

Eliot Porter. *BALANCED ROCKS, BALANCED ROCK CANYON, GLEN CANYON, UTAH, SEPTEMBER 6, 1962.* Color photograph. P1990.51.5152. ©1990. Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth, Texas. Bequest of the artist.

**DESERT SOLITAIRE AND THE LITERARY
MEMORY OF AN IMAGINED PLACE**

JARED FARMER

"In another generation or two," notes Bruce Berger, sadly, "no one alive will have a personal memory of Glen Canyon. The once pulsing lifeline at the heart of the canyon country, its dim and soaring side canyons, its native American ruins and pungent shores will exist only in books, photographs, and journals, phantasmal as Troy or the passenger pigeon" (61). Berger would know: he's one of the lucky ones who floated down this section of the Colorado River before Lake Powell replaced it in 1963. He wrote about his experience in an essay. His is a kind of history, although different from that produced by historians. Personal memories have independent validity; they require no outside corroboration or documentation. But when private memories become public—when people publish memoirs—they enter contested ground. How true are personal recollections? Is Berger's recollected Glen Canyon—a place that seems too perfect to be real—the "real thing"?

The same question applies to *Desert Solitaire* (1968). The book's longest and most moving chapter, "Down the River," recounts Edward Abbey's one and only trip through Glen Canyon. Ann Ronald calls it "almost a synopsis of the author at his best" (76). Even better, Abbey's public memory (his book) can be compared with an earlier, private memory (his journal). Discrepancies exist. This has significance beyond scholars and aficionados interested in "Cactus Ed," the author's literary persona. With the appearance of James Cahalan's careful biography, *Edward Abbey: A Life* (2001), there's hardly more need for myth-busting for its own sake. Instead of questioning further what readers have been led to believe about Abbey, it may be better to ask what they have been led to believe about "Abbey's Country," especially the canyonlands of the Colorado Plateau. There among the red rocks, *Desert Solitaire* has produced something of a socioenvironmental impact.

It may be impossible to measure the influence of this or any book, but in terms of sales, no other work on the canyon country comes close. (A distant competitor is W. L. Rusho's *Everett Ruess: A Vagabond for Beauty* [1983]—which features an afterword by Abbey.) Paperback editions of *Desert Solitaire* have stayed in print continuously since the early 1970s. The book has, it seems fair to surmise, converted tens of thousands, most of whom maintain some connection to the canyon

country,—by living there, by visiting regularly, by donating to the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance, and so forth. The “Coyote Clan” celebrated by Terry Tempest Williams in *Coyote’s Canyon* (1989) might as well be the Abbey Clan. In my travels around the Colorado Plateau, I have met dozens of people who speak of their first reading of *Desert Solitaire* as revelation. Unlike most great literary works, this one directly changes lives. As David Quammen has observed,

Trees go to pulp mills every day, paper gets made, presses roll constantly, and we bob along on a Noachian flood of printed words, a great tepid and oily deluge of discourse, nearly all of which is as dispensable as sewage effluent. But this particular book was not dispensable. This book, by some miraculous convergence of honesty and insight and wit and good timing, struck firmly upon hearts and brains; it fastened. It mattered. ... [P]eople discovered this new, odd, cranky book; they found it on their own, by happy accident or hearsay, without benefit of official hype, and they mailed paperback copies to each other with peremptory notes in the vein of “Here. Trust me. Just *read* this thing.” (25)

Jim Stiles remembers, “[A] friend of my father gave me my first copy of *Desert Solitaire*. I was just out of college, unemployed, confused; I read the book, and found myself saying, yes, that’s what I felt, but could not express. I read it again. I memorized long passages. I’ve probably bought *Desert Solitaire* 50 times to give to friends that I thought would understand. I gave a copy to my parents, hoping they would better understand me.” Soon after, Stiles moved to Utah and became a seasonal ranger at Arches National Park, where he met many other groupies. “People knocked on my door constantly, looking for Ed. I finally hung a sign on the door that read: ‘This was NOT Edward Abbey’s trailer.’” Stiles eventually settled in Moab to start an independent newspaper.

