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June 16, 2006

Bell-Keith Cemetery
c/o Mrs. Betty M. Fluckey
209 East North Street
Mt. Sterling, Illinois 62353

Dear Betty,

I am happy to have made your acquaintance via phone this past Friday, June 9, 2006. It was very interesting to converse about the history of Bell-Keith Cemetery. The information that I have accumulated regarding my own family's early history in Brown County seems to be intertwined with the history of some of your own ancestors.

I have a keen interest in the interments at Bell-Keith Cemetery. As I explained, my great-great-grandfather, John McMeins is buried on the grounds with six other unnamed McMeins family members. I have paid visits to the cemetery on several occasions since 2002 and always found the grounds to be well maintained.

There are emotions, difficult to explain, that prevail when one pays a visit to the eternal resting place of their ancestor. Bell-Keith is ideally located to offer the visitor privacy and provides a most picturesque and tranquil atmosphere. I was able to fully appreciate my visits. My only regret was the absence of a memorial marker for John. It is to that end that we have come to know one another.

The work that you perform as caretaker of Bell-Keith is an important task to the descendants of the deceased and to the community. The names on the memorial stones in Bell-Keith are but a scant reminder of the folks that founded and helped build the community of Mt. Sterling in the early 1800's. There are numerous individuals buried on these grounds that served in a military capacity during the Mexican and Civil wars. While every resident of Bell-Keith is of equal importance to their family, the early settlers and veterans are of special interest to the history of the community. So, it would be fair to state that you honor our ancestors and perform a service to the community by maintaining the grounds that these folks occupy.

There are no less than 180 individuals interred in the Bell-Keith Cemetery. The earliest known burial is that of James Bell in 1839 and the most recent, per your report, in the 1980's. The life spans of these folks range from 1772 through 1980. Their lives represent many threads in the historical fabric for this region.

Some of these residents of Bell-Keith Cemetery performed acts of kindness toward members of my ancestral family. I would like to take this opportunity to present some of these people, their deeds and the family that benefitted from their good will.

The Bell families of Brown County Illinois were early settlers in the north-central part of the county known as Missouri Township. I am not an authority on the history of this family, but written history illustrates some of their contributions to the early development of Mt. Sterling and the surrounding area. The John B. Bell family is celebrated within this text to illustrate some of their contributions that have not been recorded in the history books.

There is nothing extraordinary about the McMeins-McMeans family that settled in Western Illinois. They were a farming family with roots tracing back to colonial Pennsylvania.

After the Revolutionary War, one of the sons, James McMeins, migrated to Kentucky and finally Missouri, via a brief stay in the southern part of the Illinois Territory. James' eldest son, Alexander migrated to Adams County in Illinois about 1836. The families of this line literally plowed their way through the wilderness of unsettled Colonial America.

The subject of this writing is John McMeins. John was the eldest son of Alexander McMeins, born in 1823, a native of Jefferson County Missouri. John migrated to Adams County with his father and siblings, Charles, David, Ann and at least two other sisters. Alexander was a farmer and John helped his father on the farm until he reached the age of emancipation.

On August 1, 1841, John celebrated his marriage to Mary Ann Carter. The marriage was solemnized by Reverend John Ausemey in Adams County, Illinois.

John and his new bride started off their new lives in the farming business. There is no evidence to indicate that John and Mary Ann owned land in Adams County. They rented farmland in various locations and engaged in tenant farming. John moved often and over the span of thirty-eight years resided in Adams, Brown, Schuyler and Fulton counties.

In 1846, Mary Ann gave birth to their first child, Elizabeth. Two years later, John traveled to Mt. Sterling Illinois where he enlisted in the Army for service in the Mexican War. John served as a private and was assigned to Company D, 1st Regiment of Illinois Foot Volunteers. This unit was commanded by Captain's John C. Moses and Edward W. B. Newby. John's service consisted of seventeen months with tours to Fort Leavenworth, Kansas; Santa Fe, New Mexico; Jemez, New Mexico and Albuquerque, New Mexico. He was honorably discharged on October 12, 1848. John received a bounty land warrant for 160 acres of land in Ogle County, Illinois to which he promptly sold to Daniel Berry of Rushmore, Illinois. John returned home, gathered his family and moved to Schuyler County. There are indications that John owned the land in Schuyler County and its value was about \$100.00 in 1850. John's farm in Schuyler County was located adjacent to the farm of his brother, Charles.

