

Bridges, Beer Cans, and Bulldozers: In Search of Answers along Abbey's Road

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Do not jump into your automobile next June and rush out to the Canyon country hoping to see some of that which I have attempted to evoke in these pages. In the first place you can't see *anything* from a car; you've got to get out of the goddamned contraption and walk, better yet crawl, on hands and knees, over the sandstone and through the thornbush and cactus. When traces of blood begin to mark your trail you'll see something, maybe. Probably not (Abbey, Desert Solitaire xii).

Let me begin by saying I have done this. I did exactly just what Edward Abbey told me to do. I trudged, at times painfully slowly, through the Maze District of Canyonlands National Park, located in Southern Utah. I have been there, and I know exactly where he is coming from. At the time being, it's just that this is not the story I want to tell. Instead, I choose to describe a part of my journey to the Maze, along a 50 mile stretch of Utah State Highway 95 the afternoon prior to my arrival in Canyonlands. I was in a car, it's true, but I do not intend to attempt to portray the natural wonder and beauty of this land, Desert Solitaire does a far better job than I could at that. My focus here is on another book of Abbey's, The Monkey Wrench Gang, and how driving, research, and a little bit of misbehavior gave me insight into both Abbey's love for the region, and his reason for writing the novel. For, what I came to realize is that The Monkey Wrench Gang is more complex than most readers must assume; it is in fact not a novel advocating violence and destruction at all, instead it makes these actions seem ridiculous so that thoughtful reasoning becomes the only solution to the issue of preserving the Wilderness of Southern Utah, or any other dilemma.

The Monkey Wrench Gang, Edward Abbey's most memorable work of fiction, begins with four "Origins" chapters, each one devoted to one of the four main characters. The first, Dr. Sarvis, is a medical doctor living in Albuquerque who enjoys burning billboards in his spare time. The second character, George Washington Hayduke, is an ex-Green Beret, beer-chugging, rebel-rousing psychopath, hell-bent on preserving his countryside by any means necessary, or "By God, there'll be trouble" (Abbey, The Monkey Wrench Gang 18). The third is Seldom Seen Smith, is a "Jack Mormon...to a decent Mormon what a jackrabbit is to a cottontail" (Abbey, The Monkey Wrench Gang 30). He runs an obscure

rafting company from southern Utah. The only woman of the group, Bonnie Abzug, is Sarvis' girlfriend/assistant, and hails from the Bronx. The characters all meet on one of Seldom's river trips and agree to form a gang to begin destroying tractors, earthmovers, roads, even bridges that are, in turn, destroying Southern Utah and Northern Arizona. They move to bigger and bigger projects until they are finally cornered and caught by the infamous Volunteer Search and Rescue Crew, led by Mormon Bishop Love. With the exception of Hayduke, who "dies" fighting, the rest are captured and plead guilty to much lesser charges than they actually committed. The story ends with the Gang reunited, and the promise of the cycle of sabotage and destruction continuing. A vast majority of the action in the novel occurs on or around Highway 95, at real locations with many issues concerning development, which I chose to investigate further.

One such site is Comb Wash, located at the bottom of Comb Ridge. As Claire I. Longpré asserts, Comb Wash is a watershed that runs ephemerally, which means in essence that it can be dry one day, and flash flooding the next. The section of Comb Wash described in The Monkey Wrench Gang is near Blanding and Hite Marina in Utah, at the extreme north of the Comb Ridge monocline, which "[rises] gradually on the east side, dropping off at an angle close to 90 degrees on the west side" (Abbey, The Monkey Wrench Gang 76). After the building of Glen Canyon Dam and subsequent creation of Lake Powell, Hite Marina became a large part of the tourism industry of the region, and having no easy access from the east side of Hite Marina was suddenly unacceptable. So a road was slated to be built parallel to Comb Wash, joining Highway 163 in Bluff and Highway 95 in Blanding.

