

Tales of a Lawdog Turned Bar Owner

Bill Henne walks into a room and he fills it, with his wide brimmed hat and his trademark vests, he looks every inch the Montana cowboy. But he actually started out as a cop in King County, Washington. Today he's the owner of Lawdog's in the tiny Montana town of Elliston.



Bill was born and raised in Eastern Washington. His mom dated a cop who worked the night shift and every morning he'd wake Bill up and tell him all about his night. After a two-year stint in the Marines, working as an air traffic controller, Henne became a cop in King County on Valentine's Day 1972.

He worked homicide and robbery, with occasional gigs in bombing and kidnapping. It was a kidnapping call that changed the course of Bill's history . . . and the history of 131 missing children.

A parental abduction case came in. A father had kidnapped his two-year-old. "There were no real laws for parental abduction back then," Henne explained, "but we got that child back." He was so inspired by that case that he went into the Civil Section of the Department and asked how many other cases there were. There were

six more parental abductions and within a month and a half, Bill had found them all. This was side work, something he wasn't even officially supposed to be doing, but he did it so well, those in command let him keep working the cases.

He worked with the Family and Friends of Missing Children and Violent Crime Victims to draft laws concerning parental abductions in Washington. Those laws are still in place today. All told, he rescued 131 children who were kidnapping victims. "I remember every case I ever worked. And you have to remember, this was all before computers and cell phones." He even helped get the photos of missing children on milk cartons.

Bill left law enforcement in Seattle in 1986 after losing two partners in the line of duty and going through a terrible divorce. It was about this time he moved to Montana and got remarried. He was here hunting when he saw a job advertised with the Ravalli County Sheriff's Office. After a couple years, his wife Becky got a job in Butte, so he moved with her and started a private investigation business. It was shortly after that he noticed an ad from the State Department and United Nations, looking for officers to conduct police training in Kosovo. He was one of 660 people recruited from that ad. He went to Kosovo and rose through the ranks rapidly. "I promised my wife I'd only be there for a year, so when that year was done, I came home to be with her."

That stint was followed by a job as the Criminal Investigator for the Montana Lottery. He and Becky were living in Elliston by then and he started bartending at Stoner's. "I like the people," Bill shared. "It's not the same camaraderie as in law enforcement but it's not the 'I've got woes' talk that people think happens with bartenders. We talk about . . . nothing: hunting and fishing. We don't talk politics and we

don't talk religion. I've made a lot of friends doing that. Lots of vets come in and we just talk." After three years of bartending on the side, Bill bought the bar and renamed it Lawdog's.

"My daughter and I love the movie Tombstone. There's a scene where Wyatt Earp is dealing cards and cowboys come in and say, 'We don't need no Kansas City lawdogs here'. That's where the name comes from." And that bulldog on the sign? "That's the Marine bulldog. We added a badge and cowboy hat and that's how Lawdog's came to be."

Through the years, Henne has been involved with many projects that benefit others. In 1984 he began the Lawman 1000 Charity Motorcycle Ride in Seattle. It was 1,000 miles in two days and he started it to help raise money for a friend with MS. That first year it had 126 riders and raised \$26,000, "and the weather was rainy and so awful we didn't know if we'd ever do it again." By the third year there were over 1,000 motorcycles participating and over the years it raised \$5 – \$6 million.

"We started one here in Montana, too, for the Hope Project and raised \$485,000. One thousand miles in two days is hard and you have to push yourself. We need to push our bodies to the limit because that's what these sick kids have to do. So should we." Sadly, this project died when Bill left for Kosovo and no one else stepped in to take the lead.



And now, the Hennes are selling Lawdog's. "I miss law enforcement tremendously," Bill shared, so he's opened Lawman's Private Investigations and there's a buyer for the Saloon, going through the arduous process with the State to become a liquor license holder. Through the years Bill has become famous, for his chili, great steak nights and the camaraderie he's built at Lawdog's Saloon in Elliston, MT, but also for those 10-gallon hats and the amazing number of children this cowboy with the big heart has rescued and helped.