

'My People'

Edward Abbey's Appalachian Roots in Indiana County, Pennsylvania

by James M. Cahalan

AUTHOR OF MORE than 20 books, native Western Pennsylvanian Edward Abbey (1927-1989) became internationally known as a writer and a champion of the canyons and deserts of America's Southwest.

Abbey was born and grew up in Indiana County, about 60 miles northeast of Pittsburgh, and spent nearly all of his first 21 years there. His parents were also from the region, and several of his relatives still live in Indiana County. Ed Abbey's writing attracted a popular, even cult following, especially in the West, but there is a double-edged irony to his fame: he has remained largely unknown in

his native Western Pennsylvania, while most of his readers in the West know little about the Pennsylvania heritage that Abbey himself considered crucial to his voice as a writer.

Desert Solitaire (1968), a book of essays about the red rock country of Arches National Park and Canyonlands National Park in

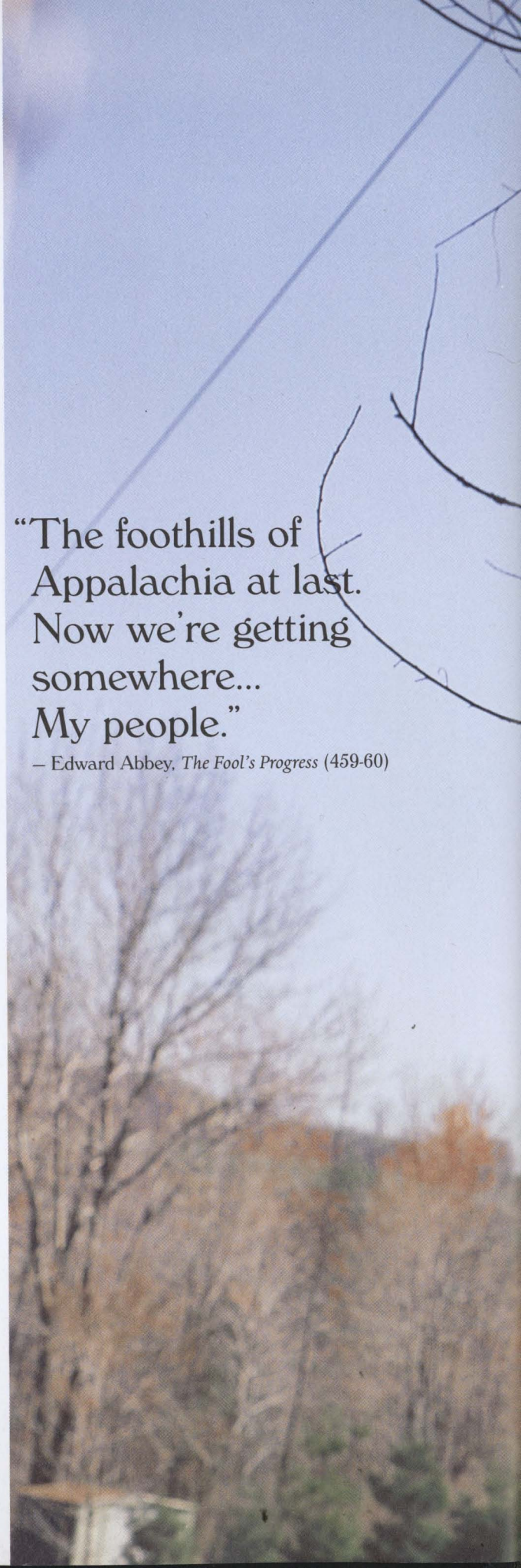
Utah, tops some lists as the

best twentieth-century book about the natural world. *The Monkey Wrench Gang* (1975), a novel about four activists who believe in direct action against "development" of wilderness

James M. Cahalan is professor of English at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, where he directed the doctoral program in literature from 1987 to 1991. An authority on Irish literature and a recipient of IUP's Distinguished Faculty Award for Research (1990), Cahalan is the author of numerous articles and five books including, most recently, *Modern Irish Literature and Culture: A Chronology* (1993). His article "Edward Abbey, Appalachian Easterner," will appear in November in *Western American Literature*.

"The foothills of
Appalachia at last.
Now we're getting
somewhere...
My people."

— Edward Abbey, *The Fool's Progress* (459-60)





Edward Abbey often said he was born in Home, Indiana County, although he wasn't. As a child, he did live in this village with the perfect name (and he posed there on a trip Home in 1986). His knowledge of the area around Crooked Creek, far left, provided the setting for the novel *The Fool's Progress*.

From an early age, Abbey showed an intense interest in "the West." Note the toy revolver in his grasp.



areas, inspired the movement called Earth First! and solidified Abbey's reputation as an aggressive opponent of federal land use policy.¹ Larry McMurtry, author of *Lonesome Dove* and other fictional works set in frontier days beyond the Mississippi River, has called Abbey "the Thoreau of the American West."²

This article aims to redress the circumstance that Abbey is so little known in his native region and that the significance of the area to him and his work has been little appreciated even by those who know Abbey's books. Drawing on interviews with more than 20 people (mostly in Indiana County), more than a thousand pages from the Abbey archive at the University of Arizona in Tucson, and my reading of his writing (both published and unpublished), I hope to encourage an understanding and appreciation of Edward Abbey. Because scholars and fans of his writing largely have missed the significance of his heritage, I also want to tell as much of Abbey's Western Pennsylvanian story as possible. Basic facts about his years in the area are not widely known, while others have been reported wrongly. An example is his birthplace — reported incorrectly until now as Home, Pennsylvania.³

I will focus mostly on Abbey's life, and draw on his writings as

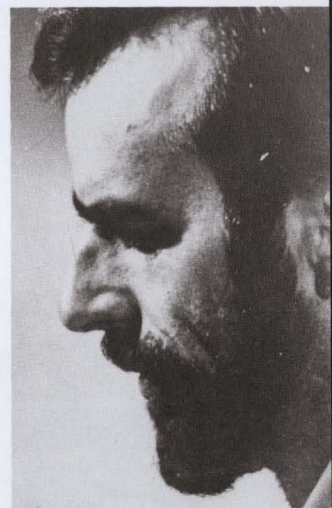
part of his life story.⁴ Western and environmentalist readers have long considered Abbey's books instructive. But Western Pennsylvanians may learn a lot about themselves and their world, as well, from Edward Abbey.

Several books about Abbey and his work have already appeared and are still coming out, and he has been written about in French.⁷ The Abbey collection at the University of Arizona contains 30 large boxes of almost every imaginable kind of archival material, so scholars have ample resources for many more articles and books. All of his books have remained in print except for his first novel (*Jonathan Troy*, 1954), which Abbey disdained and refused to have reprinted — and so that novel has become quite a collector's item. A bookstore manager in the Southwest tells me that he would not consider selling his used copy for any price below \$1,000, and some people have obtained the novel via inter-library loan and then deliberately failed to return it.

