



Harry Oscar “H. O.” Bell (1884-1971)

Bought the first Ford car dealership in Missoula in 1915. In 1929 he opened the first modern sales and service building on South Higgins Avenue. He was an avid aviation enthusiast and played a principle role in the development of Missoula’s airport.

- His beliefs for success:
 - *You have to love what you are doing.*
 - *There isn’t a thing you can’t learn if you want to and are willing to work at it hard enough.*
- **1884-Birth:** December 4, 1884 in Coshocton, Ohio. Parents were William Jefferson Bell, a general insurance agent, and Susan Mullett Bell, a teacher.
- **1909-Marriage:** 1st Wife. Grace in 1909. Two daughters: Dorothy and Betty. Grace was killed in an automobile accident in 1950 when a fraternity student rolled her vehicle after a dinner out.
- Harry’s father died when he was nine years old. His mother was left with four children and a farm mortgage so all the children were required to help run the farm. Harry never attended school again after his father’s death. His formal education amounted to about a 5th grade equivalent. Rivalry between Harry and his older brother drove his mother to send Harry to live with an uncle and aunt on a farm near Fort Wayne, Indiana to work on their farm.
- **1899.** Harry’s Uncle Daniel Mullett bought the first car in that part of the country – a Milwaukee Steamer. This laid the foundation for Harry’s love for automobiles and his future destiny. He would take the car, and future cars, apart then put them back together again and drive them around the country roads.
- **1901.** Fascinated by a Winton automobile owned by his uncle, Harry went to the Indianapolis agency where it was purchased and sought employment. He was hired at a dollar a day and remained working for the Carl Fisher Automobile Company for five years.
- **1901-1906. Harry** spent these years tearing apart and re-building the many race cars owned by Carl Fisher. (Carl Fisher eventually built the Indianapolis Speedway and Miami Beach Florida Speedway.) Long distance auto racing was thought to be the ‘way of the future’ and was used to gain insight into improvements in design and construction of automobiles. Through Harry’s experimenting, he successfully invented a safety plug used in acetylene tanks to illuminate early headlights.
- **1904-1905.** Harry traveled the race car circuit throughout the Midwest as Carl Fisher’s mechanic. At one point, Harry was the relief driver for Jap Clemmons who was driving at a National.
- **1906.** His love of fishing brought him west to Spokane, Washington. His friend, Lou A Rose, had an uncle in the car business in Spokane who offered a line of credit to the boys to open a new store. The business closed after one year. Other ventures were tried but also failed.
- **1909.** Hired by Jack Stoner who owned the Stoddard-Dayton Reo dealership. Harry did most of his racing at this time. Harry won the Wemme Trophy race in Portland, Oregon driving a Studebaker at 56 mph for 100 miles on a dirt track with dirt 4-5 inches deep in spots. The 14 mile course had 4 right angle turns and one S turn every 14 miles.
- **1910.** Harry ventured back East. He had his first balloon ride over Indianapolis but due to lack of wind, three hours later they were only 40 miles from their take-off point and had to wait for a motorist below to grab the drag rope and tie it to a tree to let them down.
- **1912.** Became a wholesale manager traveling Washington, Idaho, and Montana, establishing new dealerships.
- **Note.** There were no show rooms in the early years of car sales, only garages. Everything but the body of the car was considered an accessory and cost extra such as the lights, windshield, and tops. Early car owners didn’t care about style but performance was the key. Gas tanks were located under one of the seats. Automobiles brought issues needing the City of Missoula’s attention such as:
 - **1906.** Ordinance limiting the speed of an auto to eight miles per hour and required to stop if frightening the horses.

- **1907.** Ordinance requiring two lights in front and one in back of every auto.
- **1915.** Harry was offered financing to open the Ford dealership in Missoula. \$30,000 in cash and an equal amount of credit was provided by his boss, under the terms of a contract written by the 30-year-old Bell. He owned this business for 55 years.
- **1927.** Harry was an avid aviation enthusiast. He was elected chapter president of the local chapter of the National Aeronautic Association and served on the board of directors for over 30 years. Their goal was to foster aviation progress in the Missoula area. They wanted to secure a feeder line from Missoula to connect with a proposed Butte-to-Salt Lake City air-mail route. They also wanted Missoula designated a stop on the New York-to-Spokane route of the 1927 National Air Races. Placing Missoula on the race route was extremely important to advertise the 80 acres of land southwest of Missoula near the fairgrounds. (The site of the UofM College of Technology) Harry and local businessman, C. H. McLeod, lead the effort and the county soon acquired the land for its first airport. In the mid-1930s the airport would be named Hale Field in honor of Missoula County's aviation minded county surveyor, R. J. Hale.
- **1952-Marriage.** 2nd Wife. Mary E. Mista Bell.
- **U of M athletes.** A firm supporter of University of Montana athletes, Harry sponsored many an athlete. He assisted with their tuition and even housed some at his own home. The students worked odd jobs for him in exchange for their financial support.
- **Rancher.** Harry and Mary loved their Bar Lazy B Ranch near Ronan. They raised Arabian horses and Hereford cattle until the day Harry died. Mary then sold the ranch and moved into Missoula.
- Harry was very successful and much credit is given to the two women who loved and supported him through the years and every one of his endeavors. He was a community servant and loved Missoula and Montana with a passion. He firmly believed in everything our country stands for and loved the history of such things as the constitution and declaration of independence.
- Poem written by Harry Oscar 'H O' Bell depicting his spirit:

*The power to choose the work I do,
 To grow and have the larger view,
 To know and feel that I am free,
 To stand erect, not bow the knee,
 To be no chattel of the State,
 To be the master of my fate,
 To dare, to risk, to lose, to win,
 To make my own career begin.
 To serve the world in my own way,
 To gain in wisdom, day by day,
 With hope and zest to climb, to rise,
 I call that **PRIVATE ENTERPRISE.***



- **Death:** October 22, 1971 in Missoula, Montana.

Information provided by: Betty Skibsted, daughter.