



The Magnificent John Bell

If you were a train, how would people describe you? What would people say about you when you passed by? How would people who were on board for a long time describe being part of your journey?

If John Bell were a locomotive, he would be named the Magnificent John Bell, Engine Number 1923. The DNA components of John Bell's locomotive came from his parents John and Caroline Bell. John and Caroline Bell lived a life of faith and family and provided John with the right components to have a successful journey through life. The Magnificent John Bell was placed into service on Saturday, July 14, 1923 in Jeanette, Pennsylvania. Equipped with the finest parts, he was placed on the straight tracks early in life.

During his early years John's route was a local line winding through Jeanette as he never traveled too far from home. He traveled through the Laurel mountains of western Pennsylvania with his six sisters, being the only boy in the family. He attended Jeanette High School and during his senior year, John was a member of the 1939 Jeanette Jayhawk football team that won the Western Pennsylvania Interscholastic Athletic League (WPIAL) State Championship by beating Ambridge 6-0. Less than 70 years later, Ohio State standout Terrell Pryor became a football legend for the Jeanette Jayhawks who also won the state title in the WPIAL. John took a lot of pride hearing about Terrell and reminiscing about his time on the gridiron with the Jeanette Jayhawks

CATHOLIC FAITH CAR

In John's early journeys the first car that he attached was his Faith Car. As a conductor, John was a devout Catholic and always led by example. He conducted his life by loving God and saying the rosary every day. As a child I remember dad kneeling at the foot of his bed to say his prayers every night before going to bed. John Bell never missed Mass and cherished receiving communion. The moral compass in his faith car was always calibrated with precision as his focus was on the Lord.

A testimony of his faith and kindness can be told through Annie Krist. Annie was an elderly woman who just happened to live along the railroad tracks off 21st Street in Newark. Annie was homebound but wanted to attend Mass each Sunday. Every Sunday John Bell would pick up Annie and attend Mass with her at the 6 a.m. service at St. Francis. Afterwards, Dad would go home, read the Sunday paper in his recliner for awhile before preparing the legendary Sunday feast for his family consisting of roast beef, mashed potatoes with gravy, peas, corn and salad.

John's faith car would also have a television inside tuned to the Eternal Word Television Network. John loved watching EWTN and most importantly loved watching Sunday Mass when he was not able to travel to Church.

PATRIOTIC CAR

John earned his Patriotic Car after serving in the United States Navy from April 6, 1943 to March 5, 1947. John served just shy of three years on active duty (a requirement to receive a Good Conduct Medal.) He often told me that he wished he could have served another month to earn his Good Conduct Medal. Through the life he lived, we all know John earned his Good Conduct Medal.

In the Navy, John was a Water Tender Second Class. Today a Water Tender would be called a Machinist's Mate Petty Officer. John worked hard tending to the fires and boilers in the ship's engine room and he did his job with perfection. The lives of the men on board and the combat effectiveness of the USS Tuscaloosa was in the hands of John Bell.

John served off the shores of Normandy on D-Day and was proud to have helped win the War in the European Theater. But John did not return home for a ticker tape parade since his ship was called upon to serve in the Pacific Theater. John continued to serve his country as the USS Tuscaloosa fought in various campaigns leading up to the battles off the shores of Okinawa (the last ground campaign of WWII). John served with honor and he took pride in two of his sons who also wore the uniform in defense of our country.

COAL CAR (1947)

After serving his country, John hooked up with a coal car. He met Kathleen Shanley in a movie house and the two were inseparable. Kathleen Shanley came from the coal mining family in the coal mining town of Crabtree, Pennsylvania. She had beautiful coal black hair. John and Kathleen began their journey as husband and wife on June 14, 1947 in Holy Rosary Roman Catholic Church outside Pittsburgh. As the coal car, Kathleen provided the fuel and energy for John through their 67 years of marriage. Kathleen made John stronger, made him smile greater and enabled him to pull many more cars. They had some uphill journeys and challenges through life, but they also enjoyed the beauty of adding family cars during their journey.

