

# Scheming and Dreaming

Jim Bell's Brass Extrusion Labs Story

## Chapter 1

In June of 1965, a 24 year old Jim Bell had dreams of hunting the world like Ernest Hemmingway or being center stage of a Rudyard Kipling adventure. He had to settle for going to India in the Peace Corps, just after a whirlwind week of graduating from Southern Illinois University and getting married. Who knew the Peace Corps would lead to a lifetime career in ammunition?

A key piece of the back story is Jim grew up in the family business, Bell's Gun and Sport Shop, on Manheim Road in Franklin Park, Il a Chicago suburb. There Jim swept the pistol range, worked the counter, worked on guns and much more. Jim's father, James J. Bell Sr. known as Big Jim, was a 3<sup>rd</sup> generation Gunsmith and Jim Jr. was 4<sup>th</sup> generation. Big Jim started working on guns in his basement after he got back from WWII. Big Jim had with several gun shops that he worked for and collected guns on Saturday and worked on them at nights after he got off from International Harvester in Melrose Park. Jim Jr. fondly remembers going along with his father on many Saturdays to pick up and drop off guns. The basement shop was eventually traded for a small retail store on Grand Ave in Elmwood Park. The family lived above the retail store. Jim Jr. remembers a small attic area that was his room with no heat, only heat from rooms below. It made for some cold Chicago winters. Around 1953, the business moved into a custom built retail store, with 20 plus lane range and attached 3 bedroom residence was complete.



Bell's Gun Circa 2005 – credit Tim Boyle.

Big Jim was quite a wily character and that definitely rubbed off on Jim Jr. Big Jim was notorious for trying crazy item or excessive quantities to sell in the store. Typically, this was buying way, way too much inventory and leaving his wife Elsie – known as Tootie or Ma Bell - to sell it. In the 70's, there were dozens of SKB Shotguns that took almost a decade to sell. There were cartons full of Weaver

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scopes in every nook and cranny taking more than 40 years to be eradicated from inventory. Big Jim also dabbled in many areas semi-related to Guns and Shooting Sports. One such example was being a McCulloch Chainsaw dealer. Since chain saws were not in high demand in the Chicago suburbs, Big Jim's departing gift for the India Adventures to Jim Jr. was a brand new chainsaw to help clear the wild Jungles of India.

The Madhya Pradesh region where Jim Jr. served was not a jungle. It was closer to a desert. The chainsaw was *the preeminent* standing joke among the 80 person Peace Corp group. What good is a chainsaw with no trees? Rajah(Prince) Chota Uidpur sent out a call to the Peace Corps for help with a Forestry project. It turns out that there were some trees here and there after all. Because Jim had the chainsaw, he was nominated and promoted to be the 'Forestry Expert' for the local Peace Corp assemblage. Jim met with the Rajah and demonstrated the chainsaw by chopping down a troublesome tree that was infested with fire ants, the keystone task of the forestry project. The Rajah was most impressed. Seeing opportunity to make friend, Jim decided to give him the chainsaw, as it was of zero use to him and maybe he would get the rest of the group off his back. In return, the Rajah gave Jim a beautiful Holland & Holland 375 x 2.5 inch double barreled rifle. In 1965, Kynoch had stopped producing the ammunition and the rifle was as useful to him as the chainsaw was to Jim.

In additional conversation over proper English tea, Jim snuck into the conversation about Big Jim wanting to hunt in India, the gun shop, his other hunting adventures and the whole family story. The Rajah said he would be glad to host them on a hunt! Over the next couple of years, Big Jim made 2 trips to India to hunt Tiger, Bears, Blue Bull, Chetal Deer and Dykers. The rest of the Rajah's magnificent collection was viewed with much adoration. Many of the rifles were in the same boat at the .375, no ammo or at least not readily available ammunition. Both of the Jim's wheels began to turn a scheme about buying the rifles on the cheap in India and selling in the US – and maybe a few hunt's along the journey.

Fast forward to 1968 and on Jim's last trip though London with the Peace Corp, he stopped in at Holland and Holland. He wanted to see what the cost to re-barrel the rifle to a modern caliber. The Holland Ballistician informed him that the action was not strong enough for newer hunting calibers, and the retrofit would cost \$8-10k. Coming off his Peace Corps pay of \$.11/hour, this was not an option. Jim commented it would be cheaper to make the ammo himself. The Brit said, 'Mate if you do that we'll buy some too.' The additional wheels started turning for a plan to make his own obsolete ammunition for old British Double Rifles. The precursor idea Brass Extrusion was born.