On the Internet, Abbey is the subject of a very active "Abbeyweb," which is a "listserv" discussion group, and "Abbey's Web," one of the most elaborate and highly rated sites on the World Wide Web. Both were created by Christer Lindh, whose account of how he came to devote himself to Edward Abbey is illustrative of the kind of devotion that Abbey continues to attract:

Abbey's Web is reachable from anywhere in the world via the Internet, but it is physically located on a computer in Stockholm, Sweden, of all places, and is written and maintained by me, a Swedish software engineer. The obvious question is, Why me?... One day a friend gave me a book to read; it was called *Desert Solitaire* and it was written by one Edward Abbey. That evening I read it from cover to cover. I was hooked by his writing, with its unique combination of beautiful descriptions of the desert and a biting wit that attacks the forces that would destroy it. The next weekend I ventured out on my own to try to find the magic of the desert that had obviously eluded me so far. I found it. This experience fueled my metamorphosis from a computer nerd to an outdoor enthusiast and nature-defending nerd. Before returning to Sweden in October of 1989, I took a month-long trip through southern Utah, northern Arizona, and the eastern Sierra Nevada. Along the way I read more books by Edward Abbey and got even more firmly hooked when I had a chance to see and feel the areas he loved and fought for.

Abbey's web site is filled with admiring comments by readers from throughout the world. Two quick, typical examples can suffice: "Memorize *Desert Solitaire*. Carry it around. Make it your



Abbey the novelist in the mid-'60s, after three books. His next and most famous work was non-fiction: *Desert Solitaire*.

Edward Abbey's Books

Anthologies

The Best of Edward Abbey
(also published as
Slumgullion Stew), 1984.

The Serpents of Paradise:
A Reader, 1995.

Nonfiction

Desert Solitaire, 1968.

Appalachian Wilderness, 1970.

Slickrock, 1971.

Cactus Country, 1972.

The Journey Home, 1975.

The Hidden Canyon, 1978.

Abbey's Road, 1979.

Desert Images, 1981.

Down the River, 1982.

Beyond the Wall, 1984.

One Life at a Time, Please, 1987.

A Voice Crying in the Wilderness:
Notes from a Secret Journal, 1989.

Confessions of a Barbarian:
Selections from the Journals of
Edward Abbey, 1951-1989, 1994.

Novels

Jonathan Troy, 1954.

The Brave Cowboy, 1956.

Fire on the Mountain, 1962.

Black Sun, 1971.

The Monkey Wrench Gang, 1975.

Good News, 1980.

The Fool's Progress, 1988.

Hayduke Lives!, 1989.

Poetry

Earth Apples, 1994.

part of his life story.⁴ Western and environmentalist readers have long considered Abbey's books instructive. But Western Pennsylvanians may learn a lot about themselves and their world, as well, from Edward Abbey.

The value of Abbey's work has been recognized for more than a quarter of a century. Abbey won a Fulbright Fellowship to Edinburgh University in Scotland in 1951, a Wallace Stegner Creative Writing Fellowship to Stanford in 1957, and a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1974. He also enjoyed popular and critical success. Kirk Douglas turned Abbey's second novel into *Lonely Are the Brave* (1962), which Douglas says is still his favorite movie, and he eulogized Abbey in the *Los Angeles Times*.⁵

Yet Abbey always felt that the New York literary establishment

life,” and “Ed Abbey came into my life many years ago via *The Monkey Wrench Gang*. Since then I have acquired nearly all his books and he remains my favorite author. I can’t count the number of times I’ve given *Desert Solitaire* to others to read. I miss him.”⁸

The son of Paul and Mildred Abbey, and the oldest sibling of Howard, John, Nancy, and Bill Abbey, Edward Abbey was born January 29, 1927. Except for a two-year hitch in the Army between 1945 and 1947, he lived in Indiana County before moving to the Southwest in 1948. He returned home to visit his relatives many times throughout his life. His Appalachian heritage in Western Pennsylvania comes up repeatedly in his writings, even in books set entirely in the West. *Jonathan Troy*, whose namesake is an autobiographical high school student, is set entirely in and around the town of Indiana (fictionalized as “Powhatan, Pennsylvania”), which Jonathan finally leaves, hitch-hiking west, at the end. The novel he considered his *magnum opus* and called his “fat masterpiece,” *The Fool’s Progress* (1988), which he struggled to write for many years, concerns the boyhood and eventual return home of his autobiographical protagonist, Henry Lightcap. Here Indiana is thinly disguised as “Shawnee, West Virginia,” and the area eight to 10 miles north of the town in Indiana County where Abbey grew up becomes “Stump Creek” (an actual village not far from Punxsutawney and Clearfield, Pennsylvania).

Abbey’s desire for recognition in his native place is reflected late in *The Fool’s Progress* when Henry comes upon a historical marker: “Shawnee... Birthplace of Henry H. Lightcap” (498). Yet when I made my first phone call to propose such a historical marker for Abbey in his native county, the reaction was “Who’s Edward Abbey?” (Robert Redford, who knew Abbey, and others wrote letters of support for this marker. It was approved by the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, and it will be dedicated in September 1996 on U.S. 119 in Home.)

Abbey himself remarked that his least favorite categories of incoming mail included “letters addressed to Edward Albee,” from readers wondering why *The Monkey Wrench Gang* was so different from Albee’s *The Zoo Story*. In Indiana County and in Pennsylvania in general, Edward Abbey, so acclaimed elsewhere as a writer and environmentalist, has tended to get lost in the shadows of his more glamorous fellow Indiana native Jimmy Stewart. Stewart left Indiana for good at the same age as Abbey, but his return for his 75th birthday celebration in 1983 dominated the *Indiana Gazette* for months, and the Jimmy Stewart Museum (occupying the entire third floor of the town library) was opened with similar fanfare in 1995, when the actor was still very much alive.

In contrast, a majority of people in Indiana County have never heard of Edward Abbey. Yet there are certainly more than enough people in the area who knew Abbey and his family, including his two surviving brothers, to set the record straight.

Abbey’s Early Life

Let’s begin with as simple a matter as birth — the facts of which have been little known, even apparently to Abbey himself. Virtually all sources, ranging from the popular



His Aunt Betty George remembers babysitting Ed at his first boyhood home (1927-28), top, at 254 N. Third St. in Indiana.

Bottom: The first time Ed lived with his family in rural northern Indiana County was near Home on the Chambersville Road (1931-32).

press to the scholarly publications, have followed Abbey in recording his birthplace as the village of Home, about 10 miles north of Indiana. Yet in fact, as reflected on his birth certificate and the baby book kept by his mother, Edward Paul Abbey was born at the Indiana Hospital.⁹ Moreover, his first homes were in Indiana, and his family did not move to the area around Home until he was 4 years old. Why the inaccuracy? Because the family's many moves in his earliest years preceded or escaped Abbey's memory, and because he so much loved to link himself to appealing place-names. Later he would claim "Wolf Hole" or "Oracle" as his place of residence; both are real places in Arizona, but Abbey never lived in either. He just liked the sound of their names, and preferred to mislead people after he became a cult figure.¹⁰

Home is indeed a real place with an appealing name — so appealing that in history it supplanted another, earlier place-name. At Kellysburg, founded in 1838, the post office came to be known as "Home" because the mail was originally sorted at the home of Hugh Cannon, about a mile away. The name stuck so well that eventually it officially replaced "Kellysburg" altogether as the name of the village, though people often continued to refer to Kellysburg, as did Abbey in his journal and manuscripts as late as the 1970s.¹¹ Since the Home post office has rural delivery, while several other surrounding villages (such as Chambersville) do not, a number of people living not particularly close to Home are able