I trace the history of my own book, *Glen Canyon Dammed* (1999), to the day I came across *Desert Solitaire* in my junior high library. Some of Abbey’s philosophizing went over my head, but his river trip narration went straight to my heart. I became obsessed with the ghost world of Glen Canyon. As I soon found out, the canyon’s successor, Lake Powell, ranks among the most contested landscapes in America. The reservoir attracts loud defenders and critics. More often than not, the debate pits the reality of Houseboaters’ Paradise against a memory of Paradise Lost. Of course, by this point, most of those who work to keep that memory alive have no personal recollections. Their understanding

of Glen Canyon is by necessity an act of imagination—albeit one aided by the photographs and words of eyewitnesses. Of these, *Desert Solitaire* is by far the most important. Somewhere behind comes Eliot Porter's *The Place No One Knew* (1963). Together they form the foundation of the imagined Glen Canyon. The remembered place in "Down the River" has become the dominant Glen Canyon: an ecotourist's vision of wilderness paradise.¹

But alternative imaginings are possible, as Abbey's own journal suggests.



Edward Abbey made his river trip in June and early July 1959, when Glen Canyon Dam stood half built. Ironically, the dam had been authorized at the moment when river running in the Glen was coming of age. Already fairly popular, the canyon became a must-see during the construction years, 1956 to 1963. Canyon lovers—and, no less, curiosity seekers—came to see the dying canyon. Abbey and his pal Newcomb were part of a long line of recreational pallbearers. The pair spent nine days traveling roughly 150 miles of the Colorado. Cost: \$350. The largest expense was a pair of lightweight rubber boats. Abbey and Newcomb eventually lashed them together for better maneuverability. At every opportunity, however, they let the river do the work ("at four or five miles per hour—much too fast").² They paddled only to land, or to avoid certain obstacles.

Like any trip, this river voyage had its share of minor upsets. Abbey's journal recounts a long restless night in a soggy sleeping bag ("Oh wretched sensation!") spent listening to a downstream rapid, and bemoaning the oversight of life jackets. Ed suffered from the constant "haunting fear" of the boats slipping away while he slept or hiked. In the book, however, the sleeping bag seems to dry out, and the fear evaporates overnight. The journal describes a time when Abbey penetrated a slot canyon dark as night, only to leave hurriedly, gripped by terror, aware of something alien inside that "awful catacomb." That side-trip doesn't appear in "Down the River," however. In Abbey's public memory, as in many people's private memories, the bad stuff faded over time, while the good stuff magnified. Since Abbey never got a second chance to see Glen Canyon, his trip took on, in retrospect, great, even sacred meaning. "I was one of the lucky few," he wrote, "who saw Glen Canyon before it was drowned. In fact I saw only a part of it but enough to realize that here was an Eden, a portion of the earth's original paradise" (152). Indeed, the draft of "Down the River" went by the title

“A Last Look at Paradise.” The essay is set in river time, with days blending into one long reverie. The spell—and the essay—is abruptly broken with a sign from the Bureau of Reclamation: “YOU ARE APPROACHING GLEN CANYON DAM SITE. ALL BOATS MUST LEAVE RIVER” (195).



