

FOUNDERS *of the*  
BELL FAMILY

A RECORD OF  
PIONEER SETTLERS  
IN  
MIFFLIN COUNTY  
PENNSYLVANIA

*By* RAYMOND M. BELL

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## **Traditions From the "Old Country"**

When King George III came to the throne in 1760 our ancestor lived in north Ireland, near Belfast, probably in County Antrim or County Down. The Bells were originally Scotch, but had gone to Ireland a number of years before. George Bell's father was a linen manufacturer. He had several children. He was a staunch Presbyterian. Peat was used for fuel; candles for lighting. There was not much farming.

Trouble arose in Antrim and Down about 1760 when the bishops and landlords tried to stamp out Presbyterianism. Houses were burned and people killed. The oppression was so great that George Bell like many others decided to go to America. A few years before he had married Mary Bell (no relation) and they probably had two or three children when they went to America. They sailed from Glasgow and after a long voyage landed at Philadelphia.

## **The Date of Settlement**

Before 1767 we must depend entirely on tradition about George Bell. In that year he was assessed in Fermanagh Township, Cumberland County, Pa., for 100 acres (5 cleared), 3 horses, 2 cows; so that we may conclude that he had been living there for some time. The first assessments that were returned for any part of Mifflin County were those of Fermanagh Township in 1763. In 1764, 1765 and 1766 no assessments were returned due to unsettled conditions. As George Bell's name does not appear in 1763 we can definitely state that he settled in what is now Mifflin County between 1763 and 1767, probably 1765. Fermanagh Township included what is now Juniata and Mifflin Counties. In 1768 Derry Township was formed and included all of what is now Mifflin County. In that year George Bell

was assessed in Derry Township for 100 acres (5 cleared), 2 horses and 2 cows.

The first settlement in Mifflin County was about 1752, but few settlements were permanent until 1765. The Indian Wars of 1755 and 1763 forced the settlers to flee to the older settlements for protection. The rush started after Colonel Henry Bouquet's defeat of the Indians in November 1764 had given the settlers new courage. We find a statement dated May 1, 1765, which says that there were "many settling" in the Juniata Valley.

The rapidity with which the settlers poured in is shown by a study of the formation of the townships. In 1768 it was necessary to form Derry Township and two years later Armagh (which included all of Mifflin County north of Jacks Mountain). The first carriage road in Mifflin County was laid out in 1768 at the petition of many, including the Jacks Creek settlers. It ran from Sherman's Valley to Kishacoquillas Valley. Before that time, paths were used on which it was difficult to travel.

The locality in which we are interested is Jacks Creek Valley. George Bell was probably the first settler at the upper end of this valley. He settled on a branch of it, which was later named Bell's Run. This region was noted for its excellent hunting and that, no doubt, played a large part in its selection. At the time George Bell located there practically all of Mifflin County was in timber except for a few scattered clearings such as Buchanan's (Lewistown) and Brown's (Reedsville). The adventurous Scotch-Irish pushed up into the Juniata Valley, following the streams through the mountains.

In the summer of 1766 Rev. Charles Beatty, a Presbyterian missionary, made a trip through this region. He kept a Journal of the entire trip. He said. "It was truly affecting to see almost every place on the frontiers marks of the ravages of the cruel and barbarous enemy. Houses and fences burned, household furniture destroyed, the cattle killed, and horses either killed or carried off, and to hear the people relate the horrid scenes that were acted". August 25 he went through the Lewistown narrows, "where a rocky mountain bounds so close upon the river as to leave only a small path along the bank for the most part". The path was uneven and obstructed by trees blown down in a recent windstorm. He stopped at Thomas Holt's where he was refreshed. Going on, he found a "pretty good" road. The land was level and very rich, fine for hemp and Indian corn. He saw lots of fine black walnut timber. His account is very valuable, because it is the only description of the region at this time.

In 1768 George Bell and Thomas Holt (mentioned above) were appointed Road Supervisors for Derry Township. In 1769 George Bell was an Overseer of the Poor. These facts indicate his position in the community. He was assessed in Derry Township in 1769 for 100 acres (6 cleared), 1 horse, 1 cow; in 1770 for 100 acres (10 cleared), 1 horse, 1 cow. His name does not appear on the list for 1771 for some reason, but in 1772 he is assessed for 1 horse and 2 cows. In 1772 Northumberland County was formed. The line ran through the land on which George Bell lived, but his house was on the Northumberland side in Penn Township. After 1772 he is mentioned in both Cumberland and Northumberland records. In 1814 George Bell sold a part of his land and described it as part of a tract which he had improved May 6, 1773 and had yearly occupied since.

### **Before the Revolution**

The traditional account of George Bell's settlement is most interesting. Upon his landing at Philadelphia, he travelled westward to the Presbyterian colony at Paxtang, a Scotch-Irish outpost. Here no doubt were friends and relatives. He left his family here while he explored the region of the Juniata Valley. With the true Scotch-Irish spirit he selected a remote spot near Jacks Mountain at the head of one of the tributaries of Jacks Creek. The location was under a big spruce tree beside a spring. Game was plentiful in this vast forest. There were deer, bears, wolves, panthers, wildcats, squirrels, turkeys and fish. Jacks Creek Valley had "better hunting grounds".

