

chapter 5

The year 1970. The genesis of a decade of infamy for the landscape of the American Southwest. Actually, the infamy had already begun with that concrete-and-steel monument to Mammon, overindulgence, and heresy against the flow of Nature, the Glen Canyon Dam.

In order to understand what fired the passion of Edward Abbey during the final decades of his life, I must tell something of its story.

The Glen Canyon Dam stoppers the mighty Colorado River just upstream from Lee's Ferry, that arbitrary line of demarcation that divides the upper basin of the Colorado River drainage from the lower basin. The Colorado River is 1,440 miles long, draining a watershed that spans 244,000 square miles and includes parts of seven states: Colorado, Wyoming, Utah, New Mexico, Nevada, Arizona, and California. For seventeen miles it separates the United States and Mexico; it thereafter flows another eighty miles until it drains into the Sea of Cortez, one of the world's most beautiful seas.

"The Colorado River is a unique river system," according to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. "No other stream in the world has cut such a remarkable series of extremely deep trenches, with the Grand Canyon the deepest and most spectacular. The river drains the most arid sector of the North American continent; and because of its intensive development, it is called the 'Lifeline of the Southwest.'"

In the last third of the nineteenth century, a one-armed veteran of the Civil War, John Wesley Powell, and his men ran the Colorado River through the Grand Canyon in wooden dories, charting its course for the U.S. Geological Survey and having the adventure of a lifetime. In 1878 Powell published his *Report on the Arid Regions of the United States*, a milestone in conservation literature, written at the time of the taming of the West by the white man, a time of infamy from the point of view of the Indians, a time of land grabbing by cattle barons, a time of realization that the West is drier than a dead man's sense of humor. It wasn't long before everyone was making plans for the water

in the Colorado, with no compunctions about rearranging the watershed and its adjacent ecosystems.

In 1922, when future U.S. president Herbert Hoover was Secretary of Commerce, the Colorado River Compact was designed by representatives of the seven western states constituting the drainage area. It was decided that Lee's Ferry, downstream from Glen Canyon and upstream from Marble Canyon in northern Arizona, would mark the boundary separating the Upper Colorado River Basin from the lower. Colorado, Wyoming, Utah, and New Mexico were included in the upper basin and California, Arizona, and Nevada were in the lower basin. It was erroneously determined that seventeen million acre-feet of water courses down the Colorado in an average year. (It's more like 15 million acre-feet per year.) The upper and lower basins would equally split fifteen million acre-feet a year. An acre-foot is an acre of water one foot deep. Three acre-feet comes to roughly a million gallons.

It took another twenty-two years to establish what share of this water would be reserved for Mexico. And no one thought to ask the Sea of Cortez how much it needed for the maintenance of its biotic community.

In 1928 the Congress of the United States authorized construction of Boulder Dam (now Hoover Dam). It was completed in 1936 and resulted in Lake Mead. This dam, supervised by the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, established the hegemony of Washington, D.C., over the fate of water in the West. Shortly after Hoover Dam was constructed, a second dam was built—Parker Dam, which created Lake Havasu. It is from Lake Havasu that one billion gallons are pumped westward every day, supplying Los Angeles and San Diego with the lion's share of their water.

After the apparent successes of these dams, the federal government started eyeing the Colorado River with more dams in mind. Some even seriously considered building dams in the Grand Canyon! In 1956 the Colorado River Storage Project Act authorized construction of yet another dam just upstream of Lee's Ferry: the Glen Canyon Dam.

Of all the places in the world to build a dam, why there? Why stopper the river there and flood what was truly one of the most beautiful places on Earth? It has made grown men weep. It makes me weep as I write. If there was ever a monument to the technomaniacal mind of man, it is the Glen Canyon Dam.

In the early 1960s the Glen Canyon Dam was completed, plugging the

Colorado River and filling Glen Canyon with water, turning it into Lake Powell, named after John Wesley Powell, who spins in his grave.

For many years the idea of the Central Arizona Project had been fomenting, conceived by Arizona politicians who relentlessly cursed California for claiming the largest single entitlement to the Colorado River. "We want our share! We want! We want!" Phoenix needed water. Tucson needed water. Early on, Arizona senator Carl Hayden pushed for the Central Arizona Project, as did his political descendants. California kept shouting it down. In 1952 Arizona filed a lawsuit to get rights to a major portion of the Colorado River. In 1964 the U.S. Supreme Court decided in favor of Arizona with the result that Arizona would receive 2.8 million acre-feet per year plus the flow of its own in-state tributaries to the Colorado. But problems remained. How would the water get across the desert from the river to Phoenix and Tucson? There was an enormous coal deposit in northern Arizona that could fire a power plant or two to generate the juice to pump the water to Phoenix. "Great idea. Too bad the coal is under Indian land." "That's okay. We'll screw the Indians. Been doin' it fer years. Why stop now?"

