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Figh-Pickett-Barnes School House - 1837

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THE BELL BUILDING

BY JOHN B. SCOTT, JR.

In 1881, Newton J. Bell left his farm and country store in Lowdnes County to move into Montgomery, where he prospered greatly and soon became one of the city's business leaders. Although still a compact little city, by 1910 the population of Montgomery had reached 38,000. In that year Mr. Bell completed the construction of a new 12-story office building on the southwest corner of Lee and Montgomery Streets that would dramatically alter the city skyline. Designed by the local architectural firm of Ausfeld & Blount, working with consulting engineers, Wescott & Ronneberg of Chicago, the Bell Building had a classic elegance that endures to the present day. Some aspects of the new building were apparently inspired by the famous 1888 Wainwright Building in St. Louis designed by Louis H. Sullivan, a leading architect of the "Chicago School."

One striking feature of the new Bell Building was simply its height of 160.1 feet. The only comparable

"skyscraper" in the city was the First National Bank Building on Commerce Street constructed in 1907, which also boasted 12 stories but was only 155.2 feet tall. Mr. Bell had recently [during that time] helped to organize the rival Exchange Bank and it is left to your judgment, Readers, as to whether he and his architects were seeking to go "one up" on the First National Bank.

The views from the top floors of the Bell Building were spectacular. To the north was the panorama of Union Station, the Alabama River and the distant blue hills of Autauga and Elmore Counties. To the east the view took in Court Square and the heart of the city, then up Dexter Avenue to the state capitol perched on Goat Hill. N. J. Bell died in December 1910 just as the building was being completed and the ownership passed to a family trust set up under his will. His son, N. J. Bell Jr., as trustee, took over management of the Bell Building along with the Whitley Hotel and other properties included in the trust.

With construction costs



BELL BUILDING
From early Postcard
Architects - Ausfeld & Blount

amounting to the astronomical sum of \$500,000, the new Bell Building was a prestigious location and was soon filled with a variety of business and professional offices including many famous old Montgomery names. Among the early tenants were Dr. T. Brannon Hubbard, Dr. Forney Stevenson, Jenkins Brick

Company, Attorney W. A. Gunter (later the longtime mayor of Montgomery), The Alabama Power Company, the Brame, Ward & Hancock insurance agency, Fredrick Ausfeld (the lead architect of the Bell Building), the headquarters of the Alabama Democratic Committee, and the law firm of Rushton, Williams & Crenshaw (the predecessor of Rushton, Stakely and Johnston). The ground floor was occupied by retail establishments, with the first tenant being the Peter Unger bakery.

From the opening of the Bell Building until the mid 1930s, the entire 12th floor was occupied by the Beauvoir Club, the city's premier downtown club for men. The club also had a roof garden on top of the building where the ladies were invited for dances and parties. The folklore is that at several of these affairs, young Zelda Sayre danced on the parapet, showing early her penchant for living on the edge.

Along with card games, dances and other such social activities there was some serious drinking done at the Beauvoir. Ironically, just a few floors down in suite 508 was located the local headquarters of the Anti-Saloon League, a militant organization that was working night and day for enactment of the Prohibition Amendment. This goal was accomplished in 1920 with the enactment of the 18th amendment to the U.S. constitution imposing a national ban on the manufacture, sale and transportation of alcoholic beverages. Prohibition lasted until 1933 and dried up most of the forty public saloons in the city, but it is doubtful that it ever put a dent in the drinking habits at the Beauvoir Club. ²

With the onset of the Great Depression times became hard in Montgomery as else-

where, but the Bell Building stayed remarkably full. The city directory for 1933 during the depths of the Depression showed only a few offices vacant and one main reason was the compassion and/or good business sense of N. J. Bell Jr. as manager. Tenants who couldn't pay their rent were just allowed to stay on with the understanding that they would catch up when times got better. Mr. Bell's son, Tommy Bell, recalls that his father's trust proved well founded, with all of the delinquent rents being eventually paid so that the Bell Building "never lost a dime." A little more of such mutual good faith would certainly help everybody get through our present economic crunch.

N. J. Bell, Jr. died in May of 1941 and his son, N. J. Bell III, took over as primary trustee of the Bell family trust. Later that year World War II broke out and many of the younger men who had offices in the Bell Building went into the service. This resulted in some vacancies, but wartime governmental agencies such as the federal Office of Price Administration and the Office of War Information took over most of this space.

