

WILLIAM J. BELL

Disciple of the Social Gospel

Clarke A. Chambers

WHERE THERE WERE FRONTIERS, regions of recent settlement — places perceived by prudent, settled folk to be abodes of social disorder and moral anarchy — to such wilderness areas came missionaries carrying the good news of Christ's salvation. So had come Jesuit priests and Franciscan friars to the new world of the Americas to claim savage souls for eternal salvation. They came with Bible, cross, and cup, with sheep, seeds for fruits and vegetables, western techniques of weaving and potting, the written word, slavery, and good works. So, centuries later, did solid Protestant congregations in New England organize home mission societies and gather funds to send itinerant preachers and colporteurs into frontier wilderness wherever that might be — the Ohio Valley, the prairies of the Upper Mississippi, the plains of the West, or the crude mining settlements in California, Nevada, or

Montana. In like fashion logging camps from Maine to Wisconsin and Minnesota and, later, to the Pacific Northwest, were regularly visited by shepherds of souls — “sky pilots” — preaching and peddling their spiritual wares.

William Jefferson Bell — Billy Bell of the Range, as he was often known — was one of that calling, who found his destiny and career ministering to immigrant workers on Minnesota's iron ranges from 1913 to 1931, and then broadening his work to reach Indians and whites in Minnesota, Wisconsin, North and South Dakota, Nebraska, and Montana.

LIKE MANY tales, his began simply. He was born in Fergus Falls, Minnesota, November 14, 1888, to James Hamilton Bell and Clara Wiley Bell. He had one sister, Clara. His father was a person of modest means, a farmer for a bit and then a hardware dealer. Bell's was a largely uneventful childhood and youth. As a high-school boy, he had heard the Reverend Frank E. Higgins, “sky pilot” to the lumber camps of northern Minnesota and a friend of Thomas Whittles, pastor of Bell's church, speak of his missionary exploits. Bell had been moved by that “romantic” influence to dream of entering mission work himself someday.¹

THIS ARTICLE is the eighth in a series of Minnesota Profiles, biographical sketches of interesting Minnesota men and women. Each profile presents the salient facts of the subject's life, attempting to characterize the person and to assess the significance of his or her work.

¹ A version of this paper was presented at the Western History Association meeting in St. Paul, October 12, 1984. Interview of William J. Bell by Lila Johnson. February 2, 1968, p. 1, transcript in audio-visual library, Minnesota Historical Society (MHS); Francis R. Bellamy, “Bell of the Iron Range,” in *Red Cross Magazine*, n.p. (December, 1919), reprint copy in William J. Bell Papers, division of archives and manuscripts in the MHS. Unless otherwise noted, all manuscripts and correspondence cited in this article are in the Bell Papers. See Higgins to Bell, February 18, 1913. For more on Higgins, see Harold T. Hagg, “The Lumberjacks' Sky Pilot,” in *Minnesota History*, 31:65-78 (June, 1950).

Dr. Chambers, professor of history and American studies at the University of Minnesota, is the founder/director of that institution's Social Welfare History Archives.



The
LUMBERJACK
 SKY
 PILOT

The above cut is a photo of Rev. F. E. Higgins, commonly known as the Lumberjack Sky Pilot, who for the past ten winters has been traveling the forests of Northern Minnesota holding religious meetings in the various logging camps, distributing reading matter and visiting the various hospitals where the men are taken when sick. Mr. Higgins is now giving his entire time to this work.



He will deliver an address on his trials and experiences as a Missionary in this work

In the

ALL ARE INVITED

Like many small-town Minnesota Presbyterian boys in that generation, Bell's intellectual and moral education had been entrusted to Macalester College, St. Paul, which maintained a church affiliation; he earned his baccalaureate there in 1910. He then attended the prestigious seminary at Princeton, New Jersey, for his theological training, graduating in 1913. There is evidence that sky pilot Higgins followed Bell's career there. Their correspondence shows that Higgins helped Bell shape his plans to work on the Mesabi Range. And in the spring of 1913 Bell received a letter from Higgins, then superintendent of logging camp missionary work based at Delano, Minnesota, urging Bell to join his team with the observation that the field needed a man of "horse sense."²

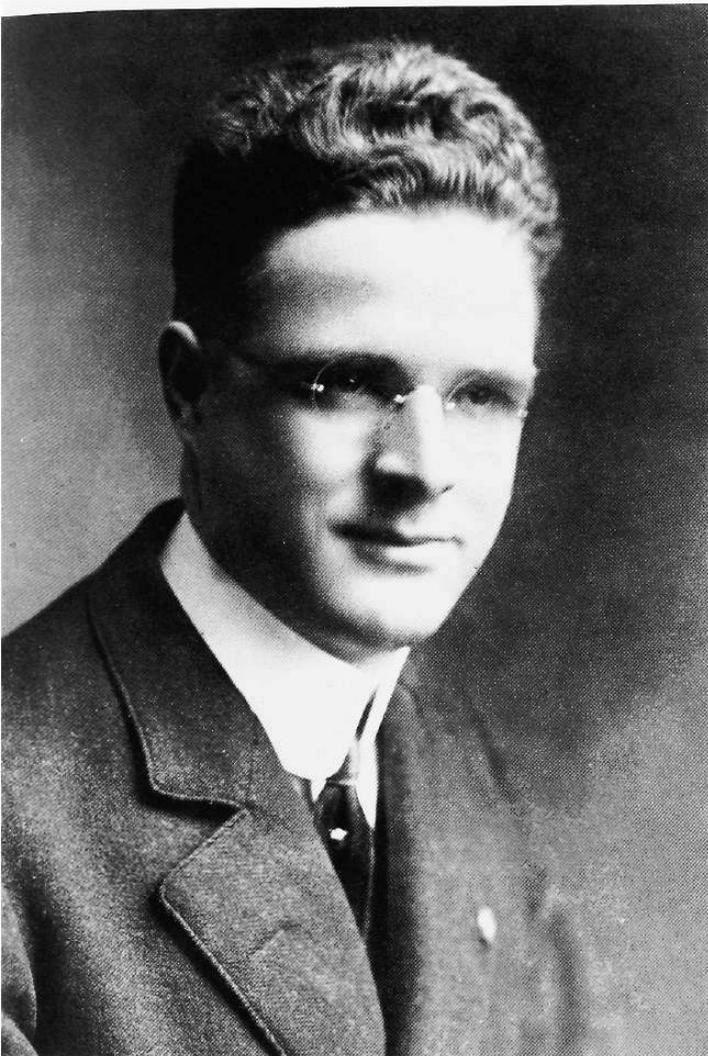
But Bell had his sights set on following the trail Higgins had blazed decades earlier. Lumbering in northern Minnesota had given way to mining, and it was the immigrant settlements on the iron ranges that attracted the graduate's attention. The national Board of Home Missions of the Presbyterian Church, centered

