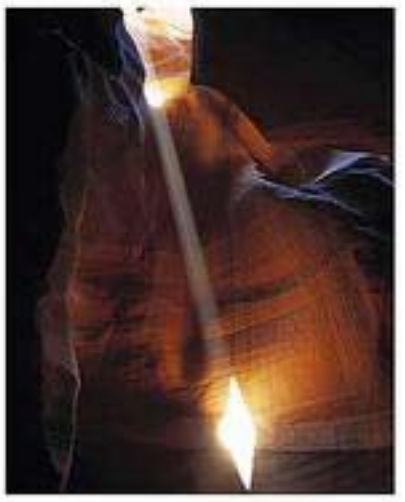
TOM TILL GALLERY

Arizona Highways



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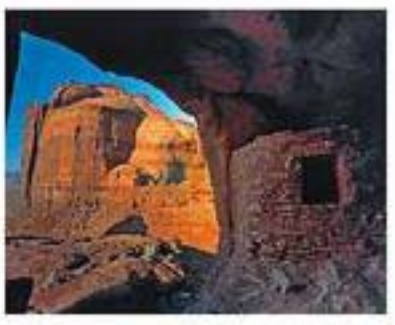

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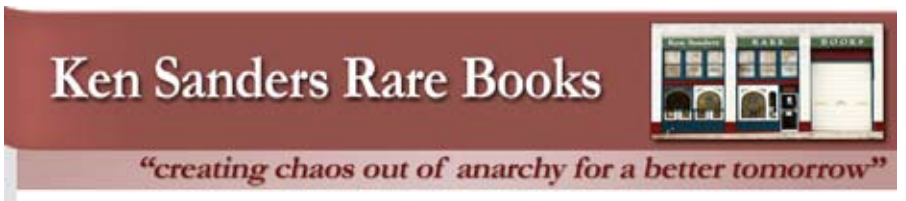

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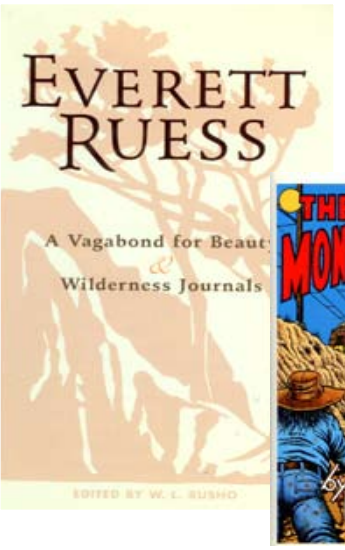

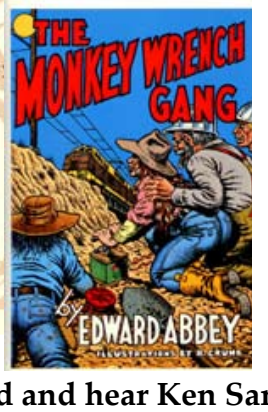

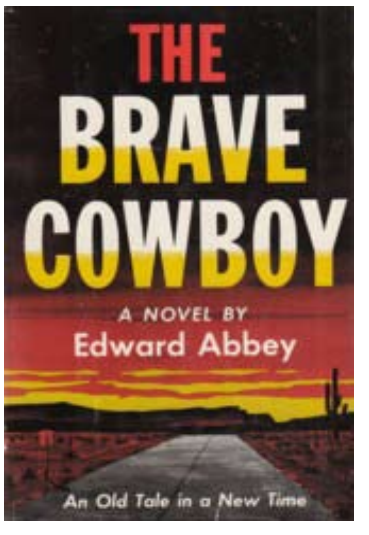

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Rhetoric, Death, Wilderness & Candor

As America reels from the Tucson shootings, another ugly episode in San Juan County shines more light on our War of Words, from BOTH sides.