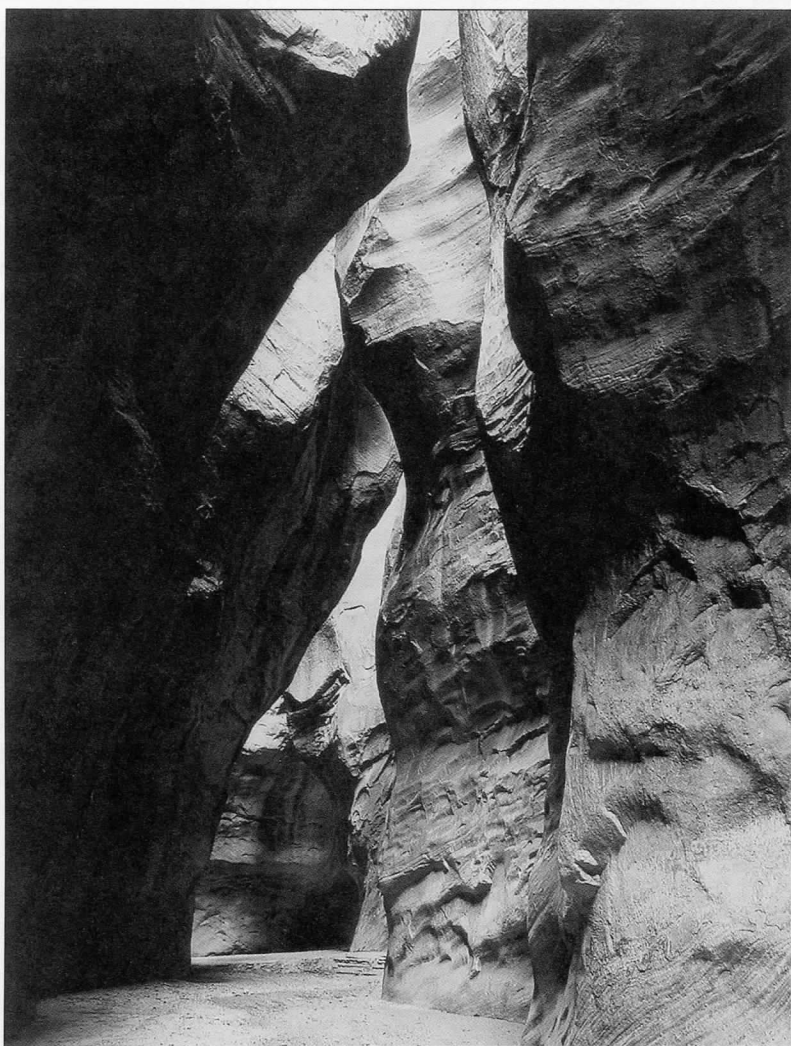
The trip, however, went on.

“I woke up Ralph,” Abbey wrote in his journal. “Astonished, he read the sign. We could hardly believe it, so certain were we that it’d take us at least another day to reach our destination.” Somehow, they hadn’t heard about the new, mandatory take-out at Kane Creek, near Crossing of the Fathers. They had planned on floating to Lee’s Ferry, Arizona (another forty miles), where they could procure transportation to Hite, Utah, where Abbey had left his truck.

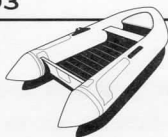
Paddling like mad, the pair positioned themselves on the right, and pulled out at the landing. It was deserted except for a National Park Service motorboat and an empty house trailer. “We made ourselves at home,” reads Abbey’s journal, “cooked supper, lay on a warm rock & watched the moon rise over the river, wondered where the hell we were—Kane Cr., yes, but where was Kane Cr?” Next morning, seeing no one had appeared, Abbey decided to hike out to Page, Arizona, figuring (incorrectly) it couldn’t be far. Game-legged Newcomb stayed by the river, prepared for a two- or three-day wait. It might have been longer if Abbey had not encountered, that same morning, some tourists on the road who offered him a ride. After returning for Newcomb and caching the rafting gear, they drove over “miles of rough, winding desert road thru scenes of unbelievable arid desolation—buttes, mesas, canyon, starving cattle—to the artificial tin-and-cement-dam-construction town” of Page. There Abbey and Newcomb had a wonderful time “gorging themselves sick” alongside the construction workers at the government cafeteria. “Bellies tight as drums, we sprawled on the cafeteria bench and smoked enormous cigars.” After a celebratory shower and haircut, the friends said goodbye. Newcomb would thumb it to Flagstaff while Abbey would fly to Hite. More hospitality: some officials with the National Park Service were making an air reconnaissance of Glen Canyon the next day, and they offered to take Abbey along and drop him off.

After a noisy night in the dam workers’ dormitory, Abbey awoke with the bell and boarded the plane. From the air, he marveled at the “vast, uninhabited wilderness of canyon country” through which the river

ran. After two hours of “swinging and soaring,” the Cessna landed at the White Canyon airstrip, directly across the river from Hite. Abbey bought some cheese and beer from the local store, then began the long, long drive by primitive roads back to the take-out to pick up the gear. At Kane Creek, he camped one more night by the river, then packed up and headed home.



