

A Life on the Road

Sterling Wells 1920-2007

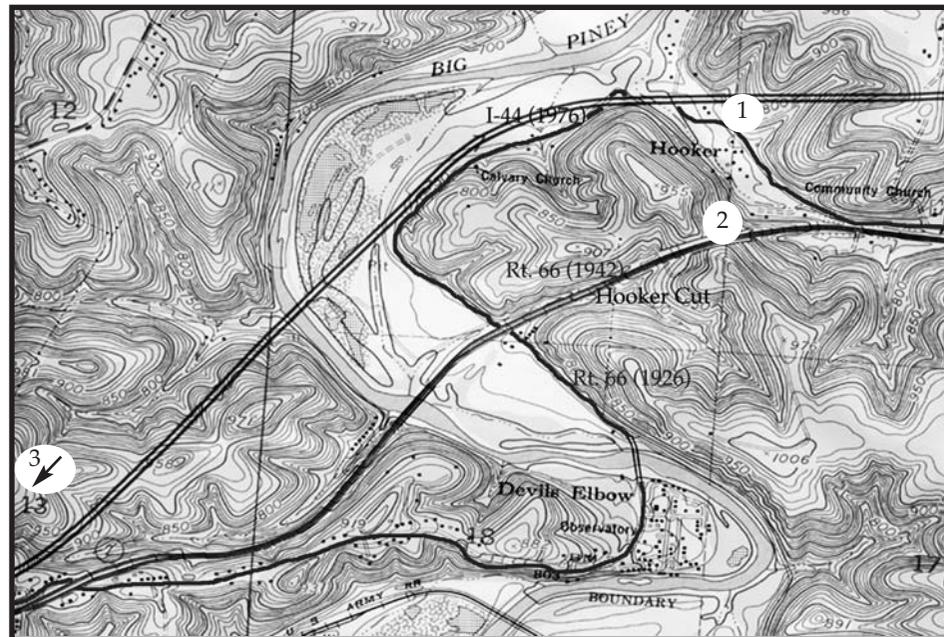
by Jewell Wells Nelson and Sherry Wells Ernst



The life of Sterling Wells more than spanned the official life of the “Main Street of America” — Route 66. Sterling began his life in 1920 alongside Missouri Route 14, a gravel road that ran through the small community of Hooker in Pulaski County. Route 14 was commissioned U. S. Route 66 in 1926 and with that designation came tourists, generally referred to by the family as “flatlanders,” which became the focus of Sterling’s business life.

The Wells family came to Missouri from Virginia right after the Civil War, settling in Hooker Hollow, along the Big Piney River. David Wells, Sterling’s son, recalled how the Wells family became involved in the tourist business at a 2004 meeting of the Missouri Route 66 Association at Witmor Farms Restaurant.

“Squire Wells [Sterling’s father] got started on taking care of



Route 66 changed over the years and Sterling changed with it. The first place of business was Wells Station in Hooker (1). When the 40s four-lane was built, the business moved just east of Hooker Cut and became Sterling’s Hillbilly Store where it was a fixture for decades. When the last section of I-44 was completed in Pulaski County, the Hillbilly Store moved to the junction of I-44 and Highway 28 (indicated by 3). The final move was to Buckhorn at the junction of the old road (Highway 17) and I-44 (not on map.)

