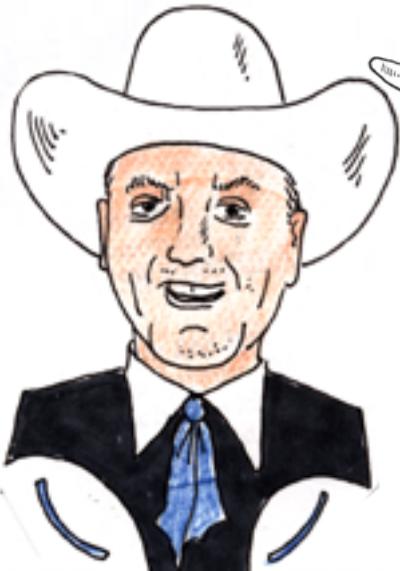


GENE AUTREY SAYS:

"Come on, all you
BUCKAROOS!
JOIN THE
BACKBONE!!!"

THE BACKBONE #17

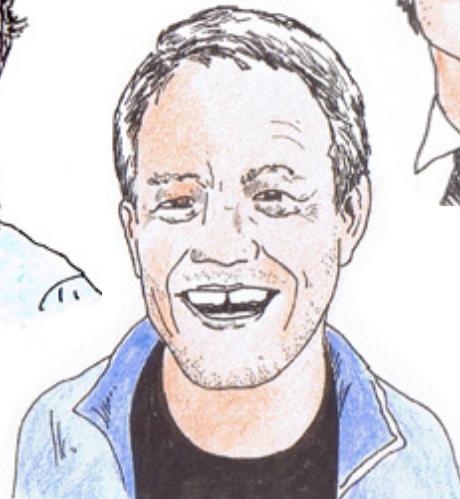


STEVE LESJAK
The Sonora



DR RICH
INGEBRETSEN
SLC, UT

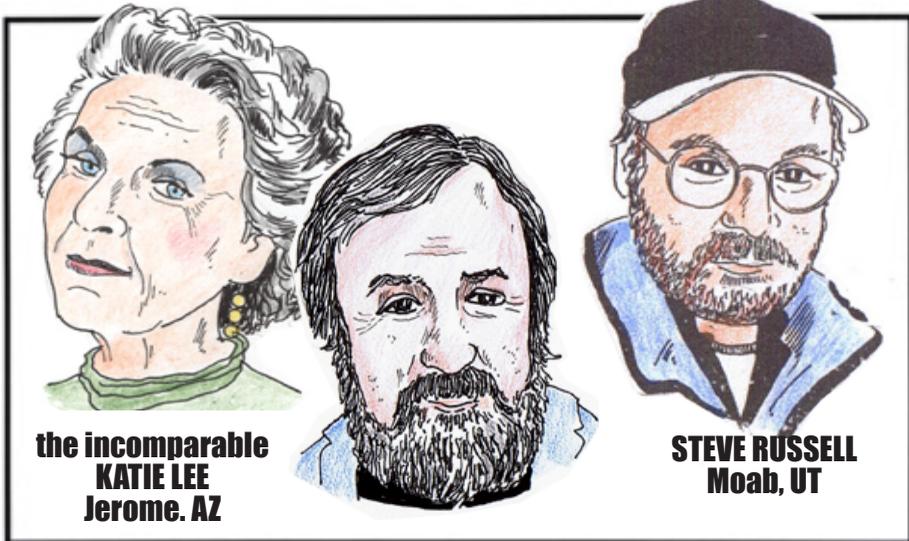
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THE BACKBONE #8

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POINTBLANK

“SHANE! COME BACK!”

By Al Cornette

Shane, Shane, please come back!

When I first saw the Red River Gorge in southeastern Kentucky, I probably experienced the same thing as Jim Stiles when he first rode into Moab, Utah.

Half a century ago the Red River Gorge was a no-man's land, a twilight zone between the coal country in eastern Kentucky and the flatlands of the Bluegrass area of the state. It is one of the most unique areas in the eastern United States.

It started innocently enough for me, a mid-life crisis sort-of-thing, a yearning to return to a bit of normalcy and a great desire to escape from a corporate lifestyle not tuned to the harmonies of man's mental stability and physical longevity. I merely wanted to get away to a quiet place where a man could escape the unnatural lifestyle of the contemporary world.

One of the activities that brought me here was rock climbing. The area is a small part of the western edge of the Cumberland Plateau with over 600 miles of sandstone cliff line and the only area east of the Mississippi River that provides such a plethora of climbing opportunities. And it was innocent enough of me also to think that climbing a few of the magnificent sandstone rocks would do no harm to the environment.

In retrospect, one or two climbers not using bolts, drills, and chalk, had little impact in this regard, but, as with the hikers and campers, as the years rolled on from the late 60s to the 90s, hordes of hikers, campers, and climbers spread out from the more prominent areas such as Chimney Top, Half Moon, Tower Rock, and Auxier Ridge, into the peripheral areas of the gorge proper – including private land. Little respect was shown for the delicate cliff lines harboring rare plant species and rock-shelter archeological sites by the late-arriving, immortality-minded climbers who explored every nook and cranny encompassing a large area so they could be first to “open a route” and thereby have the privilege of getting their name in the climbing guides.

Heated discussions accompanied meetings arranged by the U.S. Forest Service to clarify and designate our public land use and it soon became evident that one man or a small group of concerned citizens could not change what the Forest Service condoned, either through apathy, short-handiness, lack of funds, or managers following the philosophy of “don't rock the boat, I may lose my job.” Climbers and campers were free to roam where they pleased.



the sandstone formations of the gorge. Would you ponder the scenery for more than an instant, knowing that some idiot may be on your side of the road while also pretending to enjoy the scenery.