Eliot Porter. *DUNGEON CANYON, GLEN CANYON, UTAH, AUGUST 29, 1961*. Color photograph. P1990.51.5009.1. ©1990. Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth, Texas. Bequest of the artist.



But where in the world is home? The reader of *Desert Solitaire* has little idea. The book is structured as “A Season in the Wilderness”—one year alone at Arches National Monument—but in fact, the author drew on two seasons of rangers (1955–1957), plus incidents before and after. (One or two chapters are plainly fictional, besides.) In 1959, when Edward Abbey floated down Glen Canyon, his family lived in poverty in Albuquerque. Less than a month before the trip, his wife gave birth to his second son. In other words, Abbey abandoned his family in a time of need. The “delirious exhilaration of independence” he felt as he pushed off from shore referred as much to bachelorhood as the Big Outside (155). But the readers of *Desert Solitaire* don’t hear about Abbey’s husbandly obligations or the portions of his trip beyond the water’s edge. This trip, like most, began and ended at home; Abbey had to get to Glen Canyon and then get *back*. However, “Down the River” leaves out two-thirds of the journey. By focusing on the river, Abbey successfully excluded most of the humans, human relationships, and human aides that made possible his journey to the wild.

Even within that focus, Abbey fudged facts. In the book, he congratulated himself on carrying only one navigational aid, a fairly useless Texaco road map of Utah. He reported nonchalantly that the map fell overboard the first day. That whimsical detail wasn’t true: Abbey pulled out his map when he reached Kane Creek; he was annoyed, in fact, that it didn’t show Kane Creek. When it came to the geography of Glen Canyon, he wasn’t as unconcerned or unknowledgeable as he let on:

BOOK: We pass an opening in the eastern wall, the mouth of a tributary stream. Red Canyon Creek? There’s no telling and it certainly doesn’t matter. (161)

JOURNAL: [Red Canyon], the first sure landmark.

BOOK: We make our second river camp this evening on another sandy beach near the mouth of a small creek which enters the main canyon from the northwest. Hall’s Creek? Bullfrog Creek? Sometimes I regret not having brought a decent map. (163)

JOURNAL: We make our second camp on a sandy beach near the mouth of Hall’s Creek.

BOOK: I come to a fork in [Forbidding Canyon], the main branch continuing to the right, a deep dark narrow defile opening to the left. There are no trail markers but even on the naked sandstone I can make out the passage of human feet, boot-shod, leading into the unlikely passage on the left. And so I follow. (191)

JOURNAL: [F]inally, about four miles up-canyon, I came to a place where a deep & narrow, dark & sheer, canyon entered on the left, and here I found the name, "Rainbow Bridge," scratched in the rock, an arrow pointing left.

Getting to Forbidding Canyon—the passageway to Rainbow Bridge, the largest and most magnificent natural bridge in the world—presented a dilemma. On the one hand, Abbey wished to see the Glen "as Powell and his party had seen it, not knowing what to expect, making anew the discoveries of others" (156–57). On the other hand, he didn't, at all costs, want to miss the bridge, the high point of any canyon voyage. He had done enough research to know that Forbidding fed into the river below Navajo Point (the southern tip of the Kaiparowits Plateau), next to a riffle. So, after spotting the point, Abbey stopped at every left-bank side canyon to look for signs of human passage. If the place looked pristine—no foot trails, no trash—he knew to move on. At one promising stop, Abbey found a trail leading into a canyon, next to some toilet paper "where some dirty swine of a tourist had stopped to crap." "Conscientious as ever," Abbey lit the paper on fire, only to have the wind pick it up and ignite the entire bank on fire. He had to make an emergency exit to the boats and push off, watching "the unbelievable clouds of smoke filling the deep side canyon. I felt pretty foolish, and mighty regretful too, at having possibly ruined my only opportunity to reach the Rainbow Bridge." Further downstream, however, at a different side canyon, he hit paydirt: "trash, tennis shoes, straw hats & incombustible tinfoil piled in dead campfires. This has got to be it," he wrote in his journal. Thank God for trash. It was as good as a map. As much as he reproached *Slobivius americanus* in the book, Abbey owed a strange debt to the species. He could not have arrived at Rainbow Bridge to have a wilderness experience without first discovering the trash.

