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James Thull [00:00:10] How did you get introduced to angling?

Celia O'Connor [00:00:10] My father was a fisherman.

James Thull [00:00:12] And that was here in Bozeman?

Celia O'Connor [00:00:13] And that was here in Bozeman. Yeah. He had three daughters, no sons. So, girls went fishing. Girls dug worms, the girls did everything.

James Thull [00:00:24] You told me your mom used to send you to Sourdough Creek?

Celia O'Connor [00:00:27] We would have to cross Sourdough road. We could just go down there and catch them up, little Brooks for dinner.

Tom O'Connor [00:00:34] And I grew up in Australia, and uh, fished in the mountains. Basically strarted fishing right away when, well we moved there when I was in the fifth grade so. But I'd been fishing before that. I think, it was just part of life. We always fished; my dad, mom. My mother was probably more adamant than he was, but anyway. Eastern Montana, fishing for catfish. And then we moved to Australia and then we fish for browns primarily, down there. There was, uh, there was it it actually there was one period of time which was absolutely phenomenal. The job my dad was working on was construction project, and they were building a very large dam. Which was basically building it behind an existing dam. So when they decided to start filling, when the big dam was big enough, there was a period, about a half mile there that was trapped water. And they said, "Come get all you want. Keep them, please keep them." So that's really how we got started. And I think uh. Um, we've- I fished all the way through college, we actually. Well I guess the statute of limitations has run out but, uh, four guys living together, a place in Bozeman, fish was pretty high on the menu. Fish and elk and deer. So. But that's that's how we got a good start, I guess.

James Thull [00:02:09] In 1949, when you moved to Australia, were you fishing in the Blue Mountains?

Tom O'Connor [00:02:15] Yeah. We were, we had a place called [unknown] Weir. Now they've shortened it to just [unknown] because Weir was the name of the dam. So. So yeah, that was and we were there for five years there, and then we moved up to another job which is now a suburb of Sydney, of Penrith, which is where I went to high school. And we actually rented a house which was right on a river, which was a phenominal river. So, we did a lot of fishing there with my best friend in high school. So.

James Thull [00:02:50] And that was mainly brown trout?

Tom O'Connor [00:02:52] Yeah, primarily. Yeah, we fished, I think I've fished all my life. Not as much as I want to lately but we would do it.

James Thull [00:03:03] Is there something special about cathing a native species of trout in its native habitat?

Celia O'Connor [00:03:10] I don't think I ever thought about it.

Tom O'Connor [00:03:13] Well I think about it a lot, because we like to fish Slough Creek. And at least the park is doing some good things with the cutthroat population in Slough Creek. Well it's getting impossible. You can't sight in there anymore. It just really is. My brother usually comes up from Colorado in October every year, and we fish the last week that the campground is open. But we're both getting pretty old and just getting the camp, we waited. He went over every morning at 3 a.m. before we finally got a campsite in there. For about four days. He's just come out of there. We didn't get to go this year, so.

James Thull [00:03:56] How important are national parks in regard to protecting native species of fish?

Celia O'Connor [00:04:02] I don't think we'd have any sanctuaries without those National Parks.

Tom O'Connor [00:04:06] Well I don't know. I think Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks has done a pretty good job of trout management over the years. They didn't start out too great, but you know, lately they've been doing the right things. And I think the park is doing the right things for trying to get rid of those damn lake trout. Which have just killed the cutthroat population. So we've been watching that pretty close, and we had a couple speak, I'm in Kiwanis club, and we've had a couple of speakers on trout management in the park which sort of pushed.

James Thull [00:04:43] Do you remember fishing in Yellowstone National Park before Lake Trout dominated the waters?

Tom O'Connor [00:04:43] Totally different. I mean everybody stood there and fished with worms, catch fish when I can't cook them. And. You know. I've heard all Buds lectures, but in fact he always refers to me as Captain O'Connor. And I refer to him as Lieutenant Junior Grade Lilly. Because he actually in the old days, and even today, protocol and everybody has calling cards. And theoretically you can walk up to the White House and present your card. But actually you're supposed to present enough cards for the number of men in the household, with I forget what the deal is. But anyway. And then you make a call, and then the call has to be returned. And anyway he still had some of his old cards from World War Two. So we had a good time bantering about that.

