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Can Edward Abbey learn to love Glen Canyon Dam?

by Ed Marston

Tom Gamble wants to show writer Edward Abbey through Glen Canyon Dam. If Abbey has the time, if he's not racing a deadline to finish his next book on ecotage or the horrors of modern America, he might want to accept the invitation.

Gamble, 47, gives a good tour; he has run the dam for a decade and knows all 710 vertical feet of it. Moreover, he's a spirited tour guide. He's a career Reclamation man. But rather than a faceless, opinionless bureaucrat, he's an outspoken defender of the eggshell-shaped Glen Canyon Dam and of the 30 million



Edward Abbey

acre-feet of water it backs up to form Lake Powell.

"People say the lake is boring. Boring hell. I go to Arches (National Park in Utah) and I say: What this place needs is water. I don't buy the argument that we've ruined a unique place. There's a hundred canyons just as beautiful."

His admiration for the dam goes past megawattage and water stored into the intangible. He sees himself as caretaker of a symbol as much as of a structure. "Lake Powell represents the United States all over the world. Wherever I travelled in Europe, I saw it on posters."

Gamble says European and American tourists who visit his facility at Page, Arizona find more than just "a lake that rivals any other in the world for stark, exotic beauty." They also find proof of America's ability to build big and be efficient. "I like big structures. I like machines. I like to see things run well."

He satisfies these multiple likes at Glen Canyon. He runs the 1200-megawatt powerplant and hosted 380,000 visitors last year with only 55 employees. And there is no sign of decay at the dam and powerplant -- it is all clean and painted and in order. For invidious comparison, the nearby coal-fired Navajo power plant needs 750 employees to produce only two to three times Glen Canyon's power.

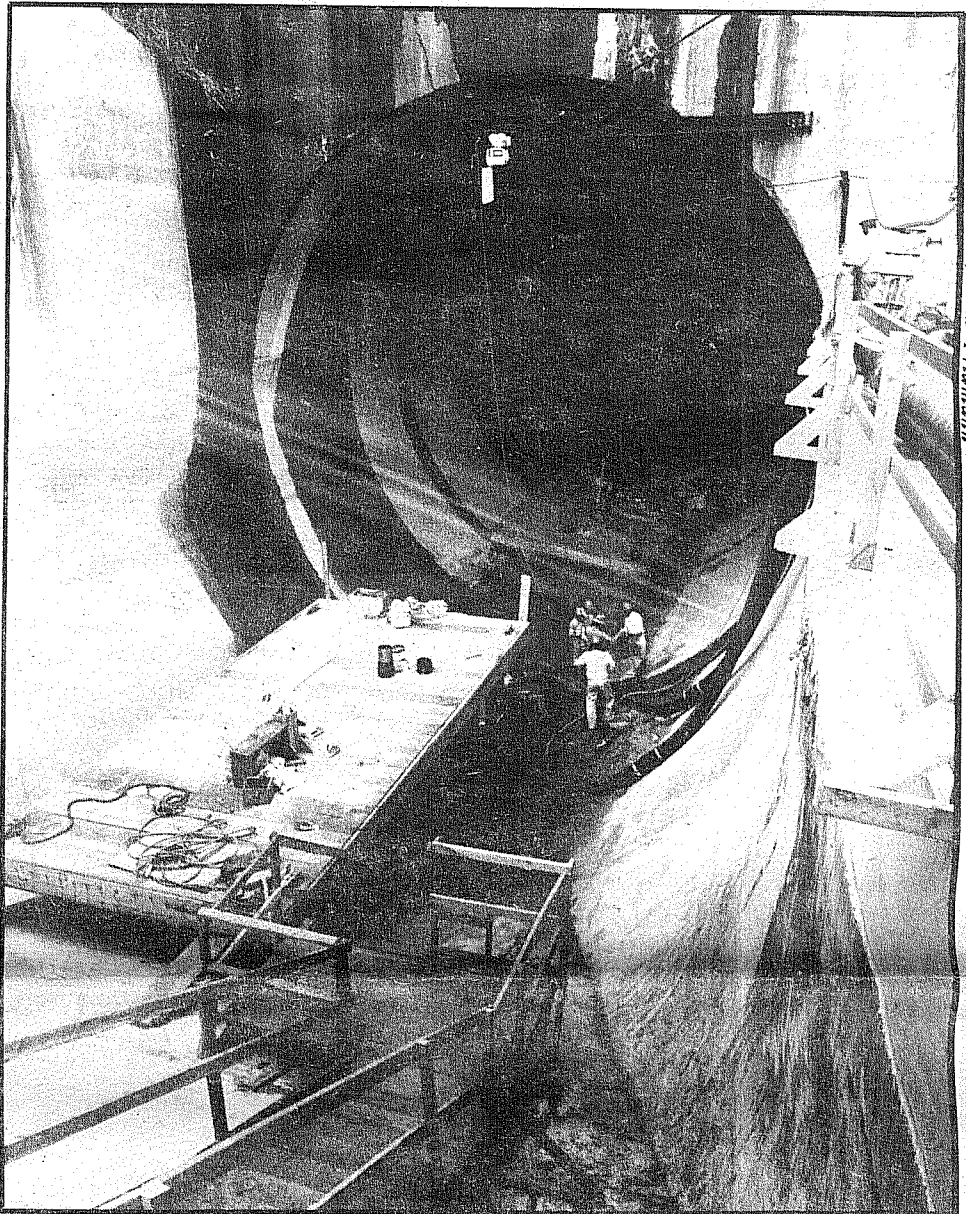
Despite its productivity and efficiency, the dam is casual -- no buttoned up technologists guarding the portals. "We've bent over backward to make it accessible.

