

MESAVERDE

Living

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*Meet
Bill Burke*

**The Man, The Mountain,
The River, and
Sweet Humanity**



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Meet Bill Burke

The Man, The Mountain, The River, and Sweet Humanity

By Julie Leah.

Photos provided by the Burke family.

*T*his is a story about a man, a mountain, and a river.

Some people admire the highest peaks and the longest rivers in the world and think "someday I will make the time to explore." Others, like the famed Nike ad says, "just do it." We'll tell you about a man who heeded the call to explore the tallest mountains in the world, and a river so large it spans across the inner belly of the United States. Seventy-eight year old Bill Burke, a Mesa Verde resident and avid adventure seeker, has climbed Mt. Everest six times, reaching the summit twice; and he just completed a 2,342 mile solo canoe journey down the length of the Mississippi River.

Bill and his wife, Sharon, watched their home being built in the Upper Bird Streets and moved to Costa Mesa in 1972. They have been married 58 years. They raised four children, Lisa, Lori, Dan, and Amy, and have 14 grandchildren.

Bill attended Stanford Law School and practiced law for over 45 years, handling complex international capital market transactions. He successfully argued cases in the United States Supreme Court and the California Supreme Court and was given five Lifetime Achievement Awards for his work in legal writing and law reform.

Like many Americans, when he retired at age 60, Bill wanted a hobby. While some choose calmer, greener pastures, Bill chose the unlikeliest of pursuits: alpine mountain climbing. The way Bill put it, "I'm a type A personality, and I thrive on adventure and risk."



In 2009, at age 67, Bill became the oldest American to reach the summit of Mt. Everest (the highest mountain in the world at 29,035 feet) and return alive. That year, he climbed Mt. Everest from the South approach, which begins in Nepal. His goal then became to climb the mountain from the more challenging North approach, which begins in Tibet. In 2014, at age 72, he reached the summit from the North approach, breaking his own record and becoming the oldest person living outside of Asia to climb Mt. Everest. Watch Bill's epic adventures climbing Mt. Everest in the award winning documentary, "Eight Summits: The Bill Burke Story", which received first place in the International Outdoor Film Festival in 2019 for "Extraordinary Lifelong Sports Performance," and can be streamed or downloaded from Amazon.

Everest is not the only epic mountain Bill has climbed. Bill has climbed the highest mountain on every continent: Mt. McKinley (North America; 20,320 feet), Aconcagua (South America; 22,834 feet), Mt. Kilimanjaro (Africa; 19,339 feet), Mt. Elbrus (Europe; 18,510 feet), Vinson Massif (Antarctica; 16,067 feet), Mt. Kosciuszko (Australia; 7,310 feet), the Carstensz Pyramid (Oceania; 16,023 feet), and Mt. Everest (Asia; 29,035 feet). He is the only person to accomplish this feat after reaching the age of 60. Read about each of Bill's climbs and view slideshows/movies on his website, www.eightsummits.com.

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Bill even has a Himalayan mountain named after him. During Bill's last Everest climb in 2014, the government of Nepal opened 104 new Himalayan mountains for climbers and named one after him, called "Burke Khang" ("Khang" means mountain in Nepalese). Burke Khang had never been climbed. Bill attempted to climb Burke Khang (22,775 feet high) three times. In his last expedition in 2017, he put a team on the summit consisting of his good friend from Ireland, who is a professional mountain guide, and four of his closest Sherpa friends from Nepal.

After that, Bill decided "My next big adventure should be closer to sea level and home." Chances are, never in your wildest dreams have you thought about making a solo canoe trip down the river known in the South as "The Big Muddy". But when Bill saw a documentary about the Mississippi River, he wanted to paddle down it in a canoe. The only problem was that Bill had never even sat in a canoe, let alone paddle one.

Bill's movie documenting his Mississippi River canoe adventure is posted on his website, www.eightsummits.com.

Bill began his 120-day solo canoe journey at the source of the River in Lake Itasca, Minnesota on July 26, 2019, and ended the trip at the Gulf of Mexico on November 17, 2019. He nicknamed his canoe, "Ollie Power" in honor of his disabled 19-year old grandson, and "livelikedan" in honor of his 21-year old grandson, Danny Giger, who was tragically killed in a skiing accident in December of 2018.

In some ways, canoeing on the Mississippi was more life threatening than alpine climbing. Bill said he had two near-death experiences on Mt. Everest. The Big Muddy presented six!