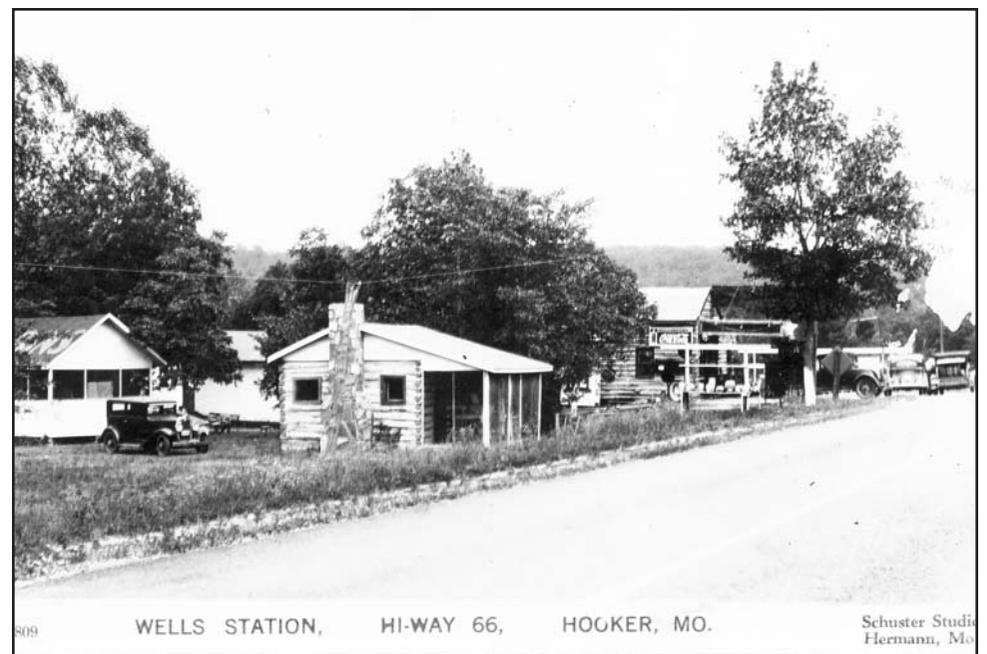
tourists where the Wire Road went across the [Big Piney] ford at Hooker, Missouri. There was a long pull down there that the Model Ts had to get through the mud to the river. Grandpa Squire figured out that if you dammed up that ditch [Hooker Creek], it’d be a good loblolly [mud hole] all the way in through August, maybe. He kept some mules right by it and for a dollar a pull, he’d pull the tourists out. That kind of got us into the tourist business.”

As Sterling said in his only public address about his life as a roadside entrepreneur at that same Missouri Route 66 Association meeting in 2004, *“In the twenties, right after I was born, they decided to build a road [Route 66].”* The two were linked thereafter.

On the following three pages are reminiscences about Sterling Wells from two family members, sister Jewell Wells Nelson and niece Sherry Wells Ernst.



Squire and Anna Wells lived in this dogtrot log cabin after they married, from 1918 until 1925. It was located at the mouth of the Big Piney, near Hooker. Anna fixed meals for river travelers but rafters did not stay overnight at the house. Two of the Wells brothers, Sterling and Dallas, were born in this house. Harold and Jewell were born in a house near what became Hooker Cut. After Squire’s family left, the house was occupied by his brother Tommy.



The first business place of the Wells family was Wells Station. It offered groceries, gasoline, several cottages, and a souvenir and basket shop for browsing. It was located on the south side of gravel Route 66, past where the Hooker Church stands today and the I-44 overpass. A kerosene stove exploded and the resulting fire destroyed two houses and the grocery store. Courtesy of John Bradbury.

My Brother Sterling Wells

by Jewell Wells Nelson

Years ago, a friend of the Wells family was planning to drive to California. My father asked her what she would do if she had car trouble. Her reply was, "I'll call Sterling." When I think of my brother Sterling I think of the many people he helped and the many times he helped me. A few years ago, Sterling got a check from someone he did not know. The note with the check stated that the sender was stationed at Fort Leonard Wood back in the 1950s. During that time, Sterling had loaned the soldier money. The check was the overdue payment of the loan. Others received loans, too. Some repaid. Some not.

I had three older siblings: Sterling, Dallas, and Harold. Sterling was the oldest and more like a father than a brother to me. My dad never liked to drive so Sterling was the first driver for the family and, as each of us got old enough, we became the driver for our parents. When I was young, it was Sterling who took me to the doctor, the den-

tist, or to get a new pair of shoes.

My three brothers and I each had chores and responsibilities as we grew up. Our parents, Squire and Anna Wells, managed a grocery store, souvenir and basket shop, gas station, and several cottages on Old Route 66 in Hooker, Missouri. We usually owned two or three milk cows and several pigs. In the spring, we planted a garden. All of that kept our family busy from milking time in the morning until the last customer left at night. For a break, Sterling would sometimes take Dallas, Harold, and me to a movie in Rolla on Saturdays in the cooler months. In the summer, Sterling was our chaperone when we walked to our favorite swimming hole in the Big Piney River.