Today, the road has been built, but it is certainly not the time-saving luxury it was envisioned to be. The San Juan County Community Development Office notes, "The road through [Comb] wash is graded dirt, and can become impassible in inclement weather. Four wheel drive is recommended" ("Comb Wash"). While it is unclear whether pressure from the public and people such as Edward Abbey prevented the construction of a large-scale road in Comb Wash, or whether the plan just wasn't that dramatic to begin with, the road certainly was not the last major plan for development in the area. As recently as 2002, Comb Wash became the object of heated debate in San Juan County, due to a vicious

fight between environmental, wise-use, and governmental groups over a loophole in the 1866 Mining Act that allowed the use of off-road vehicles in this area of Utah's public lands ("Campaign: Off-Road Vehicle"). As of yet, the situation has not been even remotely resolved. Five years prior, in 1997, groups such as the Southwest Utah Wilderness Alliance (SUWA, boasting members of the likes of Terry Tempest Williams), went to battle with the Bureau of Land Management (BLM, which manages the area) over the Comb Wash Watershed Plan, which would create a more reliable water source in Comb Wash for cattle ranching in the area. This plan was ultimately revoked; however the BLM is preparing another, revamped watershed plan, which has already been opposed by the SUWA ("Keep it Up, Comb Wash Advocates!"). Clearly, Comb Wash is one example where the horrors of the destruction of Southern Utah Edward Abbey alludes to in The Monkey Wrench Gang have not come to fruition. However, Comb Wash is also far from being safe from an environmentally-friendly standpoint. I intended to find out exactly how "awful" this road really was, and whether Abbey's stance toward it was really justified, or too radical.

I pulled my car over at the north end of this infamous road where it connects with Highway 95 on Friday, at about four o'clock PM (Rush hour)! However, I did not find the assortment of ranchers in big trucks I had been expecting, nor the bulldozers Abbey depicted, or even the OHV's the SUWA feared. Instead, I found nothing, save an informative kiosk and a sign-in box for visitors, both put up by the Forest Service. Looking to the east, it was easy for me to imagine the Monkey Wrench Gang concealing themselves from view amongst the scrub atop Comb Ridge, which jutted dramatically out of the landscape a couple hundred yards from where I stood. Below the ridge I noticed that Comb Wash was clearly an ephemeral watershed. Despite the fact that snow from a storm about two weeks prior had been melting off the ridge and adjacent mountains, Comb Wash was not flowing while I observed it, making it clear to me why the Comb Wash Watershed Plan sounded like such a godsend to the ranchers of the area.

That being said, I was still confounded as to the battle over the road I was currently standing on. It seemed as though no one had passed by it in years, at least not anyone from the Forest Service, judging by the state of the windblown, splintered kiosk. The road itself was also not exactly super highway

material; in fact, as seen in Figure 1, it reminded me more of the un-maintained Jeep trails I anticipated hiking in the Maze the next day. So why was everybody so upset about the Comb Wash road? Could this dusty, empty road really cause so much disdain?



Fig. 1. The Comb Wash Road from the location of the kiosk, looking south.

Comb Ridge is pictured on the left.

In an attempt to find answers to these questions, I turned my attention to the kiosk and visitor log-book. The kiosk described in limited detail the geology and history of Comb Wash I had already learned from my prior research, and notably ignored Abbey, the SUWA, the Comb Wash Watershed plan, or any other incendiary details of the region.

Somewhat to my surprise, I learned from the log-book that two other people had passed through the area that day. The first remarked how deplorable it is that the road exists, using vulgar diction I opt not to repeat here. In response to the first person, the second stated something to the effect of, “I don’t know why people need to use language like that, but I do agree with them- this road should be removed.”

I was amazed at the significance of these comments, and to me it was almost as though Abbey himself had written them. In these entries I saw two of his characters in The Monkey Wrench Gang- George Washington Hayduke and Bonnie Abbzug- practically leap off the page. There was Hayduke,

foul-mouthed and full of hatred, in perennial argument with the more subdued (yet like-minded), Abzug. In the entries in the log-book I could picture them fighting with each other as they stood there earlier in the day, as always so intent on the argument that they nearly miss their point.

But the people who made these entries were not fictitious characters, I reminded myself, and at that point it became clear to me why Abbey protested the road at Comb Wash: It was not the extent of the construction he was fighting when he wrote The Monkey Wrench Gang, it was the fact that there was construction at all. It did not matter how many people traveled on the new road to him, be it one or one million. Any amount of people in the area as a result of this road would be, to Abbey, too many. Feeling one step closer to comprehending how deep of a love he felt for the protection of this country, I wrote, "Following in the footsteps of Abbey" next to a false name in the log-book (I have learned never to give the Government a real name after mentioning Abbey), and drove away.

