

# WINDJAMMERS HALL OF FAME

## Jack Bell (1898-1972), 2001 Inductee

By Rod Everhart, WJU #1351



**101 RANCH WILD WEST "COWBOY BAND" LEADER JACK BELL WITH ARENA DIRECTOR, GEORGE L. MYERS.** *(bucklesblog photo)*

Circus bandmaster Jack Bell was born John W. Bell at Coalgate, Oklahoma on September 25, 1898. Back then Coalgate was considered as "Indian Territory" (Choctaw Nation) and the 1900 Federal Census reflected his birth location as such. His parents, John Temple and Sara Ann (Patterson) Bell were both born in England. Jack had an older brother George R (1895), and younger siblings Joseph Daniel (1903), Elizabeth J. (1908) and Thomas (1910).

Jack's grandfather, Ridley Bell, was a coal miner in Coalgate and the 1900 Federal Census reflected that occupation. In 1901, however, he had moved to Pittsburg, KS and then subsequently to Lafayette Co., Missouri. Ridley then encouraged the rest of the family to join him and his wife, Margaret, in Missouri.

So, while still a toddler, Jack's family moved 400 miles north to Lexington, Fayette County, Missouri, east of

Kansas City. At the age of 12, he quit school after finishing fifth grade and went to work in the coal mine where his grandfather worked. Apparently, he found that not as much fun as he expected, so left to deliver meat for a local Lexington market. That was not fun either, so he returned to the mines. However, prior to his 18<sup>th</sup> birthday he decided to enlist in the U.S. Army. But because of a mistake, he found himself in the Missouri National Guard instead. When the Guard discovered the error, he was discharged because of not yet being 18. When he did reach that age, he again attempted to enlist in the Army, this time successfully.

Initially, Jack was stationed in Arizona and then Arkansas. He was sent to France at the outbreak of World War I. He served there as a Sergeant Bugler as well as delivering messages to the front line. When the War ended in 1918, Jack re-enlisted in the Army and became a member of General Pershing's band. That band was the forerunner of the U.S. Army Band and provided ceremonial music for the General's headquarters. During this time in Europe, he had the opportunity to have lessons from the trumpet professor at the Brussels Conservatory in Brussels. In 1920, he was back at the Army's Camp Pike in Arkansas with the Federal Census that year listing his occupation as U.S. Army Bugler.

After his discharge from the U.S. Army, Jack was briefly back in Lexington, Missouri. With his trumpet skills, Jack then began his association with circus bands. Over the following few years, he was with the **Mighty Haag Show**, **Robbins Brothers Circus**, and **Lee Brothers Circus**. While with Mighty Haag, rumor has it that the young drummer boy, Harry Haag James, son of bandmaster Everette James (WJU Hall of Fame 1998), would ask Jack for help in playing the trumpet. *[See SEP-OCT 2019 Circus Fanfare for Hall of Fame feature on Everette James and his son, Harry James.]*

Jack was with the **Miller Bros. 101 Ranch Wild West** during the 1929 season. Homer Lee was bandmaster at that time. When Homer left the show in Greencastle, Pennsylvania, Jack took on the bandmaster role. That band included four trumpets, three clarinets, two trombones, a baritone, two basses, a snare drum, a bass drum, and a calliope. The 1929 Route Book for Miller Bros. included these kind comments: *"Jack Bell (now altogether – three cheers) picked up the director's baton and proceeded to distinguish himself. His sudden rise to fame would make good material for a Horatio Alger novel that could be entitled 'From Trumpet*

Player to Director, or Tooting His Way to Fame.”

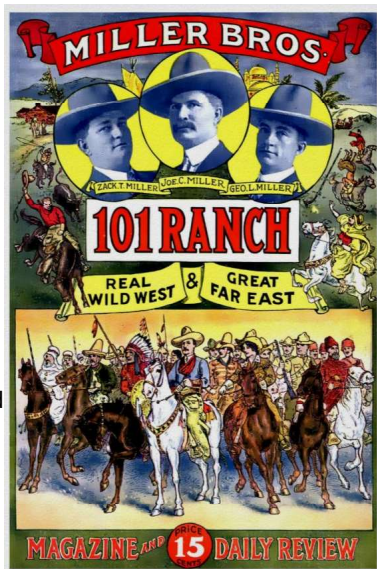
The 1930 Federal Census reflected Jack's location as Perry, Oklahoma, and listed his occupation as "Musician in Circus Band." On March 1, 1930, Jack married Dorothy Marshall. He was 31 and she was 20.