Our family regularly attended the one room Calvary Baptist Church. It was across the field on old Route 66, from the swimming hole. Years later, I-44 took down the church building but left many memories, such as "all day meetin's and dinner on the ground." Baptisms were conducted just below the old swimming hole. Sterling, Dallas, Harold, and I

were baptized there in the Big Piney River.

Sterling married Betty Jane Groover right out of high school and they had two children, David Lee and Kathy Sue. David became an attorney and still practices law in Kansas City. Kathy became a teacher and recently retired after 35 years of teaching in Kansas City. Sterling was a devoted husband and dad. He worked hard and seldom took time for a vacation. He did enjoy an occasional fishing trip. He also took flying lessons when he was young and later in life he owned his own airplane.

After they were married, Sterling and Betty lived in a house just behind the Wells Grocery Store. It was a hot dry September in 1945. Betty was baking a birthday cake for my brother Dallas. The kerosene-burning stove she was using exploded. No one was injured but the fire destroyed their house, our house, and the grocery store.

Our family rebuilt a store beside the new four-lane Highway 66 just east of the Hooker Cut. Sterling and brother Dallas operated the Wells garage and gas station next to the store. Dallas later left the garage business to begin his own upholstery business. Sterling and employees continued operating the garage and gas station. After my father died, Sterling also became manager of the store. He and Betty turned the grocery store into a large gift shop. It became "Sterling Hillbilly Store".

The Wells business had to move again when I-44 cut off the four-lane Highway 66. This time, Sterling built only a store, but a larger store, along I-44 at the Route 28 exit near St. Robert, Missouri. Travelers on I-44 could easily see Ster-

ling's giant hillbilly waving its windmill arms. Soon Sterling expanded the retail business to wholesale and retail. He built a warehouse and increased his number of employees.

Sterling had a busy life but he took time for his family. He was my transportation to and from college from time to time. When I was single and lived in California and then Alabama, Sterling was often my transportation to and from the St. Louis Airport when I visited my family in Missouri. He took time off from work to drive to Birmingham, Alabama for my wedding. After the wedding, Sterling drove all night back to this home and went to work in his Hillbilly Store that day.

Sterling brought my mother to Louisville to stay a few weeks after the birth of each of our two sons. He came to Louisville when I had major surgery. He came without a request but I was always grateful to see him.

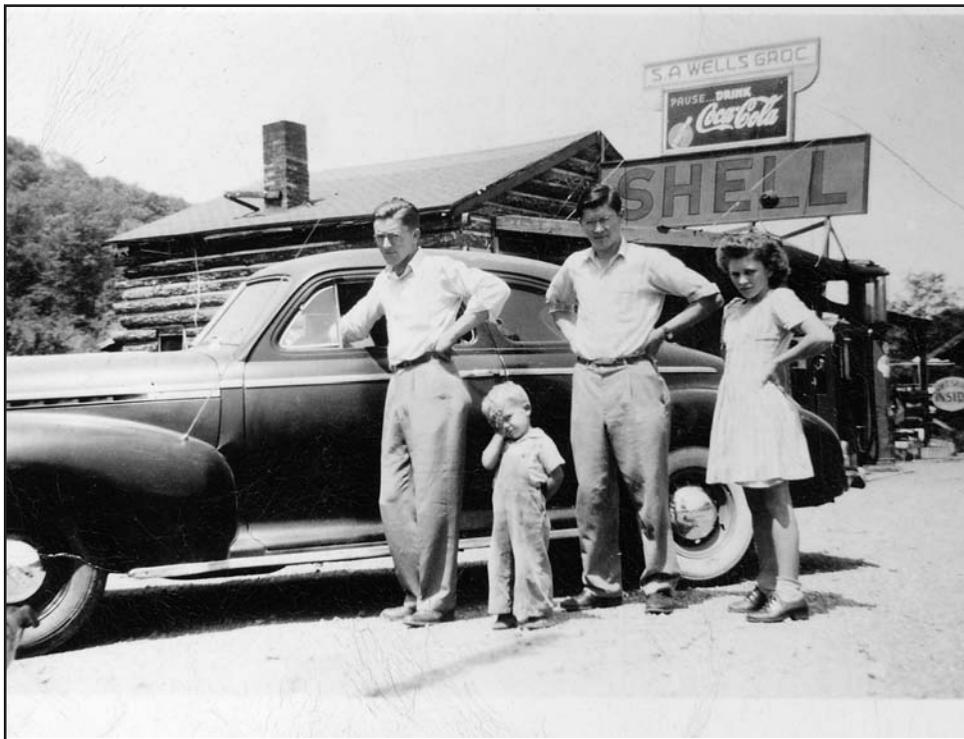
Sterling and Betty had been married 44 years when Betty died from cancer in 1984. Her death was devastating to Sterling. Since work was a big part of Sterling's life, he turned to work for help to heal the hurt. He remodeled his store and concentrated on his ever-growing wholesale/retail business.