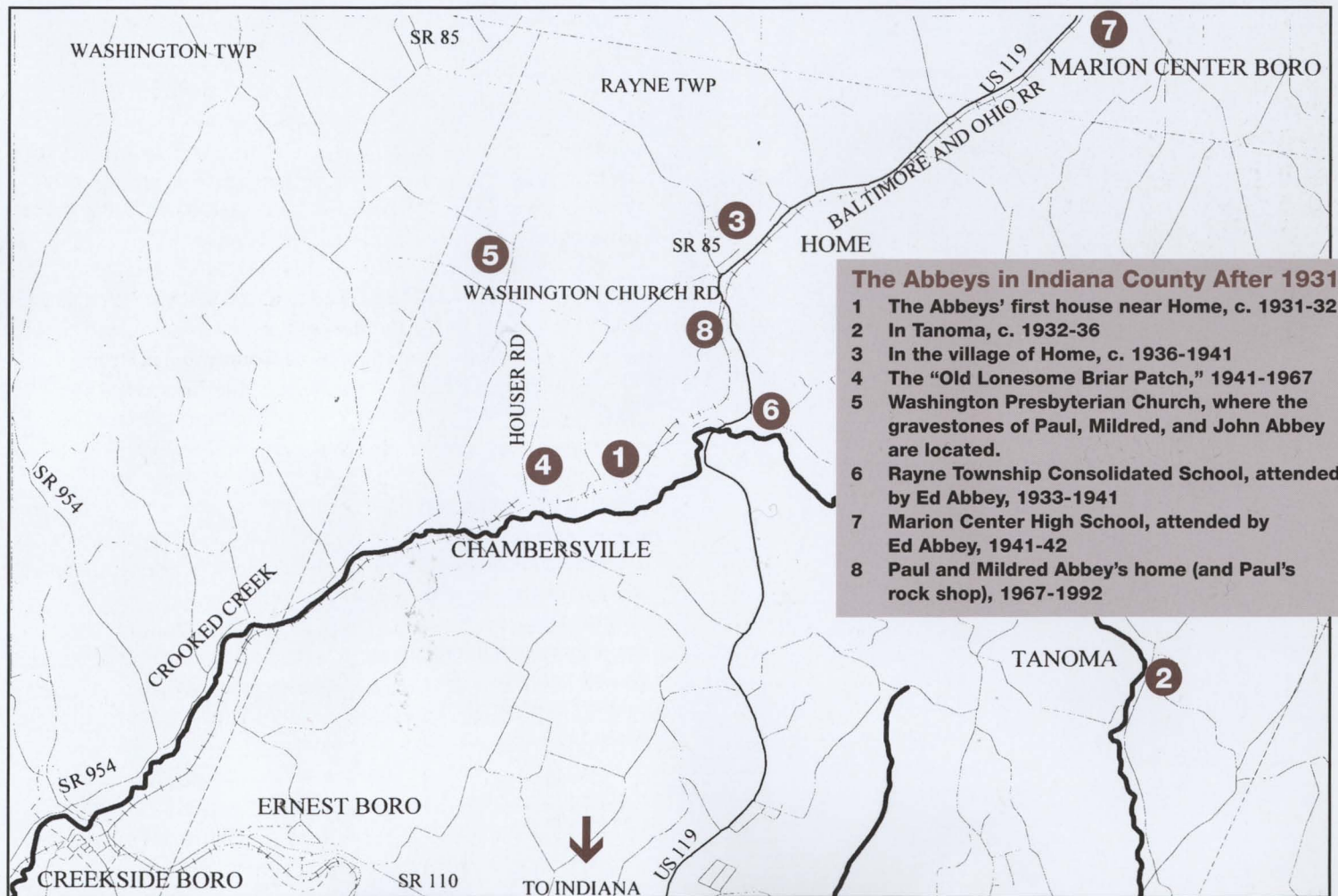
to claim it as their address.

The appeal of "Home" in the Abbey family is expressed by Bill Abbey, Edward's youngest brother, who retired to Indiana County in 1995 after 27 years of teaching in Hawaii, and who collects his mail at the Home post office even though he lives closer to a different post office. "I like the name 'Home, Pa.' I wanted that all my life," Bill says. "When I came back here, I really needed to get a Home, Pa., address because nobody believes it back in Hawaii. I have a deal with the postmistress at Home where she stamps my letters to Hawaii 'Home.'"¹²

Edward Abbey always referred to Home as his birthplace — not only in print, but also in his private diary, much of which was published as *Confessions of a Barbarian* (1994): "Joy... where are you? Where were you on the night of January 29th, 1927, in that lamp-lit room in the old farmhouse near Home, Pennsylvania, when I was born?"¹³

Home has been dutifully repeated as his birthplace by virtually everyone else; only the FBI got it right, in the file on Abbey that he obtained under the Freedom of Information Act: "Subject born January 29, 1927, Indiana, Pa."¹⁴

The Abbey family moved around a lot, in poverty and in the midst of the Depression; their dwellings were difficult to trace, since the earliest ones were not remembered well by surviving relatives and because they could not be traced through ownership





Paul Abbey, right, Ed's father, quoted Walt Whitman from heart and espoused radical political notions his entire adult life. The Abbeyes lived in rural Tanoma, *top*, for about four years before moving "into town" at nearby Home, *bottom*, in about 1936.





records, as Abbey's parents always rented before 1941. Edward Abbey could remember, however, that "I found myself a displaced person shortly after birth."¹⁵ Indeed, there were at least eight scattered residences in Indiana County at which he lived from just after birth to adolescence: two houses in Indiana and then two places in Saltsburg, about 20 miles southwest of Indiana, between 1927 and 1931; then three different houses in or near Chambersville, Tanoma, and Home between 1931 and 1941; and finally the farmhouse, cornfield, and acres of woods near Chambersville (but with a "Home RD" address) that Abbey memorialized as "the Old Lonesome Briar Patch."¹⁶

Moreover, in 1931, when Edward (or "Ned," as the family called him) was 4 years old, the Abbeys spent a summer on the road, in the middle of that string of eight different residences. Along with Howard (nicknamed "Hoots"), who was a year-and-a-half younger than Ned, and John, who was just a baby, Paul and Mildred Abbey drove from Indiana County eastward over the mountains to Harrisburg, then to New Jersey, and back into Pennsylvania (and perhaps Ohio) before returning to Indiana County, all the time living in camps as Paul picked up various jobs to try to support them while he competed in sharp-shooting competitions. Mildred kept a remarkable diary of this trip. One of her most poignant entries was written somewhere in northeastern Pennsylvania: "As we drove under the big apple tree Hootsie said 'Wake up, Ned, we're home.' Poor little kids! They haven't been getting much of a show this past year. Ned gets homesick to live in a house, and frequently when we drive past an empty one he will exclaim hopefully 'Momma, there's an empty house we could live in!'"¹⁷

Writers such as James Bishop, Jr., author of the journalistic biography *Edward Abbey: Epitaph for a Desert Anarchist*, have tended to romanticize Abbey's countryside boyhood: "It was a beautiful, though ragged, farm community where people were connected to the earth.... People knew the wildflowers by name, tending and appreciating them as they grew."¹⁸ This may have been true, but it was also true, as Edward's sister Nancy told me, that "we lived so simply because we were so poor."

