

## **Zion Lodge Stories** **Memoir – Dan Mabbutt**

### **A Job in Zion Park**

The year was 1966 and I had just graduated from the high school in a rural Utah town. I had hardly been outside my valley.

Jobs were hard to come by so I filled out an application for a job as a kitchen helper in the Zion Park

Lodge. After a few weeks, I got a phone call telling me that if I could make it into Salt Lake, I could take



the train down to Cedar City and then there would be a bus to take me to Zion National Park.

Train transportation was provided because Utah Parks Company was owned by the Union Pacific Railroad. Today, people forget that the railroads built most of the really great national park lodges so people would ride their trains to get to them.

**Winner**  
**Z-Arts! 2009 Zion**  
**Centennial Literary Arts**  
**Writing Contest**  
**Adult Non-Fiction**

The original Zion Park Lodge, designed by Gilbert Stanley Underwood in the

1920's, had burned down that winter. They rebuilt the lodge in 100 days and they were just finishing up when the bus dropped me off in front of it in late May.

I believe my actual wage was 74 cents an hour. I worked six days a week. I also got room and board. In about a month, I had worked my way up to supervising the janitorial crew. But it paid the same.

My "raise" for being the janitor supervisor was that I was sometimes called to bellhop for bus tours and bus dishes in the dining room. The company got free labor, but I could make several times my wage in tips. The bellhops were at the very top of the non-management totem pole.

When I worked the dining room, I could carry one of the big metal trays loaded with at least fifty pounds of dishes on my shoulder with one hand. The “style” we had to adopt in the dining room didn’t allow anything lower-class like a dish cart.

### **Working in the Zion Lodge Kitchen**

In late May when I first arrived at Zion Lodge, I was impressed by how warm it was this soon in the year. Since I hired on as kitchen help, I reported to the kitchen. I later learned that “kitchen help” was the entry job for everybody. If they decided you would work out better somewhere else, you were moved out of the kitchen. I was moved to the janitor crew in a couple of weeks.

On the first day, the Lodge wasn’t open yet, so they had us doing odd jobs. I remember sitting out on the concrete behind the kitchen scrubbing iron cookware that been salvaged after the fire with sandstone rocks. A moth got stuck on the wet concrete. Within seconds, several black and yellow wasps had zeroed in on the moth and seconds after that, all there was left on the concrete was a couple of milk white wings. For some reason, that still stands out in my mind like a photograph.

In those days, the lodge was only open during the summer season and, except for a very few career Utah Parks people, everybody was a high school or college kid there just for the summer. A friend had worked there the previous summer. The stories he brought back made my mouth water. Testosterone stew!

The kitchen was run by older boys who had worked at the lodge before. Some had been coming back every summer for years. Most were in college and they treated the new hires like frat house pledges.

The stoves and food preparation tables were on the up-canyon side of the kitchen and our dish sinks were on the down-canyon side. The kitchen itself was a single room with a concrete floor. Everything was made of stainless steel. In full production, it was a noisy place.

As I remember it, there were maybe three dishwashers on duty. We were made to understand that our job was really pretty simple. Wash everything that came our way and put it back where it came from.

When job #1 was done, we really didn't have much to do. So during the lunch and dinner rush, we were scrambling. But between the rushes, there was time to goof off.

The busboys would bring loaded trays of dirty dishes and drop them off. But when the cooks emptied a big pan or something, they would throw it down the concrete floor at us. Sometimes you had to just get out of the way. Sometimes, the pan was still loaded with some pretty good stuff! If a pan had something yummy in it, we would kick it aside for later and then pig out with our hands. And sometimes we had some really great food fights. There's nothing like berry pie in the face at ten paces.

In a lot of ways, I was sad to leave the kitchen after I got promoted – even though I earned four cents an hour more.

### **Lodge Visitors at 2 AM**

Nothing much happened on most nights when my crew and I cleaned Zion Lodge. Even the tourists went to bed when our shift started at 10:00 and by 11:00 or so, it was just us and the night clerk at the desk. For some reason, they kept a guy there all night long. I never understood why, but they did. He was an accounting type and was generally pretty boring, so we just cleaned the lodge and then left again at six.

But on one particular night, two young ladies walked through the front door at about 2 AM. I was cleaning the main entry when they came in and looked around for the ladies room. I never found out what they were doing wandering around at that time of night. It had never happened before and it never happened again.

To appreciate this story, you have to know about one particular man on my janitor crew. The rest of us were ... well, let's be honest ... "ordinary" would be a kind description. But this guy was tall, blonde, slim.

He usually did his work in nothing more than shorts and shoes. To tell the truth, the rest of us wished we looked a little more like him. He had a bashful, shy personality, but I think he knew that he had a running start on the rest of us. We had a lot of fun teasing him. He usually took things pretty well. We were a generally happy crew.

Our janitor closets were in the back of the restrooms so when we cleaned the lodge, we propped the doors open with a mop so we wouldn't have to keep opening and shutting them as we went in and out. The two young ladies in need of facilities examined the propped open door and decided to go in anyway. In a flash of inspiration, I knew what to do.

