

Walking With A Ghost

Edward Abbey urged us to leave our cars behind and experience the national parks on foot.

BY JAMES M. CAHALAN

LAST JANUARY IN Big Bend National Park, I floated down the Rio Grande through Santa Elena Canyon and hiked in the Chisos Mountains. Then I went walking in Guadalupe Mountains National Park, enjoying its shifts from desert to riparian streambed and forested upland. I felt that I had Big Bend and Guadalupe largely to myself—unlike Yosemite, where in June I drove past the crowded valley into busy Tuolumne Meadows.

Like most of my fellow citizens, I've spent far more weeks driving to, in, and around our national parks than

I've devoted days or hours to hiking and rafting them. I'd driven Skyline Drive in Shenandoah National Park several times, sticking to the scenic overlooks, until I finally got out of my car in 1997, hiked all day on two trails—and saw nine bears, including a mother trailed by her four cubs. I remember those few hours of hiking and rafting much more vividly than I do all the driving.

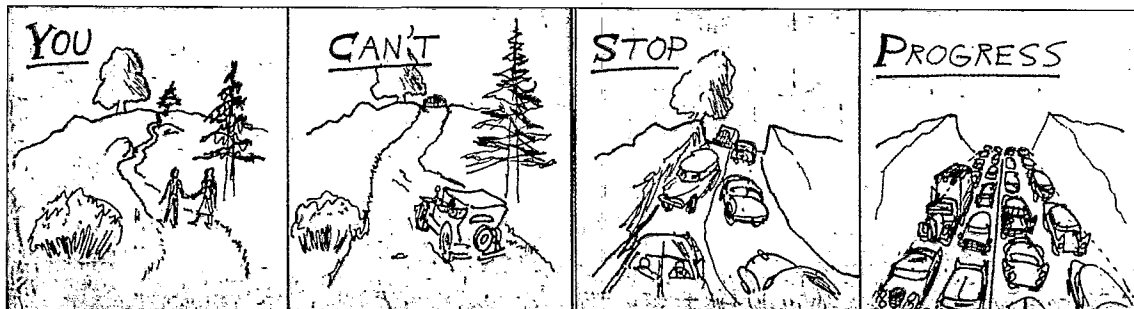
Try this litmus test on yourself: Bring up whatever mental images you have of your own drives through national parks. Perhaps pleasant, but slightly vague, aren't they? Now think about your hikes (or campouts or river or bike trips). Are you able once again to hear those birds and sounds of rushing water? See just how bright the grass or

how brown that desert mountain was? Remember how thirsty you got and how your joints ached a bit? I can—and I'll bet you can, too.

In my own expeditions, I've been haunted by a ghost, because I've been tracking Ed Abbey. I've followed him not only in national parks, but also right here at home in Indiana County, Pennsylvania, Abbey's native county. I live in

a tunnel because the road there is so narrow and winding that the trees on either side interlace their branches overhead, forming a canopy."

When Ed Abbey hitchhiked to the Grand Canyon for the first time in 1944 at age 17, he asked to be dropped off a mile away, because even as an adolescent he had an instinct that it was better to walk to the South Rim. He remem-



EDWARD ABBEY: EL CREPUSCULO DE LA LIBERTAD, 14 JANUARY 1960, P.2, COURTESY OF THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA LIBRARY, SPECIAL COLLECTIONS, EDWARD ABBEY PAPERS, BOX, 28

woods beside the old site of a mine where his firebrand father, Paul Revere Abbey, worked 80 years ago. Every time I ride my bike beside our nearby creek, I hear Ed's voice, from *Appalachian Wilderness*: "That's Crooked Creek, glowing with golden acids from the mines upstream." Often I bike to the old Abbey family home and sidehill farm, the "Old Lonesome Briar Patch" near the village of Home. Everywhere I'm surrounded by trees, trees, and more trees: pines and an endless deciduous array. As I point my bike "up a red-dog road under a railroad trestle through a tunnel in the woods"—where the Abbeyes' house used to be, with its adjacent springhouse still guarded by a faithful horse—I hear him speak again: "I call it

bered in his essay, "My 40 Years as a Grand Canyoneer," that he had "belonged to the Grand Canyon ever since, possessing and possessed by the spirit of the place." Because of *Desert Solitaire*, most readers associate him with Arches and Canyonlands. Between 1953 and 1979 Abbey worked in 16 different national parks and forests, from Glacier to Everglades. He was interested in the parks not as a career, but as a series of sites for exploration and writing. He began as a laborer in New Mexico's Carson National Forest for \$10.40 per day and ended as a fire lookout at Arizona's Aztec Peak for a seasonal wage of less than \$3,000. He knew that in the underfunded park and forest services, he would never make much money. But

he liked the job: "All you have to do is get up every 15 minutes or so and take a look around." And he loved the beauty and solitude. As he declared in *Cactus Country*, "A man or woman could hardly ask for a better way to make a living than as a seasonal ranger or naturalist for the National Park Service."