in New York City, offered a program that suited Bell's aim. The board, under its Department of City and Immigrant Work, awarded promising candidates a scholarship to go abroad and study the old-country language, history, and culture of an American immigrant group. The student would then return and, thus educated, go as a missionary among those people.

Bell planned to take advantage of this arrangement. He wanted to marry Helen Mary Hunt, his sweetheart from Macalester, study for a year in Zagreb, Croatia, and then minister to the South Slavs of the Mesabi and Vermilion ranges. The home mission board, amenable to Bell's plan, however, had little knowledge of conditions in northern Minnesota. And so a compromise was effected. William P. Shriver, national director of the board, suggested that Bell spend the summer of 1913 surveying conditions on the ranges; if his study showed there was work to be done, he would receive his scholarship to Zagreb. And so, with song sheets, the New Testament gospels in half a dozen immigrant languages, a bundle of religious leaflets stuffed in a pack sack, and a folding organ on his back, he launched his ministry of "Visitation, Colportage, and pastoral work among the aliens" of the iron ranges.

THE YEAR in Zagreb never materialized. Bell's summer on the ranges proved to the Board of Home Missions in New York and the Duluth Presbytery (whose domain covered the area of Bell's endeavor) that there was much work to be done. Bell proved to be a quick learner, long on common sense. His letters to Shriver, whose inspiration and financial support were to sustain his parish for nearly two decades, give evidence of an astute observer of the local scene. Although the economy of the ore industry was strong, conditions for laborers were both onerous and hazardous, and destitution was common among the families of ill-paid workers. Socialist beliefs were spreading. Among immigrants from southern and eastern Europe there was widespread defection from religion and accumulated hatred of the state church. Immigrant parents neglected their children and forbade them to attend Bell's Sunday schools, held in public-school and other buildings at various range locations. Even though they had no church of their own, they were "wedded to their own denominations. . . . They are not cruel," Bell wrote back to Shriver, "they have never heard of the rights of childhood." He took the response of one immigrant to his pastoral call as typical of many: "Me

² Here and two paragraphs below, see Bell interview, 1968, p. 2-4, 27; F. E. Higgins to Bell, April 14, 1913; Bell, "Report on Summer's Work," 1913, p. 3. One wonders if ever, that summer, he paused to consider the meaning of the word he was to use so often in the years to follow — "colportage" — literally to carry tracts around one's neck.



WILLIAM J. BELL, as he looked about 1920

believe [*sic*] God, me believe Christ, me believe Bible, me no believe priest."³

Described in one news clipping as a preacher without a pulpit, as a pastor "doing what he can to help them [immigrant worker families] in this world and for the next world," Bell confessed to Shriver that "my whole heart is here." On the range "I want to do right for Christ, and His church and these people who so need Him."⁴

Shriver concluded that the field was "wide open"; to interrupt the work Bell had so successfully begun would be to lose momentum. So Bell was persuaded to take a regular appointment as Sunday School missionary; his charge was to work with children, whether or not they belonged to a church. His scholarship was postponed only for a year or so, until he established a routine. He did marry Helen Hunt in December, 1913, but it was to Mountain Iron that he brought her. By the time he was ready to travel to Zagreb, World War I made such a venture impossible.⁵

Later in life, Bell remembered how woefully inadequate had been his training at Princeton in preparing him for what he would confront on the mining frontier in Minnesota. After six months on the range, he recalled, his inadequacies led him to a feeling of bankruptcy, and so he embarked on William R. Harper's American Institute of Social Studies. This continuing correspondence course sponsored by the University of Chicago introduced him to current literature in history, politics, economics, and industrial relations. He later took further steps to bolster his training. In 1920 he used the "foreign study" scholarship awarded him earlier by the Board of Home Missions to study for a year at Columbia University and Union Theological Seminary with George Coe, Harry Ward, and Harry Emerson Fosdick. This interim undoubtedly strengthened his commitment to social Christianity.

