

# *Back in the Country...*

## *Bell Acres Stories*

by Debby Rabold



### **Jonabell Farm**

John A. Bell, Sr. was the fourth generation of Bells to reside in the Pittsburgh suburb of Carnegie where the first John Bell settled in 1768. Orphaned as a child, Bell found work as a store clerk at age 16 and at 21, acquired interest in a local flour mill. Bell became well known in the Carnegie community, counting among his friends those active in Allegheny County politics.

In 1888, a year after selling the mill, Bell was appointed chief clerk to the county treasurer. He was later elected County Treasurer and served from 1891 through 1894, after which, he entered the banking business. Bell soon extended his business interests into oil and coal, becoming Western Pennsylvania's largest independent coal operator with 20,000+ acres of coal fields, two Great Lakes docks and nine mines that he consolidated into the Carnegie Coal company. At the same time, Bell was president of six area banks and owner of the 1,100-acre Bell Dairy Farm in Moon and Findlay townships where his extraordinary knowledge of pedigrees enabled him to develop a prize-winning Holstein herd.

*Bell Farm*



JOHN A. BELL, JR.

Following his 1908 graduation from Princeton University, John A. Bell Jr. was sent to Oklahoma where he remained for the next six years overseeing his father's oil interests before being called home to help with family businesses. Bell Sr.'s reported intention was to make his only son Western Pennsylvania's "coal king".

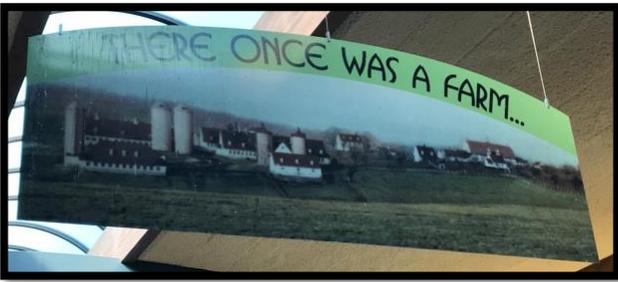
After returning to Carnegie in 1914, Bell Jr. married Nelly Waite with whom he would have four children: Dorothy Bell Evans, John A. Bell III, Jean Bell Snyder and Reynolds Waite Bell. Bell Jr. and his young family lived in a fourteen-room home built for them by his father on the Bell Estate in Carnegie and in 1923, Bell Sr. transferred the deed of his prized dairy farm to his son.

The Bells' multi-million-dollar business empire collapsed in 1925 when Bell Sr.'s flagship Carnegie Trust Company along with two of his other banks collapsed. Newspapers of the day reported extensively on Bell's rags to riches story along with detailed accounts of his financial ruin. Bell Sr. was convicted on multiple counts of embezzlement, but due to ill health, served only two years of his sentence as a patient in Allegheny General Hospital before being released. Never recovering his health, John Bell Sr. passed in 1933.

A downturn in the coal industry also contributed to the family's financial ruin. Bankruptcy sales followed. The transfer of the dairy farm from father to son was disputed by the father's creditors and despite the court deciding ownership in favor of Bell Jr., the farm was sold in 1927 to help pay debts.

The Bell Farm was a nationally known stock farm for registered Holsteins and hosted annual field days for buyers, sellers and those who simply enjoyed spending a day on the farm. The Bell name was much respected in dairy circles and the farm and herd continued under the Bell name long after being sold to Charles Nettour and Edward E. Reick of Pittsburgh's Reick Dairy Company.

The farm continued to operate until 1941 when the herd was auctioned and the land sold to the Federal Government for the construction of an Army Air Corps airport. In 1945, most of the property was conveyed to Allegheny County for construction of a new airport, but not before trees were transplanted to North and South parks and coal was mined. The Greater Pittsburgh Airport opened in the Fall of 1950.



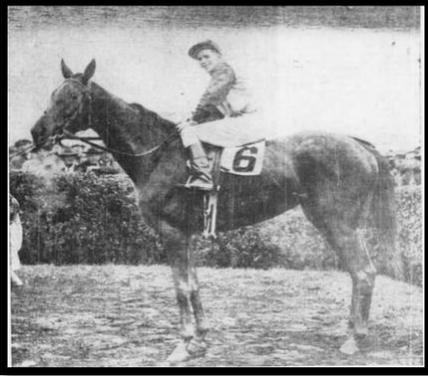
*A photo of the former Bell Farm hangs in the airside terminal of Pittsburgh International Airport. Bellfarm Kitchen is the name given to the airport hotel's restaurant.*

Following the family's bankruptcy and loss of the farm, Bell Jr. headed to Tulsa, Oklahoma where he established a company that supplied oil drilling equipment. His partner in the venture was the son of the founder of Philips Petroleum. Within a short time, Bell Jr. returned to Pennsylvania where he and his family made their home in Edgeworth. Circa 1935, Bell purchased the former Tener farm on Camp Meeting Road in nearby Sewickley Township where he not only re-established a prize-winning Holstein herd, but also began a stable of brood mares that formed the foundation for the family's future success in the Thoroughbred industry.



*The former Jonabell dairy farm on Camp Meeting-Duff City Road.*

Named "Jonabell", the farm consisted of two separate farmsteads. The larger dairy operation faced Camp Meeting-Duff City Road, while the smaller racing stable fronted Camp Meeting Road, opposite Turkeyfoot Road. For many years, the farm was managed by George Goubeaud whose Camp Meeting Road home was once the Jenny School and is now the Bell Acres Municipal Building. Throughout its existence, the farm continually set records for the amount of milk and butterfat produced by its prized Holsteins. Bell Jr. was at one time a director of the Holstein-Friesian Association of dairymen.



In 1939, Bell acquired *Dark Discovery* (pictured left). By 1942, his stable grew to seven brood mares and a stallion. He soon transferred the racing operation to Lexington, Kentucky where both of his sons would relocate and firmly establish the family in the Thoroughbred industry. John A. Bell III established his own Jonabell horse farm in Lexington, which remains in operation, though now under different ownership. Bell III's children continue to work in Kentucky's Thoroughbred industry.

While the Bell sons were at home in Kentucky, the Bell daughters remained in the Sewickley area. Dorothy Bell Evans was an addiction counselor who resided in Edgeworth before relocating to New Hampshire. Her sister Jean Bell Snyder was a long-time resident of Sewickley Heights who was actively involved in community affairs.

The Jonabell dairy remained in operation until 1952 when the herd was sold and moved to Langhorne, Pennsylvania. John A. Bell Jr. passed in 1964, survived by his wife, four children and fourteen grandchildren.



In 1960, Sewickley Township was transitioning into a borough and needed a new name, but the name Sewickley Borough was already in use. Bell Acres was chosen in recognition of John Bell's extensive land holdings within the new borough. In time, the property was subdivided with only the Bell name remaining as a reminder of this once landmark estate.

*A 1957 aerial view of the Jonabell Farm. The horse farm is in the lower left with the dairy in the center. Camp Meeting Road runs top to bottom with Camp Meeting-Duff City Road running left to right.*