The only boyhood home remembered in all of the writing both by and about Ed Abbey is "the Old Lonesome Briar Patch," where he and the rest of the family must have been very glad to settle in 1941, after all of their previous moves. This was the scene of everything that mattered the most to Abbey about his boyhood, as recaptured in *The Fool's Progress*. Near here were the "Big Woods" that the Abbeys loved. Here was where he and his brothers wandered in and around Crooked Creek, organized baseball games, and followed the family tradition of liberating coal from passing trains on the Baltimore and Ohio line. This countryside was then much less "developed" than it is now, yet it was actually easier for children to get into the larger town of Indiana than it is now: all the Abbeys had to do was walk to the end of their road to catch the "Hoodlebug" train to town.

In *The Fool's Progress*, Abbey fictionalized this family home as "Lightcap Hollow" and, with wishful thinking, wrote of "the gray good gothic two-story clapboard farmhouse that remained, after a



century, still the Lightcap family home" (85). Paul and Mildred Abbey continued to live at "the Old Lonesome Briar Patch" from 1941 until 1967, when they moved to a little house on U.S. 119 just south of Home that became well known because of the rock shop next to it where Paul would sell and give away rocks collected from his trips west.

The "Old Lonesome Briar Patch" house burnt down in the early 1970s. Later Ed Abbey wrote that the name revealed his brothers' and his own "attitude toward it":

We liked the woods, the hunting and trapping, fishing in Crooked Creek and small-town baseball, but tired quickly of pitching manure, milking cows, husking corn, fixing fence, plowing up potatoes, and the fifty other daily and seasonal chores that required, we thought, too much of our time. We had better things to do, though we had only the dimmest notion of what those better things might be. We envied our city cousins with their electric lights, indoor toilet, hot and cold running water, new car, neighbors living one hundred feet away, and the poolroom and movie-picture show only a few blocks down the street. When the war came and an opportunity to escape, we left — in a hurry. Without regret. My father, not keen on farming himself — he preferred the logging business — sold our farm.... We should have kept the place in the family.¹⁹

The family's experience with their homestead was not as idyllic as imagined by some writers and perhaps sometimes by Abbey himself. It was never a complete or very successful farm; much of it was covered by woods, some of which Paul Abbey participated in clearing for strip-miners. Mildred Abbey was very upset when they moved in 1967 to a much smaller house and plot of land right next to the busy, noisy Route 119, writing to Ed: "I protested as much as I could. I'd been promised, when we moved there, that I'd never have to move again and there have been many times when I've felt that I just couldn't survive the *fourteenth* uprooting. I had resolved that I'd never go near the place again. To have watched its slow dying... If I can't live out my life there, then I don't want to be involved in it in any way."²⁰

Ed Abbey remained very nostalgic about the Old Lonesome

Briar Patch, writing about it repeatedly — perhaps most memorably at the beginning of his significantly entitled book *Appalachian Wilderness*:

You go down into that valley... until you come to a big creek — that's Crooked Creek, glowing with golden acids from the mines upstream — and across the creek and up a red-dog road under a railroad trestle through a tunnel in the woods. I call it a tunnel because the road there is so narrow and winding that the trees on either side interlace their branches overhead, forming a canopy.... At the far end of the living tunnel, beyond it and in the open, under a shimmer of summer sun or behind a curtain of whirling snow or within a lavender mist of twilight condensing toward darkness, stood the house. An austere and ancient clapboarded farmhouse, taller than wide when seen from the road, it had filigreed porchwork, a steep-pitched roof and on the roof lightning rods pointing straight up at the sun or stars; half the year there would be smoke winding out of the chimney and amber lamps burning behind the curtains of the windows.... Nobody even knew if there was a key. Home again. Time to slop the hogs, Paw.²¹

However, Abbey's relatives and friends remember that as a boy he was not, in fact, anxious to "slop the hogs" or do other farm chores; he seemed interested only in nature, reading, and writing. Howard and Bill Abbey remember that Ned did not join them, their father, and their brother John in hoeing corn, and claimed that he had a heart problem. Nancy Abbey recounts this incident:

Ed was sitting in an apple tree eating an apple and reading a book and my dad was working in a garden not too far away and my dad yelled to Ed, "Ed, will you go down and get me a hoe?" And Ed says, "Where are they?" And my dad says, "You mean to tell me you live on this farm and you don't know where we keep the hoes?" And Ed says, "Yes, and I'm proud of it."

Similarly, Ed's best boyhood friend, Ed Mears, recalls that "he went out to pick blackberries and he took a book along. How many blackberries are you going to pick with your hand on a book?"

Clearly, Ed Abbey was an independent, rebellious, free spirit from an early age. Betty George, his aunt, recalls that she "couldn't hang on to Ned" while babysitting him when he was a year old. The baby book that Mildred Abbey kept on him includes entries like these: "Falls out of bed at 3 months," and "Goes everywhere at thirteen months."

Abbey's Family

Edward Abbey's mother and father were impressive people in their own right. Appreciating them is a key part of understanding Edward Abbey. In 1979, Abbey insisted to Clarence Stephenson, author of a history of Indiana County:

If you are really compiling a book of worthy Indiana County residents I believe it should begin by including an account of the lives of my parents Both have distinguished themselves as citizens, parents, and leaders in many and varied ways.... Their contributions certainly exceed mine.²²

Retired Indiana University of Pennsylvania English professor Bill Betts, who knew the Abbeys, nicely summarizes this inherit-



The Baltimore and Ohio Railroad tracks, *top*, near Edward Abbey's cherished childhood home, the "Old Lonesome Briar Patch" (*opposite*, after the Abbeyes had moved and fire had destroyed its interior in the early 1970s). An early draft of *The Fool's Progress* (1988), written in Tucson some 30 years after he'd lived there, included a rendering of the house.

About a dozen banners made by Mildred Abbey, Ed's mother, grace the walls at Washington Presbyterian Church, where she played the organ and led the choir. Known for her fast gait on country walks and her charity, Mildred Abbey was a rebel as well: a church elder, she supported the rights of homosexuals to be ministers long before the national Presbyterian leadership.



ance: "Ed got his lyrical feeling for flowers and all of nature from his mother and all of this political sense of injustice and the rebelliousness from his father."

