

Founder: Burning Man's evolution far from over

By Linda Fine Conaboy

INCLINE VILLAGE – Burning Man founding board member Michael Mikel told *Lake Tahoe News* that Nevada is the last American frontier. “It’s the last place where there’s so much freedom, people can be themselves.”

Mikel is also known by his playa name, Danger Ranger. This month he gave a historical overview of Burning Man at a talk at Sierra Nevada College.

History comes easy to Mikel. His bio says he’s a historian and a futurist. He’s also, for the last two years or so, a proud Nevadan, having migrated to his turn-of-the-century Reno home from the Bay Area.

Mikel and other founding Burners thought Nevada was the ideal place, which is why in 1990 they packed up The Man and trekked him, ensconced in a rented truck, to the Black Rock Desert, far from his fog-shrouded Baker Beach origins in San Francisco.

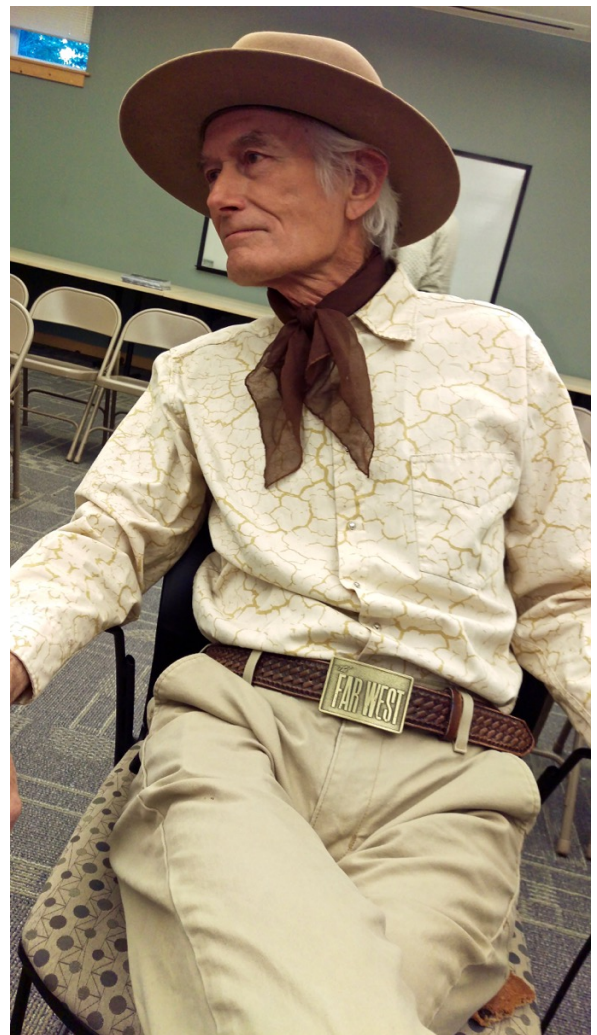
The Man, Mikel said, simply outgrew his coastal origins and the desert turned out to be his destiny, a fact proven by the number of people, whether they have attended the desert event or not, know who the tall guy is.

Mikel’s mission on this cold evening at SNC was to lay out for his audience what he calls the five ages of Burning Man. The evening was a most interesting trip through history related by Ranger Danger, who, true to his moniker, dressed as a ranger from his Mounties-style handsome hat to his brown boots, into which he tucked his trousers.

Around his neck, he tied a scarf, nattily offsetting his custom beige shirt with an imprinted pattern depicting the whorls of dry, parched clay that is the Black Rock desert.

Although others disagree with the evolution of Burning Man, according to Mikel, the story unfolds perfectly in five periods. They are: exploration; rapid growth; protectionism; outreach; and the age of scarcity.

The Age of Exploration, from 1986 to 1990, according to Mikel, was actually the precursor of today's Burning Man, but nobody knew it. It became an underground event full of experimentation with a low barrier to entry—everybody was welcome—resulting in a high rate of participation.



Facts from Michael Mikel:

- Burning Man uses more

propane than any other industry in the U.S.

- 6,000 portable toilets are emptied two times each day
- There are regional burns in 34 countries
- In July, Nevada Museum of Art opens a Burning Man exhibit. Upon closing in Reno, it heads to the Smithsonian Museum.
- 5,000 low-income tickets are sold annually at \$195 each
- People sky dive in Burning Man, but so far, each has had a ticket
- 5,000 people volunteer at the event.

