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Evan Barrett

Montana Tech of the University of Montana

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Joe Quilici and Bob O'Bill – Men in the Arena

A Newspaper Column by Evan Barrett

August 16, 2016

It's a tough week here in Butte as two "Butte guys" of note passed away. Both Joe Quilici and Bob O'Bill made a mark on their town, its people, its history. Although they both greatly impacted Butte, they did it in totally different ways and their respective accomplishments demonstrate that there are many ways to make a difference. And to understand these two men is to understand Butte.

Joe Quilici's path was very public. Elected to the Montana House of Representatives in 1970, he began service there on behalf of Butte in the 1971 legislature, the first session in which I was involved. While many longer serving legislators moved from the House to the Senate, Joe never left the House for the thirty years he served. He was glad to wield his influence on behalf of Butte in the junior chamber where his seniority served him and Butte well – until he was "term-limited" out under that ill-advised law.

Joe was a key member of the Butte-Anaconda-Southwest Montana team that had influence in Helena far greater than their number would warrant. There is a very long list of projects and priorities that have the fingerprints of Joe and his fellow area legislators on them. Those have been only partially listed in news stories, obituary and memorial statements and I won't try to list them all here.

Joe always was part of a team that put Butte first. He enjoyed accomplishing things for Butte but he always saw those accomplishments as team accomplishments, often done with help from both sides of the aisle, for Joe would work with anyone who could help get the job done, especially if it was "for Butte." When I moved to Butte from Helena in June of 1979 I had already worked with Joe and the Butte delegation for five sessions. But it wasn't until I had become part of Butte, and Butte part of me, that I understood the drive that Joe and the delegation had for the city and its people. As it is in politics, we sometimes disagreed but more often than not we found ourselves in harness together, especially when the issue pitted Butte against the rest of the world.

When he was forced out of the Legislature, Joe served four years as a member of the Butte-Silver Bow Council of Commissioners. Joe was a truly public person, involved in his community. One of his involvements for many years was as a Board member for Our Lady of the Rockies. That Board, that effort, was the nexus where Joe Quilici and Bob O'Bill found common cause.

Since December 1985, each day Bob O'Bill could look up to the top of the East Ridge and see the fruits of his commitment – Our Lady of the Rockies. This inspiring story of Bob and Joyce O'Bill has been told many times over in many different ways. A story of personal love and commitment – and faith, Our Lady of the Rockies helped fuel the faith of all of Butte as the Mining City suffered through economic dislocation that would have destroyed a lesser town, a lesser people.

Bob's vision and its implementation channeled the efforts, hearts and spirits of skilled miners and tradesmen who were suffering a great loss. Instead of falling to depression, the individuals and community rose up and found a positive outlet, an inspiration to which they could aspire on a daily basis as their beloved town tried to get itself on solid footing and survive. Our Lady was a symbolic aspiration for a town and people who needed to move tenaciously and hopefully forward.

The struggle to complete the "Lady" was not easy, just like the struggle for Butte to survive was not easy. But quitting was not in the make-up of Bob O'Bill and his friends just as it was and is not in the makeup of Butte.

Like most everyone in Butte, I supported the efforts of these unemployed miners in small ways hoping to make a difference, hoping to contribute to the Lady on the mountain and a better future. The lessons of what it is to be "Butte proud, Butte resilient" are embodied in the efforts of Bob O'Bill in that symbol at the top of the East Ridge. After many years and over a quarter of a million hours of voluntary Butte hours, when she finally looked out over the Summit Valley on December 21, 1985, the fortunes of her people began improving.

Both Joe and Bob, in their own way, were men "in the arena." Teddy Roosevelt said it best: *"It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat."*

Joe and Bob had both been in the arena of dedication, commitment and accomplishment. Butte too, as a city, as a culture, has always been in that arena as well. In Joe's case, the arena was very public with many visible accomplishments. In Bob's case, it was a little less public, but no less notable, with his most visible accomplishment hovering forever above his beloved city and people. In the arena of accomplishment they both stood tall. Georgia Quilici and Joyce O'Bill stood tall with Joe and Bob as inspirations, support and guidance. Butte is thankful to all four of them as their community and fellow Buttians are better for their presence among us. May all of Butte aspire to be in the arena of accomplishment in some manner in the mold of Joe Quilici and Bob O'Bill. God speed.

*Evan Barrett of Butte, recently retired from 47 years at the top level of Montana economic development, government, politics and education. He currently writes columns and commentaries, is an award-winning producer of Montana history films and occasionally teaches.
(1048 words in the body)*