George Bell began to clear a site and build a cabin, but he was forced to return to Paxtang, either because of an Indian outbreak or the coming of winter. Much of the travelling was done by canoe. The streams were deep when the land was covered with trees. In the spring he finished his cabin and brought his family to their new home in the wilderness. Pioneer life was not easy. They learned to endure many hardships.

The greatest danger was from the Indians who were always lurking around. They travelled stealthily and in small bands. They might attack at any moment. Many settlers lost their lives during these trying days. Not only might Indians come at night and burn the cabin and murder the family, but there was constant danger from wild animals. Wolves often attacked the sheep and cattle. Then winter was faced with crude equipment. The rifle was always in readiness.

Sometimes George Bell and his family had to flee to Paxtang in times of danger. In one instance it is related that a scout riding at 2 A. M. spread the word of "Indians". Paths and trails were marked by blazing the trees.

The cabin was made of logs and had two rooms. There was a fireplace at one end and a window at the other; doors at each side. The windows were made of thin skins. When they washed clothes they used paddles and smooth boards. An axe was an important tool. Herbs were used for medicine. Although practically independent in their living, still at times they had to go to Paxtang or Northumberland for salt and necessary provisions.

Furnishings were homemade. Benches, stools and tables were made by hand. Floors were made of split logs. Dishes were wooden and pewter. Kettles in the fireplace, candles, and a spinning wheel were to be seen in the cabin. They did their own spinning and weaving and ground their own flour. It was a slow process to cut down trees and clear fields in which to raise crops. Since cloth was homespun, the women spent much time at the spinning wheel. The men wore hunting shirts and moccasins among other things.

The food of these early settlers was limited. Wild game and wild fruit were available at certain times of the year. Hominy, johnny cake, mush, and cornpone were used. Flour was easier to get after mills were established. Maize or Indian corn was abundant. Flint was used to start a fire. Fireplaces were used for heating, cooking, and lighting. The pioneers got sugar from the trees.

### **The Revolution**

The part that the frontier played in the Revolution was largely Indian warfare. In the summer of 1775 the Indians appeared. George Sigler, Jr., a lad of 13, son of a neighbor, on his way to Bell's, to ascertain the truth of the report that Indians were around, was captured by the Indians. He was released after being captive for a year.

The tradition that George Bell was a captain in the Revolution is verified by the Pennsylvania Archives. In Volume 6 of the Fifth Series we find that George Bell was Captain of the Eighth Company of the Fifth Battalion of the Cumberland County Associators (militia) in 1777 and 1778. This company was in service March 1778 between the Schuylkill and Delaware Rivers.

The militia was composed of practically all the able bodied men. They took turns in serving so that there were always some at home to raise the crops and protect their

homes against the Indians. We find the following expression in the Archives. Men were sent out to warn "the militia to march". Equipment included muskets, bayonets, canteens, rifle guns, cartouch boxes, scabbards, and shot pouches.

In 1778 there were Indians all around; they were still around in 1780. Even in 1783 the militia made a tour through the Kishacoquillas Valley, the same year that Presbyterians of the valley called their first regular preacher, James Johnston. During these troublesome times we should not forget the pioneer's brave little wife, Mary Bell. When her husband went out on scouting expeditions it was her task to keep things going.

### **After the Revolution**

The first record of George Bell after the Revolution is his name on the assessment roll of Beaverdam Township, Northumberland County in 1789. The next year a road, 33 feet wide, was laid out from Lewistown to "George Bell's in Jack's Valley". In the census of 1790 he has listed under his name 2 males above 16 and 3 females. In 1791 his daughter, Elizabeth, was married at his home to Charles McClenahen. At various places we find mention of George Bell. In 1813 he appeared on the assessment rolls of Beaverdam Township, Mifflin County.

Belltown was in Fermanagh Township, Cumberland County to 1767; Derry Township, Cumberland County 1768-1772; Penn Township, Northumberland County 1773-1788; Beaverdam Township, Northumberland County 1789-1812; Beaverdam Township, Mifflin County 1813; Decatur Township, Mifflin County 1814 on.

The early Bells were staunch Presbyterians. Probably the first preacher to travel through Mifflin County was Rev. Charles Beatty, the missionary who made the trip in 1766. In 1775 Rev. Philip Fithian, another missionary, found a large society in Kishacoquillas Valley which met in barns. James Johnston became the first preacher of this society in 1784. Services by a travelling preacher were occasionally held at the home of George Bell. About 1800 a Presbyterian Church was started in Little Valley, seven miles from Belltown. Here the Bells attended. The log building, erected about 1806, was one story, with no heat, slab benches, and few windows. All of the first three generations of Bells were Presbyterians.

George Bell died in the spring of 1816 at the home of his daughter, Margaret. Although he was about 80, his hair had not turned gray. He was strong physically, six

feet in height and we are told he was noted for being particular and being a great singer. In his will he mentions ten children John, Jane, Mary, Sarah, William, George, Elizabeth, James, Arthur, and Margaret. The will was written December 29, 1815. Letters were granted April 15, 1816 to the executors, his sons, William and George. All that we know about his wife is that she died a few years before her husband. Much credit is due to this brave little woman.