

# THE ZEPHYR CHRONICLES...PT 1

## BEGINNINGS...1988-1996

JIM STILES

Here's how far we've come.

Shortly after The Zephyr's first issue appeared on newsstands, in mid-March 1989, I was at the old Main Street Broiler, eating one of Debbie Rappe's wonderful cheeseburgers and overheard a spirited conversation at an adjacent table. "This smart ass kid thinks he can just start a newspaper and then tell us how to live! His 'Zephyr' garbage won't last three months." His friend nodded, "I hear he's one of those environmental weirdos."

Jump ahead—way ahead—to the day last year when I found this post on our web site; it was in response to a story on extreme sports. "It's this geriatric community of do-nothings," young Seth complained, "that wants to sit by and look at rock that is getting butt-hurt...It's so sad watching you get old and bitter."

From smart ass kid to old and bitter. Seems like only yesterday.



Back in 1990, when somebody asked Grand County Commissioner Jimmie Walker what he thought of the new publication, Walker grinned and said, "I can sum up The Zephyr in one word... SHIT." And in 2012, Grand County Councilman Chris Baird described The Zephyr like this: "You are like a flesh-eating cannibal...But vultures will be vultures."

On the other hand...

Almost a quarter century ago, one reader had this to say about our new publication: "Stiles is an aggressive perpetrator of knowledge, a passionate defender of kindness and common sense, and has a splendid sense of humor...The Canyon Country Zephyr might be the best local newspaper in the country." But a local realtor disapproved: "Stiles wants to return to the good old days of Ed Abbey and economic depression. He has a closed mind when it comes to progress."

In 2013, one reader left this comment: "Stiles is a fount of unending negativity. I can't believe it hasn't killed him yet." But another reader expressed a different sentiment: "Thanks for your eloquent writing." And she thanked me for "the much-needed voice of the CCZ."

In 25 years The Zephyr has traveled the spectrum, from "one word...shit" and "flesh-eating cannibal" to "perpetrator of knowledge" and "a much needed voice." No wonder I feel a bit schizoid at times. I never know whether to bask in the love or jump off a cliff. Fortunately, most of the time, I've chosen to do neither. One thing is for certain, as we enter the 26th year of life, very few people who read The Zephyr are ambivalent about it. And though this rollercoaster has almost broken me a couple of times, it's a journey I'm grateful to have been a part of. It's been quite a ride.

**In 25 years The Zephyr has traveled the spectrum, from "one word...shit" and "flesh-eating cannibal" to "perpetrator of knowledge" and "a much needed voice." No wonder I feel a bit schizoid at times. I never know whether to bask in the love or jump off a cliff.**

### BEGINNINGS...1988-1996

In the waning days of 1988, Moab was a different kind of place; so was the world. I was months way from publishing the first issue of a new publication I had recently decided to call, "The Canyon Country Zephyr." I'd kicked a few less memorable names around, including "The Slickrock Journal" and "The Moab Monthly." But driving along Mill Creek Drive, near Emmitt's K-D Second hand Store, 'Zephyr' popped into my head. It stuck.

I had recently been writing and cartooning for Bob Dudek's irreverent monthly, "The Stinking Desert Gazette." The Gazette had been around for a couple years and Bob had offered me work when his cartoonist Nik Hougan briefly moved north to run the family's farm in Idaho. I needed the money and was intrigued with the idea of being part of a newspaper. I had earlier quit my seasonal ranger job at Arches National Park, after the death of a co-worker and very close friend. Though the details of that tragedy are not suited for this story, its sordid and ugly aftermath would affect me and this publication for years. Later in this narrative, I'll explain how.

The Gazette was my introduction to newspaper production, 1988-style, and I enjoyed it. My role there grew and soon I was submitting stories and essays as well. I liked Bob and the gang who had been a part of the SDG since its inception, but Dudek and I were

not a good fit. I think Bob enjoyed exploring the absurdity of Moab more than me, even then, and he avoided embracing the hard news stories. He once told me he wanted the SDG to become the "MAD Magazine of the Desert," and I think he could have succeeded. Meanwhile I kept trying to slip serious stories about Moab politics into Dudek's off-beat, funky rag. He always printed them and was consistently patient with my aberrations. But ultimately, for me, it didn't work, so I gave my notice in September 1988.

My first thought was to pursue a reporter/cartoonist job with an environmental magazine like 'High Country News,' but opportunities then were far and few. I was even offered a seasonal job with the Park Service in Alaska by an old ranger buddy. But in November, when Grand County citizens voted to stop a toxic waste incinerator, it occurred to me that Moab could use another news voice, besides the weekly "Times-Independent," Grand County's newspaper 'of record' since 1896.

