

Bound Fragments in Time: The Legacy of James Ford Bell



James Ford Bell was born on August 16, 1879, in Philadelphia. He moved to Minneapolis with his family at the age of 9, when his father, James Stroud Bell, was recruited by William Hood Dunwoody, a vice president of the Washburn Crosby Company, to help rescue the company from growing competition and other economic difficulties associated with flour milling in the late 19th century.

Young James attended Lawrenceville School, a private boarding and prep school in New Jersey. He then attended the University of Minnesota, graduating with a B.S. in Chemistry in 1901. A year later he married Louise Heffelfinger, with whom he would have four children: James Ford Jr., Charles, Samuel, and Sally.

While still at the University, the young Bell had set up a flour testing lab at Washburn Crosby, one of the earliest—if not the first—such laboratories in a flour mill. Upon graduation, he went to work for Washburn Crosby as a salesman assigned to the Michigan territory. The towns were small—he saw a new one every day traveling by train—and the conditions were, at times, primitive. But the experience proved invaluable. It gave rise to James Bell’s belief in the importance of understanding all aspects of an enterprise, from the inside out.

Selling his father's flour gave Mr. Bell an appreciation for the many other businesses that were involved with wheat as a product. He came to see how the miller was linked to the baker as well as to the farmer.

James Ford Bell became vice-president of Washburn Crosby Company in 1915. In 1917, he was tapped by the Wilson Administration to run the Milling Division of the US Food Administration, the agency now known as the US Food and Drug Administration. After WWI, Mr. Bell left government service and returned to Minnesota to reorganize Washburn Crosby, becoming its president in 1925. Three years later, in 1928, he formed General Mills by consolidating four other milling companies from around the country with his own.

During the Great Depression of the 1930s, Mr. Bell became a member of President Hoover's Advisory Committee on Relief for Unemployment. At the same time, General Mills became a leader in the food industry, as well as in radio and later television. In addition to bringing us Cheerios® and Betty Crocker®, Mr. Bell, through the purchase of a small local radio station, also brought us WCCO radio (from Washburn-Crosby Company).

On the steps of the pool house at Bellford, Mr. Bell's estate on Lake Minnetonka, Wayzata, Minnesota, ca. 1930

Top row, seated in chairs, left to right: Mrs. Sewall D. Andrews, Charles S. Pillsbury, Mrs. William Dalrymple.

Second row: William Dalrymple, Sewall D. Andrews (head of Pfunder Pharmaceutical Company).

First row: James Ford Bell, Samuel Bell (visiting from Philadelphia), and Lou Newell.



Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.



Minneapolis, MN 1945
President Morrill's inauguration.

From left: Regent James Ford Bell, University
President James L. Morrill, and Theodore C. Blegen,
Dean of the Graduate School.

Mr. Bell became a leading community figure and philanthropist. Before his death, he was a trustee of the Minneapolis Society of Fine Arts and a major contributor to the Minneapolis Institute of Arts; a trustee of the Dunwoody Institute of Minneapolis; and a trustee of the Carnegie Foundation in Washington, D.C. His active interest in hunting and fishing led him to present to the University the building that houses the Museum of Natural History. The Museum was named the Bell Museum of Natural History in his honor. The Delta Waterfowl Research Station in Manitoba, which he established in 1931, reflects his concern for conservation and wildlife.

J. F. Bell was a regent of the University of Minnesota from 1939 until 1961.



Photo courtesy of the Harry Bullis Collection,
Minnesota Historical Society.

James Ford Bell, early 1950s

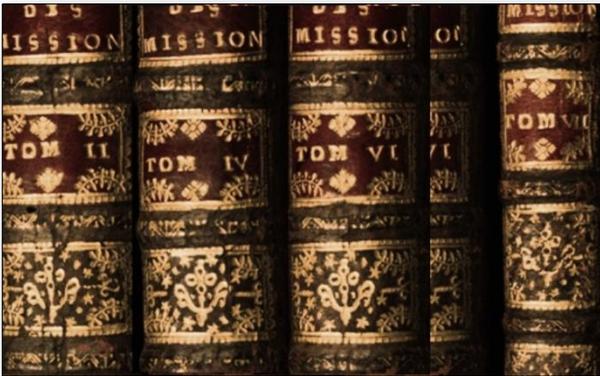
“One seeks those objects which reflect his interests. He awakens to the possessive urge to gather them about him. He treasures them for those qualities which bespeak his interest, often far better than his own words. They form the historical background of his present cultural environment.

