

Opening Remarks

Remembering Bob Burns

July 5, 2023

James Harnar
Express St. James, Cimarron, NM

Afternoon, everyone!

Welcome to **Remembering the Unforgettable Bob Burns**—our tribute to the late Robert A. Burns, a truly remarkable man who was such a memorable and enduring presence in our lives.

My name is Jim Harnar. On behalf of Brad Newberry, Matt Talley and Katie Bryant and the Relics of the Old West, I want to thank you for joining us today.

The Relics, by the way, is an informal group of 300 plus Philmont staff from the late 1960's to the early 1980's who are dedicated to preserving and honoring the friendships and memories forged a half century ago here in Cimarron.

On behalf of the Relics, I want to express our condolences to Brad, Matt and Katie and their families, as well as to Bob's first cousins, Donnie and Jack Golightly, who are here today.

When Bob Burns first darkened the doorstep of this establishment way back in the 1960's, it was called the Don Diego. But Bob—and all of us from back in the day---knew this place simply as Vera's. Vera was the no-nonsense owner and bartender here---a lady who could spot a 19 -year-old with a Philmont belt buckle and a fake ID a mile away.

In fact, some of those 19-year-olds are here today masquerading as Senior Citizens. Am I right?

Where *does* the time go?

Well, it's altogether fitting and proper that we're gathered here today, as Bob Burns knew this bar and this courtyard well---very well! In fact, this is hallowed ground, where over the years Bob held court, nursing a beer and engaging in wide-ranging conversations while savoring his trademark cigars.

Bob made it clear he didn't want a funeral service. And he might not have liked the idea of a so-called Celebration of Life---so we're not calling today's gathering a service or a celebration. But I'd like to think Bob has a smile on his face, looking down on the 80 or so friends, family and co-conspirators gathered here today to remember a one-of-a-kind figure who touched our lives and the lives of so many others who couldn't be here.

Roger Smith described our old friend so well in his Colfax Gazette tribute to Bob last fall: "Simply put," Roger wrote, "Bob was a presence. One did not have to spend much time with Bob before he became unforgettable."

No truer words have ever been written.

I can tell you that 51 years ago this summer, Bob certainly made an impression on me---an impression that's lasted a lifetime.

In 1972---not long after his discharge from the Marines---Bob returned to Philmont, where he had been a camper in 1965 and then a backcountry staffer the following year. He told friends that he came back here to northern New Mexico to decompress after the intense close-combat he saw as a young Marine in a place called Vietnam. That's where Bob, in his own words, had "seen hard things and done hard things," earning a Purple Heart for wounds he sustained in a mortar attack.

To me---and to many others were wet-behind-the-ears college kids with high draft numbers or deferments---Bob was a quiet, somewhat mysterious and even menacing character back then.

Rumors abounded that summer about Bob's actions in the heat of battle. There were stories of gun fights in dense jungles and rice paddies--- and knife fights in places where Marines gathered to blow off steam. Bob was just 20 or 21 when he joined the Marines and by the time he returned here to Cimarron and Philmont, he was battle-hardened and considerably older, wiser and well-traveled than nearly all of us on staff.

My first encounter with Bob occurred in the early 70's, not far from here—over at Joe's Ranch Bar.

Anybody here remembers the Ranch Bar?

That summer I was a 20-something numb skull spending far too much time under the watchful eyes of the two-headed calf that was mounted on a wall over at Joe's.

One night my pal Touchette and I---and the lovely raven-haired Eleanor, the world's prettiest bartender---were the last three people at the Ranch Bar at closing time. As we staggered out, I spotted a blue jean jacket with a handsome blanket lining hanging from the back of an empty chair. It might have been a chilly night---who knows? —but I tried on that jacket and it fit like a glove, all broken in.

A half century later, I'm ashamed to admit that I wore the jacket back to Philmont that night—and I wore it whenever I came back to town or over to Red River or Taos.