The first man was 8-feet-tall, doused in gasoline and pulled into place by humans before being set afire on Baker Beach during the summer solstice in 1986.

“It was like a family picnic,” Mikel said, “so the 20 or 30 of us there decided to do it again in 1987.” The following year, The Man was 30-feet -tall and more complicated, and in 1989, with a 40-foot-tall Man, the number of attendees quadrupled; in 1990, the authorities broke up the party and didn’t allow the beach burn.

The Age of Rapid Growth, from 1990 to 1996, saw Burning Man’s new beginnings at Black Rock. “It literally flew out of control,” Mikel said, although only 80 people participated in the first desert burn.

He said this enthusiastic group of desert neophytes had much to learn about life on the playa. For example, their first big

lesson was that parachutes, which they erected for shade, are designed to catch the wind. And catching the first playa breeze, off they sailed.

That year (1990) saw people pulling the rope to raise The Man to his full height. In 1991 Crimson Rose, also a founding board member and board secretary, climbed The Man. Crimson Rose founded the Black Rock Arts Foundation as well as the Burning Man Project.

In 1992, there was music and the Black Rock Rangers were born. The group emulating the Texas Rangers, now numbers 800 people. This was also the year of government regulation—they were required to pull a permit. Today, Mikel said, it takes an entire staff to work with Burning Man's federal landlords.

Subsequent years during this period, saw the first theme camp, which was inundated by extreme weather—lots of airborne dust followed by huge dumps of rain.

The population in 1993 was relatively small, leading to a mandated entry fee of \$30 in 1994 to augment costs, the same year the lamplighter ceremony began, witnessed by a surge in population—2,000 people.

Other firsts during this period of rapid growth included the first café, the first communication with the outside world, the first art car and the first trash fence installed to snag garbage as it blew about the playa.

The population of Pershing County, the site of Burning Man, surged each September, making Black Rock City the county's largest town. Unfortunately, disagreements grew during this era as did the number of auto accidents and resultant deaths.

Wired magazine featured Burning Man on its cover and serious art was becoming popular as was the flow of liquor. The founders decided at this point they needed to adjust the event's course, shepherding in the Age of Protectionism from

1997 to 2000.

Attendance swelled to upward of 10,000 attendees. Protected boundaries became the norm, as did controlled access to the boundaries, which resulted in far fewer accidents.

Ticket prices increased again, this time to \$50 in advance and \$65 at the gate. County government became more involved, mandating street signs, fire protection system and numbered parking spaces.

To meet some of the restrictions, Black Rock City developed the now familiar semi-circle used for campers' parking. A website was designed and even Google got into the act by developing a Burning Man Google Doodle. The leave-no-trace philosophy was implemented, one of the 10 tenets of Burning Man.

With 26,000 participants in year 2000 generating tons of trash, MOOP (matter out of place) patrols became the norm. Radar protecting the perimeter was installed and 2000 became the last year The Man was raised by ropes.

Succeeding ages included the Age of Outreach (2001-2010), which pretty much saw the event go on auto-pilot and the doubling of the population to include many mainstream folks, who perhaps formerly, eschewed the event.

The Age of Outreach also became the age of emergency services—medical and religious services were introduced. Talk about the largest city in Pershing County—2006 boasted a Burning Man population of more than 40,000.

Black Rock Solar, the first nonprofit solar company in the U.S. made its appearance during this age when a group of volunteers installed a 30 kilowatt array on the playa surface in Black Rock City, themed that year as The Green Man. Later, the team moved the array and installed it in Gerlach, donating the solar project to the town's school system.

The final age, Scarcity, from 2011 to the present is certainly not the end of Burning Man, and certainly a sixth age awaits.

Now, according to Mikel, everybody wants to be a burner. The demand is huge with 70,000 tickets sold by computer via a lottery. "Scarcity raises the price of access," he said, adding wryly, "sorry, the lifestyle you ordered is out of stock."

As the founders of Burning Man age, Mikel confirmed that the old-timers are getting ready to turn over the reins to a younger cohort. "I believe the next generation will make us proud," he said.

He added that although Burning Man has changed over the years, "It is still the most incredible thing on the planet, teaching people how to get along in peace and harmony."