He, in effect, becomes a collector.”

--James Ford Bell
“Bound Fragments of Time,”
1953

James Ford Bell began collecting books in the early 1920s. As his personal wealth increased with the success of his business endeavors, he was able to devote more time to this pursuit and his philanthropy and his interests in the natural world—a measure of the man that became reflected in his books.

In an effort to understand the flour milling business and how Minneapolis became a focal point for the industry, Mr. Bell collected books that dealt with the commerce of Minnesota and the upper Midwest. This, in turn, led him to the North American beaver trade, and to the annual reports of the French Jesuits who were instrumental in the development of Canada.



These annual reports, called in English “Relations,” were rich in the detail of natural resources and the customs, language, and way of life of the Native Americans the Jesuits encountered and observed. A nearly complete set of these Jesuit *Relations*, dating from 1632 to 1672, were part of Mr. Bell’s initial gift of 600 books to the University. This gift initiated the founding of the Bell Collection, later to be called the James Ford Bell Library. Of the 41 annual reports, he was missing only 4. Today, the Bell Library owns a complete set.

By the end of 1940, Mr. Bell had invested \$185,438.78 in 85 titles, according to a surviving notebook detailing his book collection. However, his voluminous correspondence with book dealers shows that the titles in the notebook represent only a portion of Mr. Bell's collection. To build his collection, Mr. Bell utilized the services of dealers around the world, as well as the services of curators and librarians. For example, Mr. Bell often had materials that he was interested in sent to the Clements Library at the University of Michigan to have its experts examine and opine on the items. His private secretaries also were heavily engaged in the enterprise—in some folders in the Bell Library Archives, for every one letter of Mr. Bell's letters there are five written by his secretary, conveying Mr. Bell's interest, offers, and counteroffers for an assortment of rare materials.

Two of the most important items in the Bell Library collection were among those purchased directly by Mr. Bell: the first printed edition of Marco Polo's *Travels*, printed in Germany in 1477, and the famous 1507 Waldseemüller globe gores. Together with a 12-panel wall map, this small globe gores was the first map to use the name America.