Jack stayed with 101 Ranch Wild West until it closed. During this

time, he and Dorothy divorced and on December 4, 1933 he married Ruth Lee Davis. For the 1934 Season he was with **Gorman Brothers Circus**. We do not know who he was with the next few years, but during that time he and Ruth divorced, circus life being quite hard on marriages.

From 1938 through 1941, Jack was with **Polack Brothers Circus**, having replaced Charles Redrick as bandmaster during the 1938 Season. While with Polack, he met Lillian E. (Wahmhoff) Burgess Monesmith, an equestrienne on the show. They were married April 22, 1940. Their daughter, Sarah Ann (Sally), was born March 14, 1941 in Chicago, Illinois.

With Chicago now his "home base", and a daughter to look after, Jack Bell left the sawdust world at the end of the 1941 Season. Initially he worked for the Graver Tank & Manufacturing Company in the Chicago area, and then joined the M & M Tank Company as a plant foreman. He performed well and they subsequently transferred him to their plant in California.



In 1944, when it was decided to have a **Golden Jubilee Celebration** of the original Miller Brothers 101 Ranch and Wild West show, the 101 Ranch Cowboy Band was once again under the direction of Jack Bell.

The Jubilee event and concert were held at the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum on July 21-22, 1944. Colonel Zack T. Miller, the last remaining Miller brother, was among those celebrated. Years later, Lillian Bell reminisced about sitting in that Coliseum before show day, helping Jack sort out the music scores from the trunk containing his "collection." For this event, the circus band was comprised of top-notch Hollywood studio musicians. Opening night saw many movie stars in the audience with Lillian and Jack's mother sitting behind Robert Taylor and Barbara Stanwyck.

Perhaps not a surprise, sawdust fever hit Jack Bell once more. He toured as bandleader with the **C.R. Montgomery Wild West** until the show closed in 1947. Jack was the bandmaster for **King Brothers Circus** in 1948 with a seven-person band.

Then in 1949, Jack was with **Biller Brothers Circus** as its bandleader.

He had 12 musicians in that band. That roster included Jack as bandmaster/trumpet, Carmen Petraca and Karl Wahmund on trumpet, Lewis Shaw and Jack Campbell on trombone, baritone Felice Gambone, tubist Alfred De Pascates, Homer Clark on clarinet, Benny Kenner on clarinet & sax, Frank Thompson on snare and John Apollo on bass drum. An unnamed additional trumpet player joined after the roster was published. In addition, Betty Biller (for whom the circus was named) was on the roster as a soloist and Louis Jordan was listed for the calliope. The calliope was not technically part of the band, but rather was mounted on a small trailer and used for ballyhoo in town and on the Midway.



REGISTRATION CARD—(Men born on or after February 17, 1897 and on or before December 31, 1921)

SERIAL NUMBER 1. NAME (Print) ORDER NUMBER  
 T. 274 John W. Bell T. 10,584  
 (First) (Middle) (Last)

2. PLACE OF RESIDENCE (Print)  
 10060 Ave. L. Chicago Cook Illinois  
 (Number and street) (Town, township, village, or city) (County) (State)  
 (THE PLACE OF RESIDENCE GIVEN ON THE LINE ABOVE WILL DETERMINE LOCAL BOARD JURISDICTION; LINE 2 OF REGISTRATION CERTIFICATE WILL BE IDENTICAL)

3. MAILING ADDRESS  
 Same  
 (Mailing address if other than place indicated on line 2. If none insert word none)

4. TELEPHONE None 5. AGE IN YEARS 44 6. PLACE OF BIRTH Colgate  
 DATE OF BIRTH Sept. 25, 1898 Oklahoma  
 (Month) (Day) (Year) (State or country)