Within a year or so after the end of the war, the flood of returning servicemen had the building full and humming again. Among the new tenants coming in at the end of the war were physicians Bob Day and Jane Day, who took over the practice of Dr. Fred Wilkerson and Dr. Frank McConnico in 1946. Bob Day moved from Montgomery a few years later but Dr. Jane stayed on to become one of the city's real medical icons.

In 1957, after a stint as law clerk for Alabama Supreme Court Justice John L. Goodwyn, I moved downtown to practice law with my father, John Scott,



MR. N. J. BELL, JR.
TRUSTEE OF BELL ESTATE
FROM 1910 - 1941

Sr. He shared offices on the second floor of the Bell Building with his longtime friend, Tom Martin, who was by that time winding down his practice. Their very pretty and very smart secretary, Carolyn (Mrs. Rogers) Enslin, presided over the office. Along with being judge of the municipal court and looking after a busy private law practice, my father had recently agreed to serve as Executive Secretary of the Alabama State Bar and, in one corner of the office, there was an ancient wooden three-drawer file cabinet that contained the entire records of the state bar association.

By the 1950s the Bell Building was beginning to show a little age and had no dedicated parking, but it was still a beehive. In large measure this was due to the affable manner and efficient oversight of Henry Hobbie, who was then managing the building for the Bell Estate. On the ground floor were Dixie Office Supply, Williams Soda Shop and Auerbach-Jordan. The upper floors housed a cross-section of Montgomery's busi-

ness and professional community. For instance, there were quite a number of prominent physicians, including Doctors Fred D. Reynolds, Leon Rosen, John H. Blue, Milton B. Fitzpatrick, Paul D. Everest, Sim Penton, Jackson L. Bostwick, William B. Crum, William H. Smith, Pearson Burke, Bruce F. Holding, J. McIlwain "Mac" Barnes and John L. Branch. A handy resource for the physicians in the building was the medical lab of Dr. Abraham Trumper on the second floor. He ran all manner of tests for the other doctors, giving his office a somewhat mysterious aura. For instance, the windows in Dr. Trumper's lab faced the neighboring Whitley Hotel and in the space between the two buildings there was a platform where he kept a number of female rabbits necessary for the then state-of-the-art test to determine pregnancy.

Along with the medical doctors, there were a number of dentists, including Drs. Frank M. Matthews, Dennis Hugh Carr and Thomas M. Wheeler. Most of the dentists had offices on the upper floors and maybe this was so the spectacular views would keep the minds of the patients off the business at hand. Among the lawyers, the largest firm was Rushton, Stakely & Johnston with offices that occupied most of the 12th floor. From this Valhalla the senior partners - Col. Marion Rushton, Charles Stakely, Watkins Johnston, Jessie Williams and Roman Weil - dispensed all manner of sage legal advice, while the younger trial lawyers - Charlie Porter, Bill Moore, Oakley Melton - and their legendary mentor, Jimmy Garrett, sallied forth to legal battles at the county courthouse and the federal district court, with an occasional foray up Dexter Avenue to the Alabama Supreme

Court.³ Among the other attorneys in the Bell Building were Tom Fitzpatrick, Charles Wampold, Calvin Whitesell and the especially famous John P. Kohn.

One of the most colorful of the Bell Building characters was John W. Overton who owned Turner Insurance & Bonding Company. This agency, with a suite on the second floor, wrote bonds and insurance for nearly all of the major building contractors in Montgomery along with other clients throughout the Southeast. "Big John" Overton took good care of his clients. His affable manner and effective contacts caused his contractor clients to think of him as their guardian angel. The agency mainly wrote coverage through the United States Fidelity & Guaranty Company of Baltimore and was for many years the leading agent for USF&G in the whole country.

The building had a wide assortment of other tenants including The Association of County Commissioners, The Alabama Trucking Association, The Alabama Road Builders Association, Blount Brothers Construction Company, Butler & Cobbs (building contractors), Troy & Troy (CPAs), Cantelou Brothers (peanut brokers), Montgomery Map & Blueprint Company, The Alabama Automobile Dealers Association, R. L. Keenan & Associates (consulting engineers). There were also insurance and real estate agencies too numerous to list.

