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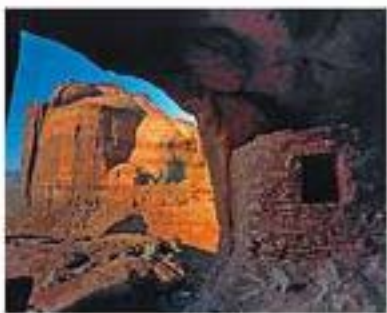
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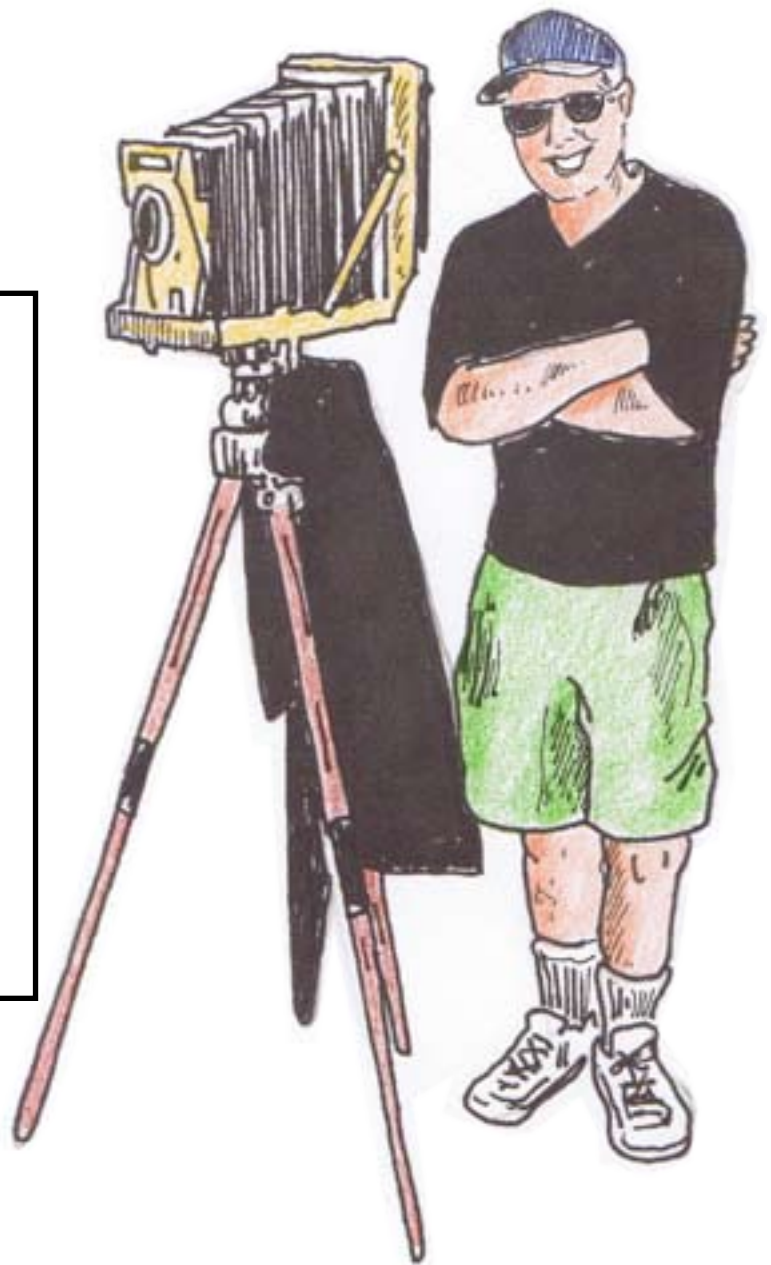
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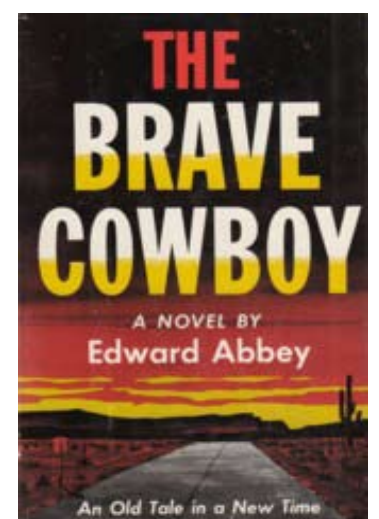
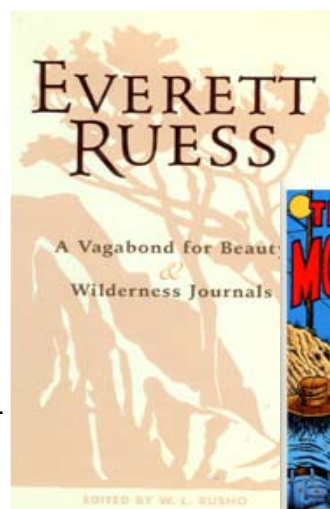
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# SEASONAL RANGERS

*The 'Fat Cat Feds' who live on Ramen Noodles*

Jim Stiles

Whenever the American economy starts to slide and unemployment rises, we can always predict a simultaneous increase in complaints about government workers. Whether they work at the federal, state or local level, the insults come faster and harder as jobs become tighter. The recent upheaval in Wisconsin over teacher pay, benefits and bargaining rights is a painful example. It looked like a revolution up there and it was hard to determine just who wanted to lynch who. Certainly the teachers thought they were getting a raw deal and their long sit-ins at the state capitol drew global attention.

