

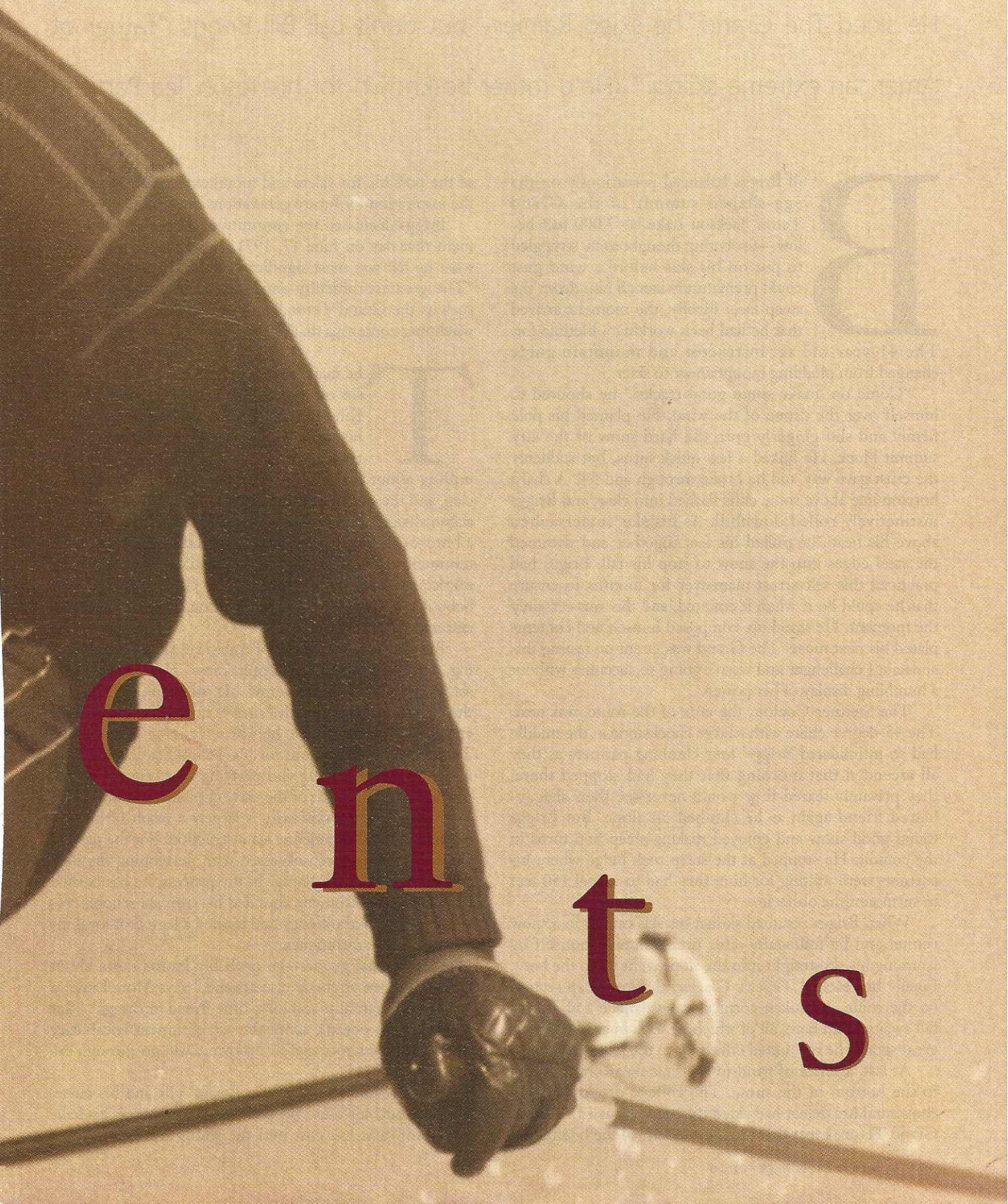
T h e M a n

D e s s e c

By David Goodman

O f F i r s t

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# The Man Of First Descents



He skied The Grand, he skied Rainier—but don't call Bill Briggs "father of American extreme skiing." (He'd rather be known for his Teton Tea Parties.)