I ran upstairs to where our handsome hero was cleaning the dining room and did something I never did. Using all the authority I could muster up as supervisor of the crew, I ordered him downstairs to help clean the bathrooms. I was actually amazed when he did it. He tramped down the stairs muttering about who was going to do his work.

He tramped into the ladies room with his bucket and his mop. There were loud shrieks and he tramped back out again. I never knew someone could blush all over their body before. He gave me a really dirty look and then retreated back to the dining room.

The two young ladies came out about five minutes later loudly complaining that this invasion of their privacy would be reported to management. The night clerk hid in his closet and the rest of us found a place to hide too. They must not have found any management because we never heard another thing about it.

### The Biologists

The kids who worked at Zion Lodge worked pretty hard. A six day work week was the standard and some of us worked extra hours as bus boys or bell hops just for the tips. So there wasn't a lot of free time to

get to know the other guys who worked there. And getting to know any girls was totally out of the question for me. It may be completely unfashionable to admit it today, but only my mother had kissed me when I started working at Zion Lodge.

In my particular case, it was double hard to do much socializing because my work day was actually a work night and I was either working or sleeping when most of the other kids were doing things.

So I was about the last to know when stories began drifting around about what was going on in the room just down the hall from mine in the men's dorm. The guys who lived in that room were veterans who worked as cooks in the kitchen so they were above my social level anyway. Actually, they didn't seem to have much to do with anybody because they spent all their spare time hiking in the back country.

The rumors were that they had some pretty strange stuff in their room. Live rattlesnakes, scorpions, tarantulas and other wildlife. The word was that these two were biology students back where they came from and the main reason they came out here to work in the first place was to be close to their chosen field of study.

I only managed to get one peek through the door before the boss, the man from Paragonah, came down and had a few words with them. It looked to me like a biology lab, all right. The boss assured the rest of us that all the wildlife was gone, but I know I slept uneasily for a while after that.

### **Why One Toenail Grows Straight Up**

Part of the toenail on one of my big toes grows straight up. It will start to tear a hole in the top of my sock if I don't keep it clipped off. It's not that I'm a genetic oddity. It all dates back to my days at Zion Lodge.

When I was a teenager, I was troubled with ingrown toenails on my big toes. I had already suffered through two operations (it can only happen four times, twice on each toe) when I got the job at Zion Lodge, so I was pretty familiar with the symptoms and the cure. The cure is local surgery to cut out the toenail right to the root. When the local anesthetic wears off, it hurts like hell.

I read through the contract I got from Utah Parks and noticed that one of the benefits was medical care. I could tell that in about a month, I would have a problem with another ingrown toenail, so it seemed like it would be a nice thing to save my parents a little money and have Utah Parks pay for it.

Sure enough, in about a month, my big toe started to turn red from infection and ooze pus. I waited long enough to make sure it was pretty obvious and then went to see my boss, the man from Paragonah. I told him I knew exactly what it was because it had happened before. He didn't seem very enthusiastic about authorizing treatment, however. He looked my toe over pretty good. I pointed out that it wouldn't be too much longer before I wouldn't be able to walk on it. I remember Utah Parks as generally being pretty cheap about everything, but finally, he told me I could hitch a ride on the commissary truck into Cedar City to see the doctor they had on contract on my next day off.

That was one of the great things that happened to me because I now have this memory of Cedar City the way it used to be, with old fashioned storefronts up and down both sides of Main Street. The grocery store, bank, and city hall that are there now weren't there then. I bought a shirt at a sidewalk sale in a store that isn't there anymore. It's a nice memory.

The doctor Utah Parks had on contract is not a nice memory. I knew what this operation should have been like and this guy butchered it. To make things worse, he prescribed an over-the-counter pain pill no stronger than aspirin. (And I'll bet he charged Utah Parks for a full prescription on it.) I was used to scoring some heavy duty drugs for this operation and I was really bummed out.

That night was my night off from my job at the Lodge, but at about the time the crew started to gather, the local anesthetic was wearing off. I was hurting. Even though I missed my normal sleep cycle to keep the appointment in Cedar City, there was no way I was going to get any rest so I limped down to the Lodge to have something to do.

One of the crew had to move a desk with a thin piece of plywood as the front. He asked me if I could just hobble a few steps and help him lift it. Sure enough, it slipped out of my fingers and the plywood fell directly on the toe.

Blood, blinding pain, searing agony! The guy I was helping thought it was really funny though.

By the end of the night, my toe had stopped bleeding again and the pain was only horrible, not unbearable.

The crew was waxing the dining room floor that night. At that time, it was a tile floor that needed to be waxed every few weeks. We did it in thirds, moving all the tables and chairs from one third to do the work and then moving them back at the end of the night. The crew was just finishing up and starting to move the chairs back. A couple of them started competing to see who could carry the tallest stack of chairs. Of course, I could carry more chairs at once than anybody else. At least, I could for a few steps. Then the whole stack fell right on my toe.

Blood, blinding pain, searing agony! This time, the whole crew thought it was really funny.

