

Samuel Bell: jeweler, silversmith & knife maker

It is recorded that Samuel Bell, born in 1798 in western Pennsylvania, embarked on his long, illustrious career in fine metalwork when he was involved in sword making at a Pittsburgh arms manufactory during the War of 1812. He was but 14 at the time.

By 1819 he relocated to Knoxville, Tennessee, where he opened a shop with two partners. During the Knoxville years, Bell and his wife Eliza (Carr) Bell expanded the Bell brood. There, also, Bell was upwardly mobile, serving as mayor during the 1844-'45 term.

In or shortly before 1852, Bell also became westwardly mobile. He, along with his wife and many of his children, removed to San Antonio, Texas, where he opened a shop on Commerce St.

Their offspring included (and nearly all went to Texas with him):

Eliza Carr Bell, b. 2 Jul. 1822 in Knox County, Tennessee. She married James Churchwell Luttrell IV and remained in Knoxville. Their son Samuel Bell Luttrell later became a mayor of Knoxville.

Edward C. Bell, b. 12 Sep. 1823. Eldest son Edward heard a different call than his siblings, journeying out to Mariposa, California, where he is found running a butcher shop in 1860. An obscure clipping in an 1869 edition of the *San Antonio Express* notes that he died in Mariposa at the age of 48.

We regret to announce the death of Mrs. Bell, the wife of our respected fellow-citizen, Mr. Samuel Bell jeweller, which took place on Thursday evening last. The deceased lady was much esteemed, and her death will be regretted by a large circle of friends and acquaintances; amongst whom may be included most of the old citizens of San Antonio. We sincerely condole with the afflicted family in their bereavement.

James Bell, b. circa 1828/9. Went to San Antonio and was involved in his father's firm and then, for a time, the subsequent Bell & Bros.

David Bell, b. 11 May 1831. David, a silversmith, journeyed with the family to San Antonio, and it is his family that father Samuel lived with at the end of his life. David worked with his father and subsequently with Bell & Bros.

Anna Maria Bell, b. 30 Nov. 1833. She went with the family to San Antonio.

Powhattan Bell, b. 7 Jan. 1836. Powhatan accompanied the family to San Antonio, where Powhatan was a silversmith and a partner in the later Bell & Bros. firm.

Jessup Bell, b. 1837/8. Moved to San Antonio and was involved in the family firm and in Bell & Bros.

Margaret A. Bell, b. 1839. Margaret accompanied the family to San Antonio; she does not appear to have ever married.

Fetterman Bell, b. 1843. Fetterman relocated with the family to San Antonio and became a silversmith.

The speed with which Bell and family established themselves in San Antonio is highlighted by the 1858 obituary of wife Eliza, which appeared in the Ledger & Texan. She is referred to as "esteemed" and is noted as having "a large circle of friends and acquaintances." They had moved to the area scarcely five years prior.

BELL JEWELRY CO. PROUD OF RECORD FOR 70 YEARS

BUSINESS ESTABLISHED HERE
IN 1852 STILL CARRIES OLD
NAME.

Among the oldest businesses now existing in San Antonio is the Bell Jewelry Company, undoubtedly the oldest jewelry business conducted in the city of its origin on its original street, in the entire Southwest.

Away back in 1852 Samuel Bell and his two sons, David and James Bell, founded the establishment which still bears their name. A few years later Jessup M. Bell, who was but 14 years of age when the family moved here from Knoxville, Tenn., was taken into the firm.

They were all practical workmen, jewelers and silversmiths, designers of rare merit and among the most treasured heirlooms of the older families of this section are the exquisite pieces hand wrought by the Bells from Mexican silver dollars, beautiful pieces of handicraft, a tumbler, a goblet, spoons, forks, vying in beauty and grace with the old silversmiths of the Revue period in New England.

Relics now, and obsolete as far as utility is concerned, there are nevertheless no more treasured souvenirs of pioneer days than the old "howie" knives, then a very necessary part of the pioneer's equipment. These, too, the Bells manufactured, for they were cutlers as well as jewelers, your pioneer craftsmen having a versatility that would bewilder the single track union worker of today. Men's belt buckles of heavy hand wrought silver, gleaming silver spurs survive to this day, eloquent testimonials to the character of the work of these pioneers.

Many generations of distinguished persons have been served by the Bell store, the backs of the office showing the names of Lieut. Robert E. Lee, Lieut. Ulysses S. Grant, Capt. Jeff Davis and numerous others destined to be written among the immortals in the tragic years that were soon to follow.