Continuing along Highway 95 on my way to the Maze later that afternoon, I was reminded of Hayduke driving through Arizona en route to Lee's Ferry, tossing emptied cans of Schlitz beer out the window as he guzzled them. I remembered a statement Abbey makes in The Journey Home:

Of course I litter the public highway. Every chance I get. After all, it's not the beer cans that are ugly; it's the highway that is ugly. Beer cans are beautiful, and someday, when recycling becomes a serious enterprise, the government can put one million kids to work each summer picking up the cans (159).

I decided I would conduct an informal survey of beer cans along this otherwise unimportant stretch of Highway 95, feeling this would be as good a barometer as any to catalogue the presence of both careless visitors and followers of Abbey like myself, making the pilgrimage to their unique Mecca.

The results of my survey were unexpected, to say the least. I counted a total of three beer cans along a twenty mile stretch of highway, two after I picked one up (As a Boy Scout, I was one of the "one million kids" Abbey describes, and some habits are just too hard to break). A total of five cars were counted during this same stretch, all but one of them leaving in the opposite direction. Believing, as Abbey did, the fewer people here, the better (besides myself, of course), I found these numbers

promising, although I was slightly disappointed that the real Hayduke of the visitor log-book did not seem to have taken my same path.

As I drove, I came to another location described with ire by Edward Abbey in The Monkey Wrench Gang: the Dirty Devil Canyon area. Dirty Devil Bridge, which connects the walls of Dirty Devil Canyon, is located about 3 miles east of Hite Marina, on Highway 95. At one point, Dirty Devil Creek flowed through its namesake canyon on its way to the Colorado River, but since the construction of Glen Canyon Dam, the canyon has been backfilled with water and has become a part of Lake Powell. Without a bridge crossing Dirty Devil Canyon, traffic was forced to head several miles south and detour around to the other side. Again, with the construction of Hite Marina, this annoyance suddenly became objectionable. But Dirty Devil, although it is the largest canyon in the area, is not the only canyon. As Abbey explains:

The best place to bridge the river (now Lake Powell) was upstream at Narrow Canyon. In order to reach the Narrow Canyon bridge site it was necessary to bridge White Canyon on the east and Dirty Devil Canyon on the west. Thus, three bridges (Abbey, The Monkey Wrench Gang 119).

In The Monkey Wrench Gang, the foursome sets their sites on White Canyon Bridge, attempting to destroy it by using thermite to essentially melt the bridge in half. This would have isolated Narrow Canyon Bridge on one side, thus forcing traffic to make a sizeable detour, and temporarily hindering developers. Therefore it is easy to see, from the perspective of the Monkey Wrench Gang, why these bridges are so detested. If they were never there in the first place, developers would need to put a lot more effort in to transporting materials and equipment to build sites, and it is likely fewer areas in the region would be bulldozed.

Yet, little debate seems to have occurred with the building of these bridges. Unlike Comb Wash, where different interest groups have been wrangling with the government and each other for several decades now, the bridges over Dirty Devil, White, and Narrow canyons have caused much less of an uproar. One possible reason for this could be that everyone recognizes the function of these bridges in

providing quick access to Hite Marina and the west side of Glen Canyon Recreation Area. However, this seems unlikely because many groups are currently advocating the removal of Glen Canyon Dam, which would render Hite Marina and the rest of Lake Powell obsolete. Plus, the bridges only save an hour's driving time at most, and that number becomes even less as speed limits increase. From this perspective, bridges across canyons such as Dirty Devil should actually serve to fuel the fire for those in support of Glen Canyon Dam's decommissioning.

A more likely reason there was little or no protest against the building of these bridges is that there was no one *to* protest. As David Brower laments in "Encounters with the Archdruid,"

No one knew what was there. Glen Canyon was one of the two or three remotest places in the United States- far from the nearest road, a hundred and twenty-five miles from the nearest railhead (McPhee 32).