Other Wisconsinites bitterly opposed the teachers and demanded across the board cuts. And these were *teachers*, employed by the state. If anything, animosity toward *federal* employees is even harsher. For as long as I can remember, "the Feds," have been the target of derision and ridicule. They get paid too much, their vacations are too long, their benefits are too generous and their productivity is somewhere on a par with house cats.

I'm sure I can find a: "How many feds does it take to screw in a light bulb?" joke if I look hard enough. Worst of all, the lament insists that you can't get rid of these Feds. They are fire-proof. They are albatrosses around the taxpayers' necks. They are single-handedly driving the country to ruin.

Well...not so fast.

I cannot say that the insults are *totally* without merit. I've sure known my fair share of government screw-offs; in fact, I was a Fed myself once. For more than a decade, I was a seasonal ranger at Arches National Park. I wasn't a particularly hard worker and I was known more than once to fall asleep under a juniper tree while on trail patrol. So in terms of my sloth and indolence, I plead guilty.

But the idea that I, or any seasonal employee of the National Park Service was somehow a drain on the U.S. Treasury is something that still actually makes me guffaw. Yes...GUFFAW. Seasonal employment in the NPS was like the a last vestige of the feudal system, and we were its serfs.

"Seasonal Serfs reporting for duty, sir."

**But the idea that I, or any seasonal employees of the National Park Service were somehow a drain on the U.S. Treasury is something I still chuckle over. Seasonal employment in the NPS was like the a last vestige of the feudal system, and we were its serfs.**

As I used to make my way through the Devils Garden in pursuit of camping fees, young boys and girls would timidly approach me, urged on by their beaming parents, to proclaim, "When I grow up, I want to be a ranger too!"

I would stare at the kids, and then at their parents, and then I would fall to my knees, in my loden green jeans and I would extend my arms in plaintive supplication and I'd say:

"Please, for the love of God, don't let your children end up like me. It's horrible. Horrible...living on Ramen Noodles and sleeping in my car during the off-season. Sneaking down to use the toilet at the park visitor center at eight in the morning. I beseech you...don't wish this nightmarish future on your children..or their children! Or their children's children!"

Okay...maybe I just *wished* I'd said all those things. But they were all true.

During my days in the Park Service, seasonal employees were the notable exception to the Fat Cat Fed rule. Seasonals were paid low wages, received no benefits, and often had to even buy their own uniforms when their meager clothes allowance failed to cover the costs. We lived in sub-marginal housing that would

have been condemned had it been anywhere but seasonal housing. For years I lived in a rotten, rodent-infested trailer at the Arches campground. The deer mouse turds began to collect in the walls and at one point, we pulled out the cheap paneling to find a foot's worth of solid mouse crap. When we beat on the walls, they sounded like a rain stick.

Worst of all, we had no guarantee that we'd even get re-hired the following season, regardless of job performance. Seasonals could be terminated at any time for "lack of funding," an excuse NPS managers could use whenever they wanted to terminate an employee and could find no other justification.

"Sorry, Bub, but this year money is tighter than bark on a tree."

There was no recourse, no appeals system, no medical benefits. It's no wonder we spent so much time asleep under trees.

And yet, for all our napping, it was and has always been the seasonal NPS employees that the public sees and interacts with and, ironically, the reason the

Park Service manages to sustain a fairly decent reputation. When you ask questions at a visitor center, or experience a campfire program, or take a ranger-led hike, those are most likely seasonal rangers and interpreters leading the way.

Once, I needed to show my bosses at Arches some resource damage along the Landscape Arch trail, and though I was off-duty, I agreed to meet them the next morning at the trailhead. They arrived in their Class As, fur felt smoky hats firmly screwed to their noggins. I was in cutoffs and sneakers.

But when hikers repeatedly stopped them on the trail to ask for directions, they had to grimace and shrug and re-direct the

questions to me. They had no idea where Double O arch was---It was one of the most triumphant moments of my life.

When I finally left the Park Service, after a decade, I was grateful for the opportunity to work in the national parks but wondered how much longer seasonal

employees would tolerate the bad pay and slum-like conditions. I assumed that sooner or later, and hopefully sooner, the revolution would come.

But it never did.

I recently heard from a long-lost ranger buddy of mine. After all these years, he is still trying to gain permanent ranger status, and with no real hope in sight. According to Assistant Superintendent Paul Henderson at Canyonlands NP, "Seasonals have always been 'at-will' employees – no guarantees, and you can terminate them at any time for either 'lack of work or lack of funds.'" Paul was a seasonal himself and sympathetic to the plight of the seasonals, but agrees, not much has changed in 25 years.

So the next time you're angry about the debt and the deficit and the federal government in general, and you feel like taking out your frustrations on federal employees, and you see a young man or woman dressed in green and grey, first take note of what they're eating—if it's Ramen noodles or Doritos and dip, take pity on them. In fact, take them out to lunch. Most likely it's been a long time since they could afford a decent meal.