On or about November 1858, Mary Ann McMeins contracted tuberculosis or consumption, as it was known in those days. About one month later Mary Ann announced that she was pregnant with their second child. Mary Ann gave birth to Amesser (Elmira) in September 1859. Mary Ann was still suffering from the effects of consumption and the birth of Amesser (Elmira) complicated any chance Mary Ann may have had for recovery. By fall of 1859 Mary Ann became so seriously ill that she and the children were taken in by John B. Bell and his wife, Elizabeth Carter-Bell. They took care of the children and tended to Mary Ann during the last few weeks of her life. Mary Ann passed away in John B. Bell's residence in November 1859.

The reader may have noticed that Elizabeth Bell and Mary Ann McMeins were both Carters. I have not performed research of the Carter family to confirm any relationship. It is possible that Elizabeth and Mary Ann were sisters.

John B. and Elizabeth Carter-Bell continued to care for John's daughters for almost one year after Mary Ann's death. During this time John courted Eliza Jane Dopp, daughter of David Dopp of Adams County. They were married on March 8, 1860.

The 1860's were very confusing times for America. A handful of politicians drew a line in the sand and declared separate north and south sovereignties. The general population was left to themselves to decide their allegiance. John did not enlist in the military during the Civil War but he was listed in the military reserve because of his age qualifications. John's brother David, and half brothers, Lewis and Milton did enlist in the Union Army. David and Milton returned home after the war. Lewis was a casualty in the 1864 Savannah Campaign.

The period from 1860 to 1868 John and his family moved several times, residing mostly in Adams County with brief stays in Brown, and Fulton counties. He finally settled in Missouri Township by about 1868 and for the next eleven years he engaged in his farming enterprise. The John McMeins family did not accumulate much in the way of wealth. In 1870 John reported that he had no property and no personal estate assets. The neighbors that lived around John's farm revealed assets worth several thousands of dollars.

The family may not have had much in worldly assets but they did manage to raise a family. Eliza Jane gave birth to five children, William (1863), Charles (1864), Julia (1867), Daniel (1868) and Susan (1877). Daniel died at a young age and the remaining children lived well into the 1900's.

In October 1879, misfortune struck the McMeins family when John became paralyzed. The family's financial position did not improve with John's inability to work. The boys were too young to manage the farm and resources were dwindling. On October 15, 1879, Eliza Jane had little choice but to remove her family into the care of the Brown County Alms House in Lee Township.

John's condition deteriorated and as a result he and his family remained as residents of the poor house for several years. Given John's condition, the best of medical care may have made him comfortable and may have even extended his life. I fear that the care in the facility was much less than the best. In fact, testimony from Eliza Jane's 1887 pension application revealed that medical care was almost nonexistent at the poor house. Eliza Jane and the girls contributed most of the care that John was to receive. The boys, William and Charles, worked at surrounding farms and helped to provide for the family. After languishing at the poor house for nearly five years, John passed away on August 18, 1884.

Eliza Jane was without the means to provide John with anything but a pauper burial. Again, the Bell family extended their kindness to the McMeins family and provided a burial plot in the Bell family burial grounds. John B. Bell was already residing in the cemetery since 1882, so it is likely that one of his sons, Marion or Ira, provided the plot for John.

The Bell family continued helping the McMeins family as late as 1887. Ira and Marion Bell provided testimony in support of Eliza Jane's pension application in September and November 1887. Their testimony revealed numerous facts pertaining to the death of John's first wife, Mary Ann. They also testified regarding the variations in the spellings of the McMeins surname. Marion Bell revealed that they had known and been friends of John and Eliza Jane for about twenty years. Several other residents stepped forward in support of Eliza Jane during her pension application ordeal. The result of this support enabled the court to award Eliza Jane a federal pension of \$8.00 per month until her death, which occurred in January 1906. The Bell testimony was the most informative and probably had the greatest impact on the outcome.

The story as recited is merely a grouping of facts that the author has accumulated over the years. On the surface the facts reveal the sorrowful saga of a family's struggle during the early settlement period of Western Illinois. Beyond the surface though, one can find the subtleties of generosity and human kindness that may enlighten the reader as to the character of the good folks that settled this region. The Bell family saw beyond their affluence and shared portions with those that were in need. The family stopped their busy life and helped a dying woman see her end peacefully, looked after her children, provided burial plots and finally, stood before a court of law and proclaimed their longstanding friendship to the McMeins family.

I cannot travel back in time to personally thank these fine people for their contributions to the community or for the help they provided to members of my ancestral family. I do hope that at some juncture, one of the descendants of the Bell family may hear of this story and accept my gratitude for the acts of kindness that their ancestors bestowed to my family in their time of need.