**B**ill Briggs balanced precariously on the egg-shaped summit of the Grand Teton. Jackson Lake lay 7,000 feet below—a sobering thought as he struggled to put on his skis before a wind gust could prematurely launch him down the steep face. Finally, the moment arrived that he had been working a lifetime for. The 41-year-old ski instructor and mountain guide changed from plodding mountaineer to skier.

"Come on, make some good tracks!" he shouted to himself over the drone of the wind. He planted his pole firmly and slid gingerly onto the hard snow of the airy summit block. He linked a few quick turns, but suddenly the crust gave way and he broke through and fell. A sharp horizon line above some cliffs flashed into view, and Briggs instinctively rolled downhill. As his skis somersaulted above his head, he pulled his feet together and slammed the steel edges into the snow to stop his fall. Briggs had practiced this self-arrest maneuver for months to ensure that he could do it when it counted, and this was certainly the moment. He stood up, composed himself and contemplated his next move. The Grand was intent on testing this audacious challenger and wasn't going to succumb without a humbling display of her power.

The Stettner Couloir, the crux of the route, was next. The 45-degree chute with a large chockstone in the middle had so intimidated Briggs' four climbing partners as they all ascended that morning that they had stopped there; they privately feared they would never see their shaggy-haired friend again as he climbed on alone. But Briggs found good snow and enjoyed making steep hop turns in the couloir. He stopped at the steep rock bulge where his partners were waiting for him; they had to rappel 150 feet to surmount the obstacle.

When Briggs resumed skiing, his skis caught in a snow runnel and he fell again—this time stopping himself by jamming his ski straight into the slope right up to the boot. Finally he reached Tepee's Glacier, the last steep section on the route. A broken cornice, an avalanche and a third fall awaited him here, all of which he took in stride. "It was great sport!" he recounted effusively to the local press.

At last, a series of wind-in-the-hair turns brought him to the bottom of the snow. The college dropout with a congenital hip defect had skied the precipitous 13,770-foot Grand Teton, a feat that instantly redefined the boundaries

of the possible for skiers and mountaineers, and provided the inspiration for future generations of extreme skiers.

Briggs dismissed the enormity of his athletic achievement that day on June 17, 1971, and instead emphasized what he felt was most significant about this bold descent. "The greatest difficulty encountered in doing a ski run such as the Grand Teton," he insisted later, "is the overwhelming consensus that it is impossible."

**T**he man dressed in blue jeans and a bolo tie sits off to the side in the lobby of the Snow King Resort, an autoharp cradled gently in his arms. His mellifluous crooning barely rises above the din of the guests who are milling about the wine and cheese table. A few people clap, and the singer, a fringe of silver hair framing his face, acknowledges them with a trademark twinkling smile. It is a bittersweet scene, laced with both pathos and quiet contentment. This is Bill Briggs today: 65-year-old country musician, owner and director of the Great American Ski School at Snow King Resort in Jackson, Wyo., and former extreme skier.

Bill Briggs is the father of American ski mountaineering, a distinction that few people know. This uncelebrated ski legend pioneered numerous big mountain ski descents throughout western North America in the Sixties and Seventies. For over a decade he was a climbing guide in the Tetons and is still famous for his Teton Tea Parties, long nights of music making and partying that came to define the freewheeling spirit of the early climbing community.

Briggs' relative obscurity is largely a result of his single-minded zeal to redefine ski instruction. For the past 40 years, Briggs has been obsessed with developing the perfect method to teach skiing. In the process, he has battled the skiing establishment, founded his own ski school, created his own methodology and trained a legion of loyal instructors in his techniques.

"He's a real genius—he probably knows more about technique than anybody else around," says Mort Lund, a veteran ski journalist and long-time friend of Briggs'. "But anybody who doesn't adopt the establishment vocabulary in any field and goes out on his own...will go through excruciating times."

Being a visionary has been Briggs' gift and his curse. His disregard for other people's dictates has been his hallmark, and that has cost him the status and professional

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recognition that many of his colleagues are now contentedly retiring with. But his free thinking has enabled him to see a little differently, go a little further than everyone else. Breaking the rules may have even saved his life. Twenty-five years after skiing the Grand Teton, Briggs still strives to be on the cutting edge.