It's often raining along the Mississippi River, but when that rain turns into a storm known in the South as a "gully washer," lightning and thunder pounds the river, and it is definitely not the place to be in a canoe. Bill explained, "You need to get out of the water really fast because lightning is very dangerous and travels through water." It became a matter of survival to seek shelter from the rainstorms and lightning on the riverbank sand bars, and in remote, heavily forested areas Bill called, "No man's land".

Other life-threatening obstacles on the Mississippi are the thousands of rock structures called "wing dams," which unlike a regular dam only extend part of the way into the River and force the water into a fast-moving channel in the middle of the River. According to Bill, "The strategy while canoeing among the wing dams is to ride over them where the rocks are submerged and avoid a collision." But one time near Caruthersville, Illinois, he collided with a wing dam, capsizing his canoe and throwing him helplessly into the fast moving current. With all of his gear wet and clinging for dear life to his upside-down canoe, Bill worried about getting run over by a tow boat. Pulling his canoe, he swam to a sand bar to shelter and regain his composure.



Wing dams reduce sediment accumulation and allow tow boats to navigate the River. "Tow boats" are enormous vessels that push large barges in front of them which impede visibility.





Bill cautioned, "You never want to be on the River in the dark – that is totally dangerous. After the capsizing, I was forced to paddle in the dark, and I was terrified, not sure if I would run into another wing dam and capsize again, or get run over by a tow boat." Bill emphasized, "Tow boats can be longer than an aircraft carrier and are terrifying. They throw off a huge wake."

After that, Bill became quite adept at maneuvering around wing dams, heading to shore at nightfall, and lived to share this epic tale which in his words, "I wouldn't trade for anything."

During his 2,342 mile trek down "Ol' Man River", Bill also experienced Midwestern and Southern hospitality up close and personal. Several of the days were "zero days", where he explored cities along the way and off the beaten path, a much needed respite from the hazards of the River. It was also a chance to meet people, visit with friends and family, and time to learn about the local culture and history. Bill said, "The beautiful and best parts of the trip, from the beginning to the end, were the people."

One memorable encounter happened when he pulled his canoe onto shore near vacation homes. After he pitched his tent and settled in for the night, a man in a truck pulled up near his encampment and called out to him, "Would you like to stay in my house?" Bill explained, "That wonderful man let me warm up, take a shower, and sleep in a bed in his home. We talked until 3 AM and he fixed me a steak dinner. The next day, he invited me to a barbecue with his family and friends. Like many other people I met on the River, we are now close friends."

Another example happened by chance when Bill docked his canoe and entered a store for much needed supplies. He intended to pay the shopkeeper by credit card, but they only accepted cash, which Bill did not have on hand. The shopkeeper said, "Don't worry. Take what you need. I'll give you my address and when you get home you can send me a check." Bill said, "No, thanks, I can't do that." Much to his surprise, the shopkeeper had her Mom drive Bill to an ATM to get cash. Bill explained, "I was a perfect stranger to them and this is how they treated me. What are the chances of this happening in a large urban center?"

Bill's encounters with people along the River truly restored his faith in the goodness of people. Many folks drove him into town to replenish his supplies. Some even gave him the keys to their car so he could explore their city. Bill said, "Over and over, I kept meeting kind people, who went out of their way to make the day brighter for a stranger. They tracked me on my trip, prayed for me, and kept in touch by email and text, asking how I was doing."

Kindness like this is the magic ingredient to humanity. Bill Burke came away with a renewed love of people and a sense of the goodness of everyday Americans. One of his key messages to our Mesa Verde readers is to "give people the benefit of the doubt and a

chance to prove themselves."

It's no surprise that Bill's mantra is, "Dream big, follow those dreams, and if you fail, get back up, dust yourself off and reenter the battle with renewed confidence. Eventually you will reach your own summit and make your dream come true. Never give up on dreams."

The next adventure for Bill is a 645-mile pilgrimage across Northern Spain on the "Camino de Santiago", planned for the late fall of 2020. In 2021, Bill plans to retrace the steps of Lewis & Clark in reverse, and solo paddle his canoe down the Missouri River from its source in Montana to its confluence with the Mississippi River near St. Louis. When asked about the more distant future, he wistfully told me about the oldest person to climb Mt. Everest, a Japanese man who reached the summit at age 80. Bill said, "I turn 80 in two years... Stay tuned."



We would like to thank **DARLENE STINSON** for bringing you this month's cover story.

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