

From the 2001 Archives...

## TK 'TOM TOM' ARNOLD

VW MECHANIC/PHILOSOPHER/ECONOMIST/ ABBEY'S PILOT/TROUBLEMAKER

Jim Stiles

*from August 2001**Note: Our dear friend Tom Tom passed away in 2007.*

Why do people from all over the world come to Moab? Most will insist that it's the sheer beauty of our red rock canyons and sculpted arches and the mighty Colorado River which, after all, carved out this great sedimentary plateau.

Others may argue that our major attraction is the way the sandstone provides an excellent recreational medium upon which to play out their extreme sports activities.

Some perhaps come to Moab for the tremendous selection of espresso shops, Southwest jewelry, souvenir ashtrays, and pre-fab plastic blue motels.

And everyone visits Moab, of course, to bask in the spirit of brotherly love and affection that permeates the souls of all of us who live here in the Moab Valley.

But there is so much more. For once in my life as a Moab "Leave it Alone" recluse, I'm taking this opportunity to promote...yes, to PROMOTE! one of the great scenic attractions of Moab, the Colorado Plateau, the Southwest and, indeed, the World! Tribute is long overdue. And I stand humbly in his presence to praise the man who made it all happen...

A grateful community salutes Mr. Tom Arnold, the founder and curator of Tom Tom's Volkswagen Museum—by his account, the most fantastic collection of VWs in the world.

Some ignorant fools have the temerity to call it junk.

The Museum is not easy to miss. Located at the intersection of Mill Creek Drive and Spanish Valley Drive, known to locals as Chicken Corners—the Gateway to Spanish Valley as it were—T.K. Arnold has managed to squeeze 250 vintage Volkswagens onto a two acre lot that he bought almost 30 years ago. It is his pride and joy. Others would like to kill him and scour his collection from the face of the earth, but Arnold takes all the criticism in good stride. "They just don't know how to have a good time...I'm having a good time."

When Tom Arnold first came to Moab, in 1969, it wasn't to fill an empty lot with German cars; he came here to start a college.

T.K. taught business administration at Colorado State University in Ft. Collins, but a tip from a fellow academician led him to Moab. Before Tom Arnold, there was no "higher education" in Grand County. But when he heard that Utah State in Logan was planning to open an extension office in Moab, Tom applied for the position without even seeing the town and was offered the job. A few days later he drove to Moab and found, "this little green oasis in the middle of all that desert. It was just beautiful." He walked the streets of Moab, talking to businesses, trying to stimulate interest in the new extension. He essentially started with nothing and built a college.

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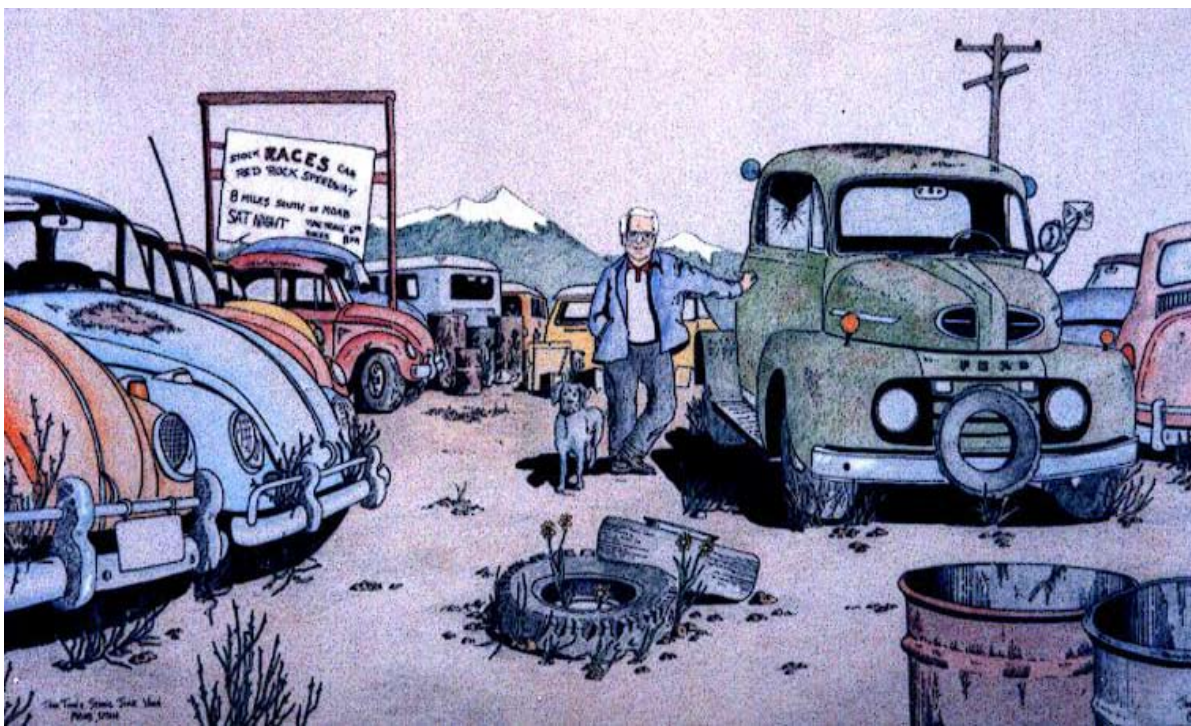
But even as he was unloading the moving truck, settling into his new digs, and throwing himself into the new job, his Volkswagen obsession was already well-established. T.K. moved to Moab with seven VWs; he rented a small shed across from the old cemetery to store them, and on weekends, he and his son spent hours doing to VWs whatever it is that VW aficionados do to VWs. The locals began to take notice...