James Thull [00:05:51] Do you ever do any fishing with bud Lilly?

Tom O'Connor [00:05:56] Never fished with him. Never ever fished with him. Did a lot of functions with him. And actually the first time I think I ran across Bud, and I spent twenty-six years in the Navy, and then ten years in [unintelligible] industry. So we were kind of out of the fishing loop in the Bozeman area. And we went to Taste of Bozeman and they still lined up the tables down in the middle of the street. Well I guess they still do. Anyway we ended up sitting next to Bud. We get and then we just hit it off from there. We weren't close personal friends but you know, we we knew each other pretty well and knew the ethos of fishing.

James Thull [00:06:41] Over the years, how have you seen fishing chamge in Montana?

Celia O'Connor [00:06:53] I don't know because we haven't fished much since we came back to Bozeman.

Tom O'Connor [00:06:57] Well I've fished a fair amount.

Celia O'Connor [00:06:57] You've done more.

Tom O'Connor [00:07:03] People, the pressure on the rivers and streams is extreme. I've spent most of my time working in Warriors and Quiet Waters where one of our base rules is that the helpers and the guides and the drivers and everybody don't fish. You you're there to be a helper for whoever it is that's doing the fishing. So but now we snuck out. We went to a little bit of Slough Creek a few times and get over to the Madison a little bit. My brother's, my son's a more avid fishermen than I, and he does work for the university also. He's a little bit crazy. But you know the people, the change in philosophy really, about keeping or not keeping and now it's almost like a criminal if you keep fish. Bud wasn't that way. But. You know that's the way it's changed. A lot more money in the business. I mean probably back when we were in college. I can't even remember a fly shop. We just went down to the wards and bought our stuff. And so that's all changed. I think that the man- again the management of the of the streams is better than it was when there was none basically. Other than when we stocked which we figured out that was the wrong thing to do but there's still stocking going on in places which is managed better, you know to restore you know the other populations back in their cutthroats and westslope and some of those subspecies that nobody has worried about in the past. So. We see that. I think that's the biggest change.

James Thull [00:09:20] Have you done any fishing outside of the United States and New Zealand?

Tom O'Connor [00:09:26] No. I was kind of hoping to squeeze in a fishing trip we floated the Mekong from Angkor Wat down to Saigon. They still say Saigon, they don't say Ho Chi Minh city. But there was really no good opportunity we were on kind of a tour thing, a cruise thing. Let's see what else would have been a good fishing hole.

James Thull [00:09:52] Did you see the guys out there with the long sticks on the motors and I've taken the same trip except the other way.

Tom O'Connor [00:09:59] Yeah. Crazy. We were stationed in the Philippines for three years but we got into scuba diving and so we really didn't do any fishing. That's a wonderful place to scuba dive. Pretty reefs and really cheap. Philippino guides'll get you a bonka boat for a whole day for five bucks and they just follow your bubbles and when you get ready to come up change tanks and whatever, he was right there. Was a great spot for scuba diving, but did not even think about fly fishing. And.... I can't think of anywhere actually else. Whatever, fly fish we've talked about it a lot but haven't done much of it. It's got it, got it to a specific. You know? We've been going with Little [unintelligible] expeditions for, since 2002 and they are very much an ecological group. You're ashore from a ship every day twice a day, hike in with naturalists and learning about stuff. But they've never put together anything they're fishing. And they put a lot of stuff together on photographers because now they're matched up with National Geographic Photography Company. They've got joint venture basically now so. And so. But. Yeah, I hadn't thought about that.

Celia O'Connor [00:11:40] But they have served us locally caught fish.

Tom O'Connor [00:11:43] Oh, yeah. Oh, we did. I did play around on the Amazon with their- it was a stick with a line on it. I guess that was fishing. Didn't catch anything. They knew how to do it. We ate a lot of fresh fish on the Amazon.

James Thull [00:12:04] I hear Pirahna is good.

Tom O'Connor [00:12:06] It is. Quite tasty actually.

James Thull [00:12:12] Yeah. You got to fish it with steel leeders I'm guessing?

