgarity and that peer pressure would subsequently result in a less profane Hayduke. A kinder, gentler Hayduke? ("Oh Flip YOU!") I couldn't quite get my head around it.

By now I was almost afraid to ask, but I did anyway. "What about the beer cans? Does he still chuck his cans out the window? Does Hayduke keep littering in the movie?"

Hardwicke, a classic role model for today's New West Environmentalist, smiled benevolently. "We really don't think that's appropriate either. It doesn't set a good example at all." She explained that again, Hayduke would be allowed to exhibit bad littering behavior once. Just once. But after another on-screen scolding from Doc, Seldom and Bonnie, Hayduke grudgingly sees the error of his ways and places his empties in a proper receptacle.

A sanitized Hayduke. A monogamous Seldom. After 30 years of anticipating an honest 'Monkey Wrench Gang Movie,' my personal wait was finally over; now I hoped the idea of a movie would just go away, though media reports of Hardwicke's film continued for months. One article reported the movie would be shot entirely in New Mexico, where the film commission offered advantages and perks unavailable in Utah.

But slowly, for reasons unknown, Hardwicke's connection to the MWG faded and finally vanished, and in 2012, the media reported that young directors, Henry Joost and Ariel Schulman, of "Paranormal Activity" fame, would "write and direct an adaptation" of Abbey's novel.

<http://deadline.com/2012/05/catfish-team-henry-joost-ariel-schulman-to-write-and-helm-the-monkey-wrench-gang-267788/>

That was four years ago. Now, in the Spring of 2016, are Joost and Schulman secretly collaborating with Leonardo DiCaprio, somewhere in the Arizona desert, finally bringing Abbey's characters to the screen? Or is this yet another incarnation? Who knows?

But does it really matter anymore? Forty years after the novel was published, is it too late to make a 'Monkey Wrench Gang' movie? Is it relevant in today's white-breaded politically correct environmentalist environment? Would anybody even 'get' it?

To see how far we've come since 1975, consider this recent post by The Grand Canyon Trust. On what would have been his 89th birthday, GCT Communications Associate Ellen Heyn wrote:

"In honor of Edward Abbey's birthday, we're celebrating his cult classic book *The Monkey Wrench Gang*—not as a guide to sabotage, but as a guide to some of the Colorado Plateau's most spectacular places. Here we retrace the steps of George Hayduke, Seldom Seen Smith, Doc Sarvis, and Bonnie Abzug in their crazy chase around the plateau."

<http://www.grandcanyontrust.org/blog/ed-abbey-travel-guide>



Fearful the Grand Canyon Trust might look too radical, but still wanting to "honor" Abbey, they chose to take one of his most controversial and highly respected works and turn it into---god help us all---a travel guide.

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The writer highlights some scenic wonders of the Colorado Plateau and introduces a variety of trails, at or near locations mentioned in the novel, then rates their accessibility and difficulty, and promotes nearby natural features. The Grand Canyon Trust thrills us with the knowledge that these hikes will "lure adventurers of all stripes." And admonishes the reader, "Start planning your trip now!"

Is this what the Grand Canyon Trust thinks Edward Abbey was all about?

Abbey believed in solitude and open space and wilderness for its own sake. He wanted wild, untamed wilderness, not packaged wilderness by reservation. He once selflessly suggested, "We need wilderness whether or not we ever set foot in it." He didn't give a damn about wilderness for its recreational value or its economic component. Abbey didn't give a damn about "amenities." He once wrote, "We don't go into the wilderness to exhibit our skills at gourmet cooking. We go into the wilderness to get away from the kind of people who think gourmet cooking is important."

He was one of the first to warn against the evils of "Industrial Tourism." And he certainly didn't pen the MWG to see it transmogrified into an embarrassing tour guide.

In 'Desert Solitaire,' Abbey offered this unique proposal: "The wilderness should be preserved for political reasons. We may need it someday...as a refuge from authoritarian government, from political oppression. The Grand Canyon...may be required to function as a base for guerrilla warfare against tyranny."

And years later, when he wrote 'The Monkey Wrench Gang,' it was into that wilderness that his heroes sought escape and refuge. Whether revolutionary guerrillas could find common ground with BASE jumpers, mountain bikes, 'adventure companies,' and zip-liners is not even debatable. It's an absurdity.

The idea that today's environmentalists might find themselves at odds with the Monkey Wrench Gang, fearful that attacks on their shared Enemy might also damage their fundraising success would bewilder Edward Abbey in 2016.

The commodification of Nature that he feared has been more pervasive and overwhelming than even Ed could have imagined, despite his own early warnings. Abbey's radical notions of wilderness would perplex most 21st century wilderness advocates who insist that its commercial exploitation via a "tourist/amenities" economy will generate untold revenues for the Rural West.

Many of us wonder, 'What would Cactus Ed do?' as we race through the second decade of the 21st Century. I am constantly struck by the stubborn refusal of so many latter day Abbeyphiles to consider how he might react to the New West we face in 2016. Had he lived to see it, and I'm almost grateful he didn't, I'm convinced he would have reserved a special place in hell for the two-faced enviropreneurs who embrace wilderness and all things natural, as long as a buck can be made along the way.

Had Abbey written MWG in 2016, would the Gang's targets have changed? In addition to oil wells and coal trains and bridges, would he have expanded his list to include trophy homes and elevated bikeways and luxury tour companies?

Would Hayduke have needed to modify his monkey wrenching behavior in addition to his language? Before setting fire to an oil rig, would he need to check the ownership? Forgive my stealing Ed's intellectual property for just a minute or two, but imagine this conversation, in a 2016 world (and in it, other than Seldom and Hayduke, the names and companies are real)...