For the first 15 years, the Magnificent John Bell helped deliver seven family cars in Pennsylvania before he changed course and headed to Newark, Ohio. Moving away from generations of family members was difficult on John and Kathleen. As a testimony of his leadership skills, John's purpose in moving three hours to the west was to enable his children to have a better life. John added his final family car in 1968 when Joe Bell was born in Newark, Ohio.

John made sure that each family car was equipped with a solid foundation and he provided a crucifix for their car. He had a strong light which enabled his family cars to see the journey through the darkest nights and he showed them the strength they would need to make it over steepest hills. Along the route, he explained why the journey through life was difficult but the destination was worth the sacrifice. He never veered off course and showed his family cars the importance of living a life of love. His cars were always connected and his love of life provided laughter making each journey memorable.

ENTERTAINMENT CAR

John's train also had an entertainment car which was probably the length of a bocce court. The walls of his entertainment car would be adorned with posters of the Pittsburgh Steelers, Pittsburgh Pirates, Notre Dame Fighting Irish and Newark Catholic Green Wave. His entertainment car would have several televisions each with a sports channel. If you asked him at any moment he would probably be able to tell you each score as well as how much time was left in each game.

John's entertainment car also would contain a recliner with a light just perfectly positioned over his left shoulder so he could read the newspaper. When he was finished with the paper he would sit in his recliner and share stories and laughter

Also included in John's entertainment car would be a Pinochle Table with four chairs, a fresh deck of cards, and a glass of ice water. The ice would be cubes, not crushed. He preferred his ice crushed but would always know if anyone dropped a cube of ice on the kitchen floor.

PASSENGER CARS

As with every other car being led by the Magnificent John Bell, there were several passenger cars with crucifixes. The cars were filled with childhood friends, high school class mates, and thousands of other friends, family members and acquaintances than John met along the tracks for more than 91 years. Some of the people knew John for a short time, others enjoyed a long journey.

As the conductor of his train, John led as a true patriarch for eight children, 29 grandchildren, and 30 great grandchildren who would frequently roam through the passenger cars with laughter.

CABOOSE

Inside the final car of John's train was our Lord. I am confident that the Lord was watching over John's journey with pride as he saw the correct decisions he was making along the journey. The Lord noticed that John attended Mass, he did not swear, he did not drink, he did not smoke, and he lived a clean life. Most importantly, he walked the walk and talked the talk. He was a true leader by example.

As a brakeman inside John's caboose, the Lord knew when it was time to slow down John. Sometimes John would slow down due to health issues so that another person could get on board and John would have a chance to make a difference in their lives. One example of this was in the lives of several care givers with Hospice who witnessed first-hand the love that John had for Kathleen and his family. The Lord also knew when to allow John to move full steam ahead to make it to his destination.

LESSONS LEARNED

In reflecting on John's life, perhaps we should take a look at which type of train we are conducting. We can always change our direction at the next train switching station if we feel we are off course. We could ensure each of our cars have a crucifix prominently displayed in our homes. John would be the first to say that the crucifix is the Church's most powerful visual aid.

We could also honor the memory of John by ensuring we have a rosary with us at all times. For the digital generation, we can even download an App for our smartphones called Laudate to help us keep the faith. The Latin term Laudate translates into the word praise.

Perhaps the best way we can honor the life of the Magnificent John Bell is to live our lives as he did—focusing on God. When the Good Lord slows us down at train crossings, perhaps we should take the time to reflect on where our train is heading.

If we see a train in the distance, or perhaps hear a train whistle, maybe it's John's way of sounding the whistle to get our attention. We can then reflect on our priorities in life to ensure that John Bell is looking down on us with the same pride we have in how he lived his life.

John's final stop was when he arrived at the gateway to Heaven. It was his time to uncouple the cars because he had earned his rite of passage.