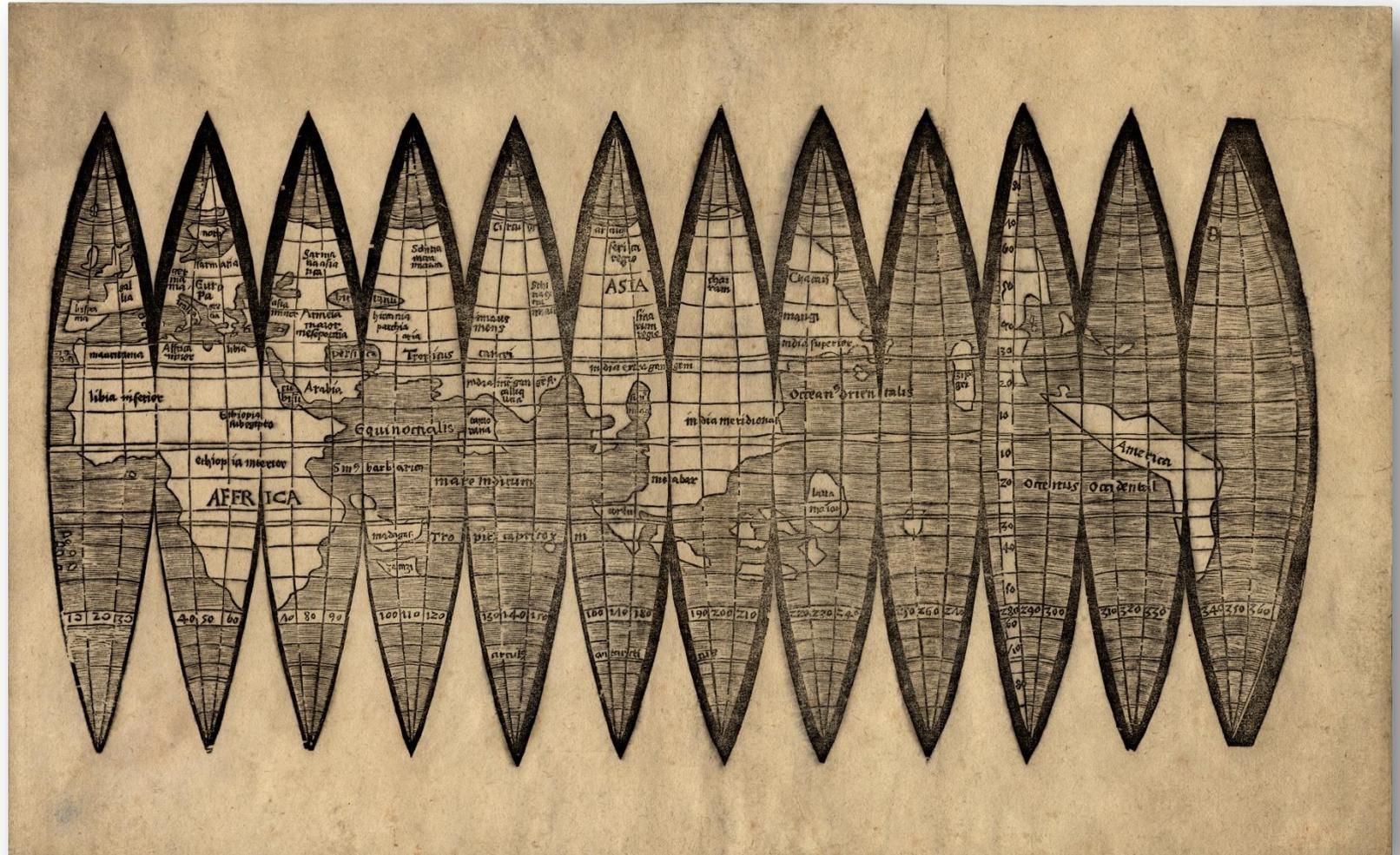


Woodcut illustration of Marco Polo in traveler's garb from the first printed edition, 1477.

“But even the most advanced methods of reproduction cannot truly embody the quality—expressively intimate and personal—of an original edition.... One takes the first edition from the very hands that touched and formed it.”

--James Ford Bell
“Bound Fragments of Time”
1953

Hie hebt sich an das puch des edel[e]n Ritters un[d] Landfarers Marcho Polo. Nuremberg: Friedrich Creusser, 1477.



