

## **HEINLEIN GENEALOGY**

### **BELL FARM**

The pioneer family farm on the frontier had by the 20th century evolved into a large commercial operation known as Bell Farm. This unique enterprise was certainly one of the more prominent aspects of Moon Township's economic history between 1920 and 1940. The Co-operative farm existed on the land now occupied by the Pittsburgh International Airport and the Airport Office Park for a period of 20 years.

Established in the early 1920's by John A. Bell, this modern dairy farm comprised 1,180 acres in both Moon and Findlay Townships. Moon Township had always been primarily farm country and Mr. Bell decided to purchase a number of small stagnant farms combining them into one large modern dairy and stock farm.

The farm had more than 20 buildings including horse barns, cattle barns, a grain mill, pump-house, water reservoir, creamery, office, garages and residences for both married and single employees. There were houses on the farm for the workers and their families and a boarding and rooming house that included a modern kitchen, dining room able to seat 20, and a large hobby/recreation room. The lower level included an apartment for the chef, John Byrd, and his family. Mr. Byrd, who had worked for Mr. Bell for 20 years before operating the boarding house, was known as a great cook. Visitors to Bell Farm always looked forward to returning for another good meal.

The farm employed 35 full-time employees and an additional 35 to 40 men who were hired in the summer making a total of 75 employees annually. The Bell Farm operation grew 200 acres of wheat and 100 acres of oats and barley as well as alfalfa, soybeans, clover and timothy yearly. They bred and raised Holstein cows producing and shipping over 1,800 gallons of certified milk daily. The designation "Certified," indicated that the milk, though not pasteurized, was produced in accordance with the strictest health standards of the time.

The reservoir capable of holding 12,000 gallons of water was built on Pine Hill, the highest point on the farm, where the first airport terminal building would later be built. Two wells brought forth 2,400 gallons of water per minute, which was pumped, to the reservoir one-quarter mile away. The water quantity was sufficient to supply all of the buildings. The creamery was capable of cooling both bulk and bottled milk within 10 minutes after it was produced. There were three large sterilizing compartments and a 14-foot by 14-foot walk-in cooler.

Milk was delivered, completely iced, twice daily to a number of local dairies, including Reick's, Menzie, Page, Otto Suburban, Sewickley Sanitary Dairy and others. The four large barns surrounding the creamery housed more than 200 milking cows. Each barn was designated for a specific purpose: a maternity barn, a bull barn, a dry

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barn, and a milk barn. All barns were equipped with heat, hot and cold running water, and locker rooms.

Mr. Bell hired P. B. Misner, who was considered the greatest breeder and judge of Holstein cattle, to be the superintendent of Bell Farm. Mr. Misner traveled throughout the country choosing the best Holsteins and purchasing them for the farm. Some of these became part of the "Bell Farm Show Herd, which was considered one of the greatest show herds throughout the United States.

Mr. Bell held an open field day at the farm for local 4-H Clubs and students of animal husbandry with judging by farm agents from Allegheny and surrounding counties. The boy and girl receiving the most points were presented a male or female calf of their choice. Activities of the day, which included food served cafeteria style, were held under a large tent which was rented especially for the occasion.

In 1927, Bell Farm was sold to E. E. Reick, Pittsburgh Dairy owner and his partner, C. L. Nettrour. At the time of the sale, the farm's livestock included about 200 of the finest Holstein cattle. Mr. Reick also owned two farms near Rootstown, Ohio, with a herd of about 200 head of Holstein cattle and decided to combine the herds bringing everything to Bell Farm. He also brought his farm superintendent, Mr. Splitstone.

Fred Splitstone, the superintendent's son, recalled how he became a Bell Farm employee. He said his father moved from Ohio and was hired at Bell Farm starting in February 1928. Fred started working there in June 1928 in the milk barn. Then he worked in the creamery for about two years. One day the superintendent asked him to transfer to a job in the office. Fred said that despite his inability to type and his expressed reservations, the superintendent persisted; so, he agreed to take the job. He said he found his new job interesting and enjoyable. And he became proficient at it, holding the job of office-manager and secretary until the farm was sold. Mr. Splitstone said that because of the size and scope of its operation, Bell Farm was considered the ideal location for testing new experimental farming methods and equipment. Two of the new methods recalled were four-time milking and the use of molasses in the cattle feed.

The practice of milking four times daily was tried, then discontinued in the early 1930's when it was determined that the health of the milkers and the cows was being adversely affected by it. The men were in a cycle of milking, eating, sleeping a couple of hours if possible and then repeating the same cycle. Through a six hour cycle of eating, producing and resting, the animals became exhausted and would perspire heavily even in rest periods. The test was discontinued. In another test, many drums of molasses were brought in and added to the feed of the animals. It was explained that molasses provided extra nourishment for the cows as well as making their coats very shiny and smooth.