WITHIN the Duluth Presbytery and the Minnesota Synod, the Range Parish occupied an anomalous position. As authorized by the presbytery in the summer of 1914, the Range Parish was to be "a federation of churches and home mission work on the Vermillion and Mesaba ore Ranges, designed to inspire Presbyterian work on the Range with a common spirit and purpose." General policy, staffing, and recommendations as to budgeting were to be worked out in conference between a special Administrative Missions Committee of the Duluth Presbytery, created with that specific charge in mind, and the national Board of Home Missions, which agreed for its part "to assure a worthy maintenance of the whole enterprise for a period of years."⁶

Although some of Bell's staff worked through various established parishes, the Range Parish had no home

³ Bell to William P. Shriver, August 18, 1913. Bell repeated some version of that anecdote, later with correct spelling, well into the 1920s. For background on social and cultural conditions on Minnesota's iron ranges through the 1920s, see Clarke A. Chambers, "Welfare on Minnesota's Iron Range," in *Upper Midwest History*, 3:1-40 (1983). See also Timothy L. Smith, "Factors Affecting the Social Development of Iron Range Communities," "Educational Beginnings, 1884-1910," and "School and Community: the Quest for Equal Opportunity, 1910-1921"; and Hyman Berman, "Education for Work and Labor Solidarity: The Immigrant Miners and Radicalism on the Mesabi Range," unpublished papers in the MHS reference library.

⁴ *Hibbing Daily Tribune*, September 25, 1913, p. 1; Bell to Shriver, October 14, 1913.

⁵ Here and below, see Bell interview, 1968, p. 3-4, 7.

⁶ Presbyterian church organization builds from the presbytery (local association of churches) to the synod (regional level) to the national church. Carbon of "Resolution of the Duluth Presbytery," April 12, 1916; Bell to Shriver, April 27, 1921. The resolution came in response to the 1916 report of the Administrative Missions Committee which, presumably, had summarized the origins of the Range Parish in 1914.

base of its own. Funding came chiefly from the national Board of Home Missions of the Presbyterian Church, although its annual budget request was routed through the Administrative Missions Committee. Recurring appeals from that committee to the Minnesota Synod for supplementary financial assistance for the Range Parish seem to have achieved but modest success — an occasional small grant for mission work provided by the division of Synodical Women. Lacking firm evidence on budgeting, one can only deduce that neither the presbytery nor the synod had the resources to underwrite the relatively expensive mission work of the Range Parish. There were, however, occasional gifts such as the one that came in the spring of 1921 from a patron in Pasadena, California, of whose generosity Bell wrote to Shriver: “Mr. Gamble . . . whose

BELL'S focus on immigrants is clear in this carefully executed cover for the 1920 budget.

A Program and a Budget

**\$13,100.00 for the Range Parish
for 1920**



**The Range Parish
Presbyterian**

William J. Bell, Director

Mountain Iron, Minnesota

‘special’ I am, has bot me a new Ford. Which is cause of great rejoicing.”⁷

Bell soon gathered a staff of itinerant missionaries to carry services to immigrant communities. These men and women would bring the gospel, but their work would quickly take a practical turn. From the beginning Bell sensed the need for education, health care, recreation, and community improvement as well as spiritual uplift. In time he would become as much social worker as minister. By Presbyterian doctrine, good works might not earn salvation, but the people of the ranges, as he saw it, needed tangible assistance. The church must be a servant of the people, and yet not use service as “bait with a concealed hook of ‘religion.’” The master propagandist of us all “went about doing good” as part of his ministry itself.”⁸

Perceiving that Italian workers appeared to be more alienated from church than other national groups, he retained Salvatore Terranova, Leone Fornaturo, and Nicola Santella, all of whom were ordained Protestant ministers, to work with Italian settlements in Gilbert, Eveleth, South Hibbing, and Calumet.⁹ Other staff were soon added, among them Louise Murray, Antoinette Jordan, and Ruby Hankey. None of these women were natives of the area.

Louise Murray, who joined the Range Parish in 1918, manifested in her life the precepts and strategies of social Christianity. Trained in music education, she had worked in a Hispanic community in New Mexico from 1911 to 1913, in a Presbyterian academy for girls in Logan, Utah, for two years, and as pastor’s assistant in Mizpah Mission Church Settlement in New York City. Given a choice of where she might settle on the range, she quickly decided upon Keewatin, a village just west of Hibbing, “where no church worker had ever lived.” She later moved to Calumet, where she initiated an elaborate Sunday school program, including music and crafts along with religious education. Subsequently she reached out to older children through Boy Scout and Girl Scout units, a Junior Homemakers Club, a Sunshine Club, and a Story Hour Club.¹⁰

⁷ Duluth Presbytery, Minute Books, 1913–33, in Hammond Avenue Presbyterian Church, Superior, Wisconsin.

⁸ Bell, typed address, dated by hand 1925.

⁹ For more on the religious disaffection of the ranges’ Italians and the subsequent Protestant-Catholic battle for their souls, see Rudolph J. Vecoli, “The Italians,” in June D. Holmquist, ed., *They Chose Minnesota: A Survey of the State’s Ethnic Groups*, 460 (St. Paul, 1981). Presumably the Board of Home Missions helped Bell locate his assistants. Santella had studied at Bible Teachers’ Training College in New York and Fornaturo was a graduate of Princeton Theological Seminary; *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, August 14, 1921, sec. 2, p. 8.

¹⁰ Louise Murray, manuscript notes in “Notes on Calumet Church History.” In the summer of 1963, Murray was still

To facilitate this work with children and youths, Murray engaged in friendly visiting in their homes. All of these activities were accomplished with the support of Bell, who encouraged her to break from formal catechism lessons so that the Bible passages her young charges learned would be rooted in "pleasant associations, useful crafts, happy experiences, music, and play." It was Bell's strategy, Murray observed, to invest in persons, not in physical plant; she and other Range Parish workers staged their activities in schools, village halls, lake camps, ethnic halls and lodges, and on the front porches of private homes. Gatherings on Murray's doorstep became known locally, and affectionately, as "Aunt Louise's Dago School."¹¹

Bell's leadership was also evidenced in annual reports of Ruby Hankey, who joined the Range Parish in the 1920s: mission workers were to engage in nature study, sports and games, handicrafts, and singing so that young folks would come to associate religion with "out-of-doors beauty, comradeship, and good times."¹²

WILLIAM BELL, who trained his staff to these goals and activities, regularly visited the mission sites and engaged actively in their community efforts. He was a lively storyteller, and his stereopticon slide shows, given in the evenings after dark to crowded congregations of children and parents, became occasions for the

living on the Mesabi Range and lent me a great bundle of papers, including a number of black notebooks, some correspondence, pamphlets, and other ephemeral material. I took extensive notes on these papers, because she asked for their return, having in mind some writing of her own; never, to my knowledge, did she write anything, at least for publication. Her papers were not deposited anywhere and must be presumed lost. I have placed my manuscript notes, including notes on an interview with Murray, July 15, 1963, in the MHS; subsequent footnotes will refer to the Murray Papers.