Europeans especially can't believe it. They ask: 'You mean you'll let us go into the dam?'"

More than that. The Bureau doesn't even subject them to a group tour. Instead, they wander unescorted into the dam at the top past the large digital cash register whose dollar totals change with each revolution of the spinning electric generators, read the story boards explaining the dam's operation, and then take an elevator 528 feet down, past galleries that allow access to the interior of the dam, to the power plant to watch the generators and turbines do their work and to look at the grassy lawn at the bottom of the dam (HCN, 12/12/83).

Why does the Bureau let several hundred thousand visitors wander through the dam? And why does Gamble want to show Abbey the dam and lake? First, to share: "I'd like Edward Abbey to experience it." And second, "Because I believe in getting as close to your adversaries as possible." Gamble also has a suspicion about Abbey. "In Abbey's calendar a couple of years ago, he had a picture of Lake Powell. But he labelled it the Escalante River." Gamble believes Abbey knew the picture was Lake Powell. "He's probably a closet Lake Powell lover."

To Gamble, Abbey is a potential convert -- a man who can be brought to see the benefits of the dam and the beauty of the 2,500-square-mile lake it creates -- a lake used by 83,000 people Memorial Day alone, more than rafted it the entire time it was a canyon.



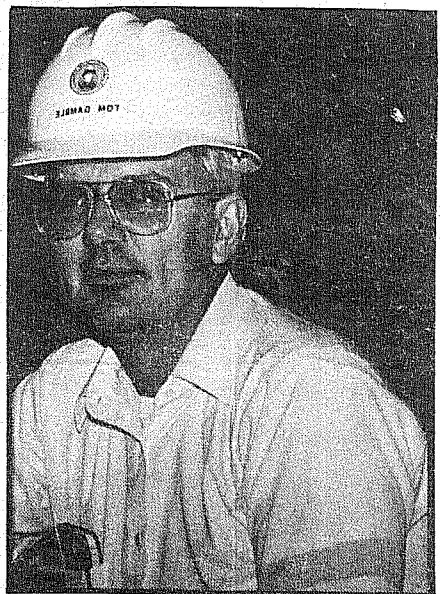
Glen Canyon Dam's right spillway outlet, 9/14/83

Bureau of Reclamation, Tom Fritmann

Anything is possible. Abbey may be living for the day his works go Book-of-the-Month-Club so he can buy a home on a Phoenix golf course and another on the ski slopes at Vail.

But it is more likely that Gamble, an easy-going and friendly man who epitomizes open, can-do America, doesn't understand the depths of Abbey's rage. The gap between the two men is as big as the dam. Gamble, for example, views the roughly 400,000 tourists who yearly seek out the dam as putting their seal of approval on dam and lake -- as voting with their tires and gasoline for a large-scale, well-managed and productive world.