Bell Farm had a fleet of 9 to 11 tractors that were all made by International Harvester. The farm was one of four rest sites in the country where International

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Harvester would send their new products for on-the-job testing before putting them on the market. Mrs. Delores Heath Gray recalled that her grandfather, father and uncle all got jobs at Bell Farm and the family moved there in December 1929 when she was very young. She has many pleasant memories of her childhood living at Bell Farm. Families were provided with a home, including electricity, water and coal or gas. Garden space was available for those who desired it, and at least one quart of milk was provided daily to each family. Women, girls, and younger boys did not become involved in farm work.

Mac Torrance was the last farm manager of Bell Farm. His son, Ron remembers that he was six years of age when his family came to Bell Farm. He said that since there was no school on the farm all school age children would walk about a quarter mile to the paved road where a school bus would pick them up and transport them to Pleasant View School. Ron said he got a work permit from the school when he was 14 years old and began working full-time at the farm as a tractor operator. As with most other farm employees, Ron said that he was not expected to do other jobs on the farm except in the few instances when weather conditions wouldn't permit the tractors to operate.

In 1931, Mrs. E. E. Reick, always active in church and social work, expressed concern for the spiritual welfare of those who lived and worked on the farm. No farm funds were available for construction of a church so Mrs. Reick committed her own personal funds to the project. She also invited any and all interested farm residents to help and there was a great response from the farm "family." The church known as "God's Church For All People", was completed in 1932.

Church services were held at the most convenient times for the dairymen and creamery men. Sunday evening services and prayer meetings were held weekly, as well as many other activities each week. One popular event was an annual Christmas party where a farm employee served as Santa Claus and all employees and their families would exchange gifts. Even farm owners, Mr. Reick and Mr. Nettrour, though they lived elsewhere, would attend services as often as possible. Many other area residents and tourists passing through would also attend.

In the early 1930's, C. F. Nettrour sold his interest in Bell Farm to Mr. Reick. Also, about this time, farm manager Harry Engle had health problems, which prevented him from continuing in his job and Mac Torrance was promoted co farm manager, a job he would hold until the farm was sold. Though his family made its home in Bellevue, Paul Nettrour, Jr., grandson of C. F. Nettrour and son of Superintendent Nettrour has many fond memories of Bell Farm. Mr. Nettrour recalls that early each spring, coinciding with the outbreak of childhood diseases in the city, his father would announce that it was "time to move to the farm." So all of his earliest summers were spent there. In the days before the parkway, Bell Farm to Pittsburgh was considered to be a half-day trip, either traveling to Imperial to Steubenville Pike through Crafton or to Sewickley and the Ohio River Boulevard; it probably would be

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have been inconceivable to farm residents of that time that anyone would ever travel to Pittsburgh via Carnegie as we now do daily via the expressway.

Everything possible was done to maintain the health of the cows and also to maintain cleanliness of both the animals and the barns. Any animal, that became sick, was cared for personally by top farm employees. A veterinarian was on call at all times. Wood shavings were spread on the floors of the barns and were changed frequently. Large numbers of flypaper ribbons were used in the barns and were changed continually. After surge milkers were installed in 1934, the udders and tails of all cows would be washed before the milkers were attached. All creamery workers and milkers were required to wear white uniforms and each of these employees were subject to an examination each month by the health department. The farm continued to be a vital part of the community.

During the 1936 flood, Bell Farm furnished milk and truckloads of bread normally used at the farm to all families in need in the nearby town of Coraopolis. Also during that crisis, all of the farm's portable water pumps were loaned out to help in the cleanup.

All former farm residents to whom we spoke mentioned the sense of family, which existed there over the years- not only involving church activities, but in everyday life. Also, most residents were concerned about political and other matters, which might adversely affect Bell Farm. Mr. Nettrour said that any politician running for office or taking political action in those years without consideration for Bell Farm would have had difficulty being elected. In 1941 when rumors arose that Allegheny County wanted to acquire the farm property for an airport, Mr. Reick, out of concern for the farm residents and employees, investigated the possibility of moving the entire operation elsewhere, but no suitable location could be found.

Mr. Reick made the difficult decision to sell the farm, including 335 head of cattle, all equipment and the buildings at auction. The cattle sale officially recognized as the largest in the history of the Holstein breed was attended by dairymen from throughout the country. All farm equipment and buildings were sold except for the Bell Farm Church. The church was later sold to the First Church of God, Greensburg, PA. It was moved piece by piece, reassembled, and is still in use today.

Our thanks to former Bell Farm residents and their family members for their bits of information and recollections. We are also grateful to Kathryn Slasor, longtime newspaper writer, who wrote an extensive series of articles on Bell Farm and airport development in the late 1960's, which was also a resource.