"Glen Canyon got gruesome; it was awful," said veteran river runner P. T. Reilly, looking back. "Too many unqualified people were taking boats down there. They were leaving open toilet areas, flies were bad, you couldn't find a spot that didn't have a pile of human waste on it to throw your sleeping bag." Another old river rat, Richard Sprang,

complained that “[river] bars were burned by the horde of let’s-see-everything-in-a-hurry travelers of that era who were down there to see what Glen Canyon looked like when it was too late to save it. One particular outfit, it has been verified, actually set fire to some of the bars to provide spectacular Kodachrome photographs. . . . This is as utterly disgusting as anything I can think of and yet it’s quite fitting. . . . You might as well cremate the damn place because it was dying.” In the days before minimum-impact camping, river runners (including Abbey, no doubt) simply buried their trash or dumped it in the river. This system worked fine in the 1930s and 1940s and early ’50s, but eventually it led to prob-



Eliot Porter. *BURNED TREES, GLEN CANYON, UTAH, AUGUST 1961*. Color photograph. P1990.70.8535.1. ©1990. Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth, Texas. Bequest of the artist.

lems. By 1960, the good camping spots looked bad and smelled bad. In popular side canyons, filigrees of fern and moss fell apart under too many footsteps. The Glen was being discovered with a vengeance.

As a first-time visitor, Abbey didn't have this long-term perspective. He wasn't blind to human impacts, however. When he saw evidence of despoilment, he applied his censure. For Abbey, it was easy to make sense of human marks when the humans were villainous trespassers (dam builders, uranium miners, slob tourists, and—in the draft essay—ranchers) or vanished inhabitants (the Anasazi) or long-gone transients (the Hole-in-the-Rock pioneers). All of these people could coexist with Abbey's understanding of wilderness: a place where modern people could visit but not remain without causing harm. But what about equivocal human marks? Sometimes in their presence Abbey turned a blind eye; he wrote about the trash pointing the way to Rainbow Bridge but not the arrow. A similar example comes from the tributary canyon of the Escalante River, on day four of Abbey's waking dream. There in the Escalante's wet sand he noted a pair of fresh human footprints. He said so in his journal. In the published book, however, Abbey gave this list of tracks: deer, coyote, killdeer, lizard, snake, but "no cattle, no horses, no people" (175). Likewise, the text has nothing about the U.S. Geological Survey benchmark Abbey passed along the river, nor the nearby stream gauging station, located at the base of a stock trail hewn into the canyon wall.

Finally, Abbey passed up an occasion for empathy on the Escalante. Midway through his day-long barefoot hike, Abbey came to a spring that dripped from a high canyon wall to a slab of fallen sandstone. "On the flat surface of this tilted slab somebody, maybe a Mormon cowboy fifty years ago, maybe an Indian eight hundred years ago, has chiseled two converging grooves which catch some of the falling water and conduct it to a carved spout at the lower edge" (177). The book then says he cupped his hands and drank. But actually, Abbey didn't, for someone had left him a gift. Someone—a rancher, no doubt, from Boulder or Escalante, Utah—had deposited a tin can below the rock spout so that any wayfarer could immediately relieve his thirst with a cup of cold water. Abbey put his lips to this courtesy cup, but he chose later not to remember. He chose not to remember how, in a small, touching way, his life intersected the life of a contemporary who used the canyon wilderness for a very different purpose.

Abbey had reasons to repress what he did—he was converting a journal into a book chapter, after all. The book revolved around the necessity and vulnerability of wild places. For clarity's sake, Abbey streamlined

and lightly revised his memories of the Glen to fit this theme. Rhetorically, it made sense that *Desert Solitaire's* longest chapter should be about a wilderness scheduled for termination. It made sense that the canyon should be edenic. And to Abbey, frankly, it probably was. In "Down the River," he spoke reverently of the earth as "the only paradise we ever need—if only we had the eyes to see" (167). But remember: the Glen Canyon in *Desert Solitaire* is Edward Abbey's Glen Canyon. It's serenity after months of professional and marital turmoil. It's the very first river trip after years of anticipation. It's the sad yet thrilling knowledge—the anticipatory nostalgia that drives so much ecotourism—that no one following you will see or feel these things again.