The 1507 Waldseemüller Globe Gores

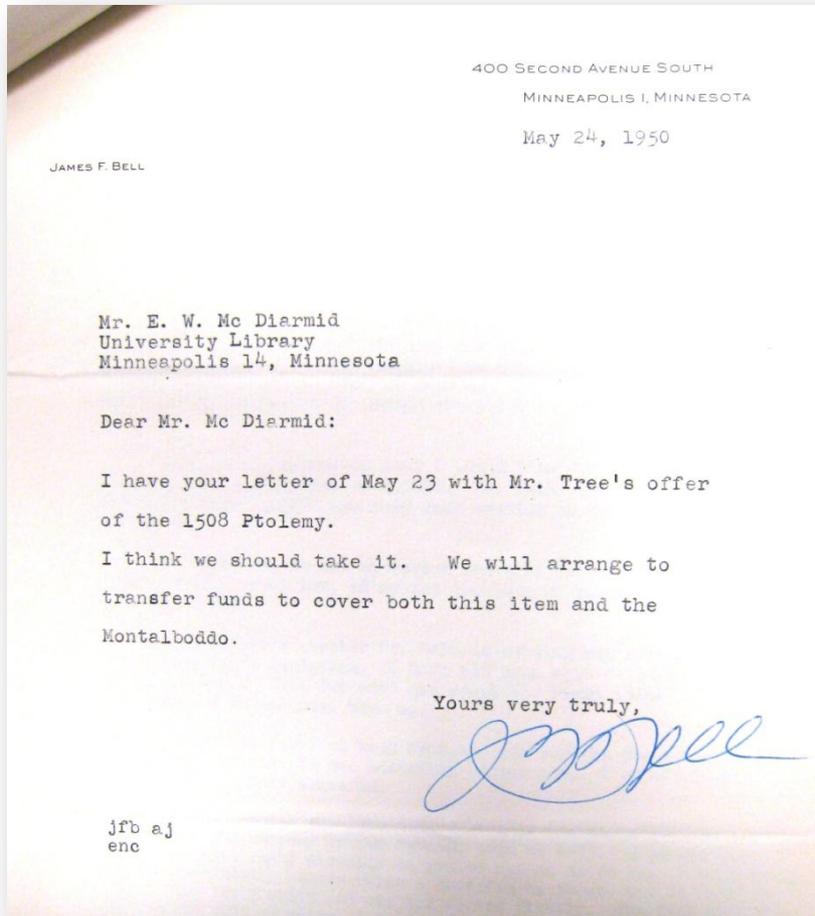
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Mr. Bell became a regent of the University of Minnesota in 1939, and his correspondence and diaries show that he discussed with the University the ultimate disposition of his book collection. In 1943, he engaged Frank K. Walter, the retired University Librarian, to complete the cataloging of the collection.

His diary entry for January 4, 1944 reads:

Mr. Walter was in this afternoon. We have gone over the work he is doing in connection with the books. He seems to find a great deal of material interest. I am still torn between my ideas of what disposition to make of these—whether to give them to the University as the nucleus of a library or to put them under the hammer [sell them at auction] that other collectors may enjoy them as I have. Once in a library, they remain.

By October of that year, he had reached his decision; his diary notes his request to the Board of Regents to begin the process of formalizing an intended gift of his Americana collection to the University of Minnesota. The Bell Library's archives contain a great deal of correspondence between University Librarians E. W. McDiarmid and Edward B. Stanford as they worked with Mr. Bell to build the collection in the late 40s and early 50s—all prior to Mr. Bell's formal gift to the University.



From the Archives of the James Ford Bell Library,
courtesy of University Archives

Mr. Bell worked in concert with three University Librarians, Frank K. Walter, E. W. McDiarmid and Edward B. Stanford, from 1943 until his death in 1961 to establish and build the Bell Collection at the U of M.

Librarian and cataloger Virginia Doneghy also was an integral member of the team that helped to establish the collection. She co-authored (with Frank Walter) the first catalog of the collection, *Jesuit Relations and Other Americana in the Library of James F. Bell*. (University of Minnesota Press, 1950)

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Key to the enterprise was the creation of the Library's physical space. Mr. Bell wanted a period room—known to him and his team as the Treasure Room—that would serve as the reading room for the Library and provide an atmosphere for modern readers similar to that of the original readers. He discussed this with President Morrill, Dean Malcomb Willey, and E. W. McDiarmid in November 1950. By March 30, 1951, the University had hired architect Winston Close.

The original drawings for the room's paneling were not to Mr. Bell's satisfaction, so he hired his own craftsmen to carve the paneling for the Library. The furnishings—all period antiques, including stained glass panels from the late Middle Ages—were supplied through French and Company, New York.





“I am not at all in sympathy with the monotonous type of panelling which he has incorporated in his sketches.”

The “Treasure Room” was originally constructed in Walter Library to Mr. Bell’s specifications.

Here, Mr. Bell and University Librarian Edward B. Stanford peruse one of the items in the collection, one of the 12-volume set of *Le grand atlas* of Joan Blaeu, 1667.



Hand carved oak paneling, crafted to mimic the English linen-fold style, graces the walls of the Bell Room. The 16th-century stone fireplace is flanked by two 18th-century Georgian needlework chairs. In the foreground are two walnut chairs covered in red velvet from the mid-17th century.