Fortunately for Sterling, he and Roberta Grider (a widow) became friends and then more than friends. They married in October, 1985. Roberta ran her own floral shop. The two business partners worked well together until his death July 7, 2007, at the age of 87.

As his age and health began to slow him down, Sterling downsized his business. He eliminated his wholesale business and downsized Sterling's Hillbilly Store to a small store



Squire and Anna Wells, parents of Sterling, Dallas, Harold, and Jewell. Courtesy of Jewell Wells Nelson.



Sterling, Dallas, Jewell, and Sterling's son David. Courtesy of Jewell Wells Nelson.

along I-44 in Buckhorn, Missouri, just west of Waynesville, Missouri. He kept his coffee pot (free coffee to those who entered) and one employee.

The Wells family store location left Old Route 66 in 1945 and moved two more times. But with each move, at least a recognizable section of Old Route 66 was within sight of each new location. Sterling was truly a lifelong merchant along Old Route 66.

Sterling had numerous health problems for several years. When we talked by phone, he always said he was "just fine." His attitude and determination helped keep him going to his store even three days before he died.

When I heard yet another bad report of Sterling's invading cancer, in June, 2007, I went to Waynesville and spent a week with my Missouri family. Each morning, I went to Sterling's store and visited with him. In between waiting on customers, we remembered old times and talked about people present and past. Sterling's mind was sharp. His humor was intact and his memory was good.

He especially enjoyed talk-

Sterling had chest pains and was taken to the hospital in Lebanon. We moved our reunion to the hospital. Death seemed imminent. On July 7, our family gathered around Sterling. Granddaughter Gretchen was expected but had not arrived. Sterling waited for her to get there. Twenty minutes after she arrived, Sterling died. He was in charge to the last.

Sterling enjoyed dressing as Santa Claus during the Christmas season and giving gifts to children and others. Sterling "gave" even after his death. He told his son, David, that after he died, he wanted

David to invite Sterling's family and Roberta's family to go to his store and get whatever we wanted. And we did. We spent a day there. It was interesting watching the family. At first everyone just looked and seemed hesitant to take anything. Then one by one, somebody would say, "I'm taking this." Or, "Hey, you need this?" And on it went until David pulled the store door, ready to lock it at the end of the day. As he closed the door, he looked at his dad's worn chair and said, "Thanks, Dad, it's been a good day."



After the fire that destroyed Wells Station on old Route 66, the Wells family moved to the new four-lane, just east of Hooker Cut. The Wells brothers were owners and managers of the garage at the new location. Courtesy of Jewell Wells Nelson.

ing about his David and Kathy and about his grandchildren and great-grandchildren: David's Gretchen (Rob) is mother to Amelia; David's Kyla (Jonathan) is mother to Lauryn and Kit. Kathy's son, Jon (Desiree), gave Sterling a namesake in December, 2005. Elliott Sterling has a brother Parker and a sister Grace. Kathy's son Preston (Amy) is dad to Charlotte and Elizabeth.

The Wells' family reunion was scheduled for July 7, 2007. On July 6,



Sterling's expanded Hillbilly Store in the 1960s. Children could feed the mule. Courtesy of John Bradbury.