¹¹ Murray interview; notebook, undated, clearly the 1920s, Murray Papers. The quoted passage is a summary of Bell's advice to her.

¹² Ruby Hankey, "Report of Work With the Range Parish, September 1927 to February 1929."

¹³ Bell to Shriver, August 28, 1913.

¹⁴ Typescript for stereopticon show, undated, probably in the mid-1920s.

¹⁵ Bellamy, in *Red Cross Magazine*, n.p. (December, 1919).

¹⁶ William J. Bell, "Great Factors, Democracy and Religion," and "The Church in Industrial Communities," in *Home Mission Monthly*, March, 1921, March, 1923. See also *Pioneer Press*, August 14, 1921, sec. 2, p. 8. Louise Murray's notebooks echoed that theme: immigrant workers needed "understanding, friendship, guidance, Christian Americanization." (Bell, like others, variously spelled the name Mesabi, Mesabe, and Mesaba.)

¹⁷ Interview of William Bell by Timothy L. Smith, July 15, 1963, copy of notes in MHS; N. Bratinich to Bell, January 18, 1927.

gathering of families. At those occasions, Bell preached Christian homilies, the social gospel of service, the American ideal of brotherhood to be realized across lines of nationality and culture, and the tenets of what Range Parish leaders often identified as "Christian democracy." Slides variously depicted the life of Christ, the settlement of the iron ranges, and scenes of countryside in Italy, Yugoslavia, and eastern Europe from where so many of his parishioners had emigrated. As Bell confided to Shriver: "With the slides I could get into halls and school houses where it would be impossible to preach."¹³ Bell also set up a stereopticon show that explained the work of the Range Parish to potential donors of funds in Presbyterian settings away from the iron ranges. The final slides in that show portrayed a congregation of 13 different nationalities in Bovey as evidence of the creation through the Range Parish of "a new race of mankind, a new democracy."¹⁴

Bell shared with millions of his fellow citizens a vision of the nation that melded strands of democracy, social progress, Americanism, and Christianity. An article about him, published at the height of patriotic sentiment following the First World War, carried a picture of children gathered for a Range Parish affair with the caption: "Their patriotism and Americanism are quickly developed and as softening influences are brought to bear upon them, they become the nucleus for a better citizenship."¹⁵ In Bell's own writings during the 1920s the concept of "Christian citizenship" recurs. "There is a spirit of democracy on the Mesaba," he proclaimed, because its citizens were a "pioneer" and "frontier" folk. On the ranges diverse peoples from many different national traditions mingled together; in cultural variety lay a potential for the making of a new America. "The range is democratic," he concluded, "because it is polyglot."¹⁶

The Range Parish preached an Americanism, however, that expressly respected the varied ethnic traditions from which the immigrant workers had come. Louise Murray, one of Bell's most loyal colleagues, observed that she had to work as much by listening as by talking: "I had to keep still in nineteen different languages." In Sunday school she urged children to teach her, and the other pupils, one of their own hymns before she taught them one of hers.

In 1963, Bell reminisced about officiating at Serbian funerals when no Orthodox priest was available, and his papers contain a letter from an officer of the Serbian Benevolent Society, Eveleth, expressing the society's gratitude for a gift from the Range Parish of 100 copies of the gospel in Serbian. No other church had ever been so generous and friendly.¹⁷

Nearly every issue of the *Range News, Presbyterian*, which the Range Parish began publishing in 1914 (and which Bell edited), illustrated outreach to varied

immigrant groups. Columns in Italian by Nicola Santella came to be a regular feature, together with articles on life in the old country and on the survival of old world national cultures in America. One issue, for example, reported on a joint service of parishioners from Gilbert and Eveleth on September 20, held to mark that day in 1878 when Garibaldi and Victor Emmanuel marched victoriously into Rome.¹⁸ An early paper, March, 1915, carried on the front page a poem by Frederic J. Haskin — “I Am the Immigrant” — celebrating the contribution of immigrants to American industry and life. Concluding lines ran: “But my brawn is woven into the warp and woof of the fabric of your national being. My children shall be your children and your land shall be my land because my sweat and my blood will cement the foundations of the America of to-morrow.”