They were serving in one army in those days, for Fort San Houston, then as now, was a dominant

druggist, retaining his old custom and steadily attracting new in the face of modern "so-getting" methods, remains one of the premier, as well as the pioneer druggists of San Antonio.

unit in the regular army system, and as in these days, too, an officer's education was complete without a term of service at Fort Sam.

In the same year that the store was opened, the firm bought the big Howard clock from the E. Howard Clock Company of Boston, Mass., now out of business. This is the clock that stands today as the last word in time-keeping in all San Antonio. It has run for 70 years and even now does not vary more than three to four seconds a year from perfect time.

In the days when the Bell Company bought the Howard clock, Indiana was the only port of consequence on the Texas gulf coast. Incidentally, it was destroyed in a heavy storm of the early 70s. But the big clock came from Boston by water to Indiana in 1852 and overland from Indiana to San Antonio by ox-cart. Not a speedy manner of locomotion, to be sure, but promising considerably less hazard to life and property than modern transportation can assure.

No less than a hundred persons a day, men and women, young and old, stop in front of the Bell store or step inside to check up their own timepieces with the big clock. And it is a standing joke in the store to "check up daily on Uncle Sam," when the standard time report comes in from Washington. For Uncle Sam's time itself is hardly more accurate than that of the big Howard clock.

The disastrous flood of September, 1921, sweeping through the downtown business district, gutted the Bell store more thoroughly than vandal hands could possibly have done, and though the financial damage was heavy, the most deeply regretted loss consisted of the numerous relics and souvenirs dating back to the earliest days of the store's existence. Of these only a few remain.

Recovered from the debris that the receding flood left of the store is an old hand wrought steel die, insignificant enough in itself, but with a history that makes it a treasure.

Steel From Captured Schooner.

During the second war with Great Britain, back in 1812-14, Samuel Bell, founder of the store, was an apprentice in a big jewelry establishment in Pittsburgh, Pa. There was no steel manufactured in the United States in those days, and the government was hard put to it to supply its armies with arms and munitions. So, when a British schooner was captured, it was a double cause for rejoicing. She was dismantled, every ounce of steel was tripped from the vessel and shipped to Pittsburgh, where it was made into rifles and cannon for the American forces. Young Mr. Bell, the apprentice, was so fortunate as to buy for a souvenir a piece of a steel rifle barrel, some three and a half inches in length and seven-eighths of an inch in diameter. For

forty years and more it "kicked about" among his personal belongings, and when after his death his sons changed the name of the store to Bell Brothers, a die was made of this old piece of steel, in the shape of a bell with the word "Howe," engraved across it, and for years and years it stood for the quality mark of jewelry in this section.

Another beloved relic recovered from the flood was an old powder candlestick, used in waxing packages in the Bell store since before the days of the Civil War, and still cherished and so used to this day.

Upon the death of Samuel Bell, the business became Bell & Bros., comprising David Bell, Powhatan Bell and Jessup D. Bell. Shortly, however, this firm dissolved, and David and Powhatan Bell retained the old business as Bell Bros., Jessup D. Bell setting up an independent business for himself across the street from the old store. During all this time the business was conducted at what is now 327 West Commerce Street.

After the death of Powhatan Bell, his brother David continued the business under the same name and in the same place until the autumn of 1895, when Ben M. Hammond purchased the entire establishment and materially enlarged its field. However, David Bell continued one of Mr. Hammond's co-workers to the day of his death, and the erect, white-haired figure of the beloved old gentleman is one of the cherished memories of every old-time San Antonian.

Under Mr. Hammond's management, the Bell Jewelry Company expanded and enlarged, and outgrowing its old quarters was removed in 1900 a block east, to 325 West Commerce Street, where it has since remained.

The policy of the Bell Jewelry Company has always been an extremely conservative one. Keeping pace with every new business movement, always abreast of the steady march of progress in the jewelry line, the Bell Jewelry Store has retained the easy, friendly hospitality of the pioneer days. Entering its spacious, attractive salesroom today is like going into the home of an old, dear friend, very sure of a sincere, unaffected welcome, and the honest service and merchandise that the Bell store has given its patrons for 70 years.

Every face is a friendly one and very few changes occur as the years go by. The greater number of the present force has been associated with the store for 20 years or more, and when on June 1 of this year the Bell Jewelry Company was incorporated, every member of the force was taken into the business, Mr. Hammond remaining the president of the corporation.

"If the record of the store doesn't speak for itself," said Mr. Hammond, "words from me are useless. Just say this store expects to be a part of the life of San Antonio for another 70 years, at least."

An October
16, 1922,
retrospective
of Bell
Jewelry
from its
inception to
the (then)
present day.