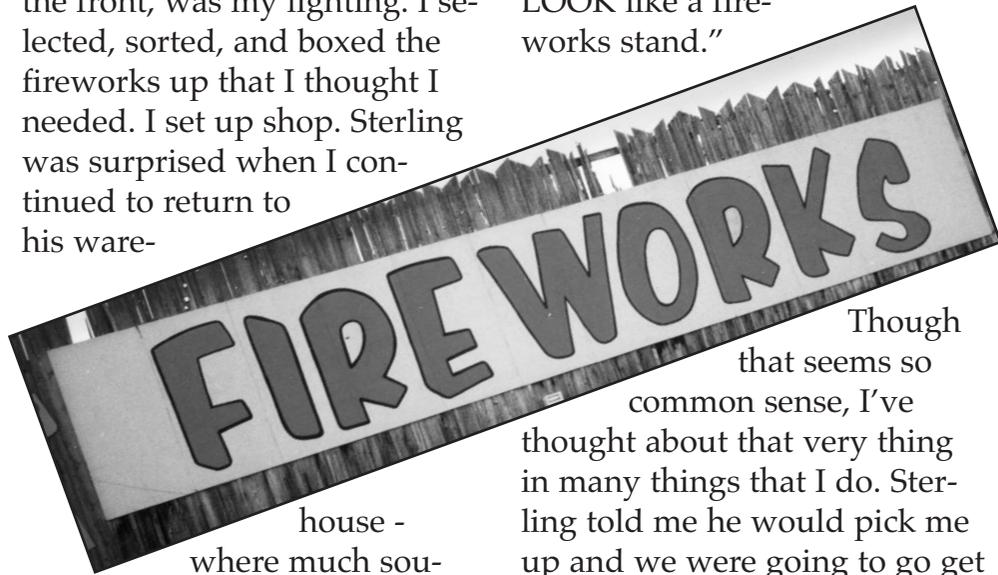
Uncle Sterling

by Sherry Wells Ernst

I had a bright idea one summer to have a fireworks stand. Knowing Uncle Sterling wholesaled them, I bargained with him to let me take what I needed, pay for what I sold at the end, and return to him what I didn't sell. Sterling leaned WAYYYYYYYY back in his chair, closed one eye as if focusing a scope on me, and questioned what I said as if I would change my mind. I remember him asking me if I returned part of the loaf of bread I didn't eat. He let me know, in no uncertain terms, that he never wanted to mess with stands. They were "too much %@#* trouble" and that he didn't want to be bothered by it at all. He eventually agreed to my terms, however, and I was in business.

With the help of my brother and a friend, I set up a pitiful

make shift stand near the bowling alley. I used the back of a horse trailer, an awning, and bookshelves. A string of yellow bug lights, wrapped in black electrical tape, draped across the front, was my lighting. I selected, sorted, and boxed the fireworks up that I thought I needed. I set up shop. Sterling was surprised when I continued to return to his ware-



house - where much souvenirs, fireworks, and treasures were stored - for more and more boxes of fireworks. He began stalking my stand. I'd see him drive by at night, just checking things out. At the end of the season, I happily counted out the money, paid him for the

fireworks, and returned what I didn't sell.

The NEXT year, Sterling called me before fireworks season. He said, "If you are going to BE a fireworks stand, you gotta LOOK like a fireworks stand."

Though that seems so common sense, I've thought about that very thing in many things that I do. Sterling told me he would pick me up and we were going to go get something. It was a long drive before I knew what was up. We ended up in Neosho, MO at a Revival Tent Sale. He picked one out, loaded it up, and WE were in business. (We shared this business for four more years.) It was so exciting. The

tent was blue and white striped and BIG. Again, each night he stalked the stand surveying its success. I think he was excited to see the way things operated as he canvassed the entire operation. We stored all the fireworks in a big truck. Each morning, I would drive his big box truck (a duelly) from his house to the tent, unload and set up the fireworks, then at night I'd load them up and drive the truck back to his house. I had strict orders to use the stick (an 18" piece of a broom handle with a bicycle handle bar grip on it) to "thump" all the tires before I got in the truck. I would do just that (in case Sterling was watching) but I had no idea what I was listening for with the thumping. But thump I did. Our tent was under a big hillbilly waving his hands as part of a huge sign in front of Sterling's Hillbilly Store at the junction of Highway 28 and I-44.