Mildred Postlewait Abbey (1905-88) was a schoolteacher, a pianist, as well as organist and choir leader at the nearby Washington Presbyterian Church, and a tireless worker. As Ed Abbey told his friend Jack Loeffler, "after she put us brats to bed at night... our little ninety-eight-pound mother... would try to play us asleep with the piano. She'd be downstairs playing the piano — Chopin... old hymns. And we'd be upstairs slowly falling asleep under the influence of that gentle piano music. I've been a lover of music ever since."²³ He also inherited his preference for hills and mountains over flat country from her. Mildred wrote in her 1931 diary, "To me there isn't anything even interesting on a road on which one can see for a mile ahead what is coming. But there is something stimulating, even thrilling in a new scene that is revealed suddenly by a turn in the road or by reaching the crest of a hill." Ed echoed her opinion almost exactly in an article written for his high school newspaper, when he was 17: "I hate the flat plains, or as the inhabitants call them, 'the wide open spaces.' In my opinion, a land is not civilized unless the ground is tilted at an angle."²⁴

Everyone who knew Mildred Abbey remembers her as "impressive, very nice, a very good person," as her sister Betty George says. Howard Abbey stresses that "she was active. If she didn't have any work to do, she was out walking around. I mean over the hills and through the woods, up and down the highway. Anyone that remembers her remarks about that."

He's quite right. Mildred's sister Isabel Nesbitt recounts that "people would tell me, 'Oh, we saw your sister walking up the railroad tracks up there by Home.' Or they'd be driving somewhere and Mildred would be walking along the road, you know. She did walk miles every day." Ed Abbey makes this a key part of her character in *The Fool's Progress*: "Women don't stride, not small skinny frail-looking overworked overworried Appalachian farm women.... But our mother did" (51).

Another retired IUP English professor and friend of the Abbeyes, John Watta — a former IUP classmate of Ed, and also my next-door neighbor — remembers: "One day, I caught up with her and told her to slow up a little bit and she said, 'Well, there's so much to do, how can you?' She was always rushing off to this and that and couldn't understand people who didn't have time for this and didn't have time for that."

Nancy Abbey emphasizes her mother's writing ability, her love of nature, and also her courage:

When she was an elder in the church, and the Presbyterian church was considering homosexuals and their stance about homosexuality, my mother stood against all the church in her support for the rights of a gay or lesbian to be a minister. And people respected her so much that she was never ostracized for this view. They tried to understand her viewpoint because she was such a respected woman that they could really listen to her and hear her and think, "my goodness, there must be something to this if Mildred Abbey's saying this." She was revered in that way by people. Part of Ed's relish in being different also

was supported so much by my mother — her not trying to hold us at home or make us fit into the mores of that little community. That takes strength of character.

Iva Abbey, Howard's wife, remembers her as "the best mother-in-law anyone could ever want" and "perfect," and stresses that Mildred was proud of Ed's accomplishments, yet also "always said Ned was just one son." Bill Abbey agrees: "She wrote to me that she was proud of all her kids."²⁵

Mildred Abbey had begun teaching school before her marriage, and after raising five children, she returned to teaching, in a first-grade classroom in Plumville. She also attended classes at IUP and did volunteer work for the Meals on Wheels program. After Mildred was killed by a reckless driver in a car accident in November 1988, one of her former students, Janice Dembrosky, who had gone on to become a teacher herself, published a moving letter in the *Indiana Gazette* headlined "Mildred Abbey Touched Many Lives."²⁶ Just four months before his own death, Ed Abbey described her funeral (the occasion of his final visit home) in his journal:

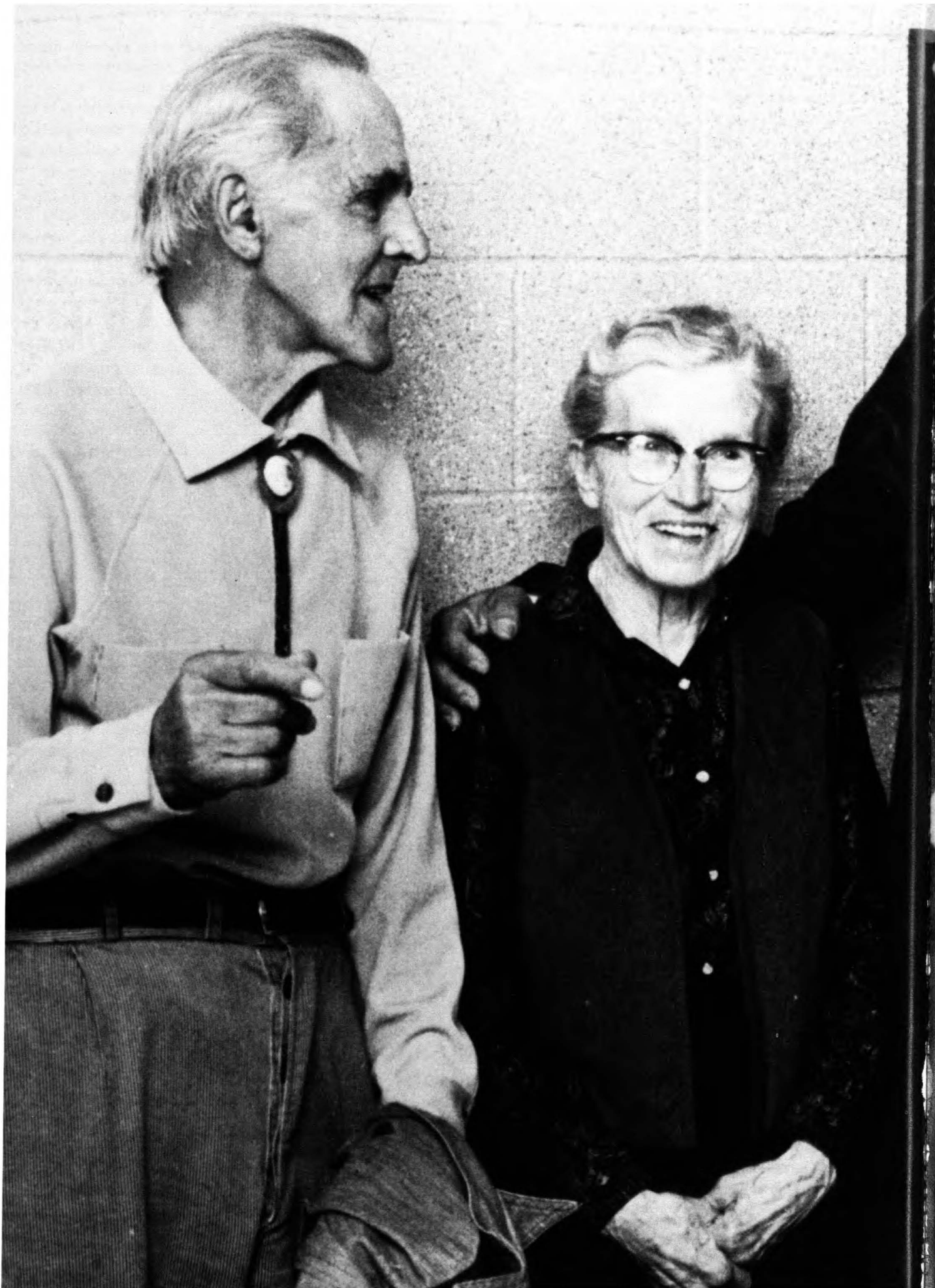
We buried her, a week before Thanksgiving, in the family plot at Washington Church. A simple ceremony. The preacher read from Isaiah and Ecclesiastes and the 23rd Psalm — exactly my own preferences. About a hundred people standing about. A chill and windy day, scattered clouds, cold sunshine. We cried. (*Confessions*, 350)

In their youth, Mildred and Paul Abbey had met on the Indiana-Ernest streetcar in Creekside, where both grew up. Paul Revere Abbey (1901-1992) was born in Donora, southeast of Pittsburgh. He moved to Creekside at age 7, in 1908, after his father, John Abbey, answered an ad to run an experimental alfalfa farm there. In a 1990 interview that was part of a federal folklore project, Paul Abbey remembered: "We had a team of horses and a riding horse and six head of cattle, and he rode the horse and herded the six head of cattle from down below West Newton up to this place here."²⁷

As a young man, Paul pursued many different jobs, as he would continue to do all of his life. He was a steelworker in Ohio, and he spent some time in the West as a ranch hand. His memories and momentos of the West were Ed's earliest boyhood incentives to go West. Paul left school at an early age but carried on a lifelong, voracious self-education. He could quote Whitman from heart, and he became a devoted socialist in one of the most conservative counties in the United States. A tall, slender man and one of the most spunky characters ever seen in Indiana County, Paul Abbey stood out.