At some point I was back at Joe's, sipping a beer, probably singing along to Charlie Pride's "Kiss an Angel Good Morning" on the juke box when Mister Bob Burns himself walked over to my table, leaned over and got right in my face.

"Harnar" he said, "that's my god-damned jacket! How the hell did you get that?"

Convinced that Bob was about pull out a knife or maybe even a firearm, I practically got down on my knees to beg forgiveness. When he walked off with his jacket slung across his shoulder, I breathed a huge sigh of relief.

Thankfully, Bob didn't seem to hold a grudge and we had a congenial relationship the next few years, including a memorable night in 1974 when he was the Ponil Ranger and I was a camp director. At an early August camp directors meeting that summer we all gathered around an old black and white TV to watch Richard Nixon resign. I'm sure Bob was part of the crowd that headed into town that night to celebrate or mourn the events of the day.

Who else was there that night?

So, I had little contact with Bob in the decades that followed.

Like many of us here who worked with Bob at Philmont in the 70's, this image (point to a poster of Bob) became etched into our brains for decades, as if he'd never change or grow old.

Bob Birkby described this image of Bob so eloquently: Clad in buckskins and a stovepipe hat, cigar clenched in his teeth, Bob was never confused for a college kid pretending to be a mountain man at Scout Camp. His slow-as-molasses East Texas drawl, combined with his deep knowledge of western lore—and his easy familiarity with the tools, hand-forged knives and firearms of the 19th century--created a wholly realistic picture of a real-life character living far off the grid in the high mountains of the majestic American West.

In 1975 and '76 Bob brought a fierce authenticity to his role at Black Mountain and Clear Creek by simply being himself, a man arguably born 200 years too late. Campers and staff in his presence felt transported to another time.

That fierce authenticity was a hallmark of Bob throughout his full and varied life, before and after his handful of years on the Philmont staff.

Let's remember that Bob was a courageous firefighter whose bravery and heroism was recognized with the Texas Award of Valor following a horrific apartment house fire. He was a skilled blacksmith, a licensed master plumber and electrician in Texas and New Mexico. An avid reader and collector of books, guns and historic artifacts. An ardent life-long learner who earned a degree in history and

government and then put his education into action, serving as Lamar County Judge back in East Texas-- and more recently, as a two-term elected Municipal Judge here in Cimarron. He was a longtime Cimarron merchant, the proprietor of Burns Hardware, which also was his base of operations for plumbing and electrical projects. In addition, Bob and Miss Katie purchased and sold many properties in Texas and New Mexico and also ran Burns Supply, a scrap metal business that under Bob and Katie's watch, managed to move some all-too-familiar lawn ornaments (otherwise known as junk cars) to the scrap heap.

I don't need to remind anyone here that Bob was a mesmerizing story-teller, an engaging conversationalist, an attentive listener who took great interest in what others thought and had to say. Stephen Zimmer—no stranger to fine points of the English language---described Bob this way: Burns, he said in his signature west Texas drawl, was a world-class rack-Con-Too-er.

Bob was married for over three decades to Katie Bryant, known to Bob and many others as Miss Katie. We'll hear from her in a few minutes. Together, Bob and Miss Katie pretty much raised a boy named Brad Newberry who came from a difficult upbringing in Paris, Texas. Under Bob and Katie's guidance and support, Brad grew up to be skilled plumber and electrician, an Eagle Scout like Bob, a Philmont wrangler, a US Coast Guardsman, a lawyer, a Navy JAG officer and the father of three Eagle Scouts.

And there's this: just over a year before Bob's death, he learned that he had a biological son he never knew about---Matt Talley, out in Oregon. And they not only met, but got close in the months before Bob passed last September. In a remarkable coincidence, Matt, who works as an engineer in the aerospace industry, is also a blacksmith, just like Bob. Matt's son Carlton, who is here today, closely resembles his grandfather. Bob's cousin Bill Duncan---a fellow Marine---couldn't be here today but wrote this: "I know for a fact that Bob was totally overjoyed to learn of Matt Talley and his family. I look forward someday to telling Bob's new granddaughter Logan all about her very special grandfather."