Without ever leaving the Bell Building one could find medical treatment for almost any known ailment, have any sort of dental work done, get insurance for life, home or business, get any sort of legal help, contract for all types of residential or commercial construction, find real estate agents of every sort and generally secure almost

every kind of service that might come to mind.

During this era the three elevators were still manually operated. One of the operators, Ulysses Pride, was an institution. As a young man of twenty-two, he began work as an elevator operator at the Bell Building in 1941 and kept at it until the elevators were automated in the early 1980s. He knew nearly all of the people who worked in the building and would announce when each one needed to get off. Joanne Dubose Morgan remembers that when the elevator reached her floor Ulysses would intone, "Second floor, Mrs. Morgan, Turner Insurance and



ULYSSES PRIDE
LONGTIME ELEVATOR
OPERATOR AND GREETER
PHOTOGRAPH BY ADVERTISER - JERRY WELCH

Bonding." This personal touch naturally did wonders for the egos of all the tenants.⁴

There was also considerable socializing among the tenants. For instance, during the 1950s the younger lawyers in the building would congregate after work on Fridays in Slick Williams' Soda Shop on the

ground floor to discuss the week's events - including their own woes and triumphs. At one of these gatherings Paul Lowery - who had recently left one of the larger law firms to go out on his own - told the group what a great week he'd had: "I got one \$25 fee and a couple of small ones." Paul probably intended this as a joke but to those who hadn't taken in anything it sounded like big money. In fact, \$25 was pretty significant back then, and anyone coming to work in the morning with a dollar in his pocket was fixed for the day.

For instance, just up Montgomery Street at the Crystal Café the "merchant's lunch," consisting of an entrée, two sides, bread and choice of beverage, was 45 cents plus a dime tip - or maybe a little more if one was feeling affluent. The Crystal and the adjoining Elite Café were both owned by the Xides family and shared a common kitchen. Thus, the fare at the Crystal was almost as good as at the famous Elite - though lacking the ambience and some of the high-end dishes on the Elite menu.

From the outside, the Bell Building now appears to be a solid rectangle, but it is actually U-shaped with parallel wings in the rear. To meet certain requirements of the city fire code the open end of the U was blocked off in the 1980s by a sheet-metal addition housing an interior fire escape. Thus, the space between the wings is now enclosed except on top and is much darker than in the old days.

Back in the 1960s, when the space between the wings was open, the windows of Lawyer Jimmy Garrett's twelfth floor office in the east wing looked across into the windows of the examining rooms of Dr. John Branch and Dr. Mac

Barnes in the west wing. As older readers may remember, Jimmy had an irrepressible sense of humor and his big spontaneous laugh carried over remarkable distances. In the days before air conditioning he kept his windows open in warm weather and his laughter spilled out into the space between the wings. The heat also caused the doctors to have their windows open so that the ladies in the examining rooms could hear Jimmy's unrestrained merriment. Jimmy would usually be regaling a client with some story or laughing at a joke, but over time the ladies using the examining rooms got the idea that he was laughing at them, and it took some serious diplomatic efforts by both Jimmy and the docs to get the ruffled feelings smoothed down.

In 1962, the trust established by N. J. Bell, Sr. was finally wound up and the ownership of the Bell Building passed to individual members of the Bell family. In 1967 John W. Overton, M. R. Thomason and Robbins Taylor purchased the building from the Bell family and held it for the next eighteen years in their TOT Corporation. During TOT's ownership extensive renovations were made to the office suites, the old coal fired furnace was converted to gas, central air conditioning was installed and the elevators were automated. Along with modernizing the building, TOT also restored the lobby to its original elegant condition. In 1981 the Bell Building was placed on the National Historic Register. During the years of ownership by TOT Corporation the building was managed by Smith & Tyson Agency and remained fully leased.

The 1979 city directory shows that the Bell Building was, at that time, still a favorite location for lawyers. Along with



ROBBINS TAYLOR

in his office on the 12th floor of the Bell Building. The CEO of Standard Roofing Company, he was also principal in the TOT Corporation that owned the building from 1967 to 1985.

the Rushton firm, there were Robison, Belser, Brewer & Phelps; Smith, Bowman, Thagard, Crook & Culpepper; and Patterson & Rinehart, plus a number of individual practitioners. There were also still a few dentists, but by that time all of the medical doctors had left for venues closer to the hospitals and with more accessible parking.