The inspiration was American, democratic, and Christian as Range Parish leaders saw it. Bell never ceased making pastoral calls during his 20 years on the range. Of course the church must concern itself with social betterment. Only in that fashion could Christianity “make real its claim to all life and all of life,” Bell declared in 1925. “A craft school or orchestra or drama club or baby clinic or pig club or good roads association do much to make genuine the interest of church leaders in the whole community. Professional social welfare folk need this interest of the church too. For social welfare work is cold and dead without the element which religion gives to work and workers. . . . Problems of family, unemployment, neighborhood quarrels, sickness, mother’s pension, and relief alternate with the institutional problems of church worship and religious education.”¹⁹

Louise Murray, for her part, put similar sentiments in the context of Christian witnessing. It was not enough to give material relief or to join in common prayer; one must give of one’s self and go to live with others, share their joys and sorrow, live “alongside” of others in “loving sympathy.” Her little black notebooks, in which she set down her own reveries together with the thoughts of others she gleaned from her reading, recorded a passage Murray had taken to heart from Dr. Wilfred T. Grenfel’s missionary memoir, *Adrift on an Ice Pan*: “When you set out to commend your gospel to men who don’t want it, there’s only one way to go about it — *to do something for them that they’ll be sure to understand*. The message of love that was made flesh and dwelt amongst men must be reincarnate in our lives if it is to be received today.”²⁰

Murray’s code of life and conduct reflected many influences — transcendentalism laced with traditional American practicality, a concern for children and youth as the hope of the world, and the more genteel aspects of social Christianity. But most immediately

and concretely, her life showed the personal influence that her friend and superintendent, Billy Bell, had on all who were touched by the force and authority of his personality and example.

HIS WAS a team effort that began at home. Bell could count on his wife’s uncritical and devoted service. The Bells had four children: Mary Elizabeth, born in 1915; James Hunt, 1916; Arthur Edwin, 1919; and Dorothy, 1924. More disciplined than her husband in the application of Presbyterian mores of that generation, Helen Bell imposed upon her children a strict piety that included a prohibition on card-playing, other games, and movie-going on the sabbath. Her boys were kept in knickers some time after other youngsters in Mountain Iron had graduated to long pants. In all things she was more conservative and prudent than her flamboyant husband, and yet she lovingly accorded him the respect she felt his due. She customarily addressed him as “William” and was made uneasy when others preferred the more informal and familiar salutation of “Billy.” Never fully at home in the small mining towns of the iron range, she deferred to the needs of her husband’s career, learned to accept his breezy style, and through it all effectively managed the household during his frequent absences. Hers was the chief responsibility, moreover, to be restaurateur and hotelkeeper for myriad visitors who found warm hospitality, lodging, and sustenance in the Bell home. On such occasions, the young boys surrendered their rooms to a parade of guests and bedded down in the attic.²¹

Life under primitive conditions that prevailed in these early years on the ranges was not always easy, although Bell’s steady and generous salary from the Board of Home Missions, plus house and car, made for more secure and comfortable conditions than those enjoyed by immigrant workers’ families. Such relative affluence provided no defense, however, against illness; the family had to bear a burden of grief when, in 1925, the baby of the family, Dorothy, died of scarlet fever and pneumonia. Conditions of quarantine restricted attendance at the burial to household members, but immigrant neighbors, religious associates,

¹⁸ *Range News, Presbyterian*, October, 1919, p. 3. A broken run of the monthly newspaper, 1914–1920, is in the MHS reference library. Scattered copies of the journal were also in the Murray Papers.

¹⁹ Bell, typescript of address, dated by hand 1925.

²⁰ Here and below, see Murray Notebooks which include poems and prayers reflecting the essence of personal, Christian witnessing. She reminisced to the author, however, about many lonely nights when she cried herself to sleep.

²¹ On the affairs of the Bell family, here and below, see author’s interview of James and Edythe Bell, St. Paul, November 17, 1984, notes in author’s possession.



HELEN BELL, surrounded by three of the Bell children: James, Arthur, and Mary Elizabeth about 1926

and friends gathered at an appropriate distance on the edge of the desolate cemetery to show their affection and respect.

The Bell children witnessed in their own lives the influence of their parents. Like their father and mother, all attended Macalester College. After raising a family in California, Mary worked for the YWCA; Arthur found his calling as an agent and officer for the Ministers' Life Insurance Company in Minneapolis. James, who was attracted to a ministerial career by the joy and spontaneous fun he observed as a boy attending staff meetings of the Range Parish, pursued his theological training first, like his father, at Princeton Theological Seminary. Disappointed by his education there (echoing his father's similar disenchantment a quarter of a century earlier), he transferred to the School of Divinity at Yale University and subsequently enjoyed a long and rewarding career as a Presbyterian minister in the Upper Midwest.

A LIBERAL Protestant in a presbytery dominated by fundamentalists who were conservative in theology

²² Duluth Presbytery, Minute Books, 1913-1933.

²³ Bell to Shriver, April 27, 1921; Duluth Presbytery, Minutes, September 27, 1922. The minutes of July 11, 1921, evidence an effort to regularize and enlarge the role of the presbytery in Range Parish affairs, but no documentation exists showing successful implementation of this resolution.

and moral code. Bell nevertheless became an active and assertive participant in the affairs of the Duluth Presbytery, which at that time incorporated churches throughout St. Louis County. Minutes of that body show Bell in all-but-unbroken attendance at the quarterly sessions. Although uncomfortable with many of the attitudes of those fellow ministers (whom he termed, in private conversation, "fundies"), Bell was frequently called upon to chair or join committees on Christian Education and even, at least once, on Temperance and Moral Welfare. He examined candidates for ordination, led the assembly in prayer, moderated sessions, and, of course, reported on the outreach mission of the Range Parish.²²

Bell's remark to Shriver that the presbytery "has bungled the work at Tower for two years now, and finally turned it over to the Parish this spring" indicates persisting differences on policy and program. Attempts of the presbytery to achieve advisory or supervisory power over the work and the staff of Bell's operation appear to have been frustrated; the presbytery and the synod, having a slim purse, lacked the power to make effective their wishes. In its September, 1922, session, for example, the presbytery, protesting that "there is no suggestion of the slightest antagonism between the Presbytery of Duluth and the work either on the Ranges or in the lumber camps," declared in its "overture" to the state synod that the mission work "is of such a nature as to be of more than local interest, being national in significance."²³

Opposition to Bell's leadership centered in the Cleveland Avenue Presbyterian Church of Virginia,

THE MANSE at Mountain Iron and behind it the Presbyterian church where Bell frequently preached



whose pastor, L. W. Gade, was reluctant to co-operate with the Range Parish, having his own outreach mission in that vicinity.²⁴ Some conservatives in the presbytery were offended by Bell's theological liberalism, by the this-worldly social emphasis of his mission, and undoubtedly by his free-wheeling personal style as well. But as long as the national board met the budget, Bell could count on enjoying the liberty to shape program largely as he and his associates wished.