BELL JEWELRY BEGUN IN 1852

Bowie Knives Important Item in Early Stock Carried

In the year of 1852, when San Antonio was still a small community of less than 5,000 citizens, Samuel Bell and his two sons, David and James, founded what we know today as the Bell Jewelry Company. Samuel Bell was an experienced silversmith and jeweler, having learned his trade through apprenticeship served with a large jewelry house in Pittsburgh during the time of the second war with Great Britain, 1812-1814.

The Bells soon became noted for their exquisite craftsmanship, and many a treasured heirloom in the possession of some of San Antonio's pioneer families represent the handiwork of one of the Bells. During those days a popular piece of jewelry was a pin or brooch made up of silver from Mexican silver dollars, and one of these has a great value among collectors at the present time.

Strang as it may seem, Bell did not devote his entire energies toward heart-stirring pieces for levee-sick swains. He had a sterner side, and this was devoted to the manufacture of the famous Bowie knife. As in jewelry, a Bowie knife carrying the trade mark of Samuel Bell was considered the best that could be secured.

Bell's became famous for its fine workmanship, the quality of its materials, and the exquisite pieces of jewelry that were produced here, and such famous men as Robert E. Lee, U. S. Grant and Jefferson Davis are numbered among the customers. In the latter part of the 19th Century when Roosevelt trained his Rough Riders here, he frequently visited the place and became one of its thousands of satisfied customers.

But the Bell Jewelry Company need not live on its past reputation. The present organization has carried on in an exemplary man-

ner those principles of fine quality and craftsmanship which made the name Bell synonymous with superior workmanship. As the old organization built up a reputation for distinctive values, so, too, has the present-day personnel taken up those principles: that Samuel Bell and his sons had instilled into the business and have carried them forward with continued success and prosperity to the firm.

The present location of the Bell Jewelry Company is on East Houston Street, just west of Alamo Plaza. It is considered to be one of the most attractive jewelry stores in the country, the absence of heavy doors giving a clear view into the interior through the glass substitutes.

Fine diamonds, watches, rings—all that goes to make up the modern, up-to-date jewelry may be found here. And, in more recent years, a new public service has been instituted. It is now possible to buy these things at Bell's and on friendly credit terms. So the name Bell carries on, rendering a



OUR BEST

for a Happy

Prosperous

Year

A December 31, 1935, article in the San Antonio Express underscores the importance and desirability of Bell's bowie knives during the early years in San Antonio.

Some historical accounts claim that Bell & Bros.—Samuel's sons' business—was not established until after his death, but this January 20, 1882, ad in the San Antonio Daily Express shows that it was already a going concern by then.

Jewelry.

BELL & BROS.

No. 11 Commerce Street.

DIAMONDS, AND WATCHES

FINE JEWELRY, ETC., ETC.



Silver and Plated Ware,

CUTLERY, ETC.

Watches and jewelry repaired. Charges reasonable. We take orders for jewelry and goods, and guarantee satisfaction. Satisfaction guaranteed.

Advertising wasn't restricted to San Antonio, as testified to by this September 14, 1882, ad in the Laredo Times.

BELL & BROS.

Manufactured A. H. 1882.



Jewelers & Opticians.

Watches, Diamonds

Jewelry, Clocks, Gold, Silverware, Plated Ware, Watch Repairing, etc. Always on hand.

An 1883 ad for Bell & Bros. in the San Antonio Light on April 5, 1883. Surviving newspapers of the era show that Bell & Bros. advertised heavily in the San Antonio Daily Express, the San Antonio Light, and the San Antonio Evening Light.

BELL & BROS.,

SAN ANTONIO, TEXAS

SILVER AND PLATED WARE

of latest and most elegant designs.

Diamonds, Watches

AND JEWELRY.

CLOCKS OF ALL KINDS, WARDEN,

POCKET AND TABLE KNIVES,

at our own importation

CELLULOID NOVELTIES.

Spectacles a Specialty.

Imported by **BELL & BROS.**

Laredo Ice Factory

for ice manufacturing with their large

THE BELL JEWELRY COMPANY CELEBRATES 100 YEARS OF SERVICE TO TEXANS!

1852 1952 100th Anniversary Jubilee

It is with a feeling of deep appreciation that Bell's announces its 100th Anniversary Jubilee. For to have enjoyed the confidence of Texans for 100 years is an achievement which seldom is attained.

In a small building at 327 West Commerce, James Bell first began business in 1852. From this modest start Bell's has grown and prospered with the development of San Antonio. Today it is listed as "Great Green Jewelers."

From its beginning the store was patronized by the leading families of the community as evidenced by the many prominent names inscribed on the books of the business in the early '50s. Among the famous names listed were Capt. John F. Lee, Capt. U. S. Grant and Capt. Jeff Davis.

