



BILL Briggs

MOUNTAINS and MUSIC in the TETONS

WORDS KRISTEN POPE | IMAGES LINDLEY RUST

Bill Briggs is not one to follow convention. No one believed he could climb the Grand Teton and ski back down – he quickly proved the naysayers wrong. His family planned for him to be a doctor but the call of the mountains lured him out west to embrace the mountain lifestyle and culture. He has spent decades climbing, skiing and inspiring others as a ski instructor and ski school owner as well as making his own unique brand of mountain music.

When he became the first person to ski the Grand Teton in 1971, many people said the feat was simply not possible.

“I was interviewed before going up and it was like ‘we have this idiot who thinks he’s going to ski the Grand,’” Briggs said. “I didn’t have any qualms about skiing it.”

Briggs, a mountain guide who had already climbed the Grand Teton over 100 times despite having a fused hip, found the biggest challenge to be the trip up the mountain.

“The hard part was getting on top,” Briggs said. “Once I was on top it was the easy part. Now all I had to do was ski.”

The morning after he successfully skied the Grand, Briggs went to the airport to see if his tracks were visible. When he saw them crystal clear, he called Virginia Huidekoper at the *Jackson Hole News and Guide* and invited her to come take a look. They went up in a plane and she took photographs of his tracks, including the iconic image seen on posters throughout the world (including one that hangs in the corner of the Virginian Restaurant where Briggs enjoys breakfast many mornings).

Growing up in Maine, Briggs first put on a pair of his father’s long wooden skis at the age of eight.

“I thoroughly enjoyed skiing and being out of doors,” Briggs said. “I was charmed by the whole thing. It was delightful making tracks in the snow.”

His love of the outdoors led him to a life in the mountains.

“I determined in college that being a doctor was not for me,” Briggs said. “Everything in college trained you for a corporate environment and that was not going to suit me at all. Growing up, I spent time out of doors and was not particularly scholastic but my parents thought I was. My parents were very convinced I would become a professional of some kind. Out of that I chose doctor and they thought that was super. Being cooped up in a hospital or in a doctor’s practice was not for me. I was into climbing, skiing and playing music. In college that was not part of any program so I didn’t last long there and instead took a course to be a ski instructor.”

Briggs eventually taught at Snow King and ended up purchasing the Snow King ski school. Though he no longer owns the ski school, he can still sometimes be found there training instructors at clinics.

In their early 20s, Briggs and friends traveled around western ski resorts, stopping to perform the ski songs they wrote for rounds of beer. He learned to play the banjo while he was hitchhiking around the west one summer, practicing while he waited for rides.

When he first moved to Jackson, he worked on the highway towards Moran. While working there, he discovered a good camping spot under the bridge at Moose and invited some friends out to play music. As word spread, more and more people attended the “Teton Tea Parties” where he brewed up a big batch of “Teton Tea” which was tea mixed with discount wine from Dornans. As the parties became more popular, they moved to other locations but still had difficulty accommodating the crowds.

These days, Briggs plays banjo at the Hootenanny at Dornans on Monday nights. He also plays the Stagecoach Bar in Wilson on Sunday nights with his band, where attending is known as “Going to Church”. When he first started playing the Stagecoach in the 1960s, it was a wild cowboy bar.

“We had cowboys fighting,” Briggs said. “We’d counteract the fight with music. It would work – it would soothe the soul.”

Whether calming rowdy cowboys with his mountain music, performing epic ski descents or teaching kids to ski, Briggs is truly a Jackson icon. ■

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