END OF AN ELECTRICAL ERA

After the Great Depression, Chester Bell started the Bell Electric Service in 1933. For 53 years Chester, joined later by his younger brother Hurshel, has been selling appliances, wiring homes, and fixing any item imaginable.

Clyde Bell and his wife, Laura, raised a large family—seven boys and three girls. The family lived on a farm southeast of Sperry, Missouri. When Chester was a teenager, his father died. With a lack of money in the family and ten mouths to feed, Chester was called upon to work on the farm and not go to school. During the First World War Chester continued to help support his family by working for farmers in the northeast Missouri and Illinois area.

In 1920 he went to work for Gilbert Sneed. Mrs. Lola Bell, Chester’s wife, recalled, ‘Mr. Sneed said he didn’t need Chester a bit more than a dog needed five legs, but that he hired him more in self-defense because every Monday morning Chester went in to ask if he had any work for him to do. Chester had always wanted to be an electrician as a child, but because he had to work on the farm, he never got any schooling in that area.’ Mr. Sneed and Bill Salisbury took him out on jobs and gradually let him do the wiring. Washington and Benton Schools were the first projects that Chester completed himself. ‘He was always so proud of those schools, that he felt like he owned them,’ Mrs. Bell replied.

When Chester started working for Mr. Sneed in 1920, he was paid $6 a week, paying $5 for room and board. Many people remember Chester Bell’s unusual way of traveling to and from his first jobs. Mrs. Bell described his transportation, ‘He rode a bicycle carrying long pipes, tool boxes, and even ladders on his shoulder. Mr. Sneed only had one truck and if the other man was using it, Chester had to ride his bike. The funny thing,’ she goes on to say, ‘was that one afternoon Chester came home talking about how he had never had a new bike of his own and believed he would buy one. So, the very next day he went out and bought himself a new bike. He was 86 years old at the time!’

Being ten years younger than Chester meant that Hurshel was too young to do much on the farm. He was allowed to go to school, going through the eighth grade before dropping out to work on a farm in Illinois. Hurshel returned home three years later to take care of his mother. He then began doing odd jobs for people from New York, New York to Omaha, Nebraska, or anywhere else necessary. He did such jobs as driving and unloading trucks. ‘I also went to a refrigeration school in Dayton, Ohio,’ states the younger Bell. One of his fondest memories is of the time he worked for the Federal Aviation Administration wiring airport lights. He and a partner bought an airplane and flew around the country. ‘We would wire airport lights, runway lights, approach lights, and landing systems,’ Mr. Bell recalled. It ended in tragedy 15 years later when his partner crashed outside of Winigan, Missouri, killing himself. Already having bought half-interest in the Bell Electric Company, Hurshel finished the contract he was working on and went to work with his brother in 1960.

Chester started the business on January 15, 1933, in the old Masonic Building located on North Elson where Too Talls

As a child, Chester Bell rode a bicycle on the 14-mile trip from his home in Sperry, Missouri, to Kirksville. He continued to ride his bike while working for Sneed Electric in the 1920s. Here Chester is shown on one of the many bikes he has owned throughout his life.
Two is today. Mr. Bell and Glen Preston each rented half of the building, each paying $15 per month. Mr. Preston ran a tire shop in his half, while the elder Bell did electrical wiring. "Kirksville had been hard hit by the Depression, and so were we," said Mrs. Bell. Thinking back she continued, "When we started, any business we got was a help in just getting by."

Within a year, the Electrical Service went into the appliance business. "There was lots of competition," Hurshel remembers, "so Chester decided that the selling of appliances would help to bring in customers." Faced with the need for more room, the business moved to 110 South Franklin, the present location of Cundiff's Insurance Agency. Soon the building was sold, so the business moved across the street to 105 South Franklin. Three years later the owner asked them to move out so she could open a dress shop. They had earlier bought the old Eggert Apartments which were then torn down and replaced by the building that still stands at 307 South Franklin. "Chester had wanted to keep the apartments, but at the time there were no empty buildings around the square," Mrs. Bell remarked. The new, two-story building was designed by the two brothers who were also the landlords of the six apartments that were built in the upper level. There is also a machine shop in the basement.