Upon the death of James Bell the firm was changed to Bell Bros., and included in the partnership at that time were David, Buchanan and James D. Bell. This association with their associates in David and Buchanan Bell continuing to maintain the Bell tradition in business and to carry on the same honorable service to the community which had been characteristic of the business from its inception.

The flood of September, 1931, was a tremendous amount of damage to the Bell Jewelry Company, which had been burned in 1900 by 327 West Commerce St., a building right in the path of the devastating floodwaters. While the financial loss was heavy, an irreparable damage was not done to the end of many

precious years of the business days in the state's history, linked so closely with the city's first beginnings. Many values which could not have been found a person's pocket were in the store's possession and were not lost at this time.

In June, 1932, the Bell Jewelry Co. was incorporated, and Fred A. Schaefer, Jr. became general manager of the business. A few years later president-manager and remained in that position until his death in 1940, at which time his brother, Tom M. Schaefer, assumed that position which he holds at this time.

A change in the business methods of the store was made in April, 1934, when a credit system was put in operation as a concession to the modern trend in business and became the first jewelry store in San Antonio to inaugurate the easy-payment system.

While the Bell Jewelry Company has never lost sales, the notable event of the year is 100th Anniversary is being observed in a grand Christmas Jubilee during which huge selections of Christmas gifts have been assembled for early choice.

Price does this pleasure San Antonio and Texas from nothing to its fine old prices of integrity and service which have enabled it to weather all the vicissitudes of a long and arduous life and which will stand proud in place in the community for generations to come.



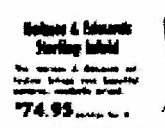
Buy Christmas Gifts Now!



For 100 Years Bell's Has Been Headquarters for Finest Silver



**International
Solid Silver**
The solid silver that has
made Bell's reputation for
over 100 years.
\$27.50



**Belmont & Belmont
Sterling Silver**
The famous Belmont set
which brings you beautiful
silverware, cutlery and more.
\$74.95

**Community
Silverplate**
Choose from the finest
silverplate patterns with all the
beauty and strength of silver.
\$77.80

For 100 Years Bell's Has Been the Home of Good Luck Wedding Rings



Lay Away Christmas Gifts Now!

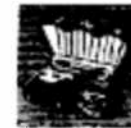
Choose now! Bell's is making
it so easy to buy Christmas
gifts. Lay away your
gifts now! At such low
prices, it's a real money-maker
for all who need.



513 East Houston Street

No Extra Cost for Easy Terms

It's easy to buy at Bell's. Just
pay in 12 to 24 months, and in 1952
you'll have a month's free
charge.



Closeups of the text in the preceding ad, which appeared in the San Antonio Express on November 16, 1852. Note the mention of prominent Confederate personages on the firm's early clientele books.

It is with a feeling of deep appreciation that Bell's announces its 100th Anniversary, for to have enjoyed the confidence of Texans for 100 years is an achievement seldom attained.

In a small adobe store at 327 West Commerce, Samuel Bell first began business in 1852. From this modest start Bell's has grown and prospered with the development of Southwest Texas, and today is hailed as Texas' Oldest Jewelers.

From its beginning the store was patronized by the leading families of the community as evidenced by the many prominent names inscribed on the books of the business in the early '50s. Among the famous patrons listed were Lieut. Robert E. Lee, Lieut. U. S. Grant and Capt. Jeff Davis.

Upon the death of Samuel Bell the firm was changed to Bell Bros., and included in the personnel at that time were David, Powhatan and Jessup D. Bell. This association was later dissolved with David and Powhatan Bell continuing to maintain the Bell traditions in business and to carry on the same honorable service to the community which had been characteristic of the business from its foundation.

The flood of September, 1921, did a tremendous amount of damage to the Bell Jewelry Company, which had been removed in 1900 to 227 West Commerce St., a location right in the path of the devastating floodwaters. While the financial loss was heavy, an irredeemable damage was suffered in the destruction of many

precious relics of the earliest days in the store's history, linked so closely with the city's first beginnings. Many objects which would no doubt have found a permanent resting place in the local museum were washed away at this time.

In June, 1922, the Bell Jewelry Co. was incorporated, and Pasco J. Scaperlanda became general manager of the business, a few years later president-manager and continued in that position until his death in 1941, at which time his brother, Tom M. Scaperlanda, assumed that position which he holds at this time.

A change in the business methods of the store was made in April, 1924, when a credit system was put in operation as a concession to the modern trend in business and became the first jewelry store in San Antonio to inaugurate this easy-payment system.