Tom O'Connor [00:12:19] Yeah, Well the natives weren't. The natives were jsut using whatever was handy. But they had some rods rigged up for us on the boat we were on. Do get some steel wet I guess. And then they served it to us for dinner, which was nice. And they deboned them which was even nicer. But there's a lot of big fish in the Amazon that they did serve. So. That was a great trip we were there when the Andes were melting in the spring and the river was coming up sixteen feet a day for about four days. So the natives are putting all our animals on rafts. The houses were on stilts but their animals were. The animals are floating around-it was interesting. And you know I have to think about looking at more fishing in other places because we've been other places.

Celia O'Connor [00:13:17] I fished in Idaho with my grandfather a lot as a kid.

James Thull [00:13:21] Trout?

Celia O'Connor [00:13:21] Yeah.

Tom O'Connor [00:13:23] And we floated the Salmon and the Middle Fork and the Salmon both. People are saying, "You been on the Middle Fork? We've done it twice. If you've never done that trip, you go through wilderness areas that we don't see anybody else. It's a great trip. And you don't even have. You could throw a bear hunk on the end of the line. That-all you got to do is ruffle the water and you get a fish. And our son, son and granddaughter, son and daughter of mine. Two kids floated it this summer. And Molly our youngest granddaughter came back and said you know I caught 11 fish in one morning.

Celia O'Connor [00:14:06] Before lunch.

Tom O'Connor [00:14:10] That's another great place to go. And steelhead we fished on the Salmon.

James Thull [00:14:14] WIth how susceptible trout are to temperature changes in their habitats, what concerns do you have for the future of the species?

Tom O'Connor [00:14:14] But then again you look at how well they came through whirling disease. And you say well. Yeah they're fragile but they're adaptable too. And maybe climate change isn't that biggest influence. whirling diseases pretty. Well, you were here. So you know scary it was. Weren't any fish left in these rivers. Yeah.

Celia O'Connor [00:14:51] Yeah and you have to think back historically that there was a time when there were dinosaurs and palm trees right here. And I presume fish of some kind in the rivers. Yeah. But the climate's always changing. I don't know that through legal action or whatever we can do a whole lot about it.

Tom O'Connor [00:15:18] I'm sure there's things we can do.

Celia O'Connor [00:15:20] I got to wondering, my statistical background, how many of the catch and release fish actually truly live after they're released?

Tom O'Connor [00:15:33] Theres literature out there on that. And population growth is good. Where do people want to live? Either want to live next to trees or next to water. And. We built. When we came back here 20 years ago, we built a really nice big house south of Gateway. On the East Side of 191 up on a hillside. Great view of the mountains and everything that was walkable to [unintelligible] Canal. A quarter mile down the down the hill. we could go down to [uninttеligible] Canal and nobody fishes it. We were down there and normally catching small fish. Great for the grandkids. My son was, was it Brian or Shawn that caught that fish? Got a 21 inch Brown and [unintelligible] Canal which is hard to believe but for a fish. As a kid dad fished Pine Tree canal. In the 50s.

James Thull [00:16:31] What is it that you love about fishing?

Tom O'Connor [00:16:39] Well in college it was to eat.

Celia O'Connor [00:16:45] I think I did it because Dad fished. Something to do with your father sort of thing.

James Thull [00:16:52] So as it is much about for you about spending time with your dad than it was about anything else?

Celia O'Connor [00:16:57] Yeah. Yeah. And of course we took the fish home and ate them. It was the time when you didn't have to compete with your mother and your sisters. for Dad's attention.

Tom O'Connor [00:17:11] Oh well that's just, oh I've just always finished. So. And it's sporadic, well depending where we live and what we do. We were stationed North of Memphis, Navy base there in Millington Tennessee. We go over to Arkansas to the White River over there. And. It was interesting because people did not know how to fish for trout. And they'd stock trout below the dam which is prime habitat for about three miles below the dam. Really cold water there, Greers Ferry. And I could go over there and I get my I could get my limit in nothing flat. But these good old boys just sitting around with their lawn chairs and their three ounce weights just chucking them out there with corn on the end of it. And I remember one morning I was fishing all by myself nobody was up yet. There were still tent camping at that point. And I'd limited out. Caught a limit. And I put it back. This voice behind me said, "I'm really glad you did that." It was a game warden who'd been watching me the whole time. And so, so we took the opportunity to fish there. And stuff around Memphis but that was all warm water stuff. And we've got enough different kinds of fishing gear around the house here we can do just about anything. Crawl space I'm thinking about now, what am I going to do with saltwater rods? I keep trying to think about having a garage sale and get rid of some of the stuff. We've got a little of everything, from four weight to eight weight I guess the fly fishing arena. So.