7. NAME AND ADDRESS OF PERSON WHO WILL ALWAYS KNOW YOUR ADDRESS  
 Lillian Bell (wife)  
 8. EMPLOYER'S NAME AND ADDRESS  
 Graver Tank and Manufacturing Co.  
 9. PLACE OF EMPLOYMENT OR BUSINESS  
 Graver Tank and Manufacturing Co. East Chicago, Ind.  
 (Number and street or P. O. address) (Town) (County) (State)

I AFFIRM THAT I HAVE VERIFIED ABOVE ANSWERS AND THAT THEY ARE TRUE.

D. S. S. FORM 1 (Revised 1-1-42) (over) \* GPO 16-21039-2  
 John W. Bell. (Registrant's signature)

WWII REGISTRATION WITH BIRTHPLACE INCORRECTLY SPELLED.



BILLER BROS. CALLIOPE, PLAYED BY LOUIS JORDAN



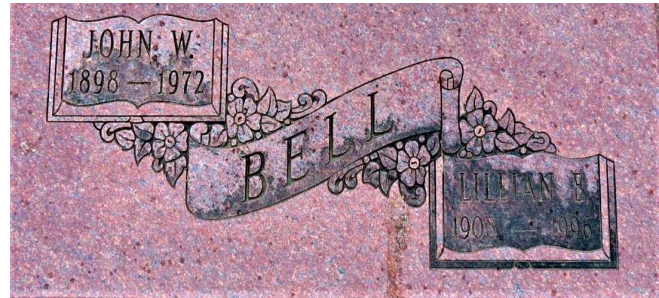
**BANDMASTER JACK BELL IN 1949 WITH HIS BILLER BROS. CIRCUS BAND.** Photo from the Collection of Max Kramer Goodall II (WJU #1060)

The next year, Jack was with **Ward Brothers Circus**, a show that played indoors and in parks under the Shrine label. On July 4th, 1950, the Ward show played the Los Angeles Coliseum on behalf of the American Legion. Over 110,000 attended those performances. For that event, similar to the one there in 1944, the circus band was augmented with 35 of Hollywood's finest musicians. That show's "Road Band" included Bill Pruyn (WJU #914 and 1997 WJU Hall of Fame) on Solo Cornet. Bill, who later served as bandleader of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus, praised Jack as a brilliant cornetist, conductor, and gentlemen. Bill added that his personal subsequent success as a show trumpet player and bandleader was due to Bell's tutelage.

