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BY JIMMY MAGAHERN
PHOTO BY MICHAEL WOODALL

Top O' the Mountain

HOW DO YOU GET TO THE TOP OF CAMELBACK MOUNTAIN? FOR BILL O'BRIEN, IT TOOK INGENUITY, HARD WORK - AND A BIT OF THE LUCK OF THE IRISH.

NOT LONG AGO, BILL O'BRIEN WAS ASKED TO SPEAK AT HIS GRANDSON'S WEDDING, A CLASSY AFFAIR HELD outside a San Francisco country club on a rolling hillside. Fresh out of college and diving head first into marriage, Steve O'Brien was looking to his worldly grandfather for, as Bill recalls, "advice that he could carry through life."

O'Brien laughs, taking a sip from his third short Harp at the Dubliner, a traditional Irish pub in northeast Phoenix owned by one of his old friends. "Now, that's a hell of a question!"

Nonplused, O'Brien took the mic, stood in front of the swank crowd and delivered a bit of wisdom gleaned from his days when he was a member of the short-lived University of Arizona polo team.

"I said, 'Keep your head down, your ass up, and charge!'"

You could spend a month of Sundays with Bill O'Brien and probably not get another motto out of him that better sums up the colorful life of the iconic Paradise Valley businessman.

At a spry 86, O'Brien is not a big man - 5-foot-6, when not wearing his trusty cowboy hat. But he's a giant in the Phoenix Irish community, as signaled by the affectionate shoulder slaps he gets from every grey-haired, red-nosed gent in tweed who passes through the Dubliner's door. It was O'Brien's influence with city leaders and businessmen that helped bring the community the Irish Cultural Center at Margaret T. Hance Park and Rula Bula Irish Pub on Mill. "The Irish community here was in a lot of separate factions," says Patricia Prior, the center's Ireland-born president. "You know how headstrong some of us can be! But Bill brought us all together."

O'Brien's even a hero with the Hispanic community, having founded a society called the Los San Patricios de Arizona, which annually celebrates the little-known band of Irish immigrants who fought on the side of Mexico during the Mexican-American War. "We always liked those guys anyway," says O'Brien, who speaks perfect Spanish. "The Irish and the Mexicans have always liked the same things: family, work, singing... drinking!"

He's also a legend in Paradise Valley for having not only owned the most valuable piece of real estate in Arizona - 56 acres on Camelback Mountain, including its summit - but also for having done the right thing with it. In 1967, upon hearing that developers were planning to build a restaurant atop the peaks - complete with a tram that would have picked up passengers near the front gate of O'Brien's own 2.5-acre ranch - O'Brien formed a partnership with his friend Russell Jackson and bought the land,

giving the top 26 acres over to the city as a preserve and forever banning construction above the 1,800-foot level.

Ask him how he got to that summit, however, and you'll get a series of wonderfully digressive stories that extol the virtues of that heads-down, hind-up determination he imparted to his grandson. The lesson becomes apparent after another couple rounds: There is no easy lesson to be learned from one man's riches; only the interlocking layers of experience formed by a life richly lived.

His first job out of college was sweeping up wool at a Boston warehouse, but O'Brien, who'd made extra money through high school

Dutch continued to battle in friendly polo matches at barbecues, and O'Brien became a substitute player for both teams. One day, a stout Brit alerted O'Brien to the news that the pound sterling had dropped to 23 cents on the dollar, and O'Brien - who'd majored in agricultural economics at UA - instantly saw an opportunity.

"The next morning, I started going to auctions from Port Elizabeth to East London, buying wool like crazy," he says. He spent close to a million dollars of his employer's money in two days, without any orders - a stunt that drew stacks of furious telegrams from his boss - but his instincts were right. The company was in the black before the following Monday.

Upon returning to Arizona, O'Brien focused those keen instincts on buying and reselling land. "I could see how Arizona was growing," he says. "So I started buying and selling land like it was wool."

He financed the preserve atop Camelback Mountain by selling the 30 acres below it to John Gardiner, the owner of a successful tennis ranch in Carmel, California. O'Brien persuaded Gardiner to catch a plane that very day, and by the next morning, the John Gardiner Tennis Ranch (now Sanctuary Resort on Camelback Mountain) was born. The 26-acre "hands-off" zone was part of the deal.

"He loves interacting with people," says long-time friend Bob Glenn. "He's always got these great ideas... and he's not scared of doing 'em!"

Glenn and his wife, Nancy, have known Bill and Sada for 40 years and are also own-



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trapping coyotes around his west L.A. home and shipping their hides to Hudson's Bay fur traders in Chicago, quickly moved up to wool grader. "I'd say, 'That's an Angus wool, West Highlands wool, carpet wool,'" O'Brien recalls. "They were impressed!" Before long, his Boston bosses shipped O'Brien and his new bride, Sada, to South Africa, where he became an international wool trader.

It was there, in Cape Town, that O'Brien's polo experience came in surprisingly handy. The Boer Wars were over, but the British and

ers of Rhodesian Ridgebacks, the dog breed the O'Briens are responsible for introducing to the U.S. after returning from South Africa with a pair. A photo of Sada with the dogs made the cover of *LIFE* in 1955. Glenn affectionately calls O'Brien "the most energetic little Irishman I've ever seen. Even now, if someone asks him, 'Do you wanna go on a wild boar hunt in Uruguay?' He's like, 'What time are we leaving?' He loves adventure."

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