The bridges in the area around Dirty Devil Canyon were built one year before Glen Canyon Dam was dedicated, in essence one year before people began visiting Glen Canyon. Before this time, there were simply not enough people in the area to rally support against the bridges, so construction went smoothly. Ironically, if Highway 95 (the road over the bridges) was not built, people would likely still not be in that area, so there would likely be less opposition to the Comb Wash Watershed Plan, since the area of Comb Wash in question cuts directly by this road.

Using The Monkey Wrench Gang as a guide, I was able to locate the first of the three bridges- White Canyon Bridge- fairly easily. The canyon was indeed white, as its name would suggest, and as I peered from the bridge down into the canyon below, I was amazed by the extensive support system placed to hold it up. To say the least, it was an engineering marvel: enormous posts of steel crisscrossing the canyon walls all the way down, cutting into the age-old rock formations. Examining this metallic giant, so entirely out of its element in the midst of the Wilderness that surrounded it, I could feel the disgust Abbey and his fictitious Monkey-Wrenchers must have felt as they observed the bridge, in much the same way I stood now, and also why the thermite blasts- Hayduke's weapon of choice for bridge destruction-

did not work. Unfortunately, I could also feel vertigo from contemplating all this while looking over the railing of a bridge, so I was forced to move on.

A few miles west, continuing along Highway 95, I came across a major surprise. In all of my research of documents and websites prior to my trip, I was unable to find anything about Narrow Canyon Bridge. I found a plethora of information on Dirty Devil Bridge, and this information was almost invariably accompanied by statistics on the construction of White Canyon Bridge. For example, I was able to determine from the Utah Department of Transportation's website on bridges that the Dirty Devil and White Canyon Bridges were both erected in 1965; costing approximately one million dollars total ("Bridges Around Utah"). However, there was never information on Narrow Canyon Bridge, which confused me since- according to Abbey- Narrow Canyon Bridge is the largest, and most important, of the three. I came to the eventual conclusion during this research that one of two things had happened: Either Abbey was making the bridge up, or it was in fact a bridge crossing a "motionless body of murky green effluent, dead, stagnant, dull" (Abbey, The Monkey Wrench Gang 120), and the state Utah chose not to acknowledge its existence out of shame. Noting Abbey's inclination towards the absurd, I was led to believe that the bridge simply did not exist.

What surprised me then, as I traveled a few miles past White Canyon, was a bridge, complete with a standard-issue green sign that noted "Narrow Canyon Bridge." It turned out Abbey was not lying or just telling another fanatical tale- the bridge over Narrow Canyon really did exist. (See Figure 2). Feeling I had to get a closer look, I pulled my car over and examined the river below. Sure enough, there was the derelict river, exactly as Abbey had described it. The cynic inside me congratulated itself for never really succumbing to the brainwashing of Big Brother and the American Government, and I was forced to leave hurriedly, in a state of paranoia that "they" might have set up wire taps or secret cameras as well.



Fig. 2. Narrow Canyon Bridge: Photographic proof that it exists.

Resuming my journey, I eventually came to Dirty Devil Bridge. By this point, these bridges represented to me what I'm sure they must have to Abbey as well, a depressing symbol of the human obsession with the destruction and submission of nature. As such, I stayed no longer at Dirty Devil Bridge than the time it took to stop, pull over, take a picture, look over the railing, and move on. As I drove away from the area, I felt closer to understanding why Edward Abbey wrote The Monkey Wrench Gang. Abbey was really no different than me writing my research, I pondered; it was not that he was supporting vandalism and destruction, or even suggesting that any of these types of actions should take place. He was just trying to describe how awful it was to develop anything in this beautiful country. I realized, in fact, that by creating a story in which the protagonists were attempting to destroy something as proud and invincible as White Canyon Bridge or Glen Canyon Dam, was Abbey not capturing the mindset of the developers creating these steel and concrete giants? After all, if it is wrong to destroy just one bridge, then how absolutely terrible must it be to bulldoze an entire Wilderness? "Well, Ed, you've made a believer out of me," I thought, and drove on in the direction of the slowly-setting, bright Utah Sun.