Since the presbytery could not direct his program, Bell chose to place priority first on work with children and youths, and then on community betterment. Beginning in 1921 and continuing for a few years after Bell departed the Range Parish in 1931, the Christian education program was enriched each summer by the services of full-time volunteer workers, typically four students from Macalester College, several teachers recruited from local public schools, and an occasional seminary student. Funds to cover expenses of these volunteers were provided by the Women's Board of Home Missions.²⁵

The volunteers received training for their summer's work from Bell and other staff members before being sent to scattered locations throughout the ranges to assist in the conduct of Daily Vacation Bible Study programs. In a summer-camp setting, the young volunteers were taught craft work, storytelling, and practical child psychology. In the journal that each student was expected to keep, one volunteer reported that their leader, Mr. Bell, was "full of vim, vigor, and vitality," and that no "pious prudes" were anywhere to be seen. Another set down her pleasure that Bell taught them "the real stuff and not a lot of sentimental stuff. I like to hear Mr. Bell say we are not to teach a theory or a book or a story, but a child." Another summarized Bell's educational philosophy as an effort "to associate Christianity with work and week day living so that it becomes more than a Sunday affair. . . . Good craft work must have elements of service, creativeness, cooperation and reality in it." Her account of Bell's advice on storytelling provides a glimpse of his renowned skill — a "good" story had "a definite aim, a positiveness rather than negative, direct discourse, rhythmic [*sic*] repetition, simplicity of language and color[ful] language." Bell urged the volunteers to move their children's groups toward becoming self-governing and, by example, taught "the joy of altruistic service." One young male volunteer called Bell and Santella "likeable fellows — may sound sacrilegious [*sic*], but I enjoyed their hearty laughs and clever quips."²⁶

Clearly, Billy Bell made a difference in the lives he touched. Interviews with persons who remembered him well provided evidence of his power of personality. One remembered him as an evangelistic self-promoter; others described him as dynamic, likeable, con-



THE SUMMER CAMP where volunteers were trained for Range Parish vacation Bible school duties

troversial, a dramatic and forceful figure, a person you were either for or against.²⁷ If the ranges left a stamp on Bell, he, in turn, impressed his mark on friends and associates in the Range Parish.

AS COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS and local government matured on the ranges, Bell came to see the mission of his parish primarily as Christian outreach and liaison work, providing an "effective, warm, personal link between individuals and homes that need and agencies that are equipped to function for such need." As the area passed beyond its crude frontier stage and developed service institutions in the private and public sector, the Range Parish's secular mission could rely on the cultivation of religious leaders who would "command the respect and cooperation of school authorities, company doctors, school, company

²⁴ On tension between Bell and Gade, see Dr. W. R. Harshaw (Minnesota Home Mission office, Minneapolis) to Shriver, June 28, 1919, and Shriver's response, July 14, 1919, carbons in Bell Papers. I would guess that Shriver, with whom Bell maintained a close professional friendship, probably provided copies of these letters to Bell. See also Harshaw to Bell, October 29, 1920.

²⁵ Bell, "Summary of summer work," written in 1968.

²⁶ Quotations in order, from the summer journals of Ethel Millice, 1930; Wilma Fox, 1926; Charlotte Anderson, 1926; and Ronald Frederickson, 1927. For Bell's own statement on pedagogy see his comments in *The Christian Educator*, April 1, 1922, copy in Bell Papers.

²⁷ Author's interviews of iron range residents Florence Frearey and Sadie Gately, both June 26, 1963, Burt Stanway, June 29, 1963, Louise Murray, July 15, 1963, notes in MHS.

and municipal nurses, county health and court officials, child welfare executives, company welfare executives, etc., etc."²⁸

Among these diverse community and government groups, Bell strived to remain friendly but neutral. Although a disciple of the social gospel, he never engaged himself in actions or statements that might have been interpreted as sympathetic to a movement then latent on the ranges to organize workers into unions. He was suspicious of Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) radicalism and skeptical of immigrant socialism. He was, undoubtedly, sympathetic with the grievances and plight of workers and their families during the great strike of 1916, but probably never supported the union's battle in that contest. "[W]e tried all the way through to maintain friendly relationships but not subservient relationship to either organized labor or to the company," Bell recalled. In a later interview he emphasized that it was unwise to seem to be identified with the mining companies: "I never once cooled my heels in the waiting room of a mining superintendent." He remembered "hearing Elizabeth Gurley Flynn [during the 1916 Mesabi strike], a woman who really had charisma. I also recall Bill Haywood because he had the brains. That period was a rather rough time

²⁸ Bell, "Memo for Eastman," September 15, 1920.

²⁹ Bell interview, 1968, p. 24; interview of Bell by Arnold R. Alanen, November 27, 1982, excerpts published in *Range History*, 8:2-5 (Spring, 1983). I have also drawn some conclusions from Linda Schloff, "In Service on the Range," student paper, 1983, copy in author's possession.

³⁰ Eastman, "A New Sky Pilot on an Old Trail," in *The Outlook*, 147:496, 497, 512 (December 21, 1927).