While the Bell Jewelry Company has never held sales, the notable event of attaining its 100th Anniversary is being observed in a great Pre-Christmas Jubilee during which huge selections of Christmas gifts have been assembled for early choice.

Thus does this pioneer San Antonio and Texas firm adhere to its fine old principles of integrity and service which have enabled it to weather all the vicissitudes of a long and active life and which will make secure its place in the community for generations to come.

From the May 11, 1961, San Antonio Express.

Bell Jewelry Company went out of business in 1961. The final owner was Thomas "Tom" Scaperlanda, who was also one of the premier collectors of circus memorabilia in the world. Along with partner Harry Hertzberg, a San Antonio attorney, he amassed a 42,000-piece collection that is now part of the Witte Museum holdings.

Scaperlanda was married to a Georgie, but there is no indication that there were any offspring from the marriage. Georgie outlived him, but he is listed in his 1971 San Antonio death record as single.

Thus, the early records of Bell Jewelry Company do not appear to have remained in Scaperlanda family hands. If any records survived and were retained by Bell descendants, their whereabouts are unknown to this writer.

AFTER 109 YEARS, FINAL DISPOSAL OF TEXAS' OLDEST AND FINEST JEWELERS

BELL'S 513 E. HOUSTON ST. **BELL'S**

AUCTION

BUY NOW
FOR
• MOTHER'S DAY
• FATHER'S DAY
• BIRTHDAYS
• WEDDINGS
• LATE CHRISTMAS

Going Out of Business

THE AUCTIONEER WILL OFFER ANY ITEMS ON REQUEST

- FINEST QUALITY DIAMONDS • DIAMOND SET MOUNTINGS • BROOCHES
- DIAMOND WATCHES • BIRTHSTONE RINGS • SOLID GOLD CHARMS
- BRACELETS • NATIONALLY ADVERTISED WATCHES • WALLACE STERLING
- STERLING AND SILVERPLATE HOLLOWARE • FINE COSTUME JEWELRY
- SILVER PLATE AND STERLING TEA AND COFFEE SETS • CULTURED PEARLS
- LOOSE DIAMONDS UP TO 4 CARATS • CLOCKS

FREE! FREE!
35 Free Gifts 35
Given to the First 35 People
Present At Each Auction Session
NO PURCHASE NECESSARY

FREE! FREE!
A Valuable and Beautiful
DIAMOND RING Given Away
At Each Auction Session
NO PURCHASE NECESSARY

**YOU BID—
YOU BUY**

**AT YOUR
OWN PRICE**

SINCE 1852

BELL JEWELRY CO.
Diamond Merchants Jewelers & Silversmiths

BELL'S
513 E. HOUSTON ST.

→ 2 ←
**SALES
DAILY
1 P.M.
AND
7:30 P.M.**

→ 2 ←
**SALES
DAILY
1 P.M.
AND
7:30 P.M.**

Sidebar

The sale or exhibit of Bell workmanship creates excitement among admirers and collectors. Below are coverage of a coveted cup that exceeded all auction expectations and the proud display of a museum piece.



*Brunk Auctions, Nashville,
Tennessee*

Caldwell Collection Sells in Nashville

by Sarah Campbell

Photo courtesy Brunk Auctions

“Over the past 40 or so years, Dr. Benjamin and Gertrude Caldwell of Nashville, Tennessee, have built one of the finest collections of southern-related art and antiques in the country, with an emphasis on their home state of Tennessee. When it came time to downsize, the logical solution was to auction the pieces where they were likely to yield the highest return—on their home turf....

“Although by day two everyone had realized there would be no coin silver steals, jaws dropped when a battle between phone bidders drove a small coin silver mug with engraved floral decoration and base marked ‘Bell & Bro’s/ San Antonio’ to \$39,100. Bell was believed to refer to Samuel Bell, a Knoxville, Tennessee, silversmith who also served as the town’s mayor before moving his family to Texas about 1850. Brunk said the mug was the object of more presale phone calls and e-mail inquiries than anything else in the auction. “I had at least five people come up to me before the sale and say, ‘I’m buying this mug,’” recalled Brunk.” © 2006 by *Maine Antique Digest*

From the Bob Bullock Texas State History Museum Collection:

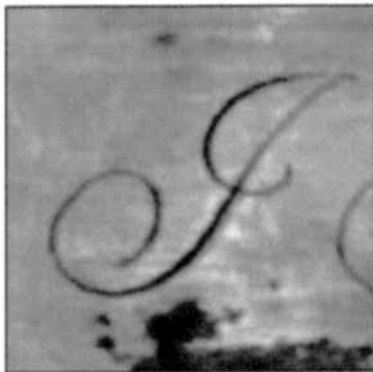
“A silversmith and jeweler, Samuel Bell (1798-1882) was born in Washington County, Pennsylvania. When he was 14 years old, he worked in an arms factory making swords for use in the War of 1812. He is said to have made a pair of silver spurs for fellow Tennessean Sam Houston, who later wore them at the battle of San Jacinto in April 1836. Bell served as the Mayor of Knoxville, Tennessee (1844-45) before moving to San Antonio, where he opened the first Bell Brothers jewelry store in 1852 on Commerce Street. Bell and his sons David and James made flatware, “Bowie” knives, jewelry and Texas-shaped hat pins for purchase by Civil War soldiers.”