The Bell Room

All visitors to the James Ford Bell Library (on the 4th floor of the Wilson Library building) are welcome to experience this distinctive period room created especially for the University of Minnesota Libraries.

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On October 30, 1953, the University of Minnesota dedicated the James Ford Bell Library as part of the University of Minnesota Library. The Treasure Room, and the James Ford Bell Collection of rare books that it was built to house, were gifts to the University from James Ford Bell.

The dedication ceremonies included an afternoon program of papers on the subject of “Book Collecting and Scholarship,” and a dinner at which Mr. Bell spoke briefly on a related topic. In this talk, entitled “Bound Fragments of Time,” Mr. Bell shared his thoughts on book collecting and his vision for the future of the collection. At the end of his talk, he said,

It is my hope that these books may make a contribution to the task of fulfilling the nature of man which every educational institution is designed to perform. I derive my feelings about the nature of man from ...the late Alfred Korzibiski[sic]...[regarding] the remarkable capacity which is peculiar to mankind...I mean the capacity to summarize, digest, and appropriate the labors and experiences of the past...to conduct their lives in the ever increasing light of inherited wisdom...the capacity in virtue of which man is at once the inheritor of by-gone ages and the trustee of posterity. And because humanity is just this magnificent natural agency by which the past lives in the present and the present in the future, I define humanity in the universal tongue of mathematics and mechanics to be the time-binding class of life.

After quoting Korzybski, Mr. Bell continued by saying: “So, then, to reading, thinking members of the noble time-binding class, I am happy to offer for their use certain fragments of time bound up in books.”



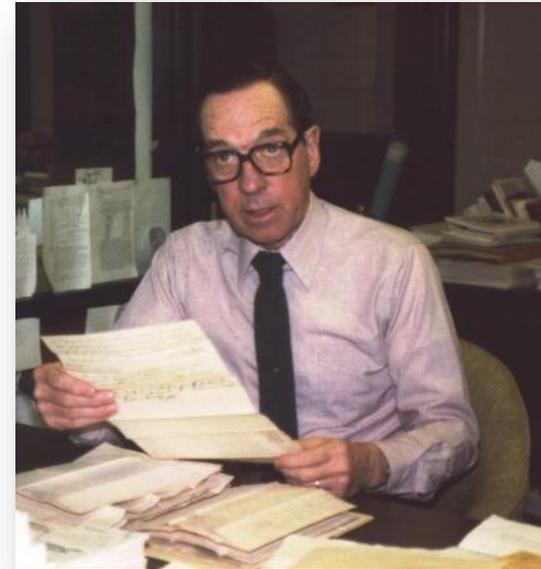
“This collection does not loom large alongside other great libraries. And yet, everything must have a beginning, and great libraries throughout the world were once small both in extent and purpose.

I sincerely hope that it may help to make the generations of students that will pass through the University of Minnesota good trustees for posterity of the boldness, confidence, vision, and wisdom which these books contain as gifts from the past.”

--James Ford Bell
“Bound Fragments of Time”
1953

Working with curator Jack Parker, in cooperation with University Librarian Ned Stanford, James Ford Bell built the collection from its original 600 volumes to several thousand at the time of his death in 1961.

Today, the James Ford Bell Library boasts more than 30,000 items documenting the history and impact of international trade and cross-cultural contact prior to approximately 1800 CE. It continues to grow thanks to a trust Mr. Bell established in 1951; to the Associates of the James Ford Bell Library, established in 1963 to support the acquisitions and programs of the Library; and to individual contributors.



John “Jack” Parker (1923-2006) was curator of the Bell Library from 1953 until 1991.

An endowment supporting Bell Library publications and programs has been established in his name: [The Parker Fund](#)

To learn more about the James Ford Bell Library, visit our Web site: <http://bell.lib.umn.edu>

Or, contact the curator, Dr. Marguerite Ragnow, at ragn0001@umn.edu or 612-624-6895.