Chester had always enjoyed wiring homes the most. The number of houses being wired rose to the point where in one year, Mr. Bell and the five boys working for him wired 34 homes. When the housing business dropped in Kirksville, the brothers were already too old to do as much as before, so this did not make a big impact on their livelihood.

Mrs. Bell recalls the most frightening time as when her husband was working on coal mining equipment in a mine west of Novinger, Missouri. "It was very dangerous because of the tremendous voltage the machinery contained," she said. Sometimes when Mr. Bell was working on a water pump motor or something else important to a farmer, he would work all day and sometimes into the night. Mrs. Bell remarked, "He always did service for people who needed it the most."

Both brothers loved to work on motors, but motors were not the only items which they repaired. While Chester was wiring houses and other buildings, Hurshel was working on motors, refrigerators, and small electrical appliances. Hurshel recalls one item in particular that he repaired, "One day a woman brought in an umbrella that had its wires broken off of it. It was hard to fix because I could not solder the metal. I finally went and bought some super-glue and fixed it that way. Recently I had to fix a climbing monkey on a rope that a woman brought in!"

The cost of getting an appliance or other gadget fixed at the Bell's store ranges from $3 to $25, depending on the size and the materials used. Their costs have risen over the years, due to inflation and other economic situations.

The brothers have been well-known in Kirksville for many years. Chester has been very active in the Kiwanis Club, being named Kiwanian of the year in 1985. Whenever people saw the brothers it seemed as though Hurshel always had a cigar in his mouth. "I'm addicted," said Hurshel, and Chester loved to golf, playing as often as three times a week. The Chester Bell Memorial Golf Scholarship, a one-year membership at the Country Club, is given by his son, Gordon, to a deserving high school boy each spring.

Chester and Lola were married August 10, 1925. They are

Chester and Hurshel Bell unload a boxcar of Hot Point appliances in the early 1950s.
the parents of two children, Sharon and Gordon. Sharon, now Sharon Smith, works for Family Services in Bethany, Missouri, where her husband, Gerald Smith, is the principal of the local high school. Gordon graduated in 1957 from MIT in Cambridge, Massachusetts, with a degree in computer science. He is now working for the National Science Foundation in Washington, D.C.

Hurshel was married to Susan McMaster in 1927. They raised a foster child, Carlos Ray, who now resides in Virginia.

The Bells belong to the First United Methodist Church in Kirksville. Chester Bell was a member of the Administrative Board and the Board of Stewards for many years. He was also a charter member of the Men’s Club and remained an active member until his health failed.

On August 9, 1985, Chester worked his normal day. At 3 o’clock in the morning on August 10th, his 60th wedding anniversary, he suffered a massive heart attack. On November 2, 1986, Chester Bell passed away.

While Chester was in Twin Fines Nursing Home before he passed away, Mrs. Bell told a story about his remarkable ability to fix items. “The other day I had broken a small radio. I took it down to Chester and even in his condition he was able to put it back together.”

The business continued to be managed by Hurshel, who still worked and repaired goods. On November 6, 1986, he auctioned all remaining items.

Hurshel and Susan Bell are retiring to a farm in Illinois that has been in her family for quite some time. Mr. Bell is doubtful of his going into farming again, “The last time I went into farming, I bought 300 cattle as an investment. I lost over $1,000 on them!”

Now that the era of Bell Electric is over, people can reflect on the many years of service that Chester and Hurshel gave to this community. Mrs. Chester Bell has no regrets on living their entire life in Kirksville. She summed it up when she said, “Kirksville has been good to us. We haven’t gotten rich in wealth, but we feel we are rich in friends!”

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