

# The Pueblo Chieftain

Your print and online news source for Southern Colorado

November 3rd, 2008

## Family of public servants

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### *Billings clan has served on fire, police forces for 3 generations*

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THE PUEBLO CHIEFTAIN

Anybody who thinks sequels can't live up to the originals hasn't met Esco Billings III.

Billings, retired at the end of April after 32 years at the Pueblo Fire Department. His tenure carried on a family tradition of public service that began two generations earlier.

Only Dalmatians have been hanging around firehouses longer.

Billings' father, Esco Jr., was hired by the Pueblo Fire Department in 1949. He served 30 years and retired at the rank of assistant chief.

The original Esco Billings, grandfather to Esco III, was a beat cop with the Pueblo Police Department. He was shot in the back in Bessemer and returned fire, killing his assailant. "He carried a bullet in his lung for the rest of his life," Billings said.

Esco III's uncle, Jim Billings, was employed by the Pueblo Fire Department for 26 years and retired as an assistant chief. His son, Jim Billings Jr., is the chief of the Pueblo Police Department.

"Esco was always like a big brother to me," said Jim Billings Jr. "We all looked up to him. He was the oldest cousin."

When Jim Billings Jr. was just a boy, his older cousin used his allowance to buy him a soda and a cupcake, luxuries the younger cousin wouldn't have enjoyed otherwise.

Years later, Jim Billings Jr. wanted to attend the races at Beacon Hill, but his parents would only allow it if he could find his own transportation. Esco came through again.

"We both were very proud of our grandfather and our fathers," Jim Billings Jr. said. "It naturally opened a path

for us to follow in their footsteps of public service. I truly enjoyed watching Esco rise through the ranks of the fire department. I've often wondered what it would have been like to be at the fire department together."

It seemed almost preordained that Esco III would follow in the career path of his grandfather, father and uncle except to him.

"I was always interested in the fire service," Billings said. "I have a lot of great memories about being a young kid hanging around the fire station. But it wasn't until a whole lot later that I decided that's what I wanted to do."

Billings returned to Pueblo after a stint in the military. Within a month, he landed a job with the city of Pueblo working as an instrument man on a surveying crew beginning in October 1971.

Surveying wasn't Billings' calling. He tested for the fire department and went to work there in November 1975. The change in jobs constituted a pay raise of \$4 a month over his city surveying salary, but it wasn't the dough that made the difference.

"I just looked at it like I'm starting at the bottom of the totem pole, but at least there's room for advancement," he said.

And advance he did. Billings ascended to the rank of captain in 1989 and to deputy chief in 2006, the rank he held when he retired, climbing beyond the very respectable rank that his father, uncle and grandfather had achieved.

The promotion to deputy chief required some adjustment, namely abandoning the 24-hours-on, 48-hours-off routine of the rank and file.

"That was a challenge, but it was a nice way to go out, as deputy chief," Billings said.

In the years between, Billings stood shoulder-to-shoulder with his yellow-clad brothers and sisters as they put out fires that ranged from minor to historic and responded to medical emergencies galore.

The Hundred Club named Billings its Pueblo Firefighter of the Year in 2007.

"A few of those fires definitely woke you up," he said. "After day-in, day-out of it for 30 years, you don't think of it like you do in the early part of your career, but the adrenaline still kicked in on the big ones. I can honestly say that the last day I went to work, I still loved it."

He made many friends along the way. His younger cousin, in his capacity as chief of police, is one of the most recognizable faces in the whole city, but perhaps not as recognizable as his outgoing cousin Esco.

“It strikes me funny when I meet a lot of people for the first time, they're always asking me if I'm related to Esco,” the chief said. “Everybody knows him.”



COURTESY PHOTO Four members of the Billings family who have served on Pueblo's police and firefighting forces, (left to right) Jim, Jim Jr., Esco III and Esco Jr., pose for this 1990 photo.



Jim Billings Jr. is interviewed as the Pueblo police chief.



Esco Billings III at the scene of a fire in Pueblo.