All of this just scratches the surface of who Bob was—and the impact that he had on so many people here in northern New Mexico, Texas and far beyond. You'll

soon hear a whole lot more from people who will give you a much fuller picture of Bob's life.

Over the years, as I learned more about Bob's fascinating life, I often wondered how he could have had fit such a wide and fascinating array of experiences and achievements into a single life.

So, when Mark Stinnett, the editor of the Philmont Staff Association's High Country magazine, asked me to write a profile of Bob, I immediately said yes. I wanted the chance to learn more, to separate fact from fiction in what sometimes seemed like a too-colorful-to-believe life.

To my deep regret, I let way too much time pass before I got around to this project. It wasn't until late last summer that I heard that Bob would welcome the chance to connect with me and share the story of his life.

In late August I set up a phone interview with Bob and we spoke for about 90 minutes. Bob was in full story-telling mode and we managed to cover maybe ten percent of his life's story. The 90 minutes flew by and the more Bob shared, the more questions I had. He spoke with great respect about Miss Katie and with enormous pride of Brad and Matt.

My wife Kathleen was in our kitchen during the interview but could hear my speaker phone conversation with Bob from a distance. After I hung up, Kathleen said: "That Bob Burns, he's really something. He sounds just like Jeff Bridges."

Afterward, I sent my old friend Wally Berg a note to share Kathleen's observation. His response was priceless: "What the hell, Jim," Wally wrote. "She got that wrong. It's actually Jeff Bridges who's been trying for 50 years to sound just like Bob Burns!"

That day Bob and I agreed that I'd come up to Cimarron from my home south of Santa Fe so we could spend an entire day together. I suggested that we meet in Bob's home---a veritable museum, I was told, of curiosities, then take a leisurely drive around town---finishing up the day right here for a beer and a smoke. I

really wanted to get a deeper understanding of what made Bob tick--- and see Cimarron country through his eyes.

A week or two later I texted Bob to nail down a date for my visit. His response was a shock. "Sorry, Jim, but I'm in the hospital right now," he wrote. "We'll need to put off our day together until I'm better."

Not fully realizing the severity of his illness, a day or so later I texted Bob to ask him if he'd be offended if I included in my story the tale of how he used to describe the three most important parts of a wood stove to Scouts as they passed through Black Mountain and Clear Creek. As a reminder, those parts were the poker, the lifter and the legs---not necessarily presented by Bob in that order. You might call Bob's lesson off-color or even totally inappropriate, especially when he urged the Scouts to repeat back the parts in the correct order, over and over again in unison.

But I thought I might be able to sneak that anecdote past my editor. I didn't hear back from Bob for what seemed like a long time and I got worried that I may have overstepped my bounds, at the same time thinking to myself, is it even possible to offend Bob Burns??

Then, a text from Bob appeared on my iPhone. It contained one word: "offended." Stunned, my brain immediately went back to the jean jacket episode a half century ago at Joe's and I thought, "Harnar, now you've done it ---you've pissed off Bob Burns yet again." An instant later a second text arrived. It said "I mean not offended." I was never entirely sure if his first text was a typo or if he was pulling my leg. Or both!

A couple days later I learned that Bob had passed away.

So, my High Country profile became an obituary of sorts. A tribute to one of the most unique men many of us will ever know.

So here we are today, gathered to remember Robert A. Burns.

Before I introduce Brad, Matt and Katie—and invite you to come forward with your own stories, I want to thank Teri Caid and the St. James staff for agreeing to open up today---the St. James was scheduled to be closed today to give staff some time to recover from the holiday and rodeo. Our of respect for Bob and his family, they graciously agreed to host today's tribute.

Many thanks go out to Bob's close friend Toby Kessler for photographing and posting pictures from today. We appreciate that, Toby!