Jim Stiles

When I was a kid, the "meanest man in Kentucky" lived just a few doors up the street. "Ol' Man Cole" resided in relative seclusion with his wife and the rare occasions when we saw him were never pleasant. My friends and I liked to skateboard on the street in front of his house and he'd storm into the yard, red-faced and fists clenched, demanding that we "get the hell out of here."

One hot summer day, my buddies and I decided to retaliate. Maybe we could scare him into leaving us alone. I ran inside and grabbed some paper and a felt marker and together, we composed a note to Ol' Man Cole. After an hour of discussion and debate, we finally agreed upon the message. It said:

"Lock your doors, Cole, or you may not see morning."

We thought we were very clever and I, hoping to impress a girl next door with my bravery and audacity, volunteered to deposit the note in Cole's mailbox. In broad daylight, I sprinted to the door, shoved the note through the slot and ran like hell. I felt like an action hero.

But the moment of exhilaration passed. By the next day I'd practically forgotten the incident. As we sat on the curb thinking of something new to distract us, a police cruiser pulled into the Coles' driveway. Terrified, we considered hiding but the cop had already spotted us. A few minutes later, he emerged from the Coles' house, the note in his hand, and walked toward us.

"Hello boys," he said with a hint of menace in his voice. "You look bored."

We smiled nervously. He looked at the note in his hand for a long moment, then held it up for us to see.

"Have any of you ever seen this?"

We lied and shook our heads. He stared at the note again. "You know, this is pretty serious. It says here, 'Lock your doors...or you may not see morning.' Do you realize what this means? It means somebody wants to kill this man."

He paused for effect. "KILL him....Do you know of anybody who would really want Mr. Cole to be dead?"

Again, we shook our heads and shifted nervously on the concrete. He knew we were lying. We knew that he knew we were lying. But perhaps because he could see that his words had made the proper impression, he decided to let the matter drop. "Why don't you boys play a little ball. But don't play in front of Mr. Cole's house."

Later I found out that Mr. Cole suffered from severe migraines and that our noise and ruckus on the street aggravated an already painful condition and that he really wasn't the "meanest man in Kentucky." I've tried to remember that moment ever since, with varying degrees of success.

Jump ahead a few decades. The shooting slaughter in Tucson on January 8 and the subsequent national debate about the tone and effect of our political rhetoric came home to roost in San Juan County when the media reported that several "Wanted: Dead or Alive" posters, threatening members of the environmental group "Great Old Broads for Wilderness" had been discovered by county and BLM officials at various remote trailheads. The signs also proclaimed, "Members of the Great Old Broads for Wilderness are not allowed in San Juan County, Utah...by order of the San Juan Sheriff office and the BLM office." On its web site, the Great Old Broads noted, "While we do not take this threat lightly, such juvenile anonymous actions will not deter us from our efforts to advocate for the land in San Juan County, Utah."

Of course, neither the BLM nor the Sheriff had anything to do with the posters; they were the product of the kind of reckless and irresponsible rhetoric that has almost become normal in today's political and cultural debate. In Utah, no subject is more rancorous or incurs more passionate and even violent discussion than "wilderness." How it can be that something as beautiful and inspiring as our scenery can also generate so much hate and distrust is a stunning reality that has been a wearying part of life in rural Utah for decades.

Increasingly, the debate isn't even about the Land anymore but about the people who want to use it. It's become personal.

Environmentalists complain bitterly about environmental damage incurred by ATVs but the truth is, many of them also loathe the people who drive the ATVs, sight unseen, whether they handle their machines responsibly or not.

Rural conservatives laugh and mock the mountain bikes that have become so prolific in the past 20 years, but it's not the bicycle they despise but the Lycra-clad riders atop them.

As the rural West becomes more urbanized and as New West towns draw former city dwellers in ever-increasing numbers, the sheer physical proximity of opposing points of view makes the debate even meaner.