Link to: "When Moab Had a Pulse"

<http://www.canyoncountryzephyr.com/oldzephyr/archives/toxicincinerator.html>

Link to: "The Calm Before the Swarm...parts 1-3"

<http://www.canyoncountryzephyr.com/2011/12/01/the-calm-before-the-swarm-by-jim-stiles/>

<http://www.canyoncountryzephyr.com/2012/02/01/the-calm-before-the-swarm-2-the-joy-of-being-poor-gets-run-over-by-a-bicycle-by-jim-stiles/>

<http://www.canyoncountryzephyr.com/2012/04/01/the-calm-before-the-swarm-3-by-jim-stiles/>

The town was in dire straits; the uranium industry had collapsed, hundreds of jobs had been lost, and a quarter of Moab's homes were empty and for sale. Moab's 'survivor's were trying to figure out ways to keep their heads above water. Oddly though, because we were all in such a bad way, there was also a spirit of community and togetherness. It was that feeling that convinced me a monthly alternative could make it, as long as I kept it simple and my 'business plan' cheap.

And it was also my hope that it could be a gathering place for divergent ideas. From issue one, I was determined to offer all points of view. Not only would I welcome constructive criticism, I would seek out different viewpoints as well. I found Raquel Shumway, and later Jane S Jones, to represent the Western Alliance of Land Users to counter the monthly contributions of the Sierra Club and Lance Christie. The 'debates' that were waged in this publication 25 years ago still make for interesting reading. My hope was that we could at least remove the demons from the debate. We didn't have to hate each other if we shared different philosophies. I know that's an idealistic and maybe even simplistic approach. I know also that sometimes different values are irreconcilable. But if there was common ground to be found, I hoped it might be in The Zephyr.

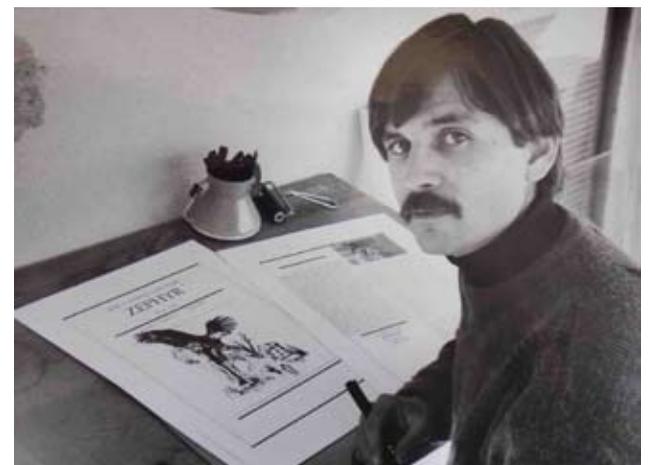
I hit the streets in January 1989, looking for advertisers and did better than I'd expected. Still, at \$18 for an eighth-page ad and \$31 for a quarter, including art work, few could refuse. And when possible, we bartered...trade-outs were big in Moab in 1989. Even preferred. A few years later, Bill Hedden would note that Moab had been, "a hard place to get rich but a good place to be poor." He was exactly right.

I also managed to convince almost a hundred friends to buy a \$10 yearly subscription. I found a good printer in Cortez, Colorado. Larry Hausman, the head press man, explained the process and he looked over some of my dummy cut and paste pages. Now all I had to do was put together a newspaper.

**APPROACHING VOLUME 1 NUMBER 1...  
MARCH 14, 1989 & ED ABBEY**

In early 1989, Moab was still buzzing from the November election. Grand County citizens had approved a measure to stop a toxic waste incinerator and had thrown two of its incumbent commissioners (and incinerator proponents) out of office. But the vote against toxic waste had crossed demographic lines; an interesting and diverse groups of Moabites had united to change Moab's future. At the time, it felt like a new beginning for Moab. I figured, what better way to keep this spirit alive than to create an ongoing dialogue with the new commissioners. I contacted incumbent Dave Knutson and newly elected commissioners Fern Mullen and Merv Lawton. All were agreeable to a monthly sit-down with The Zephyr, on tape, to discuss current issues. Later Mayor Tom Stocks also agreed to a spontaneous monthly, on the record interview.

I figured, what better way to keep this spirit alive than to create an ongoing dialogue with the new commissioners. I contacted incumbent Dave Knutson and newly elected commissioners Fern Mullen and Merv Lawton. All were agreeable to a monthly sit-down with The Zephyr, on tape, to discuss current issues. Later Mayor Tom Stocks also agreed to a spontaneous monthly, on the record interview.



In December, Ed Abbey made what would be his last trip to Moab. While he signed copies of "Fool's Progress" at Ken Sleight's book store, I told him about the proposed Zephyr. Abbey was delighted and later, as we sat in my VW Squareback, sipping beers,

he offered to send something for the first issue. "I want to put an original story in your Zephyr," he said. "Maybe I can become one of your regular correspondents."