**B**ill Briggs is supposed to be in a wheelchair. Born without a functioning hip, doctors operated on him at age 2 to chip out a ball-and-socket joint, but it was only a temporary fix. "I was told that by the age of 40 I would be in a wheelchair," he recounts as we sit in Nora's Fish Creek Cafe, a local institution in Wilson, Wyo., that is sprinkled with skiers heading up to ski nearby Teton Pass.

"The doctors told my mother that I could only do sports when I was young, and then it'd be all over and I should get a desk job." In a flash, Briggs becomes intense and subdued, as if back in his dorm room struggling with life. Stroking his chin and peering through his banged-up horn-rimmed glasses, he has an owlish look, like a professor who's been too long in the library. He is a curious mix of pensive intellectual and excitable boy, alternately searching for answers and reveling giddily in his discoveries.

Briggs walks with a limp and was discouraged from pursuing sports first as a prep student at Phillips Exeter Academy and later when he attended Dartmouth College. But he was determined to show himself and others that he could overcome his disability. He became interested in skiing, teaching himself the sport on outings with his sister's boyfriend.

Briggs' lifelong fascination with ski instruction has its roots in one bad lesson. "I was told that my form wasn't 'right,' and was berated for what I was *not* doing," he recalls of his first and only ski lesson. "It was terrible. This was a wonderful sport that was being instructed in such a way as to make it miserable. I determined at that time to do something about it."

Briggs, however, was no model student. The son of a car dealer in Maine, he had dreams of becoming a physician. But by Christmas of his junior year at Dartmouth, he was flunking out and contemplating suicide. "It was a society I just didn't fit into," he concedes softly. Briggs' departure from Dartmouth was hastened when the campus cop caught him and some friends slaloming the elm trees near the school common—in his car. "The policeman com-

mended me on what a good driving job it was," he recalls. "But the college was not impressed—I was expelled."

After bouncing around doing odd jobs and struggling with depression, Briggs figured that "if I was going to have to live, I might as well enjoy what I was doing. I enjoyed climbing, skiing and playing music. So I would do those three things and drop everything else."

Briggs took to the mountains with a passion. During summer climbing trips in college and soon afterward, he made first ascents in the Tetons and first descents in the Bugaboos. In the winter, he spent his time as a ski instructor, running ski schools at Suicide Six, Vt., and Sugarloaf, Me. He was admired as one of the first American skiers to master the *wedel*, the classic European short-swing turn.

By the early Sixties, the ticking time bomb that Briggs was born with went off. His hip was degenerating and became excruciatingly painful. In 1961, Briggs had his hip fused into place—but not before tackling one final challenge. Just before his surgery, with the help of copious amounts of painkillers, Briggs and some friends made the first verified ski descent of 14,410-foot Mount Rainier in Washington. After that, his surgeons prophesied, he would never climb or ski again.

**S**tep by step, Bill Briggs moves methodically, slowly uphill. We are ascending 10,086-foot Mt. Glory, a classic Teton backcountry ski tour that takes us high above Jackson. Climbing in his alpine ski boots with his Rossis perched on his shoulder, his familiar limp seems to disappear as he ambles up the slope. He has never been a fast climber, and never much cared about uphill speed. For him, it is pleasure enough to be climbing at all.

As with everything else he has done, Briggs set his own course following his surgery. Defying his doctor's orders to remain immobilized in a full body cast for several months after his operation, he cut off the cast above the knee so that he could ski six weeks later. It was also at that time that he became a devoted follower of Scientology, a philosophy that Briggs credits for helping him overcome pain and better understand human communication. Briggs went on in 1966 to purchase the ski school at Snow King, the "town hill" in Jackson with a reputation as one of the steepest ski areas in North America. In 1968, he stunned the ski world by skiing the Middle Teton, a super steep

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backcountry ski run where a fall could easily result in death. He followed this with even more daring descents of Mt. Owen, Mt. Moran, and—his crowning achievement—the Grand Teton in 1971.