As Highway 95 began heading north towards the Maze, I was confronted with yet another astounding, and yet disturbing, sight. About 20 miles from the nearest human habitation, seemingly in

the middle of nowhere, was a bulldozer sitting along the side of the road. I wasn't sure, but I thought I could hear Edward Abbey scream and roll over in his grave. It might also just have been me, for I was equally shocked. In my entire journey thus far on Highway 95 (about 30 miles), I had seen a total of probably about 20 people, most of them in the 10 or so cars that had passed me heading out of this country ("The good country, God's country, [my] country, by God" (Abbey, The Monkey Wrench Gang 18)). Yet here, in this land almost entirely devoid of human life, 29 years after Edward Abbey boldly declared that they shouldn't be there then, and with even less reason to be here now, was a bulldozer, facing a nearby mountain range, with undoubtedly one goal in mind.

Now, I do not carry wrenches or any other devices of mechanized torture in my car for the very possibility of running casually into an opportunity like this, but I couldn't just leave the evil machine there without some investigation. Remembering that I still had the empty can of Budweiser I had picked up earlier rolling on the floor of my car, and how bad it would inevitably look to a Utah Highway Patrolman, I decided it was time to unload my cargo. Taking the can, I placed it boldly on the yellow demon, and the three of us posed for yet another picture. (See Figure 3).



Fig. 3. The bulldozer, the beer can, and myself.

As luck would have it, at the exact moment I was having my picture taken, the previously shapeless Highway Patrolman I had been worrying about suddenly became very real, because around the bend came a Ranger, driving a Chevy Blazer. In an instant I was terrified, not only because of how devious I was feeling only a millisecond prior, but also because Bishop Love suddenly had a face. I looked the Monkey Wrench Gang's archenemy square in the eye for a brief instant, and in that time I became all of them: Sarvis, Hayduke, Smith, and Abzug, and I did exactly what they did in such situations- I ran.

Not literally, of course. Actually, I hopped in my car, gave my usual prayer (Please you stupid piece of garbage, don't break down on me now), and headed for the Maze. But this is where the story deviates, because the Ranger did not follow me. Perhaps out of confusion, or because in reality I wasn't doing anything wrong, he drove off on his own way. But, despite how petty and ultimately uneventful my encounter with the law was, I believe I understood at that time, if only for a short while, what Abbey must have felt when he wrote The Monkey Wrench Gang. Why did I feel so absurd putting a beer can on a bulldozer as a sign of subversion? In short, because such actions are pointless. The novel was about sabotage and subversion, no one can argue that. But what I came to believe is that it does not support these actions. Rather, I understood that the purpose of The Monkey Wrench Gang was to advocate political action, and sensible opposition. As Abbey himself states in an examination of anarchy, "The anarchists devoted the chief effort of their lives to the attempt to persuade' others 'that the 'critical situation' had engulfed them and that political violence was therefore justified. But in this effort, for many and various reasons, they failed. And in so far as they failed in this, they also failed to justify violence'" (Cahalan). In short, Abbey discovered that anarchy inevitably led to violence, and violence was never a solution. Monkey wrenches would indeed be effective for a time, but the bulldozers would always be back, and the only true solutions that existed were- and remain- to focus reasonably and logically on peaceful "persuasion," or to surrender, and allow the destruction to continue. I came to find that Edward Abbey chose the former, albeit inadvertently, and that I had no alternative but to do the same.

I feel I learned a great deal about Edward Abbey's motivation for writing The Monkey Wrench Gang from that 50 mile stretch of Highway 95. To start, I gained a better appreciation for Abbey's love of the region, and his unwavering desire to protect it. I also learned that occasionally- as with Narrow Canyon Bridge- Abbey is actually a more reliable source than any facts and figures the Government can provide me. But most importantly, I came to realize that The Monkey Wrench Gang is not a novel advocating sabotage. Rather, it is a story describing how wrong destruction is- be it of bulldozers, or nature. Instead of being the violent novel most people perceive it as, I believe Edward Abbey actually wrote The Monkey Wrench Gang with a different idea in mind. I think the novel was intended as a way to show the world the beauty of Southern Utah, which desperately required help to be preserved, as well as to subtly suggest logical, thoughtful opposition as the only manner in which to do so.

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