When he died in March 1989, Abbey was buried in Arizona's Cabeza Prieta wilderness, in the beautiful desert within the newly declared Sonoran Desert National Monument. Here rangers tacitly accept his technically illegal grave. Ed Abbey was a ranger's ranger.

He was also an incorrigible troublemaker—whose most radical warnings and advice continue to haunt us. After my visit to Yosemite, I remembered Abbey's admonition, in the "Industrial Tourism and the National Parks" chapter of *Desert Solitaire*, that we should all get out of our cars and walk upon this blessed land, since we have already agreed not to drive into cathedrals and other sacred places.


Thirty-four years ago this January, when this now classic book appeared, Abbey outraged many by asserting acidly that "loop drives are extremely popular with the petroleum industry—they bring the motorist right back to the same gas station from which he started." His argument fell on deaf ears in 1968 and for years thereafter, but now we urge the Park Service to implement plans allowing light rail to transport much of Grand Canyon's deluge of visitors to the South Rim and buses to shuttle visitors at Yosemite and elsewhere. Similarly, in "The Cowboy and His Cow," Abbey offended many in 1985 by attacking cattle grazing on public lands, but now proposals to limit such practices are virtually mainstream.

In January 1960, ten years before the first Earth Day and subsequent new talk of "environmentalism," Abbey published an article called "God Bless America—Let's Save Some of It" in *El*

Crepusculo de la Libertad (the dawn or twilight of liberty), a newspaper that he edited for a short time in Taos, New Mexico. He also drew the prophetic cartoon "You Can't Stop Progress."

Part of the ironic difficulty is that when we celebrate a wilderness place, we risk sending the public there and making it into something else. Arches was wilderness when Abbey worked there in the late 1950s, but now one can sit in crowded Moab, watch trucks thunder past, and observe visitors clutching copies of *Desert Solitaire*. That mountain-biking capital is so overrun as to threaten Arches and Canyonlands. For this reason, when Abbey later described his 110-mile "Walk in the Desert Hills" across the Cabeza Prieta, he deliberately misled readers by claiming that he had started out from Bagdad (a town near Prescott, hundreds of miles away). Yet he welcomed as many visitors as were willing to walk or bike through our national parks.

Emerson once observed that Thoreau's thoughts were as long as his walks. As we walk through our national parks, we can generate our best thoughts about how to protect them. I'm not the only one who hears Ed Abbey's ghost as I wander and think about these sacred places. Four years ago in *The New York Times*, Lesley Hazleton, considering possible compromises at Yosemite, heard Abbey urging her to "go the whole hog" and ban cars in Yosemite Valley. And just a few months ago in the *Idaho State Journal*, Penelope Reedy recounted how Abbey had offended her, then a rancher's wife, with his critique of cattlemen, and so she had attacked him in print, receiving a letter from Abbey telling him that he had "loved your letter; give that bastard hell." Having now become critical herself of grazing on public lands, she understands that Abbey wanted to provoke people to raise hell.

Let's take that ghostly advice. As we think about our overpopulated, overdeveloped, underfunded national parks, let's go for a walk, run a river—and raise a bit of hell. Let's encourage our public officials, as Abbey put it, to "keep it like it was." 

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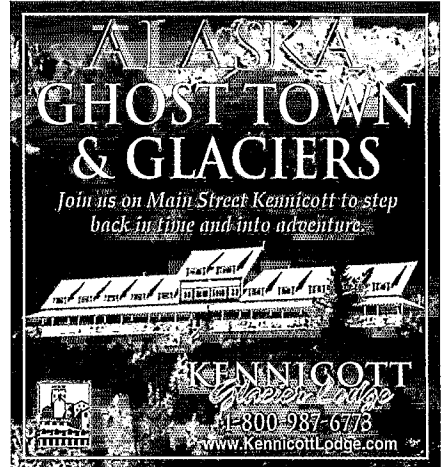
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