Ah, the glory of it all, the glory of it all. Straight pipes bellow in the old railroad tunnel at Nada and blast out both ends into the canyon, ricocheting like 30/30 cartridges bouncing around in an old John Wayne movie. Tin roofs rattle, TVs shake, glasses rattle in the kitchen, and old codgers like me cannot sit and talk at the local post office anymore. Some of them accelerate from the only intersection at Slade and actually wave at me, as if I would wave back. Hell, I want to throw rocks at them but some of them are probably attorneys and I'd be sued for disturbing their “peace.” Even the “crotch jockeys” have found the place, doing “wheelies” as they buzz down the road. For some reason, it doesn't bother me when one of them fights a losing battle with a metal guardrail on one of the stiff curves.

And what's with these overweight riders? It must be the only way an obese person can be in the public eye and attract attention. I mean, man, I feel bad judging people like this. But why is the majority of them overweight – along with their wives (or girlfriends). Some of them appear to be molded over and into the machine. Two-wheeled engineers surely have been challenged in designing bikes and tires to withstand 500 to 600 pound loads – and more sometimes.

Thankfully, we finally found a use for all the old, unclaimed strip mines in eastern Kentucky created over the last half century. Most of the jeep and ATV people can now ride hundreds of miles through the broken-up and pitiful-looking strip-mined mountains and hills of the area – and thus are removed from the Red River Gorge area. Strange, how flatlanders of the state yearn to have beautiful mountains and canyon lands to enjoy, and the mountaineers yearn for more flat land. Don't know why they don't truck and dump all the mountain-top overburden into the flatlands (the Bluegrass area) instead of pushing it into the pristine streams of the mountain valleys – forever changing the water table.

So, even though Moab may be overrun with undesirables in the eyes of some, pray real hard, or do whatever Shamanistic rituals you can imagine to repel the evils of unnatural and harsh noise upon the quiet places left on earth. Project all your negative energies upon those people who may be planning to hold a motorcycle festival in Moab, Utah.

Half a century ago the Red River Gorge was a no-man's land, a twilight zone between the coal country in eastern Kentucky and the flatlands of the Bluegrass area of the state. It is one of the most unique areas in the eastern United States.

By 2000, the word was out. Climbers were arriving from all over the world and developers discovered the place. ATVs and four-wheelers were plowing through every mud hole to be found and rutting all challenging embankments with their lug wheels. After unregulated loggers made war zones of several areas, cabin builders moved in, and with poorly enforced zoning laws, were free to build as they pleased.

I adjusted somewhat to the fate of this beautiful canyon land of Appalachia because I knew the limitations of man. The cause of it all? Somewhere in man's macho-mind lays a quirkiness of self-adulation and vanity, of recognition of a desire for attention, of aggression, of winning, of conquering. Climbing wasn't so much a desire to conquer as much as it was simply a personal need of the individual to come to terms with their fears. This basic urge used to be satisfied by screaming high in the jungle canopy or romping in the lowlands and beating on one's chest. In the 50s and 60s this primitive urge was satisfied by loud pipes on a chopped “rod,” or “scratching off” in front of the girls. The last decade of the 20th century saw booming base speakers in cars replace the red-neck habit of burning up a set of tires in a few days of “showing off” to the public. All the gaudy signs that appeared in the confusion and all the chaos that accompanies monkey farms became a part of the once pristine area we call the gorge. And it hasn't stopped.

I call them Transformation Machines because they cause supposedly mature men to drastically change personalities. Basically, these machines are motors and gas tanks mounted on two wheels. Gleaming chrome and straight exhaust pipes appears to be the magic that transforms men (and a few women) as the two-wheel motors bellow like horny bulls searching for the herd the young bulls lured into their concubines. Knowing Jim Stiles, I'll bet he didn't ride into Moab with loud pipes bellowing from the back of a Harley.

In the beginning there was one, then two, and of course, they saw the area was fair and they multiplied. And like the plague, a wild proliferation of fleas in a carpet, or roaches in a dirty kitchen, hundreds, yes, thousands came over the horizon because we had lots of curvy roads, you see. None of them, if they value their lives, ever look up to really enjoy

Embellish the gods of flat tires and mechanical failures and lavish gifts on them. Prey that the God of Noise will go deaf. Pray that the God of the quiet, peaceful places will protect you from the noisemakers, the macho-manics and those afraid of the quiet. The quiet riders are those that appreciate the wind in their faces. The noisy ones are those needing attention therapies. I find myself struggling between benevolent and malevolent behavior toward those who ride the noise machines.

It's becoming like Sturges, South Dakota, every weekend around here, but in defense of those who are trapped in contemporary man's unnatural world and a job that destroys liberty and individualism, I realize that some of them do not follow the trend. If the others would stop the ragged noise of their straddled engines they could hear the whisper of the quiet places.

In the old classic movie, Shane, the hero (Alan Ladd, Sheryl's father) straps on his gun, walks into the bar full of drinkers, braggarts, gun fighters, and crooks, and orders a sarsaparilla. Of course, the bad guys are either killed or run out of town. We have no hero's like Shane standing up for the people anymore. Sadly, most of the little people, like ants following ritual, trample the environment without remorse. Even worse, they are unaware of what they are doing.

Shane, please come back.

Al Cornette is a gifted writer and artist. He lives near the Red River Gorge in eastern Kentucky. Al can be reached via his web site:

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