May God bless this family and preserve the sweet memories of their ancestors.

I apologize for bringing you to this point with so many words. I also regret that I have two points of business yet to conduct.

First, I would like to obtain written permission from the proprietors of Bell-Keith Cemetery for the installation of a small memorial stone for John McMeins and his family. I would like the stone to offer visitors the following information:

John McMeins
1823 - 1884
Mexican War Veteran
Somewhere within these hallowed
grounds lie the remains of John and
six unnamed members of his family

When we spoke on Friday evening, you stated that you were in possession of a plot map that may contain the location of where John and his family are buried. In the event that the burial locations become evident, I would revise the caption to remove "Somewhere" and replace it with something more specific. I can make arrangements to meet with you in the coming weeks should you wish to have discussion on this subject.

My second order of business deals specifically with the information you shared with me regarding the operating funds for the upkeep of the cemetery. You revealed that the cemetery operating fund was approaching balances that would not sustain the proper care of the grounds. You further suggested that it would be difficult to maintain the cemetery grounds with little or no future income into the trust fund.

As members of a moral society, we take on the obligation to insure that our sacred places are not desecrated or left unkept. If we cease to consider the care of these grounds then we in effect shew disrespect to our ancestors and neglect our community.

That said, enclosed you will find my good check in the amount \$122.00. The amount should not seem odd as it represents one dollar for every year that John McMeins has resided in this place. I am ashamed that it has taken over one-hundred years to make this contribution and embarrassed that I could not offer more at this time. That aside, I ask that you accept this as my written instruction to deposit the money in the appropriate account for use in maintaining the grounds of Bell-Keith Cemetery. You stated that the cost of mowing was about twenty-five to thirty dollars so hopefully this will help with some of the maintenance this year.

I will make every attempt to solicit donations to insure that the grounds are maintained. Copies of this correspondence will be mailed to family members and area historical societies. I will also send a copy to the editor of the local newspapers. The editor may wish to reveal some of the history and needs of Bell-Keith to his subscribers. I would be grateful if you would share this information with your friends and family members also.

We live in a time when family and history are greatly underrated. It seems as though we spend considerable time and effort in our lives to make certain that we are remembered by our children and friends. I guess that as we age we come to realize the mortality of our existence. Given that realization we should recognize that our ancestors probably thought the same things. It is to that end that we should realize that we have been handed a baton, a baton that bears their history. To that we etch our own history and pass it to our descendants, so on and so forth.

When I started my family research several years ago, I employed a very simple motto:

"No One Should Be Forgotten!"

This served as an inspiration to continue the difficult task of uncovering family histories. It is my hope that the reader will discover their own inspiration and enlist to help in the preservation of the Bell-Keith Cemetery landmark, located in Mt. Sterling Illinois.

I have included a copy of my February 2006 correspondence to the Veterans of Foreign Wars. I hoped that the VFW could offer assistance in providing a marker for John but this letter has gone unanswered as of this writing.

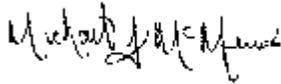
The reader may be interested to learn that some of the descendants of John McMeins are still living in the area. They reside in Hancock County, Illinois and Lee County, Iowa, just across the river. The family members that left the area migrated to Northern Illinois, Missouri and Maryland.

The McMeins families written in this account have also been known as McMeans, McMiens, McMains and numerous other variations.

Finally, I would like the readers to be aware that the subject family is not to be confused with the McMein family of Quincy Illinois. As of the writing there are no known relationships between the two families.

I thank you for your patience and look forward to hearing from you in the near future.

Sincerely,



Michael J. McMeins

Enc., Veterans of Foreign Wars correspondence dated February 16, 2006

Some Notes and Legal Stuff

The historical information pertaining to names, places and dates has been interpreted by the writer from primary and secondary sources. The possibility exists that the writer's interpretation may differ from that of other researchers. The sole purpose of the writing is for the historical enlightenment of the reader. The author welcomes any correction or criticism designed to enhance the history of the people or places represented within the document. The source list as well as copies of the source material will be made available upon written request to the author.

Page six of this document contains the distribution list of family members, friends and entities that are thought to have an interest in the subject matter. This list has been sent to the proprietors of Bell-Keith Cemetery. To all others the distribution in general is as follows:

2 local newspapers, 9 historical/genealogical societies and 17 family members.
Duplication of page six is strictly forbidden and the names are not to be revealed in any manner.

The author grants permission for use of the information contained within this document to the extent that it is used for non-profitable historical and genealogical purposes or for the purpose of solicitation of donations for the Bell-Keith Cemetery.