A 1928 Christmas card from the Range Parish staff




**Christmas
Greetings
1928
The Range Parish**

Helen M. Quinn Bell.
Ethelord Nicks Santella
Louise E. Murray
Tracy Hanky

for me since I was caught between different groups. Even though the workers had medical services and such good public schools, I knew of conflicts that existed between the companies and the miners." Like many progressives of his generation, Bell identified with the social and spiritual needs of immigrant workers, but remained aloof from their struggles to organize.²⁹

The social distance that existed between Bell and the immigrant families with whom he worked persisted throughout his ministry despite efforts to bridge that chasm of nationality, circumstance, culture, and class. These differences flared up in 1927 following publication of an article on Bell's ministry written by Fred Eastman, a staff publicist for the Board of Home Missions. The story opened with comments on the "mêlée of racial, political, and industrial conflicts" that marked iron range society. "Into that mêlée," a young missionary — William J. Bell — threw himself, determined to bring some sort of order out of the spiritual chaos." The account that followed contained points of view certain to provoke immigrant citizens on the range to take offense. One anecdote, in particular, told of a Finnish worker, driven to irreligion by the state church back home, who declared to Bell that hearty food was his "God." Pointing to a roast of beef on the stove, rubbing "a great hand over his belly," and laughing "a loud guffaw," he declared "That my God." Sections of the article could clearly be taken as patronizing and denigrating of immigrant culture. Eastman declared that Bell had found "loneliness — the loneliness of strange people in a strange land. . . . He found ignorance — ignorance of the heart and the spirit as well as of customs and language. . . . He found fear — fear of unemployment, of poverty, of hunger. . . . He found hatred — an ignorant hatred stimulated by the I.W.W. and other radical organizations." The author closed on a note not cheerfully received by immigrants proud of their heritage: Bell's "passion for brotherhood furnishes the fire that makes the melting-pot melt."³⁰

Publication of the article, whose language and tone reflected more of Eastman's convictions than it did of Bell's experience, created something of a stir on the ranges. A letter to the editor of the *Duluth Herald* from a reader who identified himself as "A Ranger" complained that "a person gets the opinion that this region is uncivilized and heathen, and especially that among the foreigners there is very little religious work carried on." The anonymous writer then proceeded to praise the work of churches, schools, and Sunday schools, and to assert: "The trouble seems to be that some people, who come here to enlighten and educate the range folks, are troubled with the superiority complex. . . . A person who cannot boost the place he lives in should

move, as every knock is just as much against him as against the community."³¹

There may have been other such aggrieved letters, although a search of iron range newspapers uncovered none. Whatever the case, Eastman, probably on the urging of Bell, responded in a letter of his own to the *Herald*. His article had been "misinterpreted," Eastman began, and "as a result some good people have been writing letters to the papers, accusing Mr. Bell of an unsympathetic attitude toward the communities of the range, and toward the Finnish people." Accepting full personal responsibility for everything in his article, Eastman went on to deny that either he or Bell had anything but admiration for the "marvelous accomplishments in educational and civic betterment" made by the citizens of the Mesabi. "Mr. Bell has simply helped, and he never claimed to do more. If he did not admire and respect them, he would hardly have chosen to live and work among them as a minister for the last fourteen years."³²

WHATEVER THE FUROR created by this incident, Bell continued to be active in community and school affairs, and it is difficult to judge how deeply felt or widely shared were the sentiments expressed by "A Ranger." Other factors weighed more heavily in Bell's decision to leave the Range Parish and take up new opportunities for a wider, though still regional, mission. Bell's brand of activist, assertive Christianity was often more than many conservative, fundamentalist leaders in the Duluth Presbytery cared to countenance. They hoped to proselytize the unchurched and make them regular parish members; the Range Parish was content to bear witness. It was also the case that as small cities replaced the mining locations, there was less need for the outreach mission of the Range Parish. When the depression depleted everyone's resources, Bell left for another mission field. After 18 years' service he felt that it was time to move on, and in 1932 he relocated in Minneapolis to direct field work in Minnesota, North and South Dakota, and Wisconsin for the Board of Christian Education of the Presbyterian Church, a position he held from that time until 1947. In 1933 Bell had received an honorary Doctor of Divinity degree from Macalester College.

His years on the iron ranges had qualified Bell as a Christian education specialist; as such he was no longer affiliated with his old friend Shriver and the Board of Home Missions. Instead, Bell was "on call" for anyone in his region who wanted expert advice on organizing or running vacation Bible schools, church schools, curriculum development, teacher education, and the like. One of his favorite projects during this tenure was Northland Recreation Lab, a nonecclesiastical leadership training camp held in the summer.³³

An important, although by no means commanding, part of his responsibilities in his new position was the planning and promotion of missionary work among the Dakota Indians. "My work was not with Indians," Bell later recalled. "That was marginal. My work was with our on-going churches."³⁴ Yet his accounts of summer conferences for the Indian tribes held between 1932 and 1937, which he helped to plan and in which he was an active participant, show a continuation of the humanitarian concerns that marked his career with the Range Parish.

His concern for youth persisted as the central theme of his mission. Bell reported his surprise at the Sisseton Reservation conference of 1932 that approximately 750 Indians were congregated in some 200 tents but only one real tepee. Struck by the lack of provision for sanitation, by evidence of desperate poverty among the delegates, and by the convention's failure to reach Indian youth, he also recorded being impressed by the informal services at dawn and sunset: "One of Custers old scouts cared for flag raising," and all the verses of "America" were sung — in Dakota. Bell maintained his respect for Indian culture despite all attempts to train them as Christians.³⁵

Of the 1933 conference he set down his disappointment: "We do not have a younger generation of Indian leadership growing up into the Christian ministry. The older men are fading out of the picture very rapidly, and at best they cannot hold the younger generation of Indians." Probably because of his expressed concern, the conference in August, 1934, near Poplar, Montana, initiated special morning programs for youth, which he conducted along with two other churchmen. Those sessions paralleled the activities he had led for immigrant youth on the ranges — gospel lessons, hymns and songs, and then discussions which centered on "boy and girl problems, the drink problem, poverty and relief [*sic*], high school and college education." In the afternoons, despite environmental conditions that he re-

³¹ *Duluth Herald*, January 11, 1928, p. 15.