Peabody Coal Company, from East St. Louis, got the contract at a ridiculously low price thanks to John Boyden, a Salt Lake City attorney who was counsel for the Hopi Tribal Council and through a masterful weave of conflict of interests also worked for the Peabody Coal Company. The coal would be shipped via railroad across the Kaibito Plateau to the shores of Lake Powell, where the Navajo Generating Station was to be constructed. Power lines would radiate in great webs borne by gigantic metal structures that looked like japes of the local deities. Electricity would be carried by these power lines to Lake Havasu to run enormous pumps to pump water out of the lake into canals that would channel the water all the way to Phoenix and finally to Tucson.

Another power plant would be constructed near Laughlin, Nevada, fed by coal from the same source—Black Mesa, the female mountain sacred to both traditional Navajos and Hopis. After the coal had been crushed into small particles of under an inch in diameter, the coal particles would be slurried for 273 miles in water pumped at the rate of two thousand gallons per minute from the ancient aquifer underlying Black Mesa, an aquifer that had provided water to Hopi springs for centuries.

An entire power grid was being blocked out over the fragile landscape of the American Southwest. It had begun with the Four Corners Generating

Station near Farmington, New Mexico. The plume of smoke from the Four Corners Generating Station was said to be the only human artifact visible to the men who went to the moon.

The Southwest was being raped by developers and mining companies. The land was being pillaged, the waters fouled, the air smoke-dimmed, traditional cultures left bereft. Power lines marched across the land like electric kachinas.

Traditional Hopi and Navajo Indians were utterly dismayed that their sacred mountain was to be strip-mined for its coal. The Hopis were aghast that the ancient aquifer that had replenished their springs for centuries was to be tapped at the rate of over two thousand gallons per minute. Much of the electricity generated there was to be used for glitzy lighting arrangements along the avenues of Las Vegas. The Navajos learned belatedly that over thirty thousand acre-feet of their water entitlement was to be extracted from Lake Powell every year to supply water for the cooling towers of the Navajo Generating Station, which would in turn generate electricity to power the Central Arizona Project. That is the equivalent of a minimum of fifteen gallons of precious water every day for every member of the Navajo Nation. For a people accustomed to hauling water in thirty-gallon containers from well to hogan, that's a lot of water—more than most Navajos even use in the course of a day!

Consciously or unconsciously, the U.S. government and the current coterie of extractors, power magnates, and developers were hornswoggling the Indians yet again. The effects of the Central Arizona Project on natural and cultural environments were uniquely devastating. Never before had such an enormous area been so affected by a single project.

It was into this milieu that Edward Abbey gazed as the despair wrought by the death of his wife was shorn away by the healing desert wind. He had returned to his lookout at the North Rim of Grand Canyon. He looked out over the Colorado Plateau and grappled with his reaction to the Glen Canyon Dam, the projected coal-fired generating stations and accompanying strip mine. His anarchist inclinations surfaced, and he reflected on "the morality of political violence," the subject of his master's thesis. He was by now anarchist, outlaw, widower, and father. Distraught as he was, the spirit of revolt that fired his soul never wavered. The current of anarchism that coursed through his being had focused on humankind's pillaging of the planet. When Abbey was

born, the human population of the planet had yet to reach two billion. By the time of the Judy's death in 1970, the population had more than doubled. For the rest of his life Ed's prevailing passion was the defense of the natural environment against his own species. He was haunted by the Glen Canyon Dam, that symbol of the prevailing cultural paradigm of turning habitat into money.

At times Abbey wandered off by himself to ruminate on the nature of reality. He headed east to Muley Point, where he could look out over ten thousand square miles of the Colorado Plateau. He wandered Black Mesa, where he schemed on every conceivable means of liberating the land from the avarice of man. He pored over *The Anarchist Cookbook*, the saboteur's version of the *Whole Earth Catalog*. Only on occasion would he inflict damage on an earthmoving machine. He watched as just such a machine dozed away the hogan of an elderly Navajo woman who had lived there all her life, whose dreams and prayers were swept away in a single swipe of this monster that had invaded her homeland. He watched as the Navajo woman fell to her knees, weeping, then fainted dead away. He crawled on his belly and looked at corrals of equipment hauled in over the new roads that scored the desert. He peered at the Four Corners Generating Station and wondered if it were true that an armor-piercing missile fired from a high-powered rifle could actually cause the station's flywheel to begin to wobble itself to death. (The revenge of the Wobblies!) As time wore on, he tried unsuccessfully to procure a bazooka, deeming it a superb anti-Earth-terrorist tool. He hauled around a gunnysack full of splitting wedges that he intended to piggyback and affix to the tracks of the Black Mesa Railway, which hauls coal across the Kaibito Plateau to the Navajo Generating Station. The notion was that maybe the wedges might overturn the unmanned train. However, there was always someone on board when he scouted, and his first rule was, "Cause harm to no human!" He paid special heed to the conveyor belt that transported coal from the strip mine to the loading silo for the coal-bearing train. It looked particularly susceptible to ecotage. He followed many miles of the slurry line that extends from Black Mesa to Bullhead City, considering blowing away a section of it, which would, of course, result in a small stockpile of coal for any indigenous people who might live in the immediate area. He formed a plan to take a tape-demagnetizing device, or degausser, into the master computer room