But it's only one (albeit the most famous and most accessible) Glen Canyon. The imagined canyon deserves a wider foundation of memories. This place was far more interesting than Abbey's private wilderness. As a coda let me offer merely one of hundreds of submerged stories.



In 1869, Albert Loper entered the world, and the world was not kind: Father deserted the family in 1871; Mother passed away the year after that; Grandma, the foster parent, died when Bert was twelve. The boy eventually ended up with his uncle in southwestern Colorado. There he worked on ranches, railroads, and mining operations. In the 1890s, he joined the short-lived gold rush on the San Juan River in Utah. Loper didn't get rich, but he developed a lifelong love for boats and rivers. After stints in the Midwest, Mexico, and the mines of Nevada, Bert was enlisted by two former mining buddies, Charles Russell and Edward Monett, to take the ultimate boat trip: down the Grand Canyon. They intended to prospect and also take pictures. At this point, the canyon was famous but unfamiliar; good photographs were worth money, maybe a lecture tour. With what little cash he had, Loper bought a roll-film camera. Russell and Monett invested in a large-format glass-plate outfit complete with portable darkroom.³

The trio embarked from Green River, Utah, in September 1907. The float to the Confluence was easy, but it preceded the well-named Cataract Canyon. Here their three metal boats received minor damage and major water. Loper's camera rusted shut. Once in Hite—the ferry at the head of Glen Canyon—he mailed it to the manufacturer for repair. He, Russell, and Monett dawdled in the upper Glen for two weeks, at which point Loper returned for his package. The others

agreed to meet him downstream at Lee's Ferry, the short respite on the Colorado before the river plunged into the Kaibab Plateau. But the post office had bad news for Bert Loper. A mini-panic had hit the country; his check meant nothing because his bank had failed. Forced to send a money order, Loper waited out his time, getting to know the men of Hite in the process. Some three weeks later, camera in tow, he pulled into Lee's Ferry, only to find that his friends had given up on him. Bert was in a jam. He had little cash, no job, no prospects. Under the circumstances, he decided that the best option was to return to Hite. After buying some rubber boots from the family at the ferry, he set off.⁴

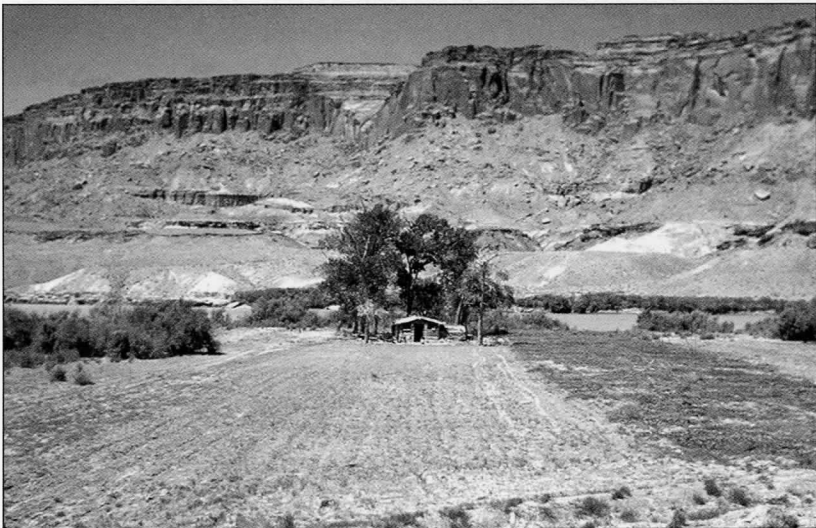
It ranks among the damndest voyages in the history of Glen Canyon. Over four weeks in January and February 1908, Bert Loper traveled 170 miles *up* the Colorado while dirty red ice-flows traveled down. Much of the time, he spent in the water, dragging his boat with a short piece of rope. Even with his rubber boots (which eventually developed leaks), his whole body went numb. Several times a day, he would have to stop, gather driftwood, and build a fire. In some stretches of the canyon, he found it easier to row against the current, but by any method, it was beastly work. "I have developed the most abnormal appetite that a mortal ever possessed," he wrote in his diary. "I start out in the morning with a bucket of cold beans, bacon and bread, and eat the entire thing during the day. Every night I have to sit up and cook beans on the camp fire. I am afraid I am going to run short of meat and baking powder before I get through" (in Baker 52).