“Why did you do it?” Briggs stops climbing and pauses to consider my question. “It had to do with people saying ‘you can’t do that,’” he says finally, “because I thought you *could*. I not only thought you could do it, I thought it *should* be done.” Briggs shakes his head, spikes his words and jabs the air as he makes his case. “Skiing *mountains* is such an appropriate thing to do—it’s part of the sport. If there was a feeling that a mountain or a run shouldn’t or couldn’t be skied, and I could eliminate that inhibition, *that’s* what I really enjoyed.”

Briggs has led in the hopes that others would follow. “The idea is that these become classic routes for skiers. The routes need to be repeatable. That’s an issue for me. To do something that’s only gonna be done once—if you’re luck has to be so high that it can never be done again—that’s ridiculous.” His face crinkles with enthusiasm as he insists, “You would *enjoy* skiing the Grand—it’s a good run!”

Many credit Briggs as America’s first extreme skier. The aging mountaineer politely declines the mantle. “I’m a cautious skier. I do what I know I can do, what I know will get me down. I can still walk tonight and ski tomorrow. I’m not about to do anything spectacular for your camera. That’s the difference between mountaineering and “extreme” skiing.

As we crest onto the summit of Mt. Glory, the sharp contours of the Grand Teton rise up in front of us. It is a majestic view, and the notion of skiing it seems all the more daunting and improbable. Briggs stops to admire the vista. “Beautiful, isn’t it?” he says quietly.

I ask him what he views as his greatest accomplishment. “My teaching, far and away,” he asserts. Since 1956, he has worked steadily on writing what he considers to be the bible of ski instruction. He hopes to complete and publish it within the next few years. “Another reason for skiing the Grand was to provide some credibility for my teaching,” he notes. “If you ski the Grand, there’s some reason for people to go along with you.”

Age has not altered Bill Briggs’ course. He still teaches clinics several times a week at Snow King, and can be found every morning at Leejay’s Sportsmen’s Cafe—where a painting of him hangs on the wall—sitting in a booth

working on his ski manual. Nor has the feisty iconoclast mellowed much. Briggs chuckles as he recounts the time in 1983 when he was sentenced to 10 nights in the local jail for illegally cutting ski trails on Snow King mountain (Briggs insists that he was set up by corrupt former Snow King managers with whom he was feuding at the time). He was also sentenced to do community service: Ironically, he was ordered to cut a backcountry ski trail, the Cache Creek Trail, now renowned in Jackson as a mountain bike ride and cross-country ski tour.

When I ask Briggs what he would most like to be remembered for, he again stops to reflect. Peering out across the mountains, a breeze rustling his thinning hair, he has the look of a seeker searching the hills for answers. “Bringing skiers together,” he finally replies with a satisfied nod.

Briggs leads the way to the broad untracked open slope of Glory Bowl. He concedes, “It’s been a few years since I’ve been up here” (he later acknowledges that it’s been “eight or 10”). His face lights up at the sight of this Teton classic, a route he guided for several decades. He pauses on a small cornice at the top, takes a deep breath and slides out onto the face. He strikes an elegant pose as he descends, his arms outstretched wide as if embracing the giant landscape around him.

**I**t is Sunday night at the Stagecoach, a small cowboy bar at the foot of Teton Pass. Men in Stetson hats and women in fringed blouses are two-stepping in rhythm to the beat of the six-piece country band at the front of the room. Photos of rodeo heroes line the wall, beers are flowing and the men and women lining the sides of the room are coyly sizing one another up. Bill Briggs’ yodels waft across the room, mixing with the pungent smell of sweat, smoke and perfume.

“Did you know that guy playin’ the banjo skied the Gray-und Tee-ton?” a woman in tight jeans hollers in her friend’s ear.

“The guy with the gray hair?” replies her friend in astonishment.

“Yay-uh. Can ya’ b’lieve it?” The two women stare at Briggs, shake their heads with incredulity and resume their gyrations.

“Take it Bill!” shouts the lead guitarist. Briggs cuts loose with a flat-picking banjo solo, and the crowd erupts into a barnboard-shaking reel. Briggs looks up and acknowledges the crowd with a broad, contented smile. ♦