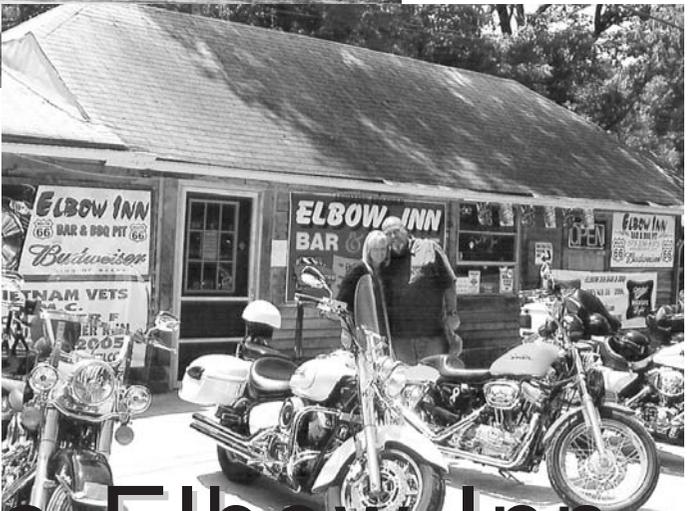
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Dallas and Joyce Wells, Sherry's parents, had a Western Store on Route 66 during the 60s and 70s. It was located at the Buckhorn. This building was razed for the construction of the I-44 Buckhorn overpass and a small strip mall was built. Sterling's last store was located in one of the buildings. Photo courtesy of Sherry Wells Ernst.

Sterling would often bring me a hammer, and sometimes a bag of hamburgers, before he left for the day, and ordered me to bang on the metal sign posts at night so the pigeons would not nest in his sign. Not sure if he was testing me or actually wanted me to do it, I stood fast and proclaimed, "I'm not doing that." Then he turned with a smirk and sped off in his Town Car. A little gravel usually spit from the tires as he floored his car, forgetting the power it had and also to exit with drama. And each evening was the same. Each night I got the hammer handed to me, a point up to the hillbilly sign, a wave of his hand directing me to the pigeons above, then he'd speed off. I would just laugh. I think he was probably laughing, too. By the way, Sterling and I both were amazed at how a preacher would sell us a tent that leaked, which we found out very soon.

The summer of 2007, the box truck was moved for the first time in seven years and 24 years since the first days I spent driving it. When Sterling died on July 7, 2007, his things were dispersed of and items were given away, sold, tucked away as treasure, but not stored. There would be no more stor-



The last section of I-44 completed in Pulaski County bypassed the four-lane through Hooker Cut. Sterling moved to the Highway 28 overpass. Photo courtesy of Sterling Wells.

ing things for now he was gone. Now his things belonged to somebody else somewhere. The hillbilly sign has long been refurbished and has moved farther west, waving its hands in front of a different home (the Mule Trading Post) and with new pigeons, I'm sure. Sterling told me he'd see everybody he knew and loved in heaven (if his cancer got him). On a hot July evening, my husband, Dave, and my nephew, David, crawled under Sterling's truck to air up the tires, switch some

around to make them work for towing, and do a few other adjustments so it would be safe to pull. After a couple of hours of working on the old Ford, my husband backed our truck up to the duelly and hooked a tow bar onto its bumper. He proclaimed he was ready to try to tow it away. As he began to gather tools and picks back into a box, I asked him to wait just a minute. I reached behind the seat, pulled out the stick with the handle bar grip still on it, circled the entire truck, thumped all the tires (just in case Sterling was watching.) Still, I didn't know what I was listening for with the thumping but I knew Sterling would want me to do that.



The hillbilly that once waved from Sterling's stores now is back on the old route at the Mule Trading Post.



The box truck sat in front of Sterling's small Buckhorn store, serving as a billboard. Photo by Terry Primas.