James Thull [00:19:10] Will you tell us a bit about your organization, Warriors and Quiet Waters?

Tom O'Connor [00:19:17] In 2007, I was running the air show here in Bozeman. And uh we brought some guys up from the Naval Hospital in Balboa, in San Diego. And uh for the air show and then somebody while they were up there said well we have to take them fishing also. So that kind of started it. So. The real mover and shaker in it is a guy named

Eric Hastings. You might want to interview him if you don't mind being dominated by a retired Marine colonel. But anyway he uh, he he basically took the lead, and over the the winter of seven, eight we incorporated and became a nonprofit and did all that stuff. And early on, it was super easy to get these guys just we could call down them. Well we had difficulty originally because eventually estabished creds with the hospital Who are these yahoos in Montana that want to bring six wounded warriors to Montana for a week.

Celia O'Connor [00:20:23] And how are they going to know how to take care of them?

Tom O'Connor [00:20:25] And how are they. And finally I guess we went down there a couple times and talked to him and then brought a group up with a psychologist and he said this is the best thing going. You know I could probably get you some quotes if you want them but. Anyway so then we started the regular program. We were incorporated and those three or four of us did everything. Like most small organizations. And we started bringing six at a time. Basically our criteria is they had to be injured or wounded in Iraq or Afghanistan, because that's where everything was. And we could just call up and they give us six names and we'd fly them up here. And one thing we still do places, yes paid staff now, we have organizational staff. But we still do, we pay for everything. Airfare.

Celia O'Connor [00:21:29] Gear.

Tom O'Connor [00:21:30] All the tackle. And Sims gives us all their equipment at cost. So one of the first things we do is we bring them in here. We try to get them all here on a Monday. Sometimes that's difficult. When they were all in the hospitals and it wasn't. And then we take them right to Sims. And we already got the measurements at Sims, and we outfit them with everything. Rain jacket, hat, waders, boots, the whole nine yards. And then we take them and feed them because they're always hungry. But anyway they're a big factor in us being able to continue because if we had to buy at retail. I mean they're not losing any money, but they're not making any money either. And they've been very supportive of us, at trade shows and stuff like that. Pretty good information. We've progressed on, and it was becoming increasingly difficult. Particularly the army to get some of the guys because they were coming out of Brook Army Medical Center in San Diego. Derek we had a retired marine Colonel and a retired Navy captain. We had more of an entree from Navy side of the system. But as things went along, the pipeline dried up, which is good. And now we're to the point where we're doing some more creative things. We just had our first all women's group. Which was, we were apprehensive about that for a long time about how that would work. And it worked really well. And now we're bringing guys that have been here, bringing them back with their best battle buddy. And they get all excited you know, I'm going to show you how to do this. And we actually have one of those going on right now. And then we, before we started that, we started with couples. Starting to bring couples back. The guy would come up, or the gal would come up. And then we bring them back with their spouse. That was really worthwhile to see the transformation in the relationship with them. Well just the six solo guys and gals that came up you can see in a week the change. We bring them in on Monday, outfit them with all their gear year and everything, put 'em to bed. Tuesday we go to somebody's private pond around here and fish for stupid fish, teach them how to cast on the grass. And then each one of 'em is matched up with a professional guide that we paid for. You know what we call a companion. And basically they just, those three stay together the whole time, and people say well why three? Say, well you get a guy with no legs, get him in a drift boat. It takes two guys. Now sometimes the third guy just. You didn't-he's not needed so we don't use him. But we try and. When they come up here, we try to float 'em one day and wade 'em

one day if they're able to do that. And. So. Then we have a farewell dinner at the end of the week and send them back to where they came.

Celia O'Connor [00:24:52] I worked as Chief Mom. Organizing all of the women that provided food. And I can tell you I can look at pictures from the given week and I can put them in order because you can see the healing happening.

James Thull [00:25:02] What do you think the benefit of bringing veterans to montana through warriors and quiet waters?

Tom O'Connor [00:25:07] It's all of that. They all comment and we have quotes we could get you, the tranquility and quietness. And, and not killing something that you've caught.

James Thull [00:25:23] So it's mostly all catch and release?

