

# Robert A. Bell

By Gary Knehans

In the Pulaski County Historical Society Museum in the Old Courthouse in Waynesville, there is a plaque that reads as follows:

*In memory of Judge Robert A. Bell, whose visionary actions were responsible for many improvements in Pulaski County. 1885-1967. Farmer, auctioneer, teacher, lawyer, Pulaski County Prosecutor, community leader, real estate and property owner and developer, member of the Waynesville school board, Masonic Lodge, Methodist Church, mayor of Waynesville, Probate Judge, Magistrate Judge, husband, father, and friend.*

Yes, even in an era when Pulaski County leaders stood tall, Bell was a giant among men. His name still lends itself to the bluff that looks down on downtown Waynesville from the west bank of Roubidoux Creek.

Every year, the lighting of a nativity scene atop Bell's Bluff kicks off the Christmas season in Waynesville. This

ceremony has continued on an annual basis since its initial dedication December 22, 1952.

To the south of Bell's Bluff and located on the city route in Waynesville was the famous Bell Hotel, Garage, and Resort. These structures are still standing today. Completely remodeled, the hotel now houses Waynesville Memorial Chapel. The renovated garage building houses Every Blooming Thing.

Robert A. Bell was born July 11, 1885, in a log cabin at Cookville in Pulaski County, the oldest of nine children born to James W. and Lora Jane Kimrey Bell. His early education came in various rural schools. He later studied summers at the Conway and Springfield Normal Schools and taught winters at schools in Laclede and Pulaski Counties.

Bell furthered his formal education by attending Washington University in St. Louis, completing a three-year course in two years and receiving a law degree in 1916. After briefly establishing a law practice in Crocker, he moved to Waynesville in 1917 upon his



Robert A. Bell. Photo courtesy of Virginia Woody.

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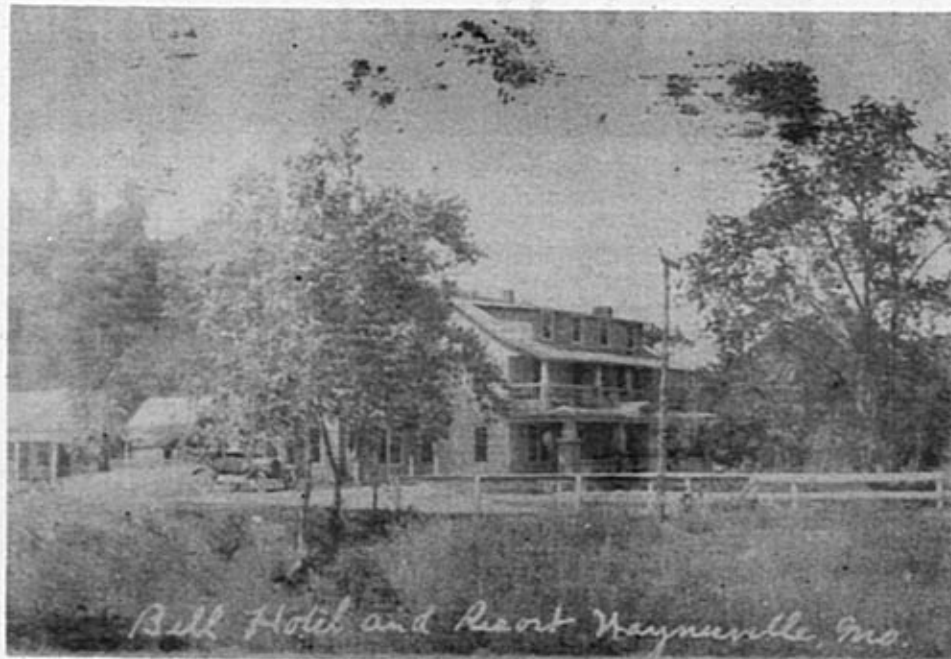
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Democratic Candidate

**Bobby L. Miller**

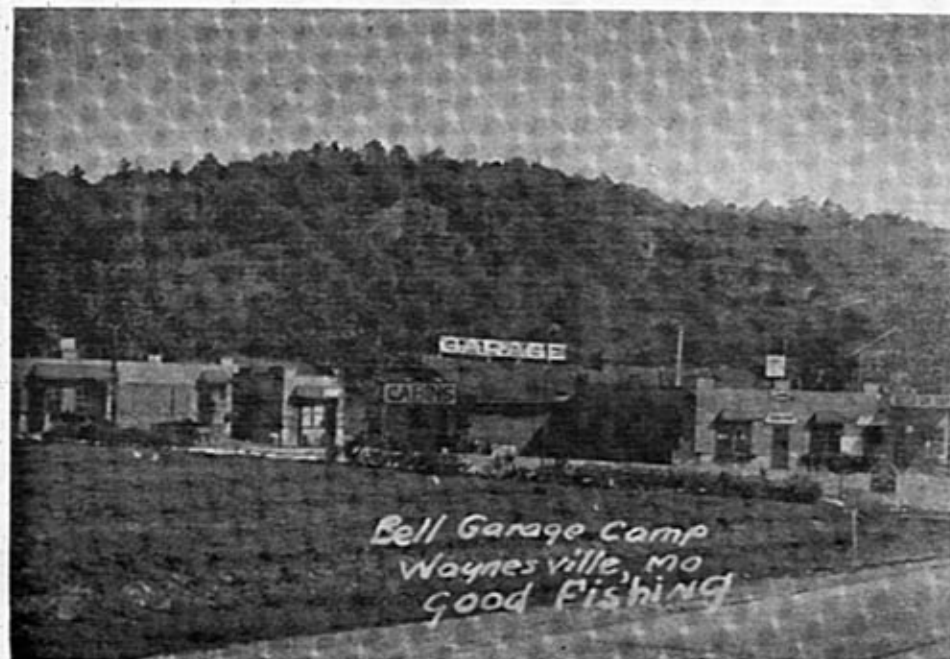
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A view of Bell Hotel and Resort in the 1920's. Postcard dated 1926 supplied by John F. Bradbury.