Loper's only companionship was his ticking watch, and then the watch went dead. "It is very much more lonesome without the time when there is no one to talk to," he wrote (in Baker 52-53). Upstream, at the abandoned Stanton Dredge, Loper was delighted to encounter five prospectors. They fed him and gave him his first haircut in half a year. His spirit revived, Loper made good time through upper Glen Canyon. At Trachyte Wash, he pulled over and knocked on the door of Cass Hite, legendary miner and hermit, who immediately took him in as a friend.

In the nearby "town" that bore Hite's name, Bert was lucky enough to find employment and a place to live. A miner who was going home to New York wanted a caretaker for his claim at Red Canyon, a few miles downstream. Loper gladly filled in. He called his new home the Hermitage. It consisted of a one-room, three-window log cabin in the shade of cottonwood trees, one hundred feet from the river. With it he acquired about ten acres of cleared land along the creek. Hoping to improve his diet, Loper added fruit trees and grape vines to the Hermitage. The plantings paid off. In the bumper year of 1912, he canned forty-eight

gallons of peaches and fourteen pounds of raisins. In the fields, he raised corn for himself and hay for his horses, Brownie and Billy Bow Legs, which he used to transport gravel from the river to a sluice. Whatever gold he recovered he sent to San Francisco in return for cash. He supplemented his modest annual income (never more than two hundred dollars) by working as a ranch hand for Al Scorup, a Mormon cattle baron who ranged stock all over the Glen Canyon region. Loper lived with few wants: “a little flour, coffee, baking powder, soap, bacon, salt, sugar, and he wore only the heaviest and most serviceable work clothing, which he ordered from Sears Roebuck” (Baker 71). For entertainment, he subscribed to *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Cosmopolitan*, *McClure’s*, *Literary Digest*, New York and Salt Lake newspapers, and the socialist publication *Appeal to Reason*. Twice every week, he made the trip to the post office in Hite—his only regular contact with humanity. But Bert was never alone: “I lived with that river so much, it pretty near became a part of me; I would sit on the banks and watch it; I would boat it; I would do everything; about the only companion I had” (qtd. in Topping 135).

In 1916, following a period of great loneliness, and another abortive river trip with Charles Russell, the forty-seven-year-old Loper reentered the world by marrying eighteen-year-old English immigrant Rachel Jameson. The couple honeymooned on the river, but Rachel nixed any plans of living there. So Bert became a regular miner again, this time in



Bert Loper's cabin. Special Collections Department, J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah.

the coal fields of Carbon County, Utah. But the river never left his mind. The Lopers eventually retired to Green River, where they regularly played host to river runners who wanted advice on Glen Canyon. In 1947, Bert was approached by a representative from the Great Salt Lake Council of the Boy Scouts Association. Would he be willing to take some Explorer Scouts down the Glen? In a heartbeat. On two trips in 1947 and 1949, Bert captivated the city boys with stories from the history of the canyon. Inspired, the second group of Explorers named themselves “the River Lopers.” They watched with admiration as the old man stopped at Sentinel Rock—a sandstone tower near the end of the canyon—to add the date to his tally: “*Loper 07 08 11 12 21(3) 22 29 39 44 47 48 ... 49*” (Baker 111). Weeks later he died of a heart attack while rowing a rapid in the Grand Canyon. He was eighty.

