

DON'T TOUCH THE BEAUTY: KEN SLEIGHT STILL SPEAKS OUT

By Maggie McGuire of *Moab Sun News*

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Ken Sleight is known to be the inspiration for the character Seldom Seen Smith in his friend Edward Abbey's now-classic novel "The Monkey Wrench Gang." There will be a special community screening of the new film "The Unfinished Fight of Seldom Seen Sleight," at 7 p.m. on Oct. 12 at Star Hall. [Courtesy photo]

"I can't hear, I can't see and I can't speak," Ken Sleight said with a laugh, returning home after feeding the goats at his Pack Creek ranch.

"I might not look it, but I can do a hell of a lot," Sleight said. The legendary river runner recently turned ninety.

Sleight and his wife, Jane, have owned the ranch just outside of Moab since 1986. For years, they cared for horses, fields of alfalfa and celebrities that came to enjoy the remote red rock scenery. Now retired, the couple divided the property up between friends and acquaintances instead of selling to a developer.

If he stands for anything at all, Sleight says, it's the preservation of beautiful things.

"Few people seem to know what real beauty is anymore. That bothers me a lot," said Sleight, known to be the inspiration for the character Seldom Seen Smith in his friend Edward Abbey's now-classic novel "The Monkey Wrench Gang."

"Beauty that's unique, you can't replace."

The man often pauses, hunting through a lifetime spent enjoying wilderness—and fighting for it.

When the words do come, they flow in thoughtful, concise paragraphs. Yet with characteristic modesty, Sleight apologizes for his speech.

"That's my downfall, public speaking. I never got the rudiments of that," he said.

Next to Sleight sat Susette Weisheit, his friend of over twenty-five years. Together, the two inspected a new poster design for the upcoming premiere of "The Unfinished Fight of Seldom Seen Sleight," sponsored by the nonprofit organization Living Rivers. The film, made in collaboration with award-winning documentary filmmaker Chris Simon, will be shown on Oct. 12 at Star Hall in Moab.

Weisheit moved to Moab in 1990 and became a river guide "instantly," she says. "Ken was on a few of my trips, and once you meet him, you can't help but fall in love."

After Weisheit and Simon produced a documentary on river runner Kent Frost, they were looking for their next topic.

"Ken Sleight looked at me and he said 'you need to make an activist film!'" Weisheit said.

"I said 'Ken, the only way I'm going to make an activist film is if you're at the center.'"

Sleight's eyes crinkle at the edges.

"She pointed at me and said 'you're next!'" he said with an affectionate smile.

A LIFE OF RIVERS

Sleight's activist history began on the Colorado River. As a river guide, Sleight travelled through Glen Canyon's deep gorges many times before the 710-foot Glen Canyon Dam was built.

"I started loving that place, loving river trips," said Sleight, "from the headwaters right on down the Colorado: beautiful places."

His face darkened as he remembered the places he'd visit, now submerged beneath Lake Powell.

"Most of the places I knew are destroyed," he said. He spoke of petroglyphs eroded away, of the water-soaked walls of Glen Canyon collapsing in on themselves.

"Rainbow Bridge is still in danger of being brought down. Wouldn't that be a shame?" he asked, looking out as if he genuinely wonders what people value these days.

Weisheit says that the film deals heavily with Sleight's involvement in a lawsuit that was filed by the Friends of the Earth.

Throughout the 1950s, Rainbow Bridge was accessible from the Colorado River after several days of floating through Glen Canyon. By 1956, Glen Canyon Dam was authorized and by 1963, the waters began to rise.

At the time, high-water estimates put Lake Powell at about a hundred feet above the low end of Rainbow Bridge National Monument. In 1973, the Friends of the Earth and other environmental organizations filed suit against the government to keep the waters out of the monument.

“I was still doing commercial trips to Rainbow Bridge,” said Sleight, “so I was able to give them standing to sue. And we won!”

A federal district court judge agreed with Sleight and the environmental groups, ordering the lake waters to be lowered.

“We thought, ‘boy, this is a great victory.’ Then it went to the appeals court in Denver and the decision was overturned,” said Sleight. “From a high to a low, I tell you.”

“That was one of the pivotal points in Ken's life,” Weisheit said, “It was when he moved from being a river guide, owner, rancher to becoming an activist.”

“He was always passionate, but Rainbow Bridge being the galvanizing point for him to actually feel like he could fight something,” she said.

“Back then, they disregarded the laws and regulations,” Sleight said, still astonished by the legal defeat. “It’s been such a tragedy to lose the beauty of what we had.”

“BE OUTGOING AND SPEAK OUT”

“We have unfinished business in Glen Canyon,” said Sleight, “but there’s a tremendous amount of other things that need tending to, too.”

Sleight remains opposed to continued development, from paved trails to population growth in Moab and Spanish Valley.

“Thousands more people, roads, service stations,” he said, gesturing to the horizon surrounding his ranch as if seeing condos appear before him.

“Every time a proposal comes up, you gotta jump on it. Don’t wait. That’s what happened to Glen Canyon, we waited too long to bring our forces together,” he warned.

Sleight sees great hope in one area: youth activism.

“Kids are getting up and expressing themselves out there, talking about the way it ought to be: I like that,” he said. “If they’ll continue on, they’ll have more sway than any congressman.”

“Look at that little kid, that girl,” he said, speaking of Greta Thunberg, the 16-year-old climate activist. “She spoke to the whole world. She’s a great example of the young people that need to come up and take our place. The important thing is to be outgoing and speak up.”

“My advantage is that I’ve had good people around me that could do that job that I couldn’t do,” he said.

“Thank god that Ed Abbey came along at the right time. He was a great spokesman, he knew how to write and speak. He inspired me as a friend and then he inspired a lot of young people to get involved with the environment.”

“I still have those people. I think that this film fills that gap, too,” Sleight said, patting the film’s poster, the image conjuring up visions of an activist Don Quixote in the desert.

“The movie may bring you to tears a couple of times, and it’ll certainly make you angry,” said Weisheit.

The ranch was quiet but for the waters of Pack Creek running free. Sleight began preparing to work on his memoir again, gathering photos in his office.

“The problem is the dam is still there,” he said. “Every year I pray for a big, big drought. I know Abbey’s up there beseeching the Almighty for a precision earthquake. I do my praying down here. It’s got to go, but I leave that to the younger generation. It’ll come to pass.”

There will be a special community screening of the new film “The Unfinished Fight of Seldom Seen Sleight,” at 7 p.m. on Oct. 12 at Star Hall, 159 E. Center St.. There will be a reception in the Sun Court beside Star Hall starting at 6 pm. There is a suggested donation of \$10.