During the era of TOT's ownership some of the other flag ship tenants were Algernon Blair Construction Company, Castle Construction Company and Standard Roofing Company. When the Rushton firm moved to Commerce Street in 1980, Standard Roofing took over most of the 12th floor and made extensive renovations under the direction of architect/designer, Joe Lacey. Included was a suite with a dining room and other amenities for entertaining.

Robbins Taylor remembers hosting a number of social gatherings there and the ambience must have been reminiscent of the old days when the Beauvoir Club had parties in the same space.

In 1985 TOT Corporation sold the building to a group of investors from Houston, Texas. Subsequently, ownership passed to Frank Barnes. In 1999 Mr. Barnes sold the building to F & A Realty, Ltd, the California based company that presently owns it. Statewide Realty with offices on the third floor is the present building manager, with Hank Escaravage in charge.

The building is as handsome as ever but not as full as in years past. Probably this is due partly to the general movement away from downtown and partly to the lack of convenient dedicated parking. There are still a good number of lawyers and business offices but the cross section of tenants has changed. The top two floors are now mostly occupied by Legal Services Corporation, the state sponsored group that provides legal help to the poor. Once a citadel of the business community, the Bell Building is now home to a number of advocacy organizations, including the Southern Center for Human Rights, the Alabama Civil Liberties Union and Alabama Arise.

Over the years the character of the business district around the Bell Building has also changed dramatically with old landmarks such as the Whitley Hotel, the Empire Theatre and the Jeff Davis Hotel either gone or converted to other uses. Now, the dominant presence in the vicinity is the Montgomery branch of Troy University, which uses the old Whitley Hotel as its main classroom and administrative center. Back when the Whitley and the Bell Building were both owned

by the Bell family an enclosed passage way was constructed between the third floors of the two buildings. In the old days it was a handy way for the Bell Building tenants to get over to the Whitley coffee shop, dining room and bar when the weather was rough. Now it provides handy access for the overflow offices of Troy University located in the Bell Building.

Of all the present tenants, Durham's Watch and Jewelry Repair Shop has been there the longest. The proprietor, Mr. John D. Durham, opened his shop on the ground floor in 1972 and still continues to provide expert service to his customers. Another business that has been situated on the ground floor for almost as long is J. M. Lebowitz, Engraver dating from 1976.

Being a structure of concrete, steel and stone, even the iconic old Bell Building cannot have a soul, but it can certainly evoke a flood of folk memories. Think, for instance, what has been witnessed over the years from the northeast corner office on the 12th floor: The convivial gentlemen of the Beauvoir Club looking out over the lights of the city on New Year's Eve and lifting a glass to Auld Lang Syne; the triumphal return of the 167th Infantry Regiment up Dexter Avenue after World War I; the mules and wagons crowding Court Square in the 1920s when the cotton was brought to town; the inauguration parades of successive Alabama governors; the cheerful bustle of the downtown stores during the Christmas rush; the daily procession of freight and passenger trains passing through Union Station on the way to all sorts of intriguing destinations; and always the winding river with its backdrop of blue hills in the distance.

It would take several vol-

umes to tell the full story of the Bell Building and touch on all of its tenants over the years. However, it is hoped that the foregoing sketch will evoke a few memories for those who have spent time there and give to others some idea of the large part that this great old building has played in the life of the city.

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End Notes

- 1 The lead architect, Austrian-born Frederick Ausfeld, had a long career in Montgomery and designed a number of other familiar landmarks, including Sidney Lanier High School, the Jeff Davis Hotel and Capitol Heights Junior High School.
- 2 In 1935 the Beauvoir Club merged with the Montgomery Country Club and bailed the MCC out of some dire financial straits.
- 3 As Rushton, Stakely & Johnston expanded, the firm needed more space and eventually took over the whole top two floors of the Bell Building before moving to Commerce Street in 1980.
- 4 When the elevators were automated in the early 1980s, Ulysses Pride was kept on as a night watchman and general ambassador of good will. ❖

Thank you, John, for your typically excellent offering. We always receive fine compliments from your writing. Editor