Almost dawn on the Great Sage Plain, in San Juan County, Utah. The early hour is marked by a thousand crimson streaks of light and the coo of a mourning dove. Nothing else. George Hayduke and Seldom Seen Smith survey the scene. Hayduke ponders the one intrusion in his otherwise perfect morning...

"Look at that goddamn oil rig Seldom...just waiting to be blown. Not a soul out there at five o'clock in the morning."

"You're right, George. Real sweet. Like the mornin' itself. Why it oughta be easy to just slide in there and...wait a minute."

"What is it?" Hayduke asked. "Do you see somebody?"

Seldom adjusted his binocs and squinted hard at the platform.

"Damn," he replied, finally. He scratched his chin whiskers and handed the glasses to Hayduke. "We got a problem."

Hayduke adjusted the lens to his own eyes. "What is it we're looking at?"

"Read the sign on the side of the rig."

"Let's see....'P-e-t...Petro Harvester...'Petro Harvester? What's that?"

"Big oil and gas exploration company." Seldom explained. "They been doing a lot of fracking up in North Dakota. In fact, a couple years back they caused the biggest brine spill in the state's history. But I think they just got a slap on the hands...nobody gives a shit."

"Okay...all the more reason to mess with them." Hayduke reached for his pack.

"Well...slow down George." Seldom cautioned. "Petro's just a subsidiary of a big ol' monster called TPG Capital...far as I can tell, they own or control or have a thumb in just about ever'thing you can imagine. Hell, George they frack, they own power plants and they sell real estate. They make chemicals and even throw in with Monsanto. In the past they've also sold cheeseburgers and run airlines and own casinos...they're all over Vegas, George."

Hayduke growled. "Goddamn it. What're we waiting for? Gimme that box of caps and some C-4. I'm gonna blow that rig to hell..."

"But ALSO George," Seldom interrupted. "ALSO...And you're not gonna believe this, but the guy who runs TPG, his name is Mr. David Bonderman...he likes to be called 'Bondo.' He gives tons of money to the environmentalists. You know our pals in Moab and Flagstaff and Salt Lake? All those, what do you call 'em...'grass roots' groups that are always out there trying to save the world and filing law suits? Well he and his pals pump millions into those groups."

"Like who?" Hayduke demanded.

"Well...let's see. There's The Wilderness Society and the Grand Canyon Trust. He's on their board of directors too. And he gives money to SUWA. That Salt Lake paper called him a "major financier" for 'em. And not just the Greenies...Hell, he seeds his chump

change all over Moab...Hell, they all LOVE Bondo over there in Moab. He's a goddamn beloved figure."

Hayduke scowled. "Well that's bullshit. He builds power plants and fracks and drills and then he gives a bit of his money back to his adversaries? He's just paying people off...It's like fucking hush money. Are you kidding me? And now we're supposed to give this guy a pass?"

Hayduke paused for reflection and snapped the top on another Schlitz. After all the sun had been up more than 30 minutes. "I don't give a shit," Hayduke proclaimed finally. "I'm taking out that rig."

Seldom touched his shoulder. "You got friends over there in Moab, George, working for those same organizations that get funded by Bonderman. You get ol' Bondo mad and he pulls his money out of those groups and they start laying off their staff. If I recall, you had a thing for one of those gals over there in the Moab office...you wanna put her out of work too?"

Hayduke fumed. "Well shit, Seldom. I hate these fucking moral dilemmas." "Me too, George. Me too."

The idea that today's environmentalists might find themselves at odds with the Gang, fearful that attacks on their shared Enemy might also damage their fundraising success would bewilder Edward Abbey in 2016. The fact that they have more in common with the "adventure companies" that Abbey would surely have loathed, than with Abbey himself would have been unthinkable. THAT's how far the 'movement' has descended in 40 years.

It is painfully accurate to admit that since the publication of 'The Monkey Wrench Gang,' saving wilderness for its solitude, remoteness, and as a base camp for revolutionary warfare, is not high on anyone's agenda. After all, where's the "Return On Investment?" Where's the profit? Otherwise..what's the point?

In 2016, the message of 'The Monkey Wrench Gang' is as simple as it was four decades ago---leave the land alone. As Hayduke pleaded, "Leave it like it was." Today's profit-driven environmentalist doesn't get *that* idea at all.



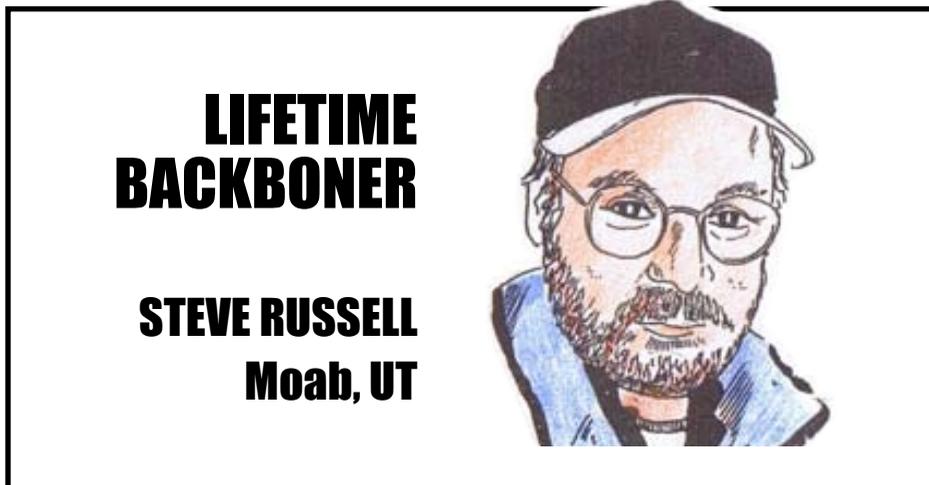
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