I've lived in Monticello, Utah for almost a decade and have rarely observed the kind of hurtful language that was exhibited on those posters but it's there if you listen hard enough. And you will be hard-pressed to find many local residents willing to condemn these senseless rants. The overwhelming majority of San Juan County residents may privately oppose reckless ATV abuse, for example, but who wants to ally themselves with environmentalists? So the random threats and the ugly words go unchallenged.

But what of the other side? Have the "progressive" environmentalists been any less cruel in their assessment of rural Utahns? Over the last 20 years, I've heard the condescending sneers, almost non-stop, from people who claim to know better. For example, in her book, "Trespass: Living on the Edge of the Promised Land," former Utah environmentalist and author Amy Irvine found little to respect during her brief time as a resident of San Juan County. A self-proclaimed ex-Mormon and a 6th generation Utahan, she describes the moment when Mormon missionaries come to her door in Monticello:

"Come back and preach at me," I bellow, "when you've made love—to someone other than each other. When you've seen death. When you've walked—not driven—across the desert."

I close the door on their pink and earnest faces.

It was just the first of many hurled insults that portrayed Monticello in as ugly a light as one can imagine. She mocked the people, their conservative values, their modest dress code. She even criticized the lack of a good merlot in a little Mormon town where 90% of its residents don't drink alcohol. It should not have come as a surprise when she wasn't embraced by the community. Or that her words left bitter feelings.

But while very few open-minded "progressives" would find that kind of scornful reproach productive, I cannot recall a single liberal who came to the town's defense. Like their conservative cousins, nobody wanted to be seen defending their ideological opponents. In fact, the New York Times' reviewer Grace Lichtenstein wrote in praise of the book and called it, "the most vivid ground-level report from this war zone that I have ever read."

A "war zone?"

And last year, when Moab environmentalist Terry Shepherd died suddenly and tragically of H1N1 flu, Ms. Irvine eulogized, "Why Dick Cheney is still here and Terry is not is simply something I cannot get my head around."

It was the first time I've ever heard a eulogy that proposed someone else should have died instead of the person being mourned....even if it was Dick Cheney. Still, no one from the environmental community raised an eyebrow.

I don't include these comments to further inflame an already volatile situation, or to single out Amy Irvine, but to remind everyone that venomous attacks and hurtful words are hardly limited to one political viewpoint. What I see are two very different kinds of poisonous language, equally painful to the other.

From my unique position (I've been the subject of some pretty nasty attacks from BOTH the Right and the Left), there are discernible distinctions when the mud is slung. When it comes from the Right, the rhetoric is often angry and emotional. When lobbed by the Left, the language can be smug and condescending. The effects are identical.

As the rural West becomes more urbanized and as New West towns draw former city dwellers in ever-increasing numbers, the sheer physical proximity of opposing points of view makes the debate even meaner.

For the life of me, I can't decide who provoked who first. At this point, it doesn't matter.

What should matter, and what needs to be addressed, is the realization that as these two sides demonize each other with ever increasing ferocity, the notion that there could be any common ground is being lost amidst the vicious thrusts.

A few weeks before his death, John Kennedy said, "In the final analysis, our most basic common link is that we all inhabit this small planet. We all breathe the same air and we are all mortal."

Whether liberal or conservative, we share so much—we love our family and our friends. We all know the pain of loneliness and guilt and regret, and of hope and renewal and redemption. We endure the sadness of death and rejoice in new-found happiness. We all have our own demons and we all struggle to overcome them.

And believe it or not, we can all cherish and revere a sunset sky at Grandview Point, whether seen from the perspective of a solitary hiker or from the seat of an all terrain vehicle. We have to remember this.

Like my childhood attack on Ol'Man Cole, the impressions and perceptions that guide our actions are often misguided and poorly conceived. And they have consequences. I agree, we cannot hold our own rhetoric responsible for the actions of others, but we must acknowledge that cruel words and hateful speech are an action unto themselves. And surely we must be held responsible for that.