Tom O'Connor [00:25:28] If somebody wants to know, what does a trout taste like? We'll we will keep one or two or we'll have- for dinner that night we'll have trout. But basically it's catch and release.

Celia O'Connor [00:25:41] Tell him the cow story. Sitting on the front porch one morning with this guy.

Tom O'Connor [00:25:48] Initially we rented a space. Rental housing for, summer housing. And we had a place out on the Swamp Creek which is pretty, pretty ideal for us, except it was full of stairs. And I was on the front porch one morning for just a day break the sun just come up over the bridge. This young warrior just says what's that noise? What is that noise. Then I realized it was cows mooing.

Celia O'Connor [00:26:18] He had never heard a cow.

Tom O'Connor [00:26:19] A lot of inner city kids. And they all smoked and they all chew tobacco. I guess not all now. Branching out a little bit more. But we've had some pretty dinged up women too. And... One navy gal, an Explosive Ordinance Demolition gal. She could go from perfectly ecstatic to being perfectly depressed in five minutes, I swear. Her name was Kat Wacker. Everybody remembers her. But she came through the program fine and she was great. Overall. But we basically had women that fed them all, and they had PTSD so they have a hard time with their names so we have aprons aprons for the women they all said mom on them. And that still continues. We've been very fortunate as an organization to get significant donations. And we've been able to purchase our own property which is north of town here. Off of Reece Creek, which this English guy got involved with the dot coms, had got in way over his head. And we were able to, through the generosity of some people locally in town and outside of town, pick up property probably for half what it was for worth. A big house, six bedroom, theater, indoor swimming pool, hot tub. And now thanks to Sim's construction we have three ponds on the place. So we'll probably do most of our introductory stuff out there. We're just stocked last year. So in the future we'll do introductory stuff right there and that's where they sleep. We've come back to every night.

James Thull [00:28:17] Do you think a lot if the individuals from Warriors and quiet Waters continue to fly fish after they finish the program?

James Thull [00:28:24] One of our, one of the things we also gave, have given them, we've since stop giving him because that was a significant expense, is that we gave a very very nice fly tying kit. In one of the measurements was how many of 'em show up in the pawn shops in Oceanside, California and around the Marine base? And we were getting a fair number of 'em showing up. That doesn't mean that weren't still fishing. But we get feedback in uh, well Facebook. The only reason I go on Facebook is to see what these guys are doing. And a lot of them still are posting pictures of their fish. Every day they caught, the San Marcos California and actually found a place to fish. So. That sort of stuff goes on between them too. The language gets a little rough but you just gotta put up with it. You know.

Celia O'Connor [00:29:25] We have one guy who is blind and had a double amputee.

Tom O'Connor [00:29:29] Go on Facebook and look at Matt Bradford. Actually his hashtag is, 'no legs no vision no I couldn't get a T-shirt.' No legs. So there's not a top shelf on mine. Side there. Anyways you can get the wrong impression, in the wrong place. And he's amazing, he's since gone on. The Marine Corp was willing to keep him on active duty because he was such an inspirational person. But then he met a girl and resigned from the Marine Corps. They got married, they have a couple of kids now. He's graduated from the University of Kentucky, and he's working for a state senator.

James Thull [00:30:25] You want to hold it up over here so we can see it for the camera? That's great. Yeah. No legs, no vision, no problem.

Tom O'Connor [00:30:36] It's great. Well that's just, that's the back side.

James Thull [00:30:39] Very nice.

Tom O'Connor [00:30:42] The man, the man is the most amazing guy. When, when they arrived, and he was pretty early on in our program probably 2008. I can look it up for sure. But I got a gate pass to go down to the door of the airplane. And, cause of his wheelchair. Obviously, had no legs. At that point I think he has prosthesis now. Anyway the first-he comes off the plane and I introduced myself and he says, first thing he said to me, "Was that flight attendant cute?" I said yeah. I said, "well do you want my elbow or my arm?" Because he had his prosthesis on. He says, "Oh, you must have done this before." I said, "Yeah my grandfather was blind in the last 10 years of his life." So we took him to this house, place out at Swamp Creek. Not really really well designed for a blind person of this post and beam house. But I guided him around the house one time and he had it locked down, he could walk anywhere in that house do anything. And. He was a neat and tidy guy. Some of the other guys were not near as tidy as he was.