Paul's political radicalism rubbed off on his oldest son at an early age. As Betty George recalls, "Indiana was always a Republican county in those days. About 1938, my husband and I took my father and Ned to the New York World's Fair.... And I remember one of the things Ned said he wanted to see was the Russian Pavilion," because his father had told him about it. Later, of course, Ed Abbey rejected his father's socialism in favor of his own developed articulation of anarchism, yet in doing so he was actually following his father's own independent streak from an early age, as Paul Abbey recounted:

Ed Abbey
with his
parents
during a
1983 visit to
Indiana
University of
Pennsylvania.





Before I was a socialist, I belonged to the KKK. Back in that time, everybody was joining the KKK — pretty nice guys in there. So, I joined up too — just a kid, you know. I went to one meeting and I heard the most miserable speech, from the lousiest guy I ever knew, telling us what we should do with the Jews, and the Catholics, and the “niggers.” So I didn’t stay in the KKK very long. Now I’m a life member of the NAACP.

While Mildred was the daughter of a schoolteacher and principal, C.C. Postlewait, Paul was the son of a poor farmer. Mildred’s marriage to Paul, her sister Betty recollects, “was very unpopular with my family. My mother died in June [1925], and Paul and Mildred were married in the fall of that year, I believe. And my father was very unhappy about it and he didn’t like Paul. In fact, his idea was that Paul was no good, so far as a husband and a father was concerned, that he wasn’t the sort of a person who would make a home and get a job and keep a job.”

Paul and Mildred were devoted, independent souls, but they lived a difficult life. Howard Abbey stresses that they nonetheless provided as well as they could for their children, and he remembers dressing as well as his peers and not going hungry. Nancy Abbey, however, told me that her mother

scrubbed diapers on a scrub board for years for the first three babies. It wasn’t until after I was born that they got a washing machine. And then, there wasn’t running water. When we moved down to the farm, we got electricity in pretty fast but we didn’t get water in for a couple of years and then didn’t get hot water in for more years than that. And she was a frail little woman She had two miscarriages — one between Bill and myself and one after Bill.... My father just never saw any reason to make money. For him, life was just fine and I think maybe I, being a girl, may have felt more deprived than my brothers because I didn’t have clothes like the other girls at school and things like that.

In the literature by and about Edward Abbey, his father is remembered almost solely as a nature-loving farmer and woodsman. Paul Abbey was both of those things, but he probably earned somewhat more money over a longer period of time selling the magazine *The Pennsylvania Farmer* and then driving a school bus for 17 or 18 years. Howard Abbey indicates that, as a schoolteacher, Mildred “actually made more money than my dad did, probably.”

Paul Abbey loved working in the woods, cutting locust trees for posts, and maintaining his rock shop on Route 119 during the later period of his life. He collected his rocks during trips to the West, during which he visited Ed. Paul worked with Ed on more than one occasion in a fire lookout tower on the north rim of the Grand Canyon, and hiked with him from rim to rim of the Canyon when he was in his 60s, 70s, and 80s.

He had hunted to help feed his family during the Depression, and taught his sons to hunt, but later gave up hunting, explaining, “we don’t need the meat any more,”²⁸ as his son noted in his essay “Blood Sport” in *One Life at a Time, Please*, where Ed explained his own decision to give up hunting.

Ed Abbey followed his father’s example in this and many other respects. Neither was devoted to a steady job; both loved to

write bold letters to the editor. Sometime during the 1970s, Ed published one in the *Indiana Gazette* headlined “Yes, There Is a Home, Pa.”: “I have read with pleasure two recent letters in your ‘Readers Write’ column from a certain Paul Abbey of ‘Home’ (is there really such a place? or is the writer putting us on?), Pa. In any case, Mr. Abbey demonstrates a rare talent for polemical satire — or satirical polemic — and I do not hesitate to predict that this young man, if he persists, will go far in his chosen field. Whatever it might be.”²⁹

While in fact Paul Abbey outlived him, in *The Fool’s Progress* Ed’s fictional father dies, crushed by a tree. Indeed there had been least one real incident in which Paul had nearly been killed by a falling tree. The fictional father’s death permits Ed’s alter ego, Henry Lightcap, to deliver this eulogy:

My father was a vain stubborn self-centered stiff-necked poker-playing whiskey-drinking gun-toting old son of a gun. He was a good hunter, a good trapper, a poor farmer and a hotshot but reckless logger. He was hard on himself, on trees, machines and the earth. He never gave his wife the kind of home she wanted or the kind of life she deserved.... He was a hard man to get along with. But I’ll say this for him: he was honest. He never cheated anyone. He was gentle with children and animals. He always spoke his mind. And he was a true independent. Independent, like we say, as a hog on ice. I mean he really believed in self-reliance and liberty. He was what some call a hillbilly — but we call a mountaineer. The mountaineer is a free man.... Mountain men will always be free. Our old man believed in that motto. And someday we’re going to prove him right. So long, Paw. (321-22)

After Paul’s death in 1992, Howard Abbey wrote and Nancy Abbey recited a comparable eulogy:

If my Dad were judged on his good versus his bad points, I think that the good points would win hands down. Although he was rather intolerant of people whose political and religious views differed from his own, he was very kind and gentle and giving to those he felt were in need of support.... My father has gone from this dimension. If there is a heaven I think he’ll be there. And Mom will be there to welcome him, because she is certain to be there.³⁰

Like his father, Howard Abbey became a woodsman and worker; he was Ed’s closest sibling and the only one to spend most of his life near their boyhood home. Like their mother, Ed, John, Nancy, and Bill were teachers at one time or another; Bill taught earth science for 27 years in Hawaii, and Nancy, who lives in Santa Cruz, California, now works for a health education organization. They all got along pretty well — except for the usual kinds of boyhood sibling conflicts between Ed and Howard as two brothers close in age, and the friction between John and the others (particularly Ed) due partly to the increased conservatism during the Vietnam War of John, a Korea veteran.

After John died from cancer in 1987, Howard made sure that some of his ashes made their way into the family plot next to Washington Church (before the rest joined those of his late wife, elsewhere), and Paul Abbey saw to it that John’s name was carved onto their gravestone there.