[Continued on page 14]



Tom Gamble

Dam...

[Continued from page 1]

Abbey sees these same mildly curious, polite, clean visitors as the scum of the earth -- "*Slobivius americanus*". At his most charitable, most humble, Abbey asks: "Who am I to pity the degradation and misery of my fellow citizens?"

At times Abbey admits to understanding how dams come to be. Rafting in Glen Canyon before Lake Powell, he wrote: "Alone in the silence, I understand for a moment the dread which many feel in the presence of primeval desert, the unconscious fear which compels them to tame, alter or destroy what they cannot understand, to reduce the wild and prehuman to human dimensions."

But in the same essay ("Down the River" in *Desert Solitaire*), dam building becomes a plot:

"Such are my... feelings... as we float away on the river, leaving behind for a while all that we most heartily and joyfully detest. That's what the first taste of the wild does to a man, after having been too long penned up in the city. No wonder the Authorities are so anxious to smother the wilderness under asphalt and reservoirs. They know what they're doing; their lives depend on it, and all their rotten institutions."

It is clear what Abbey is against. It

is harder to follow him "into freedom in the most simple, literal, primitive meaning of the word, the only meaning that really counts. The freedom, for example, to commit murder and get away with it Scot-free..."

That's Abbey the extremist -- the man who writes lovingly of exploding a bomb in the depths of Gamble's beloved Glen Canyon Dam. It's an Abbey who is easy to dismiss. While he spews hatred toward mass man, the Tom Gambles of the world keep that society warm, clothed and fed through their organizational talent and technical mastery.

So the question isn't: Will Edward Abbey deign to tour Glen Canyon with Tom Gamble, but Why should Tom Gamble take time from his productive life to guide destructive, fulminating, impractical Abbey through his dam?

An outsider can't answer that question. And Bureau insiders aren't about to tell us if they feel firmly enough in control of their destiny to guide Abbey or anyone else through their facilities. Or whether they feel, over the long run, that they are losing ground and must come to some terms with what Abbey stands for.

Is there common ground on which Gamble and Abbey can stand during this tour? Not on the issue of Lake Powell. It will take only a glance downstream of the dam -- at the river flowing through the unflooded canyon -- to remind Abbey of what's been

covered up to create "this reservoir of stagnant water" whose name "Dis-honors the memory, spirit and vision of Major John Wesley Powell... Where he and his brave men once lined the rapids and glided through silent canyons two thousand feet deep the motorboats now smoke and whine, scumming the water with cigarette butts, beer cans and oil, dragging the water skiers on their endless rounds..."

Gamble might have better luck communicating with Abbey within the dam, out of sight of lake and canyon. And communication might have been easiest during the past 12 months, when the dam was an arena which challenged workers, scientists and administrators as much as the canyon challenged Powell and his crew on their voyage. For the dam last summer came close to self-destruction.

A remnant of that effort was still visible in early June as a crew of construction workers perched on a wooden platform hung from cables in the nearly vertical 41-foot-diameter left spillway tunnel. The tunnel had been ready for water since May, but the crew was painting the lily -- installing water and pressure monitors, using torches to cut off metal bars left from the concrete pours, and examining for one last time the surface of the tunnel.

Even in the warm spring desert air, the work looked hard. The men and women were clad in plastic coats to protect against water which poured out of openings in the tunnel walls. It was difficult to imagine conditions during the winter, when below freezing temperatures and a constant wind through the tunnel whipped up the cold spilling water and made work a misery.