³² *Duluth Herald*, January 20, 1928, p. 19. A search of the *Virginia Enterprise*, the *Hibbing Daily Tribune*, the *Chisholm Tribune Herald*, the *Eveleth Clarion*, and the *Aurora News* from mid-December, 1927, through January, 1928, turned up no other letters of complaint, although Eastman, in his rebuttal, cites "letters." Bell's son, James, recalls the family's excitement and concern provoked by Eastman's article; he remembers being chased on the playground by fellow students presumably incited by family and community rumors.

³³ Interview of James Bell by the editors, April 12, 1985, notes in their possession.

³⁴ Bell interview, 1968, p. 29.

³⁵ Bell, "Memo on the Dakota Indian Conference, Sisseton Reservation, S. Dak.," August 17-21, 1932.



BILLY BELL, shown in 1983 at the dedication of the William J. Bell Building at the Range Mental Health Center, Virginia

corded, first in his diary and then in his report, as marred by "WIND, COLD, DUST," he led the youths in games of kittenball, baseball, volley ball, croquet, and horseshoes.³⁶

The 1935 gathering in Nebraska was devastated by heavy winds and rainstorms, and there was but "scattering attendance" of young folks; but Bell's heart was lifted at the 1936 meeting on the Rosebud Reservation in South Dakota by the "rapturous" singing of hymns, and by the "fine dignity" that elevated tribal ceremonies. "Communion wine may be pop with artificial grape color and flavor and served in china cups — but the dignity of the ceremonial is absolutely perfect. . . . No group I visit offers such quiet friendliness," he concluded. "It more than compensates for the long and dusty trip, the complete lack of camp sanitation, and the inevitable discomforts of a tent dweller on the drought-burned prairie." Still, he was disturbed by the apparent inability of the tribes and the missions to train up new leaders. "But those young people — we MUST capture and train them for leadership of their own people."³⁷

The following year, Bell joined the planning of a special Young People's Assembly held in Santee, Nebraska, from June 4 to June 11. Some 50 young Dakota

Indians attended, and again Bell led discussions on "Youth Problems." His hope, not to be realized, was to identify "one hand picked youth each year entering college in preparation for our Presbyterian ministry."³⁸

THESE FRUSTRATIONS, after years of such joyous success on the ranges, must have saddened Bell. But his other field work in these years more than kept him busy, constantly on the road, and happy, although one can almost hear a sigh of relief when he could record in his terse diary entries, "ALL DAY IN THE OFFICE."³⁹

In 1947, after 15 years as field director in the Upper Midwest, Bell accepted an invitation from Paul Johnston, whom he knew only through correspondence, to work as co-pastor and director of youth work at the Immanuel Presbyterian Church, Los Angeles. The partnership went well until Johnston was forced to withdraw owing to illness, leaving Bell to get along as best he could with a new and younger pastor. The best was not good enough, and Bell soon accepted a call to be an assistant pastor at a church in Eagle Rock, a suburb of Los Angeles. During his time in California (1947–67), he taught Christian education as a visiting professor at the San Francisco Seminary in San Anselmo, and served interim pastorates in Glendale and Los Gatos. It was during these years that Helen Bell gradually fell victim to Alzheimer's disease, a debilitating illness that led to her confinement in a nursing home and to her death in 1976. In 1967, at the age of 79, Bell retired back to Minnesota.

The word "retired" doesn't quite fit. In recent summers, he has been a visiting teacher at Presbyterian retreats. In 1984, then 96, he participated in a celebration of the 50th year of the Northland Recreation Lab, the program he helped to establish. He also attended as honored guest the dedication of the William J. Bell Building in the Range Mental Health Center, Virginia, and gave the keynote address on health care for senior citizens in Eveleth. The following year Bell reported that he "continue[d] in tolerable health and activities" and enjoyed attending St. Paul Chamber Orchestra concerts for which he held season tickets. His current schedule reiterates his philosophy of life, expressed in a 1982 interview. When questioned "How do you pass your time at present?" he rattled off a number of engagements and concluded with the rhetorical question: "Why should I sit around here and play Bingo all day?"⁴⁰

THE PICTURES on p. 243, 247, 248, and 251 are used by courtesy of James H. Bell, St. Paul; those on p. 244 and 249 are from the Bell Papers, MHS, and that on p. 242 is in the audio-visual library.

³⁶ Bell, "Memo on Indian Conference, Little Eagle, S.D.," August 23–27, 1933; "1934 Annual Meeting of the Sioux Indian Churches at Poplar, Mont., August, 1934." It is difficult to imagine Dakota Indian youth playing croquet on the dusty, windswept high plains, but that is what his report records.

³⁷ Bell, "Dakotah Mission Meeting, 1935"; "Memo on 1930 Dakotah Indian Mission Meeting."

³⁸ Bell, "Report on 1937 Young People's Assembly."

³⁹ Bell, Diaries, 1931, 1932, 1934–46. These diaries record his travels and appointments and provide a routine itinerary of his activities.

⁴⁰ Alanen, in *Range History*, 8:4 (Spring, 1983); Bell to the author, March 7, 1985, in author's possession.



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