"People would come by. Nobody in town worked on Volkswagens at the time...VW was a bad word then...but soon they started asking if we'd work on their Volkswagens. The people here in Moab are who put me in business. And then when the university and I disagreed and we decided to part company...that's when I leaned across the desk and handed the Dean the finger...I was already set to start the shop and stay in Moab because I thought this was the greatest little spot in the country."

That was in 1972. Out of that thrust finger came "Tom Tom's Volkswagen Repair...You can't beat him." Tom moved his operation to the present location and has been building the museum ever since.

Business was brisk and Tom found himself working until midnight at times to keep up with the demand. Among the early customers was Ed Abbey. Abbey and his wife Renee had just bought a VW Thing, only to discover that the gas heater didn't work. "It was in the fall or winter and pretty cold, so I went to work on it, but I didn't even know who he was. They were renting an apartment above Miller's Clothing Store (now the Slickrock Cafe' Building at Main St. & Center St.). But we became friends before I ever knew he was an author. I'd never read any of his books and then one day, he came by and gave me a copy of The Monkey Wrench Gang. I was working long days then, but I took it home and started reading it at about midnight until four o'clock in the morning, then got up at eight and didn't even go to work...I finished it by noon. I couldn't put it down."

By now, not only had Tom Arnold become a good friend of Abbey's, he also became a regular poker partner, the man Ed lost more money to than anyone else on Earth, except his ex-wives, and on many occasion, Ed Abbey's personal pilot. Tom first learned to fly in World War II and flew just about everything; he later volunteered to fly transports in Vietnam. Now he was shuttling Ed...



"I flew Abbey a lot. First we just flew to look at the scenery. Somebody would tell him about an arch and we'd fly around looking for it. Later, when his wife Renee wanted to go back to college, Ed paid to send her to Tucson and I'd fly him down there once a month. I also flew him to a lot of his speeches and book signings. So at first, he really wasn't a hero to me but just a buddy."

To Tom, the private Ed Abbey "was completely different" from the man he was perceived to be from his books. "For one thing he didn't give a damn about being rich. He didn't even want anyone to know who he was. His 'wealth' was what he believed in and so he didn't even want to go to book signings. People really had to force him to do those

kinds of things."

For years, Abbey didn't have a phone at his house and would make the short drive to Tom Tom's to make calls. In fact, Tom was Ed's "clearing house" for potential houseguests and visitors. "He didn't want anybody to know where he lived and I was his center point. If somebody came in to my shop and asked where Abbey lived, I knew Ed had talked to him and I could give him directions. I used to see Ed get pretty exasperated dealing with the publishers, because of the money angle. They were always looking to make more money and he didn't really give a damn.

"As far as I was concerned Ed was very serious in what he was attempting to do with his writing. He was writing about what he believed in and as more and more time goes by, the more I appreciate his writing. I really wasn't much of an environmentalist at first, but the longer you hang around here...you become one. But otherwise he was very unassuming—he just wanted to sit back and enjoy the scenery and write and dream."

And play poker.

The poker games were the stuff of legend. Although accounts differ, most recall that Tom was a frequent winner. For years men and women have speculated about the source of Tom Arnold's poker prowess. Now for the first time, T.K. reveals his secret...