Ladle, ca. 1850s, William Hill Land Cattle Company, Houston

On display in the Museum’s second floor until December 2009.

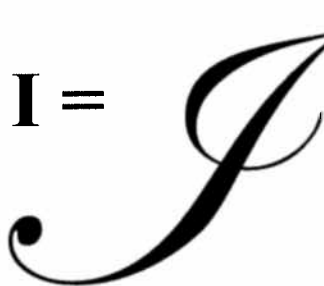
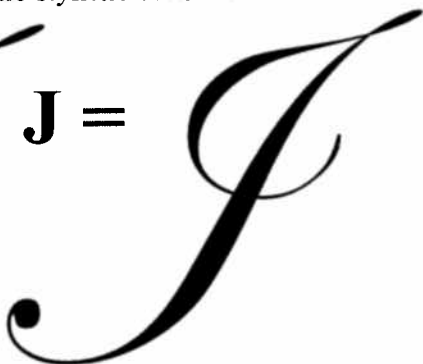


A Look at the Inscription



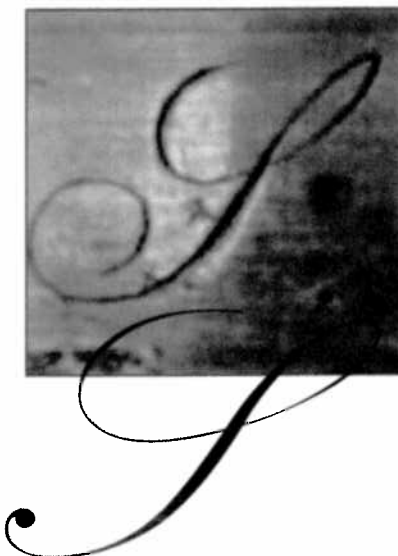
The common 19th-century engraving of I and J could be interchangeable. However, there was no record found anywhere of a possible Chunn (or variation thereof) whose Christian name began with an I.

Shown below are an Edwardian-style (and earlier) capital I and J in the same font size. There is no stylistic difference:

I =  **J =** 

Although the second letter might initially be misconstrued as an L to the modern eye, it lacks the reverse-overlap hook at the bottom. It is, in fact, precisely how an S was rendered in 19th-century script. Shown below are two renditions, one in the highly stylized “Flemish Script” and one in the simpler “Kuntsler Script.” Both echo the S on the blade:

S = 

S = 

San Antonio's Finest - Samuel Bell

by Mark D. Zalesky

(reprinted from the Winter 2000 Antique Bowie Knife Association Journal)

As far as I am concerned, San Antonio has not one, but two great claims to the history of the bowie knife. The first, of course, is the Alamo, where James Bowie and 181 other brave men were martyred for Texas independence. The other is that one of the past century's truly great craftsmen of bowie knives - Samuel Bell - spent his last thirty years living and working there. I first became fascinated with Bell shortly after my move to Knoxville, Tennessee a few years back, a place where Bell spent the first half of his working life at a location just a couple of miles from my home.

Merchant, politician, and father were all titles that Samuel could lay claim to, but it was in the role of craftsman for which historians and collectors will always remember him best. While principally a silversmith by trade, Samuel offered to the Knoxville public a variety of talents from watchmaking to gun repair and did everything from selling produce to pulling teeth in order to keep food on the table. His artistic craftsmanship shone particularly in two areas: some of the South's finest silverwork, and (in Bell's own 1846 words) "Gold and Silver mounted [dirk knives], manufactured superior to any made in the United States." By 1851, however, Bell was so enmeshed in debt that the courts foreclosed on everything he owned - business and personal - and auctioned it off on the steps of the Gay Street shop he had occupied for over 30 years. On or about Christmas of 1851, Bell and family left the town he loved for the promise of Texas, as had so many Tennesseans before him. By tradition, Samuel travelled from Knoxville to New Orleans by steamboat. From there, he went across the Gulf of Mexico to Indianola, and from Indianola by wagon to San Antonio. Exactly why he selected San Antonio is not known; although a friend of the family had done some surveying in the area during 1851.

