

CULTURAL MOMENT FOR MARCH 10, 2025 CELEBRATES JACK BICKELL

When John Paris (Jack) Bickell passed away on August 22, 1951, he was one of Canada's wealthiest and most influential men. Jack was born on September 26, 1884, in the Molesworth Presbyterian Church manse to Annie and Rev. David Bickell. Shortly after his birth, Rev. Bickell was called to lead the congregation in Mount Forest. Tragically, Rev. Bickell passed away in 1891 when Jack was only six years old. In the years following his father's death, Jack's younger brother passed away in 1892, and his older brother died of appendicitis in 1898.

The family moved frequently, and after spending two years in Alberta, they settled in Toronto. To support his family, Jack worked various jobs, some of which were questionable. He was even let go from a meat packing plant for "extramural moneymaking activities." Despite these challenges, Jack managed to support his family and pay for his tuition at St. Andrew's College, where he graduated in 1902.

At the age of 23, he founded his own brokerage firm, J.P. Bickell & Co., and quickly became a millionaire by the age of 30. In 1919, he sold his firm to focus on his interests in the movie and mining industries.

Bickell played a significant role in the development of the movie industry in Canada. He served as president of Eastern Theatres Limited and Hamilton United Theatres Limited, overseeing the construction of Toronto's Pantages Theatre (now known as the Ed Mirvish Theatre) and the transformation of the Majestic into a deluxe movie theatre. In 1920, Famous Players Canadian Corporation Limited was founded in Bickell's office, and he served as vice president.

Bickell was also a key figure in the mining industry, particularly in the operation of McIntyre-Porcupine Mines in Timmins. Bickell's philanthropic efforts included significant donations to various causes, such as the University of Toronto and the Toronto General Hospital.

Bickell's most notable contribution to Toronto was his long-time association with the Toronto Maple Leafs. He served as the owner, president, chairman, and director of the team from 1924 to 1951. Bickell played a crucial role in financing the construction of Maple Leaf Gardens, which became an iconic sports venue in Toronto. His financial support helped keep the Maple Leafs in Toronto during difficult times, and he was instrumental in the team's success. He was inducted to the Hockey Hall of Fame in 1978.

During the Second World War, Bickell was a key member of a group under Canadian Max Aitken, 1st Baron Beaverbrook, the British Minister of Aircraft Production, which ensured an adequate supply of airplanes for the British forces. After the war, Bickell co-founded A. V. Roe Canada Limited (AVRO), Avro Canada with Sir Roy Dobson. He held the position of chairman of the company until his death in 1951.

John Paris Bickell passed away on August 22, 1951, in New York City. During his life, Bickell gave generously, and in death, he willed \$13 million of his \$14.6 million estate to the creation of the J.P. Bickell Foundation. He established it to donate half of its interest income each year: 50% to the Hospital for Sick Children, 10% for bursaries aiding in medical research, 5% to mining scholarships, and 35% to be distributed to general charities in Ontario at the discretion of the J.P. Bickell Foundation Management Committee. Since 1953, the Foundation has generated over \$300 million and contributed more than \$160 million to charity.

A quote from Graham MacLachlan, Bickell's cousin, sums up Bickell the best:

"He's probably the most unknown great Canadian we have. I hope we've given him the credit in death that he didn't seek in life."

Submitted by the Wellington North Cultural Roundtable



John (Jack) Paris Bickell