As divergent as were their various choices of career and locale,

the Abbey children remained linked by a mutual attentiveness to nature that they inherited from Mildred and Paul. The first time I met Howard, I invited him into my house to take a look at Abbey’s Web on my computer; he declined, instead pointing out to me a beautiful bluejay feather in my front yard that I had never noticed.

Both Nancy and Bill interrupted me during our interviews to exclaim about birds they saw flying outside their windows. Nancy tells me that “there’s something so strong in the Abbey blood that when I read Ed’s books, I find out that I like the same music, I like the same authors. We all have this writing skill and we all have this passion for trees and birds and we have different views about ecology and the environment but we all have this love of the things outdoors. And that really came from my parents.” Adds Bill: “I remember Nancy’s boyfriend, Bruce, mentioning one day when I was visiting her, and Nancy and I were talking about this tree and that tree over there, ‘What the hell is it with these Abbeys and the trees? Every Abbey has something about trees.’ It’s true.”

The accuracy of Bill’s remark is underscored in Paul Abbey’s interview in 1990, when he was 89 years old: “Come over here and look straight across the reflection of that light — that tallest tree over there. That is a sycamore.... When we were just starting to build here, twenty-two years ago, our next-door neighbor got me a little tree. That’s it. Imagine that thing growing that much. That’s at least a hundred feet high.”

The Abbeys’ love of trees and of nature persisted throughout their lives and, through Edward Abbey’s writings, was passed on to the rest of the world. 🍷

(Part II of “My People”: Edward Abbey’s Appalachian Roots in Indiana County, Pennsylvania” will appear in the Winter 1996/97 issue.)

Notes

¹ In 1981, Abbey spoke to Earth First! demonstrators at the Glen Canyon Dam who rolled a huge, symbolic, plastic “crack” down the middle of the dam. Since 1966, this massive dam has flooded the Colorado River above the Grand Canyon, disturbing the ecosystem by slowing the river, and turning Glen Canyon, a once equally beautiful area containing ancient Native American rock drawings and dwellings, into Lake Powell. (Abbey and his followers called it “Lake Foul.”) When Abbey died in March 1989, his friends and admirers were so upset that they had not one, but two large public wakes in his honor, the first soon after his death at Saguaro National Park near his home in Tucson, and the other in May at Arches. After he was buried by a few of his closest friends somewhere in the desert at a site known only to them and his wife, they put piles of rocks at some other places in the Southwest because they were afraid that cultists would find and disturb his burial site. See Edward Hoagland, “Edward Abbey: Standing Tough in the Desert,” *The New York Times Book Review*, 7 May 1989, 45.

² McMurtry’s descriptive phrase has been cited in myriad places; one example is Brad Knickerbocker, “The Values and Philosophies of Great American Nature Writers,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, 10 Aug. 1994, 13.

³ James Bishop’s biography contains some errors about Abbey’s birth and his family. Not only does he claim that Abbey was born in Home (xi) — in fact, Abbey was born in Indiana Hospital — but, for example, he seems unaware of the continued existence of Bill Abbey, referring only to Abbey’s “surviving siblings, Nancy and Howard” (xv) and “Howard Abbey, Ed’s surviving younger brother” (56). A photograph that is actually of Bill Abbey, Nancy Abbey, Iva Abbey, Mildred Abbey, and Ed Abbey, taken at John Abbey’s funeral in 1987, is captioned by Bishop as “Brother Johnny Abbey, sister Nancy, a friend, and mother Mildred, 1986.” Bishop also mistakenly asserts that Mildred Abbey died in 1987 (56). She was killed by a reckless driver in Nov. 1988.

⁴ My article "Edward Abbey, Appalachian Easterner," in *Western American Literature* 31.3 (Nov. 1996), focuses on Abbey's writings, especially *Jonathan Troy, Appalachian Wilderness*, and *The Fool's Progress*.

⁵ Douglas, "Death of Writer Edward Abbey," *Los Angeles Times* (Abbey collection, no date). Douglas wrote that when he read Abbey's novel, *The Brave Cowboy*, around 1960, "I was deeply moved. I bought the movie rights and finally persuaded Universal to allow my company, Bryna, to make the film, which was brilliantly written by Dalton Trumbo and produced by Eddie Lewis. In the cast with me were Gena Rowlands, Walter Matthau, and William Shatner, and introducing Carroll O'Connor in a small role.... I apologized to [Abbey] that the studio insisted on changing the title ... to *Lonely Are the Brave*. In the more than 80 films that I've made, this is my favorite." I am very grateful to Clarke Cartwright Abbey for her permission to study, copy, and quote from the Abbey collection, and am also very thankful to Roger Myers, Peter Steere, and their assistants in the Special Collections Department of the University of Arizona library for all of their invaluable and copious assistance.

⁶ Abbey, letter of 20 March 1987, Abbey collection, University of Arizona Special Collections, box 3, folder 18.

⁷ See, for example, Garth McCann, *Edward Abbey* (Boise, 1977); Ann Ronald, *The New West of Edward Abbey* (Albuquerque, 1984); James Bishop, Jr., *Epitaph for a Desert Anarchist: The Life and Legacy of Edward Abbey* (New York, 1994); and Frank Stewart, *A Natural History of Nature Writing* (Washington, D.C., 1995). Overviews of criticism on Abbey may be found in *Contemporary Authors*, vol. 45; *Contemporary Authors: New Revision Series*, vol. 41; and *Contemporary Literature Criticism*, vols. 36 and 59. The criticism in French is by Sylvie Mathé: "Méditation sur le Désert: Figures et Voix," in *Mythes Ruraux et Urbains dans la Culture Américaine* (Marseille, 1990), 135-55.

⁸ Abbey's web site can be found on the World Wide Web at: <http://www.utsidan.se/abbey>; Christer Lindh, "Weaving 'Abbey's Web,'" *Arid Lands Newsletter*, issue 38, at <http://www.utsidan.se/abbey/aw/abbey-Weaving.html>; and the two readers' comments, at <http://www.utsidan.se/Abbey/Abbey-Desert.html#Heading52>.

⁹ I am thankful to Howard Abbey for helping me obtain Edward Abbey's birth certificate, and to both Howard and Iva Abbey for lending me Mildred Abbey's baby book about Ed.

¹⁰ Garth McCann, in *Edward Abbey*, also mistakenly asserts that *Jonathan Troy* is about a boy in "central Pennsylvania" rather than the more specific western Pennsylvania (10), and claims that Abbey lived "in the foothills northeast of Tucson" (32), where Oracle is located. Actually Ed and Clarke Abbey's house is just a couple miles due west of downtown Tucson.

¹¹ Abbey referred to Kellysburg in the draft manuscript of his unpublished novel *The Good Life* (Abbey collection, box 4, folder 8) and in the handwritten draft of *The Fool's Progress* (box 13, folder 2), and he changed "Kellysburg" to "Home" in the original printed version of his essay "Hallelujah, on the Bum" in *American West Magazine* at the beginning of the 1970s (box 24, folder 5, p. 13), for its publication in *The Journey Home* (New York, 1975).