In early 1852 the Bells set up shop in a small adobe structure on Commerce Street, at approximately where the San Antonio River's cutoff channel lies today, then a few doors east of Main Plaza. The new establishment was named "J.G. & D. Bell" for Samuel's second and third eldest sons James G. and David, first-born Edward having left Tennessee for the gold fields of California in '49. While his name wasn't on the sign outside, Samuel worked there at the bench as ever - he had tried retirement once before, and it hadn't suited him.

J.G. & D. Bell was by designation a "jewelry store." By the 1850s, the manufacturing silversmith was fast approaching obsolescence in favor of factory-made goods from the east, and so the firm adapted to the times as a matter of survival. Some silversmithing was still done, of course, but the Bells' emphasis shifted to retailing and engraving, with custom work a prominent sideline. Most of that work was done by Samuel himself, and among the goods he made were knives as fine as any in Texas. Apparently there was a need for that sort of thing in rough-and-tumble San Antonio, for William Steinert commented in 1849, "In general, immorality is even greater in San Antonio than in New Orleans. You rarely go out in the evening without a dagger, and in the bars you see armed waiters. A murder

does not cause a great sensation." In 1854, The Alamo Star commented, "About every third man you meet has either a six-shooter or bowie-knife. Who is afraid, eh?"

Son James joined a cattle drive to California in 1854, and in about 1860, the firm was renamed "Bell & Bro's" to preclude further name changes. The Civil War came and went, Samuel an outspoken Unionist and his sons with divided loyalties, but when it was all over the family reconvened and went back to work. Brothers Jessup and Powhatan's roles grew, and the business flourished.

Bell & Bro's moved directly across Commerce Street in 1867, and in 1885 occupied the new and spacious Kampmann Building on the corner of Soledad and Commerce. Samuel died March 3, 1882, at David's home. He was 84, and had worked regularly at his bench up to within a few weeks of his death.

The firm continued to hold a prestigious position in San Antonio even after Samuel's passing. As a local publication remarked, "Every city can boast one extensive jewelry establishment, one that is 'sui generis,' especially prominent. New York has Tiffany's, St. Louis Jaccard's, in San Antonio unquestionably the highest rank is occupied by Bell & Bro's."

In 1897, the family sold the firm to a local businessman, who renamed it the Bell Jewelry Co. The firm suffered terrible losses in the flood of 1921, and 1922 brought incorporation and renewed life. In 1961, the Bell Jewelry Co.'s doors swung closed for the last time, ending an era in San Antonio.

What remains to remind one of Samuel Bell's days in San Antonio? Sadly, not as much as Philadelphia can claim of Schively (Winter '99 Journal). A series of floods in the late 'teens and early twenties devastated the area of Commerce Street where each of the Bell shops existed, as did - in a historical sense, anyway - the street's widening in the mid-'teens. Today, there's little recognizable from the old pictures, but the Bells were once there nonetheless. To visit the old shop locations, go to the northeast corner of Main Plaza and begin walking east on Commerce. The NE corner of that intersection was where the Kampmann building stood, and the Bell's shops prior to that location were just a couple of doors down, on both sides of the street. I believe that these locations are now in the path of the San Antonio River's cutoff channel.

Another interesting place for collectors to visit in San Antonio is the Witte Museum (adjacent to Brackenridge Park at 3801 Broadway, (210)357-1900). The Witte holds in its collections over thirty pieces ascribed to Bell, but only one knife - a horn handled, silver mounted specimen donated by Samuel's grandson in 1932 (the Bell attribution is held in question by authorities on Bell, however.) A large and elaborate ebony-handled Bell knife, pictured here, was stolen from an exhibit in 1986 - if anyone has any information that may be of assistance, they are urged to contact the curatorial staff at the Witte. None of the Bell pieces are currently on display, but interested parties can call and make arrangements to see the articles firsthand.

Those who aren't too spooked out by cemeteries will find Samuel's grave -

along with wife Eliza, sons Powhatan and David, and David's family - all right together in San Antonio's City Cemetery #1 (1301 E. Commerce, (210) 923-0272). Jessup's wife lies nearby, and Samuel's daughter Margaret Bell Newton can be found here as well. Entering from Commerce, I'm told to look toward the far northwest corner of the first section you see - you'll find the Bells in the second or third row from that corner, just a few plots down from Mr. Sappington's grave featuring the tall obelisk.

Maybe I'm a little off center, but I get the same feeling standing on a site of historical significance as I do when handling a really f-i-n-e bowie (the kind that I wish I had more of). I hope those of you with a little spare time in San Antonio take a few minutes to wander the streets where men like Samuel Bell and that guy named Bowie once walked, and see if your sense of wonder is aroused in the way mine is. If so, let me know about it!