"I was the only guy at the table who didn't drink. Everybody else would get drunk and

I'd have my glass of iced tea and they never really noticed that I was sober. But that's only because I've never needed to drink to have a good time. Don't need it."

Tom Arnold—pilot, poker king, tea-totaler. It doesn't get any stranger...

Abbey moved to Tucson in the late 1970s and the regularity of the poker games slowed. But Tom continued to repair VWs, flew shuttle flights for the airport from time to time and continued to fly Abbey around when Ed was in town. About ten years ago, T.K. was taking a plane to Hite and he almost didn't make it...

"I just got to 7000 feet, right over the Green River, when I heard a tremendous bang from the engine. I really thought I could land the plane, as long as the engine didn't fall off. If it comes off, you lose your balance and you have a hell of a time landing. But it threw a rod and it was banging and vibrating.

"So I looked around and spotted a jeep road up above the Orange Cliffs. I was down to about 45 mph when I landed and there was a slight knoll at the end which caused the plane to flip over. But there was hardly any damage. But they could hear me without the radio all the way to L.A. I expect, because I was really calling out the 'maydays.' Yeah... that was quite an experience."

It's been more than a decade since Moab began to transform itself and Tom has watched the change with a wary eye.



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"We live in one of the most pristine places on earth and sometimes I just cannot believe some of the people in this area who want to come in and destroy it. And once it's gone it can't be replaced. Other things can be replaced but we can't replace the scenery.

"You know, when I first moved here, mining was the main industry here and we used to make wisecracks about the 'miners' mentality.' Well in the 30 years I've lived here, I've seen it go from the 'miners' mentality' to 'zero mentality.' And especially in the last ten years, we've seen the push for 'economic development.' What a joke. With all the money they've spent on 'economic development,' we could have built a wonderful indoor swimming pool."

When it comes to 'economic development,' one aspect of the Moab Culture has been considered a hindrance to Growth and that would be Grand County's junk, a term Tom takes exception to...

"One of the beauties of this valley is the people who have lived here. Moab is not just the scenery, it's the people. People want to live here because of what the town IS. In the last ten years though, we've seen people come here who want to change everything. So I have a collection of antique vehicles which is probably the greatest collection in the world and a lot of people don't like it. Volkswagen owners are the ones who REALLY know what I've got.

"You see, when I look at stuff that others call trash, I don't see trash. Every object has some history behind it or some memory. I think a lot of it is picturesque. So come here to this valley and accept what's here. I like this town the way it is...The way I figure it, if you're really rich, you don't need to display it anyway." So why worry about a little junk?

Tom has quit working on other peoples' cars in the last few years. He claims to be determined to restore his collection. And he quit flying in 1995. "I wanted to fly for 50 years and I did." As for the collection, for years, many of us have tried to pry a car or two away from him, but he's always resisted. Now Tom claims he's willing to part with a VW from time to time. But here's the deal...

"People ask me, 'What are you doing with all these Volkswagens?' and I tell them, 'I don't have the slightest idea. I'm just enjoying my collection.' And then they say, 'Well, will you sell one?' and I say, 'Sure, but you have to take them in order. Or pick one out, bring about ten of your buddies down, move all the cars out of the way, pull yours out, and then put everything back in again. Then they ask me what I want for them and I say, 'It's my private collection. Pick the one you want and then try to talk me out of it.' So I'll sell them if they pay me what they're worth."

Three years ago, Tom went into the hospital for some minor medical problem and left a few days later with bypass surgery. "When they told me I was going in for bypass sur-



## MOAB SOLUTIONS

*The mission of Moab Solutions is to reduce and eliminate the waste of materials and human potential while nurturing the well-being of the natural world. We protect and restore natural areas, help the homeless help themselves, and promote the benefits of Respect, Rethink, Reduce, Reuse and Recycle practices. At our core is a deep respect for and love of the natural world and all lives that depend upon it.*

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## LIFETIME BACKBONER

**STEVE RUSSELL**  
**Moab, UT**

gery, I promised myself I'd never let anything bother me again."

Not that it ever seemed to. If you could find one word to describe Tom Arnold, it's unflappable. As long as I've known him, for 25 years, that's the way he's been. "I try to enjoy life. It's amazing how people can't get mad at you when you laugh at them. My advice is, 'Relax.'"

They don't come any more "relaxed" than Tom Tom.