¹² All quotations from Bill Abbey are from my interview on 27 Oct. 1995, unless otherwise indicated. In the rest of this article, I also quote from my interviews with Howard Abbey (18 Oct. 1995), Iva Abbey (18 Oct. 1995), Nancy Abbey (2 Dec. 1995), Bill Betts (1 Dec. 1995), Betty [Elizabeth Postlewait] George (27 Oct. 1995), Ed Mears (4 Oct. 1995), Isabel [Postlewait] Nesbitt (2 Dec. 1995), and John Watta (18 May 1995). I am extremely grateful to all of these individuals, each of whom gave generously of their time and knowledge, and kindly permitted me to quote them. I also wish to express my thanks to Eric Temple, who sent me transcripts of his interviews with Abbey's relatives and friends and was generous in several other ways, and whose 1993 video documentary "Edward Abbey: A Voice in the Wilderness" is an excellent resource; to Richard Higgason, my graduate assistant during 1995-96, who transcribed my interviews and several audiotapes from the Abbey collection, helped me gather sources, and generally assisted me expertly and in various ways in this project; Jim Wakefield, IUP photographer, who took most of the pictures accompanying this article and was helpful well beyond the call of duty; Bob Sechrist of IUP's Geography Department and his student assistant Mick Burkett, who generated maps for me; Cathy Bressler, who took the time to find and lend me her photo of the Abbey family farmstead; Virginia Brown, associate graduate dean for research at IUP, who helped me administer an IUP Senate Fellowship that supported this work; Suzanne Brown of the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education in Harrisburg, who facilitated the administration of my Faculty Professional Development Fund grant, which also made this project possible; my brother Bill, a bioregionalist and Cincinnati psychologist, who gave me my first book by Abbey; and Peter Narusewicz, an IUP doctoral student whose interest in Abbey helped to increase my own.

¹³ *Confessions of a Barbarian: Selections from the Journals of Edward Abbey, 1951-1989*, ed. David Peterson (Boston and New York, 1994), 308; hereafter cited as *Confessions*.

¹⁴ Abbey collection, box 1, folder 6. Abbey was disappointed that his FBI folder was not thicker and more interesting. A few examples of the many people who have misreported Abbey's birthplace as Home are Bruce Hamilton, "Edward Abbey, Druid of the Arches," *High Country News*, 27 March 1989, 12; Michael Moore, "Out There Somewhere Lies Edward Abbey," *SMART* No. 5 (Sept.-Oct. 1989), 82; Carl L. Davis, "Thoughts on a Vulture: Edward Abbey, 1927-1989," *RE Arts and Letters* 15.2 (1989), 16; and John Macrae, ed., *The Serpents of Paradise: A Reader* (New York, 1995), 1.

¹⁵ Abbey, introduction, *The Journey Home: Some Words in Defense of the American West* (1977; New York, 1991), xiv.

¹⁶ Ed Abbey lived with his parents at 254 North Third St. from 1927 until late 1928 or early 1929, and then at 651 East Pike until about 1930; then a farmhouse at the edge of Saltsburg followed by a third-floor apartment in Saltsburg, until 1931; then a house on the main road between Chambersville and Home, until 1932 or 1933; another house several miles away in Tanoma, until about 1936; and at 57 U.S. 119, the only time the family lived in the village of Home itself, until 1941. In the absence of any official records of these residences, I operated on the assumption that if two relatives or close friends of the Abbeys told me the same thing, then it was true. My key sources in tracing these residences were Howard and Bill Abbey, Betty [Elizabeth Postlewait] George, Isabel [Postlewait] Nesbitt, and Ed Mears. Paul and Mildred Abbey bought the Old Lonesome Briar Patch on 31 Oct. 1941 (Indiana County Deed Book 317, p. 193) and closed on its sale on 2 March 1968 (Deed Book 576, p. 773).

¹⁷ I am grateful to Iva Abbey for lending me her typed copy of Mildred Abbey's summer 1931 diary and to Nancy Abbey for bringing it to my attention.

¹⁸ Bishop, 53. As another example of the romanticizing of Abbey's Appalachian boyhood, see also Carl L. Davis, "Thoughts on a Vulture," 16.

¹⁹ Abbey, typescript of a review of books by Wendell Berry, Abbey collection, box 25, folder 5, 2-3.

²⁰ Mildred Abbey, 1967 letter to Ed Abbey, Abbey collection, box 2, folder 1. Joseph and Emma McElhoes had transferred the rock shop property to Paul Abbey on 22 July 1960 (Indiana County Deed Book 489, p. 665).

²¹ *Appalachian Wilderness: The Great Smoky Mountains*, Eliot Porter photographer, with "Natural and Human History by Edward Abbey" (New York, 1970), 14. "Red-dog" is, by the way, a rock by-product of coal mining.

²² Abbey, letter to Clarence D. Stephenson, 18 April 1979 (characteristically signed "Oracle, Arizona"), supplied to me courtesy of Mr. Stephenson. Abbey concluded, "I would prefer not to be included in your book unless you also include them." Stephenson did so, listing Mildred and Paul as well as their parents and five of their children, and quoted a further sentence of Abbey's letter to him about Mildred and Paul: "The sum contributions (so far) to the economic, social, cultural, intellectual and educational life of Indiana County far exceed my ability, or anyone's ability, to measure such things." Stephenson, *Biographical Sketches of Noted Citizens, Past and Present*, vol. 4 of *Indiana County, 175th Anniversary History* (Indiana, Pa., 1983), 298. It is indicative of Paul and Mildred Abbey's different personalities that after they read their son's letter to Stephenson, Paul called it "the funniest thing I ever read" and joked to Ed that he was a "crazy galoot" and "a traitor to our illustrious county," whereas Mildred wrote: "I was downright crushed by your response to Clarence Stephenson.... He is a good man who has spent uncounted hours, years, effort, in research and writing that volume. It is a useful, interesting record for all of us who have lived in this area.... How else does a community grow?" Joint letter of 9 May 1979, Abbey collection, box 2, folder 2.

²³ Audiotape of interview with Jack Loeffler, 1 Jan. 1983, Tucson, Abbey collection, box 27, tape 4.

²⁴ Abbey, "Vagabond Lover Has Drink With Governor," *High Arrow*, 20 Dec. 1944, 2.

²⁵ Interview with author, 18 Oct. 1995.

²⁶ *Indiana Gazette*, 22 Dec. 1988, 10. Dembrosky wrote, "She made learning fun. The history of the American Indians came alive for us when she told us stories and showed us arrowheads ... Mildred Abbey was a great teacher because she loved us so."

²⁷ Interview with Jim Dougherty, 23 June 1990, in the "America's Industrial Heritage Project Folklife Division" collection in Special Collections, Indiana University of Pennsylvania. The subsequent quotation from Paul Abbey is also from this interview. I want to thank Dougherty for doing this interview and making it available.

²⁸ Abbey, "Blood Sport," *One Life at a Time, Please* (New York, 1988), 33-34.

²⁹ I am thankful to Howard and Iva Abbey for lending me this undated letter.

³⁰ I am grateful to Bill Abbey for lending me this statement, to Howard Abbey for giving me permission to quote from it, and to Nancy Abbey for sharing her memories about it.