Not long after, the River Lopers returned to Glen Canyon to erect a plaque at Red Canyon:

JULY
1869
 HERMITAGE OF
BERT LOPER
 JULY
1949
 GRAND OLD MAN OF THE COLORADO
 LIVED HERE 1907 TO 1915

No one lived there permanently after Bert, but in the 1950s, uranium miners built two dwellings and a swimming pool nearby. Among Glen canyoneers, it became a tradition to stop by the Hermitage to pay respects. Not knowing better, Edward Abbey floated by Red Canyon, his “first sure landmark,” not seeing it as a human mark, too.⁵



My purpose in telling Loper’s story is to suggest the richness of Glen Canyon’s (archival) history and the relative poverty of its (literary) memory, a legacy of the 1960s. At that time, most environmentalists were not ready to accept the ambiguity of someone like Bert Loper, who *lived in* and *worked in* (and to some degree *exploited*) wild country while demonstrating deep knowledge and love for it. Activists of Abbey’s era worshipped wilderness as a place where people only passed through. Through artful editing of his memories, Edward Abbey skirted the problem of Glen Canyon—a wilderness with human history. The less sophisticated *The Place No One Knew* simply ignored the problem. From the title on down, Eliot Porter’s book denied that Glen Canyon was a place of significant history, a place of sluice boxes, irrigation ditches, stock trails, wagon roads, post offices, trading posts, and countless Anasazi relics. Porter chose not to photograph any of these remnants.⁶ That

doesn't make his book (much less *Desert Solitaire*) a lie, for Glen Canyon sheltered pristine natural beauty in addition to human marks. The trouble arises when readers assume the two are incompatible.

Glen Canyon had more history than all the other canyons of the Colorado put together.⁷ Everyone who lived in the Glen, or labored in its complex of tributaries, or floated on through in a beat-up green pontoon, knew the place individually, and all of those individually experienced and remembered places that went by the catch-all name Glen Canyon are gone. To remember this place as merely paradise—to go by Abbey alone—is inaccurate, insensitive. It actually belittles the stupendous loss that took place. It's a shame that "Down the River" tends to become the canyon rather than a singular response to a vast and varied place. When the dam killed the Colorado, some people (and many more creatures) lost their homes. Some lost their favorite getaway. Some lost their cattle range. Some lost sacred sites. Some lost mining claims. Not a few, including Bert Loper's ghost, lost an irreplaceable companion.



NOTES

1. On Glen Canyon's place in American environmental history, see my *Glen Canyon Dammed: Inventing Lake Powell and the Canyon Country* (1999); Mark Harvey, "Echo Park, Glen Canyon, and the Postwar Wilderness Movement," *Pacific Historical Review* 60 (February 1991): 43–67; and Russell Martin, *A Story That Stands Like a Dam: Glen Canyon and the Struggle for the Soul of the West* (1989). On Glen Canyon's place in historical memory, see my "Remembering Paradise: Histories of Glen Canyon," master's thesis, University of Montana, 1998. Recent additions to the eyewitness literature are Katie Lee, *All My Rivers Are Gone: A Journey of Discovery through Glen Canyon* (1998) and Tad Nichols, *Glen Canyon: Images of a Lost World* (1999), both of which depict the history of Glen Canyon in greater, truer detail than "Down the River."

2. All quotations without page citations come from the original trip journal. Abbey's journal and a draft of *Desert Solitaire* (including "Down the River") are both on deposit at Special Collections, Main Library, University of Arizona, Tucson. Much of the trip journal has been published in David Petersen, ed., *Confessions of a Barbarian: Selections from the Journals of Edward Abbey, 1951–1989* (1994).

3. For more on Loper, see Baker.

4. On the 1907 trip, see David Lavender, *River Runners of the Grand Canyon* (1985), 44–56.

5. Ann Ronald, in her imaginative new book *GhostWest: Recollections Past and Present* (2002) writes about Glen Canyon and makes a distinction between its human ghosts and its natural “river ghosts.” By her definition my essay concerns only the former, though I rather doubt the two can be separated.

6. To be precise, only one photograph in the original edition showed anything human, and it belonged to Eliot Porter. Careful inspection of Plate 17 (reproduced here on p. 154) reveals a canvas knapsack among some polished cobbles. Indirectly, though, another image may count as a historical record. Plate 58 (reproduced here on p. 162) pictured a sandstone wall behind some blackened shrubs—the result of a fire. In *Desert Solitaire*, Abbey claims he burned this very spot (during the toilet paper incident), though how he could have known this is hard to say. Quite possibly he was poking fun at Porter and himself (188).

7. Topping is the single best guide to this history.

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