### **The Great Boys Versus Girls Football Game**

This is the kind of thing that just doesn't happen in America anymore. I'll let you be the judge of whether that's good or bad. I'm just going to tell you what happened.

It didn't take too long after I started working at Zion Lodge to start hearing about the "Boys versus Girls Football Game" that was planned for later that summer. My understanding was that it had been held before. And it had the high school and college kids working at the Lodge very excited.

Here's the deal.

Everybody said that it would be the real thing. Play to win! But to even up the odds, there would be a few special rules.

1 – Boys had to weigh less than some ridiculous number like, I believe, 140 pounds. I knew that even if I didn't eat from that point on, I wouldn't make the limit, so I didn't even try. But some of the other boys who were only thirty or so pounds away did stop eating as soon as they heard about it.

2 – Boys would have to play with their knees tied together.

3 – No fouls would be called on girls. None. Anything was legal.

Other than that, it was to be a real tackle football game. (Not touch football. Although I know the boys starving themselves did anticipate that some touching would be involved.) Looking back, the most amazing thing is that the game was planned and held with the full knowledge and participation of Lodge management. They were the referees! In today's America, where lawsuits fly like snowflakes in January, that's the part that could never happen. After all, the Lodge was run by the railroad and they are a great target of opportunity for any hungry lawyer.

In the weeks leading up to the game, a sort of a standoff started to develop. Everybody knew which boys and which girls planned to play. The boys were the ones with haggard, hungry eyes at the lunch table. The girls were the ones carefully filing their fingernails to sharp points. It became just about the only thing people talked about.

On the day of the big game, everybody gathered out under the big cottonwood tree in front of the Lodge. This wasn't advertised to tourists. It was an employee thing. There were tourists around, of course, but they had to ask to even know what was going on. I was a "cheerleader", so I wore a t-shirt stuffed with rags for boobs and a mop on my head. That got old, quick. As soon as the game started, nobody was watching me.

The game was amazingly even. The boys learned that with their knees tied together, they could run faster backward. Since it generally took two girls to bring one boy down, the boys made good progress on the offense. When the girls got the ball, however, the boys had a hard time catching them. But the girls couldn't pass and with heroic effort, the boys were often able to, ummm, get their hands on the girl carrying the ball.

And the pileups. Oh! The pileups! Boys emerged with wild eyes and rivers of blood flowing down their backs. Girls swore dark revenge on the next play. The ref's - our bosses - warned both sides that we were still in a civilized country, no matter what was said before the game.

As the game wore on, even from the sidelines, I could see that the level of intensity was getting higher. Both sides decided they were out to win. And I guess that's why the game didn't end well. At the end of one particular play, people started rushing onto the field. The news spread like a bad smell that one of the girls had a broken leg. A car arrived from somewhere to take her away. And that was the end of the Great Boys Versus Girls Football Game.

## **A Visit From Home**

I wasn't the only person who was 'out of their element' for the first time at Zion Lodge. My mother was too.

Zion Lodge was a classy place in 1966, and busy. You didn't just drive up and get a room like it was a motel. But my mother didn't know that. So I was surprised when they pulled me out of bed in the early afternoon and told me my mother was waiting for me at the Lodge. She had driven the several hundred miles or so down to the Lodge to see how I was doing, and she fully expected to be able to just stay there that night.

Of course, the place was totally booked. But it was getting toward the end of the summer and I had been a good employee. I was holding down the 'supervisor' job for the janitorial crew at the same wage the other guys got and I was supposed to get favors for doing it. I called one in, big time, to get my mother pushed to the front of the line in case somebody cancelled.

Our luck was good that day. They managed to get her booked into one of the small cabins high up on the mountain behind the Lodge. Those cabins aren't even there today.

The next day, I got a few hours sleep and then got up early to hike the East Rim trail with her until after dark. We had to stumble down the last half mile almost by starlight.

I don't know what I was thinking – maybe it was because I had been up too many hours. I thought that my mother would have arranged a reservation for a room for the next night since we had such close call that first night. But when we got back to the Lodge, the room clerk informed me that my mother's stuff had been cleaned out of the room and was in the back since the room was booked to somebody else.

"You didn't tell them you needed a room for tonight too?" I pleaded with my mom.

"Well ... Why didn't they know? They could see that my stuff was still there!" She exclaimed. "And why did they move my stuff!"

My mother was clearly not in touch with modern hotel customs.

I don't know how I did it, but somehow I was able to talk them into letting my mother stay in the girls' dorm that night. The next day she decided that I had all the visiting I could stand. I fully agreed. I was just about dead on my feet anyway and I was glad to get a good day's sleep as soon as she was gone.

A few weeks after that, I got an unexpected call from my dad at the Lodge. Using the phone at the Lodge was strictly for emergencies so this had to be important. He had made some inquiries and had lined up a job for me as a laborer in construction if I was willing to come back home. Seventy-four cents an hour just wasn't going to cut it to pay for expenses during my first year at college starting in the fall, so I was both sad and glad to hear it. When I told my boss, it was nice to see that I was actually going to be missed. I knew I was going to miss Zion Lodge.