I'd already circled the first 'press day' on my calendar and so I told Ed, "March 14 is what we're hoping for."

Abbey replied, "I'll get you something before then." We shook hands in the cold December darkness and I watched him amble away in his long, loping walk. I figured I'd see him next Spring.

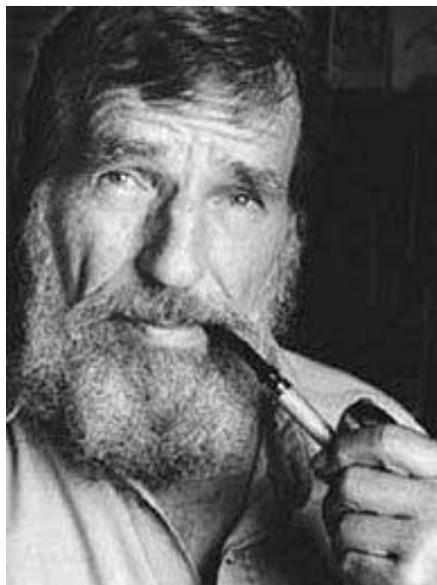
Trying to put a newspaper together posed a problem. I didn't have a computer and I didn't know how to type (I'm still awful slow). To say this was a shoe-string operation, even then, would be an understatement. But my friend, attorney Bill Benge, proposed that I use his computer and his secretary Trish West moonlighted as my transcriber. Beginning with the first issue and for three years, everything I wrote was hand-scribbled on yellow legal pads and left to Trish to interpret. Even long interviews with the politicians were hand-transcribed by me and passed to Trish.

**I'd already circled the first 'press day' on my calendar and so I told Ed, "March 14 is what we're hoping for." Abbey replied, "I'll get you something before then." We shook hands in the cold December darkness and I watched him amble away in his long, loping walk. I figured I'd see him next Spring.**

We were also in need of a printer and Trish's uncle, CPA Ed Claus, graciously allowed the use of his when we were ready to lay out pages. His printer had one postscript font—helvetica bold—and so for three years we used this thick bold eight point type for stories and essays and interviews. I hand-scribbled the headline type and ad copy too, with size and font instructions, and took it to the Printing Place, where Larry and Marge Fleenor punched out the copy on a photographic 'Compu-graphic' machine. From there it was all cut and paste. More precisely, the entire paper was held together with hot wax. My hand-held hand waxer would serve me well for the next 17 years.

In 1989, emails didn't exist. No cell phones. We depended on 5 1/4 inch floppy disks (they really were floppy) to print some stories, but most of them had to be re-typed. It was a long process.

With my first deadline fast-approaching, I began to write and gather stories. The first issue included interviews with both the commissioners and the mayor. We ran original stories about asbestos-dumping in Grand County and a report on local child abuse. I wrote a piece about my next door neighbor called, "Toots McDougald's History of Moab," and featured local artist Kathy Cooney on our first "Zephyr Gallery" page. Ken Sleight and John Sensenbrenner (the owner of Milt's 'Stop n' Eat' in the 80s and 90s) offered opinion and analysis from the Left and Right. Even my mother got into the act with "Grandma Sue's Country Kitchen and her recipe for Mock Turtle Soup."



**I got back to Moab after 2 PM and had just unloaded the first box when a friend of mine, Jean Akin pulled up to the curb. "Did you hear about Ed Abbey?" she asked. I shook my head. Jean said, "Edward Abbey died this morning."**

Abbey's story arrived in mid-February, and with a note from Ed. He had sent me a never-before-published essay called, "Hard Times in Santa Fe," but he hadn't written it exclusively for The Zephyr. He'd been busy finishing his sequel to 'The Monkey Wrench Gang' and was trying to beat a deadline. We would learn soon that the deadline was for more than his latest novel.

A couple days before I carried the layout boards to Cortez, I'd heard a rumor that Abbey was ill. The same rumor had hovered over us for years, in fact, but Abbey had always kept his health issues private. In January I called the Abbeyes and learned he'd had "an episode," but was on the mend. So at 5 AM on March 14, 1989, I packed the layouts and my check book into my 1963 Volvo and drove the 120 miles to Cortez News. It took about five hours to produce Volume 1 Number 1. I worried about typos and scrambled layouts, knowing that once it rolled off the presses there wasn't a damn thing I could do to fix them. By noon, The 2000 Zephyrs were printed, boxed and loaded into my Volvo.

The trunk and back seat and passenger seat were stacked to the ceiling. I barely had room to sit.

I got back to Moab after 2 PM and had just unloaded the first box when a friend of mine, Jean Akin pulled up to the curb. "Did you hear about Ed Abbey?" she asked. I shook my head. Jean said, "Edward Abbey died this morning."