Celia O'Connor [00:32:00] You could bounce a quarter on Matt's bed in the morning.

Tom O'Connor [00:32:02] Yeah he was great. But anyway, look him up on the net. Matt Bradford, you won't have any problem. He posts probably. He or his wife posts something every day. And he's working with a lot of other volunteer groups. He ran a marathon not too long ago and he was trying to climb Mt. Rainier this summer. They didn't make it. He trained for it for a year but one of the- he didn't konk out, one of the other guys konked out.

James Thull [00:32:34] Is your end goal for Warriors and Quiet waters for there to no longer be a need for the organization?

Tom O'Connor [00:32:42] There will always be a need I think. We may have to expand the base to not people injured and wounded in Afghanistan, to people injured and wounded other places. Like a guy in a motorcycle accident in San Diego would. There was so many people initially, we kept it pretty tight. They're expanding out a little bit now. I'm off on, I'm not on the board anymore. The fellas that had started it had all been kicked off. One of the ladies that had wanted to give us a significant chunk of money sent their lawyer to get all our paperwork and she wanted you know, corporation stuff. Well I don't think she wanted bylaws. We didn't have any bylaws. So I whipped together some from a Kiwanis Club and a homeowner's association we used to live in. One of the things it said in there, you had no more than two consecutive three year terms. Eric and I were both you know, sixth or seventh or eighth year or whatever it was. So we're not on the board, but they're pressing on. And they have the house out there. We have our office in town and six paid staff. The executive director and there's a person that basically organizes all events. And we have a guidance on both legs. You may even know him, Sal Martinez he does publicity at MSU. And he walks around campus in summer, in winter time with shorts on.

James Thull [00:34:31] I think I've seen him, yeah.

Tom O'Connor [00:34:32] Yeah. He's Hispanic. And his wife Sarah. They came up here, and he wanted to go to college, and then she ended up going to college here too. And, uh, both got their degrees, and he's our recruiter now. Actually having to actively recruit. Before all we had to do was turn the faucet and we had an unlimited supply. But we're actively recruiting now for, for couples. For whatever. That's working pretty good. We've got a parttime guide who is wounded warrior, he's going to MSU so. He thought it helps out Sal recruiting. Because they can, they can see right through the BS. He is somebody that wants to pretend he's one of these guys. We had one, one real incident that, but that was our fault because it's another organization project. Healing Waters said, we'd like to fund a couple of guys to come to your program we said sure. And we we left it at that they funded it and they brought everything and they weren't wounded warriors they were. But the other guys, two minutes and they had it figured out. We knew, but we had to just tolerate it while they were here. But now the organization is in great financial shape, and you can go online and look up the financials of the staff. So they're basically doing it all. Most of us handle six of us I guess basically aren't really involved anymore. Which is fine. But I think it'll go on for a long time, mostly because it's so successful and lots of testimonials for both medical and.

Celia O'Connor [00:36:32] When the guys get here and they're always a little nervous about what's going on. And my introduction used to be, my job while you are here is to be your mom. and I'm going to do all the things that moms do including you, including nag you if I feel like you need it. Which would break the ice, you know.

Tom O'Connor [00:36:50] And they've had some funny appearances, we've had one warrior who wasn't eating any breakfast to speak of. We said finally I said, "Isaac why aren't you eating breakfast?" He says, "I'm a Muslim and all you guys put out is bacon and ham." So after that that's fine now I think about things like that. But you know it was very, it's been successful from day one.

James Thull [00:37:22] What is the value of organizations like MSU, building archival collections based around angling?

Celia O'Connor [00:37:30] Well, I think the oral history project is important in the aspect of making people aware that the need is still there. You know, I don't know about collecting stuff.

Tom O'Connor [00:37:43] If you don't collect this stuff what's going to happen to it? You know we got stuff, been trying to give to the library, give to the Bozeman library. If it doesn't end up somewhere, it's going to just disappear. I think it's important that there is a history of those, so much stuff on fly fishing out there.

Celia O'Connor [00:38:08] And MSU is the right place for that history. As opposed to the Bozeman library or somewhere else.

Tom O'Connor [00:38:15] I think it's important to collect some junk anyway. But to preserve that for future people. Someday, 20 years from now, somebody might say who is Bud Lilly?