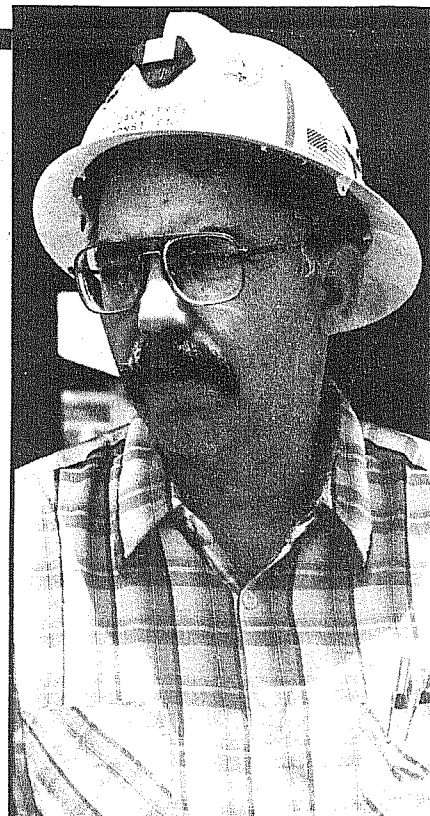
About 500,000 man and woman-hours have been spent in the two tunnels, blasting and mucking out the log-cabin-sized debris ripped out during last spring's spills, building jumbo platforms and floating barges to work on, and then pouring concrete to restore the tunnels to their original round, water-resistive condition.

The work was done by a crew that was 50 percent minority -- mostly Navajo Indians -- and 12 percent women. Judging by their t-shirts, the contractor had hired a large number of MASH fans. Judging by their appearance, they were as different from Bureau career men as is imaginable.

The work in the gently sloping bottom section of the tunnel -- the part the 100 mile per hour water had ripped to pieces -- was fairly routine. The interesting work took place above the elbow, where the vertical part of spillway is joined to the gently sloping section. On that vertical part, working off the cable-supported jumbo platforms in a constant drizzle, Controlled Demolition, Inc. played a delicate game. Their job was to drill 3,400 holes into the concrete walls to blast a four-foot-deep, four-foot-wide slot running part way around the tunnel like a belt. (HCN, 5/14/84).

Just above the slots workers poured a seven-inch ramp to send water shooting over it to mix with air sucked in through the slot. The goal is to mix air into the spilling water, turning the water mattress-soft to suppress shock waves caused by cavitation. It was those shock waves which made the initial holes in the spillway, holes then widened by erosion.

The slot and its ramp look impressive enough to visitors roped to a mancar held by cables on the very



Jack Tyler

steep sides of the left spillway tunnel. But Jack Tyler, the project engineer who has kept the \$20 million repair project on schedule for the last year, is bothered. "After all the money and agony we went through I was disappointed -- just a four-foot ditch in the tunnel."

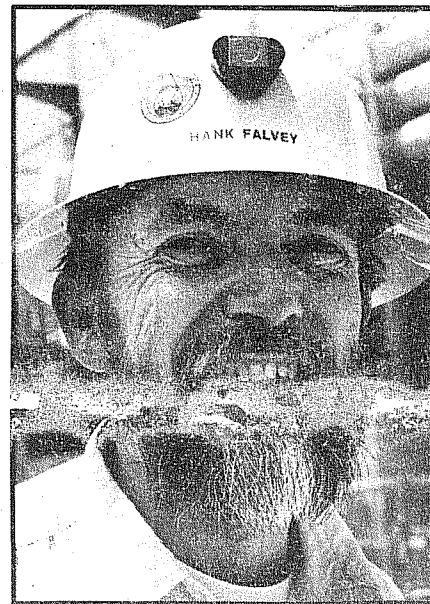
The disintegration last spring occurred under flows of only 20,000 to 30,000 cubic feet per second. This year, with the air slot in place, Bureau scientist Henry Falvey estimates each spillway will be able to handle over 100,000 cfs without damage.

Will the spillways and their fancy new air slots work? That will be known in early August. Divers will go into Lake Powell to knock out the epoxy glue which seals shut the 52.5-foot-high radial gates guarding the tunnels -- the gates on which the famous plywood splashboards were mounted last spring. With the seals broken, the gates will be raised and flows of up to 50,000 cfs will test the left spillway.

Would Abbey, after a tour, see Glen Canyon Dam as a challenge such as that which faced Powell and his crew in the same place? Would he see it as a place where people test themselves, their ideas and their instruments in as legitimate a way as faced by Powell or any mountain climber or river runner?

Would he be interested in quirks of the project, such as the "Navajo Navy" -- the barges built to gain access to the flooded spillway tunnels? Would the death that occurred in an explosion, or the fact that the project's safety record was exemplary, allow him to establish some sort of comradeship with the Bureau and its people?

Probably not.



Henry Falvey

Western issues aren't always pretty



Jeff Clack

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