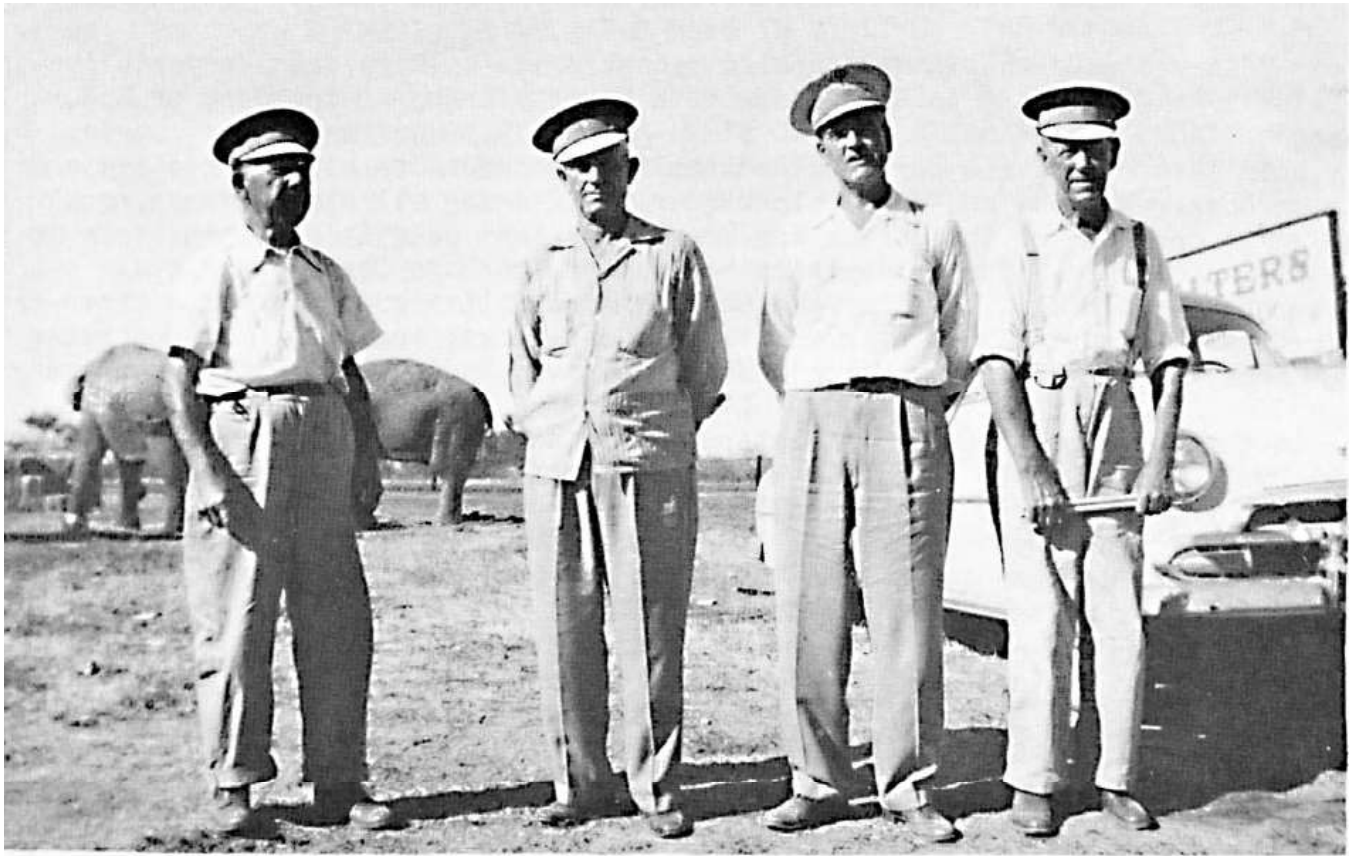
Jack Bell's final circus gig was with **Cole & Walters**. Perhaps ironically, they opened March 23, 1951 in Jack Bell's birthplace – Coalgate, Oklahoma. Jack, and his brother George, had the concessions and Jack was fronting the 5-person band, promoted as "The Best Little Band on the Road." For the 1951 season, the show toured Oklahoma, Kansas, Wyoming, North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska and Iowa before working their way through Missouri and Arkansas to close November 1 at Haskell, OK. Winter quarters was at the Choctaw County Fairgrounds in Hugo, OK. Jack continued as the bandleader for Cole & Walters through the 1953 Season.

Unfortunately, in May 1954, Jack underwent major surgery that left him unable to continue in show business. So, for the second and final time he retired from the sawdust world.

In August 1954, Jack and Lillian moved to Seattle, Washington where they could be close to her family. There, he operated a doughnut franchise until his death on November 23, 1972 at age 74. He is buried in Brier, Washington, along with Lillian, who died years later on January 4, 1996.



**John W. "Jack" Bell was recognized by Windjammers Unlimited as its 31<sup>st</sup> Hall of Fame laureate at the annual Convention in Sarasota, FL in January, 2001.**



**COLE and WALTERS CIRCUS on the road, appearing in Beaver City, Nebraska on September 6th, 1953**  
 In the photo are Paul Squeally-bass, George Bell-trumpet, Bandleader Jack Bell-trumpet, and Ross Essex-drums



**COLE and WALTERS CIRCUS Bandstand Wagon.** This trailer No. 26 would be backed into the tent beside the back door. The tail gate folded down to become the bandstand. The "Favorite Show of the West" banner would be visible during the show above the band members heads. Permanently installed inside was a Hammond Organ. The ring curbs and props were stored in the front section.