** By the way, all of the material and photos above were obtained from right here in Knoxville - May will bring my first visit to San Antonio. I hereby suggest that location is not an acceptable excuse for not writing anything historical... so keep sending Joe those submissions!

**Mark has written a chapter on Samuel Bell for Bill Adams' forthcoming Bowie in the South book and is continuing his research efforts. Anyone with Bell artifacts or information is encouraged to call him at 865-540-4189 or email him at knifepub@knifeworld.com.

***** END *****

PHOTOCAPTIONS:

- (1) The Kleiner collection; the largest single group of Bell knives in existence today.
- (2) Commerce Street from Soledad, c.1873. Bell & Bros. is on the left, at the sign of the watch. From Old San Antonio, 250 Years in Pictures by Jerry Lochbaum (1968).
- (3) The same view from c.1895. The Bell & Bros. shop is again at left, still under the same watch sign. Photo courtesy the Daughters of the Republic of Texas Library, Grandjean Collection.
- (4) A view of the Commerce Street today bears little to remind one of the past. Two of the Bell shops were to the far left of this scene, probably in the river's path.
- (5) This large ebony-and-silver knife, now lost, is an example of Bell's later work. It was donated to the Witte Museum in 1932 by Bell's grandson Samuel Cummins Bell, who may well have done the engraving himself.
- (6) Samuel Bell's remains lie in San Antonio's City Cemetery #1 near several family members and other prominent citizens from the city's past.
- (7) Current map of downtown San Antonio. The old Bell shops were located on Commerce St. just west of the river (1), and City Cemetery #1 is to the east on Commerce, just past Cherry St. (2). The Witte Museum is to the northeast of the map area.

Bell from Mark Z

The relevant text here is the bit at the end, about the wider bladed knives [all the silver handled Bells for example] better fitting the popular notion of a bowie knife.

This essay is a monster and is loaded with new research, new theories etc. But Bell plays a relatively small role in the essay as his styles were pretty independent of what was going on in the rest of the bowie world. In that sense he's more important for the 1856 letter to Sam from Edward which documents the existence of the early California styles at that date; that's discussed thoroughly in the California section but is of little relevance to your knife.

Mark

Samuel Bell

"Gold and Silver Mounted Breastknives, manufactured superior to any made in the United States..."⁸⁷ - advertisement for Samuel Bell's knives, 1846

The Samuel Bell knives are an anomaly, almost stylistically independent of other knives of the bowie era and intricately crafted and decorated by the skilled hands of a fine silversmith. While clearly deriving from the Mediterranean dirk or belduque, the knives he's best known for [3i-43.12, 43.22, 46.25, 46.26] are only similar to the dogbone handled bowies in that they have forged bolsters and slender blades - perhaps more indicative that they derived from the same source than either influencing the other.

Though Bell advertised the manufacture of dirk knives in Knoxville as early as 1819,⁸⁸

it's difficult to know precisely when he began working in that unique style.

It's believed

that the Sheffield-made versions of Bell's knives [3i-46.27], likely ordered by Bell

through a Philadelphia merchant⁸⁹, arrived in 1839,⁹⁰ and the unique styling of their

blades suggests that those blades were made to Bell's specific order;

indicating that he

was already working in the style before that time. Bell and his stepbrother George Harris

even described knives of this style (using the intriguing phrase "Mexican pirate-knives")

in an 1844 court case.⁹¹ He continued to make such knives following his move to San

Antonio in 1852 and until shortly before his death in 1882⁹², likely the longest working

career of all the American Bowie knife makers.

Less well known than the dirks are Bell's wider-bladed knives, which better fit the

popular notion of a bowie knife. Few of these are known, and all seem to date from the

later Texas era when Bell's skills reached their zenith. This exhibit includes three such

examples [3i-43.14, 43.23, 46.24].

⁸⁷ Advertisement for Edw. C. Bell (son of Samuel, who briefly ran the family business), Knoxville

(TN) Register, March 18, 1846.

⁸⁸ Advertisement for Bell, Dyer & Simpson in Knoxville (TN) Register, December 21, 1819

⁸⁹ this conclusion has been drawn from court records documenting Bell's debts, and will be

presented in detail in a future publication

90 Advertisement for Samuel Bell, in Knoxville (TN) Register, October 2, 1839
91 Supreme Court of Tennessee. Haynes v. the State, September, 1844. 24 Tenn.
120, 1844 WL
1894 (Tenn.), 5 Hum. 120
92 obituary for Samuel Bell, San Antonio Express, March 3, 1882.