

BY KATHY MONTGOMERY  
PHOTOGRAPH BY KAREN SHELL

# she knows dam well

Katie Lee is known for many things, including her stories in this magazine and her induction into the Arizona Music and Entertainment Hall of Fame. Her most enduring legacy, however, is her vigorous opposition to Glen Canyon Dam. Even today, at the age of 95, she's doing everything she can to restore her beloved canyon.

KATIE LEE'S JEROME HOME REFLECTS her life the way her beloved sandstone pools in Glen Canyon once reflected the sky.

The house was built in 1919, the year the folk singer, author and activist was born. The word "Sing" hangs under the eaves. Her front door, carved by her mother, re-creates scenes from a song about Dolores, a vanished New Mexico town that drove the narrative of her first book, *Ten Thousand Goddam Cattle*. In the dining nook, a collage of Glen Canyon photos lines a wall above a hand-lettered sign that reads, "The river always wins."

Bold and uninhibited, Lee is known for many things. Her music career earned her induction into the Arizona Music and Entertainment Hall of Fame. And her preference for hiking in nothing but "tennies" and her Lady Godiva ride through Jerome on a bicycle in her 70s have become legend. But Lee's most enduring legacy is her association with Glen Canyon.

Lee spent 10 years exploring the canyon, and many of its side canyons are known by the names she gave them. After the construction of Glen Canyon Dam, Lee became its most vocal critic, appearing at protest events with her friend Edward Abbey. Now 95, Lee remains an outspoken advocate for the restoration of Glen Canyon, most recently appearing in the documentaries *DamNation* and *Wrenched*.

Lee was born in Illinois, but her family moved to Tucson soon after her birth. Her father, an architect and builder, "cherished the tomboy" in Lee, teaching her to "shoot, hunt, climb, swim, hammer nails and saw wood." Her mother nurtured Lee's artistic side and taught her the fundamentals of music.

As a child, Lee studied ballet, drama and piano. She hated piano lessons, especially reading music. She learned to play by ear and gravitated to guitar. But drama lessons ignited a

passion for acting. After earning a bachelor's degree from the University of Arizona, Lee went to Hollywood to pursue her dream.

She achieved some success, landing bit parts in movies and recurring roles on national radio programs. Then, in 1953, Katie ran the Colorado River through the Grand Canyon and wrote about it for *Arizona Highways*.

In *Folk Songs of the Colorado*, her first published piece, Lee wrote, "Though the river's course has not changed noticeably in the last hundred thousand years, it has been known to change the course of a human life in just those few days."

It certainly changed hers. Lee ran the Colorado again the following year, this time through Glen Canyon, and found passion and purpose there. She returned every year for the next 10 years, spending weeks at a time exploring its side canyons.

"It was because of that [*Arizona Highways* article] that Alfred Knopf came to me and asked me to write a book," Lee recalls. "They were going to call it *Songs the Cowboys Taught Me*. In the end, it probably turned out to be too much about my travels and not enough about what they wanted." Northland Press eventually published the book as *Ten Thousand Goddam Cattle*.

THE DISSONANCE BETWEEN LIFE IN HOLLYWOOD and life on the river made Lee rethink her career. Taking the advice of friend and mentor Burl Ives, Lee left Hollywood to launch her



career as a folk stylist, performing in coffeehouses and cabarets around North America. In addition to the Scottish, Irish and English ballads she had been performing, she took up the songs of the West.

"I had rarely written words to a song before I ran the river," she wrote in her memoir, *Sandstone Seduction*. "After life in the canyons, heartfelt words poured out in song after song."

As the reality of the proposed Glen Canyon Dam struck home, Lee wrote her first protest song, *Pore Colly Raddy*, in 1954.

"People listen to a song," Lee says. "Especially politicians will listen to a song before they listen to somebody blabbering off about how much they don't like this or that. Music does an awful lot to get over that hump."

After reading *Desert Solitaire*, Lee sent Abbey a copy of her 1964 album, *Folk Songs of the Colorado River*, along with a survey stake she pulled from the bottom of a canyon. To her surprise, he answered, beginning a friendship that lasted until his death.

Abbey encouraged Lee's work on a book about the river, which she saw as "a novel with true happenings." He read a

draft and advised her to abandon the novel and write the book based on her journals. The result was *All My Rivers Are Gone*, later republished as *Glen Canyon Betrayed*.

"But I eventually went back and opened that thing up and said, 'You know, this is still not a bad novel. I think I'll just do it,'" Lee says.

It came out in 2014 as *The Ghosts of Dandy Crossing*.

Lee no longer sings or plays guitar. "I broke both wrists about 20 years ago," she says. "And even though, with therapy, I was able to play again, I thought, *You know, I was good, and I'm not going to get bad.*"

She gave up river-running, camping and hiking five years ago, at age 90. But she still rides her bike about 4 miles a day in Jerome. And she still advocates for the restoration of Glen Canyon, appearing at screenings of *DamNation*.

"What else can I do?" she asks. "I won't quit. I'll always have something to say about it to somebody, somewhere." **AH**

For more information about Katie Lee, visit [www.katydoodit.com](http://www.katydoodit.com).