

From Ben Hur to the Classroom

By Debbie Alexander and John Brooks



Dr. Edward Bell

Imagine a movie studio back around 1920. The bright klieg lights cause everyone in the room to perspire. Two men stand by their cameras, their heads hidden by the black sheets attached to the backs of their cameras.

Nobody knows this scene better than Dr. Edward Bell, professor of Spanish at TCU. Bell, in his early childhood, grew up in a show business family in Mexico.

"I look back on my old movie days

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with great pleasure," Bell reminisces.

Bell traces his family's show business career back to his great grandfather, who began in show business abroad in 1829. The family toured the Keith and Orphan theatre circuits in Canada, doing everything from circus acts to plays in the early 1900's.

Bell was born in Sao Paulo, Brazil in 1917. By now, the family was touring under the show name "La Familia Bell" and was well known throughout Mexico. Bell recalls 23 members of his family being involved in show business.

Everything the family did on the stage and screen was done together. Members of the family manned the cameras, worked lights and props and performed the roles. That's how it was back in the early days of the silent movies.

"It was always an enjoyable situation because I was dealing with people I knew very, very well and who didn't mind being upstaged occasionally," Bell remembers.

His very first stage appearance was with his family in Durango, Mexico when he was just five years old. His job as an "extra" required

him to run around and talk to people.

"It's a tradition in show business families that you always start off young," explained Bell. "Having been brought up in the wings of a theatre I had no stage fright. To me, a stage was where normal people functioned."

He was eight years old when he made his debut as a star in the silent flick "El Ultimo Sueno." In it, he played the part of a child who grew up in the home of a family that found him abandoned on their doorstep. He brings peace and joy to the household. But "I died in the end," laughs Bell.

Life in show business was hard work, but Bell remembers some humorous episodes. He recalls an aunt of his, who was a dancer. Dressed in her ballerina outfit, she prepared to go on stage to do her dance. As she "flounced," a very embarrassing event occurred.

"The spangle caught an electrical connection. She found she'd run on stage with nothing on except her underwear. Her costume had burned off completely," grins Bell.

Bell recalls another humorous episode—this time he was involved. He was in his uncle's magic act, wearing a turban of feathers. The young Bell would enter a box and try to disappear.

"The night they ran me on, I got into the trap and I put my head back and the box caught my feathers. When he opened the box to look in, here were the feathers sticking up."

In the truest sense of professionalism, Bell's uncle sat on the feathers. "I heard his voice saying 'get those damned feathers down,'" Bell remarked.

Then there was the incident that occurred when the family was in the middle of a play. "It sounded like the world would come to an end. It had begun to hail outside and unknown to us, the theatre had a tin roof." The

play was stopped until the barrage stopped.

In 1921, the Bell family produced a

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huge stage spectacular in Mexico. Their version of "Ben Hur" was well-received and very colorful. Bell remembers the chariot race, which would be hilarious by today's standards.

"They never could train the horses to run on the treadmills," Bell said smiling. The family decided to let the horses run as they normally would anywhere else. Bell's Uncle Willie would start the horses running from one side of the stage. Another uncle on the other side would do the same with his team of horses. So, the horses ran back and forth across the stage, with chariots and riders trailing behind.

"The race lasted the length of time it took the chariot to run across the stage—two or three seconds," said Bell, laughing.

The "Ben Hur" production introduced a new stage effect in Mexico. The Bell family was the first to use "scrim," a technique that requires a curtain made of a fine netting.

When lit from the front, the curtain seemed like a normal curtain. When lit from inside the curtain, the netting gave a cloud-like effect.

"The play got rave reviews," Bell said. "It was the first time Mexico had really seen a great spectacular."

But the show folded when it was a top attraction. Tragedy befell the family when two family members with principle roles in "Ben Hur" died.

The family then went to Guadalajara and opened a motion-picture studio known as the Bell-

Abetia Company, half the studio belonged to the Bells and the other owners were the Abetias. The studio turned out six or seven silent movies a year, but internal friction caused the breakup of the company.

Most of the money for the studio was put up by the Abetias, but the movie-making experience belonged to the Bells. "We felt that we knew what the public wanted and we felt the Abetia people did not know," Bell said, in explaining the breakup.

The Bells retired from show business all together for six or seven years, only to open again in Mexico City. Why did the family make a comeback? "Lack of money," Bell said matter of factly.

The Bells built a new movie studio that did very well. Commitments for movies were backed up for weeks. But tragedy was to befall the family once again. The studio burned and was totally destroyed. It was uninsured. The Bell family left the movie business to go on tour again with several of their diversified acts. The bookings they received were relatively minor when compared to past successes.

The long show business of "La Familia Bell" soon ended. Many of the original troupe died. The age of the family members was another factor. "The evil for show people is age," Bell said. "People just don't want to see old people on the stage."

Bell's own career was not over. He played summer stock in San Antonio for a while.

One member of the family, Richard Bell, went to Hollywood and did some Spanish-speaking movies. He was very successful in both "talkies" and color motion pictures.

Having been in early films, Bell has seen a lot of changes in movies over the years. Acting is much different, he believes.

"I think there's very little opportunity to do acting any more. Most of the good films are due not to the acting of the leads, but to the direction." Bell pointed out that improvements in directions are related largely to the fact that more cameras are used in making modern movies.

Bell observes that television has had its impact on the movie industry as well. "You have two forces acting against one another. You have people making movies, by carefully building a

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scene. Then you have television, waiting for those build-ups to break-in with a commercial. It's difficult to sustain a mood."

Bell wouldn't name a favorite actor, but he said Ingrid Bergmann and Helen Hayes are his favorite actresses.

Bell attributes his teaching career to his mother who insisted that her son have an American education. Since she did not come from a show-business family, she never liked the stage.

Bell attended Texas Western College and later the University of Texas.

Why should a man with such knowledge of the screen and stage not teach those subjects. "I thought I

had the most to offer to the most number of people by teaching Spanish instead of drama. Then I had my mother encouraging me to do anything to get me out of the theatre."

After all these years, Mexican magazines are still publishing stories about the famous show-biz family. From the old troupe there are still five living relatives besides Bell. Two aunts live in Mexico City and three cousins live in Guadalajara.

Bell, now 58, seems to enjoy teaching, because he says it is similar to acting. "Being a teacher is sort of a place for a frustrated actor," he said with a grin. "You have a captive audience—they don't dare walk out on you."