Bell Garage and Camp. Postcard dated 1938 supplied by John F. Bradbury.

taking office as Pulaski County Prosecuting Attorney. Bell served in that post for four years.

Some ten years earlier in 1906, Bell married Della P. Adams, who gave birth to six children--Jewell, Gladys, Rowland, Florene, Pershing, and Virginia. After Della died, he married Eva Wood on May 5, 1961.

County historians credit Bell with being instrumental in successfully promoting the idea of bringing Highway 66 through Waynesville. He built, owned, and operated Bell Hotel from

1925 through 1937, and personally subdivided and developed a large part of West Waynesville, including Bell's Addition. He was the mayor of Waynesville when Fort Leonard was established.

Bell became a judge in 1950, serving in subsequent years as Probate and Magistrate Judge. He died March 18, 1967, at the age of 81 years, 8 months, and 7 days, leaving a legacy of accomplishments and public service few in our county have equalled or surpassed.

The judge's clerk of sixteen-and-a-half years, Olive

B. Brown, wrote the following tribute a few days after his death:

*This is my little humble tribute to a wonderful friend of mine that departed this life a little over a week ago. This great man was Judge R. A. Bell. His familiar voice and words of wisdom will be sadly missed by all who knew him; but I'm sure that many marks of character will long remain, all because someone took the advice of my friend and partially remade their lives.*

*He was the type of man*

*with an interest in the affairs of the state and nation, but was most interested in the local affairs of his community, regardless of what level they were on.*

*Personally, I liked him as a man, a big and wise man. But I also loved the little friendly chats that we often held on many, many subjects. Yes, a friend, an advisor, and a pillar in our community is gone. But his life and interests shall live on and on for generations to come. It has been a privilege to have known "our judge."*

## Did You Know? . . .

\*Pulaski County was once called the "Switzerland of America"? That reference was made by author Walter Williams in his 1904 book, The State of Missouri.

"Pulaski county is located in the heart of the Ozark mountains," he wrote. "But one-fifth, the stream valleys, is susceptible of cereal growth. The four-fifths is high, broken, rock-bearing mountain land, whose wild picturesqueness has won for this country the title, 'The Switzerland of America.' The St. Louis and San Francisco railroad runs on a ridge across the north end of the county. Its average elevation is 1,462 feet above sea level. South of this come the precipitous bluffs of the Gasconade river, a deep-set, swiftly flowing mountain stream. From the south this river has two chief tributaries, the Piney and Roubidoux rivers; all are chiefly supplied by springs of great magnitude and number. Between the two tributaries in the south side of

the county, is a post oak flatwoods district. This is high, comparatively level land, embracing the towns of Bloodland, Big Piney and Cookville. In the rough lands of the southwest there stands the forest primeval."

\*The Waynesville Chamber of Commerce was organized on Nov. 18, 1940. Its first president was Sam T. Rollins. Prosecuting Attorney Edward Cusick was elected recording secretary. W. L. Burchard was elected financial secretary.

\*Houston, Missouri, once celebrated Old Settlers' Day, too. While this picnic/reunion had been celebrated periodically in Waynesville during the latter part of the 1800's, its annual Texas County counterpart did not begin until 1908.

\*In 1902, Pulaski County farmers planted 27,607 acres of corn, which produced almost

one million bushels of harvested grain valued at \$285,040. Dairy cows that year produced 1,043,850 gallons of milk. There were 11,728 heads of cattle worth \$293,200.

\*Newburg used to be in Laclede County. Well, at least that was the name that R. I. Nelson gave to a settlement where he erected a store in 1852, according to A History of Laclede County by Leo Nyberg. Mr. Nyberg wrote that a few years later, a Mr. Roar established a postoffice and a store three miles northwest of "Newburg". Ben Moore later built a mill and a store a mile and a half east of "Newburg" near the Gasconade River.

According to this account, the Civil War suspended much development in this area while many of the men went off to fight. Roar was killed in the Civil War, but his small settlement survived. In the aftermath of the war, many residents wanted to establish a

school for their children, but couldn't agree on where to build it. They decided to settle the issue by taking a vote on Roar or "Newburg", and chose the latter by just a one vote majority.

Nyberg's book said that Mr. Roar's death in the war eventually led to a decision to relocate the Roar postoffice to the "Newburg" community. But a problem soon developed. There already was a Newburg postoffice, in Phelps County. The name of "Newburg" in Laclede County was changed then to Competition.

Author Robert G. Schultz, however, contradicts some elements of this account. In his book, Missouri Post Offices, 1804-1981, he does not list a postoffice ever having existed in Roar, but notes that one existed in Competition from 1858 to 1863 and from 1866 to 1967.

The community we know as Newburg, located in Phelps County, was begun in 1883. The postoffice there was established a year later.