I also want to thank a dozen or so of Bob's Philmont friends who contributed more than \$2.000 to make today's remembrance possible by underwriting the costs of food service. They did this as their own sign of respect for our old friend.

These gents represent a Who's Who of Philmont staff in the 70's:

- Jim Schlegel
- Phil Winegardner
- Greg "Doc" Walker
- Lee Huckstep
- Terry Burke
- Bill Shriver
- Mike Mazzocco
- John Clark
- Eugene Montgomery
- Dr. Blair Erb
- Greg McEwen
- Mark Stinnett
- Jason and Julie Mascitti
- And last but not least: the Palnick Family

Let's give the St. James and our generous donors a round of applause.

Let's now hear from Brad Newberry

Brad speaks

Will Newberry Speaks

We'll now hear from Matt Talley

Matt speaks

No one knew Bob better than Katie Bryant, Bob's former wife of 35 years and a well-known and highly respected English, French and Spanish teacher here in Cimarron and in Texas. She and her husband Toby divide their time between their homes here in Cimarron and Santa Fe.

Katie speaks

And now, I'd like to open things up for you to share a favorite story about Bob. Because we expect quite a few people to come up, I need to ask you to keep it to a single story that can be told in just a minute or two.

To get things rolling, I'd like to call forward a man who had the un-enviable assignment of following Bob Burns as camp Director at Black Mountain and Clear Creek. As many of you know, Dr. Greg Walker has been named a Distinguished Alumnus by the Philmont Staff Association, along with Bern Holman, Wally Berg and other luminaries of Philmont from back in the day.

Storytellers

Doc Walker

Spider Holgren

Bill Shriver

Charley Walton

Tom McKinney

Terry Burke

Don Hugeley

Mike Mazzocco

Tim Rosseisen

Barry Potter

Mark Stinnett

Closing

One thing is abundantly clear. There'll never be another Bob Burns.

Please join me in a toast: To Bob Burns.... May his memory be eternal!

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In Attendance

(Indicates individuals who shared memories during the program)**

Chase Anderson and Kiley Connor

Ryan Bailey

Katie Bryant** and Toby Kessler

Andrew and Lisa Chapello

Rod Corley

Terrence Burke**

Phil and Chris Didio

Dennis Gilpin

Ned and Debbie Gold

Janet, Donnie and Caden Golightly

Lee Hadaway

James Harnar**

Spider Holgren**, Nancy Holgren, Bjorn Holgren, Sunny Ferrara

Ruel Holt

David Houllé

Lee Huckstep

Don Huguley**

Doug and Rhonda Johnson

Joseph Justice

Warren Lail
Matt Lindsey
Leanne (or Kelly?)Luetkemeyer
Jason and Julie Mascitti
Mike** and Vida Mazzocco
Tim McKeown
Tom McKinney**
George Michaels
Brad**, Stefani and Will** Newberry
Steven Pitts
Steve Rick
Jason and Edie Rose
Tim Rosseisen**
Steve Rumage
Scott Ruster and James Ruster
Jeff Segler
Jim Schlegel
Bill** and Karen Ann Shriver
Jana Sinclair and Barry Potter**
Jason Smallwood
Warren Smith
Mark Stinnett**
Mary Stuever
Matt Talley and Carlton Talley
Jim Turpin
Greg Walker** and James Materese
Keith and Robin Walters
Charley Walton**
Phil Winegardner

Invited But Were Unable to Attend

Bill Duncan
Stephen and Shari Zimmer
Rod, Patty and Mason Taylor
Roger Smith
Forky Rudin
Dave Kenneke
Joyce, Bert and Chris Newsome
Brian and Susan Hobrock
Ken Block
John Bell
John Clark

Michael Crockett
Hanna Wilson
Wally Berg
Rick Touchette
Bob Birkby
Blair Erb
Lazar Palnick
Greg McEwen
Eugene Montgomery