I couldn't believe it. I was absolutely paralyzed. That afternoon, my great friends, the Knouff family—Becky, Kate, Terry and Tim--- helped get the first issue on the newsstands. I headed out to Pack Creek Ranch to spend the evening with my buddy, and one of Abbey's best pals, Ken Sleight. A few days later, Benge and I drove down to Tucson for the private memorial service. Bill had been Abbey's attorney when he lived in Moab and had, in fact, written much of the last chapter of 'The Monkey Wrench Gang,' after they finally got caught. Abbey was a writer not a lawyer, and Bill helped fill in the blanks on courtroom procedure and the rule of law. We gathered at Saguaro NM west of town. It's a blur now. It was a hard day.

Later, Benge and I made the long 17 hour drive home. Two days later, I had to put my 15 year old dog to sleep. I was ready for that week to be over.

In late May, a larger public memorial service was organized by Ken Sleight, Ken Sanders, Terry Tempest Williams and me. My job was to find a site for the event. I inquired about a location at Arches but when I was hit with permit applications and fees and a requirement to provide port-a-potties, I decided Abbey would prefer a different venue. I finally picked a site on the mesa above Arches but outside the park. To get there, everyone had to drive the old abandoned road to the top of the canyon and then walk the last mile. In the early hours before the service, I couldn't sleep and so I drove up Moab Canyon at three in the morning to watch the night sky. All through the night, a slow but steady stream of car lights climbed the old road. Mourners came from all over the West, from all over the country. By the time the service began, a thousand people had come to say goodbye to Edward Abbey.

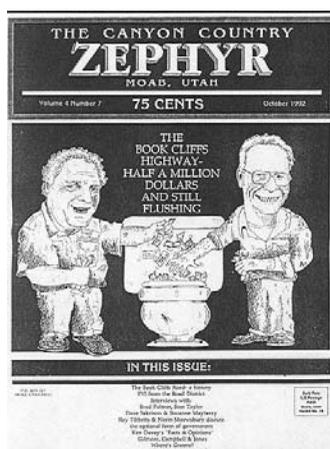
Ken Sleight was there. Doug Peacock. Dave Foreman. Terry Tempest Williams. Perhaps Abbey's best friend, John DePuy, was too moved to speak. Later in the afternoon, I took Foreman to my favorite spot at Arches—Abbey's Arch, the rock span Ed had found in 1956 and that I had re-discovered 20 years later. Less than a week after our hike, Foreman and other Earth Firsters! were arrested in a government sting operation.

A decade later, Abbey's Arch would become (for a while!) a popular destination for a commercial canyoneering company and the old abandoned roadway up Moab canyon was converted to a paved bike path. All of that, however, resided in the future. In 1989, I had no idea what was coming...

**THE BOOK CLIFFS HIGHWAY**

In the early 1990s, one story dominated Grand County news. When the incumbent commissioners were defeated in November 1988, they still had a couple months to serve. In that time as lame duck officials, they created the "Grand County Roads Special Service District." It was to be an independent government entity, funded by state mineral lease monies. They were, in effect, autonomous. And their stated goal was to build a multi-million dollar road over the Book Cliffs. Its real purpose was to provide better access for oil and gas development, but to make it more sell-able, they pushed the road as a new paved state highway that would dramatically increase tourism to Grand County.

Opposition to the highway was insignificant when The Zephyr first started reporting the story, but over the next four years, concerns that the mineral lease funds could be better spent began to take its toll on the highway's popularity. It became a regular theme in The Zephyr, as I reported the 'progress' of the project. Exclusively using mineral lease funds for the highway meant that money couldn't be used for anything else. While the road board insisted it could ONLY be used for roads, a close reading of the law proved otherwise.



**Opposition to the highway was insignificant when The Zephyr first started reporting the story, but over the next four years, concerns that the mineral lease funds could be better spent began to take its toll on the highway's popularity. It became a regular theme in The Zephyr, as I reported the 'progress' of the project.**

And yet, during that same period, I got to know and like one of its strongest and most honest supporters, Commissioner David Knutson. Knutson was the youngest member of the commission and his father Ollie was on the road board, so you wouldn't think Dave and I would have found much in common. And yet we hit it off, despite our differences. The Knutsons ran an oil well maintenance company and wanted to see the roads in the Book Cliffs improved. It seemed like a conflict of interest to me; clearly they looked at it differently. Our disagreement on the issues made for some long and interesting arguments. The Knutsons frequently hauled water for the Park Service to the Hans Flat ranger station and residences at the Maze District of Canyonlands. I once rode along with Dave, four hours out, four hours back. We never stopped talking except to unload the water.

But it was the first time I realized how difficult it would be to play the role of journalist with people that I liked. A big city reporter can bury himself in anonymity and never have to face the people he scrutinizes. A small town journalist lacks that comfortable

next page...