

Paul Ross. BICKELL, J.P. (John Paris)

J.P. Bickell: Our 'most unknown great Canadian'

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There's an anecdote in the long-overdue biography of J.P. Bickell - bachelor, playboy, jet-setting, Mississauga Road business tycoon millionaire - that gets at the heart of his complex character.



J.P. was playing golf in the 20s with some wealthy Americans at Mississauga Golf and Country Club, located beside his My Back Pages sprawling Spanish-eclectic style Mississauga Road mansion.

The \$5-a-hole stakes prompted the visitors to complain about "cheapskate" Canadians. When the foursome came to a particularly challenging hole, Bickell upped the ante to \$5,000. At hole's end, a broad grin covered the face of the man known as "Smiling Jack."

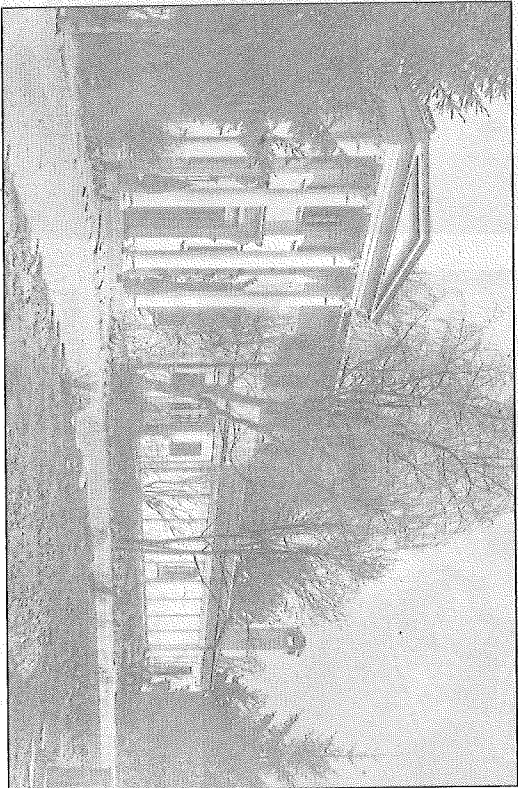
Bickell was a gambler, a self-made man who quit his successful stock brokerage at 23 to conquer mining. He consistently put his money where his shrewd interests lay. He kept the Mississauga golf club solvent with a \$50,000 Depression-era loan.

He was a foundational player in countless Canadian businesses, including McIntyre Porcupine, Famous Players Theatres, Inco, St. Mary's Cement and the Canadian Bank of Commerce.

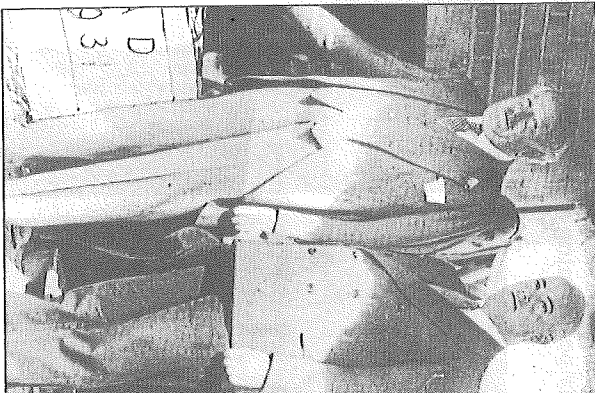
He donated two amphibious planes to the war effort, then helped Lord Beaverbrook spearhead aircraft production that turned the tide in Britain's air war.

Bickell was the nonsalaried president of the government-owned Victory Aircraft in Malton, which cranked out Lancaster bombers that made 156,000 war flights.

After the war, he co-founded and chaired Malton's A. V. Roe Canada which put the first commercial passenger aircraft, the Jetliner, into service in 1949.



Photos courtesy of Graham MacLachlan



J.P. Bickell The Life, the Leafs

and the Legacy confirms him as the chief catalyst and main financial force behind the formation of the Toronto Maple Leafs.

His partnership bought the Toronto St. Pats in 1924. When Conn Smythe was fired by the New York Rangers in 1926, he pressured Bickell to run the St. Pats hockey operations.

Bickell picked his own man, who failed. Then he took Smythe up on his offer, giving him a share of the club.

In 1947, Bickell either sold or gave Smythe the controlling shares. To signify the transfer, the board gave Bickell a sterling silver cigar box signed by its 20

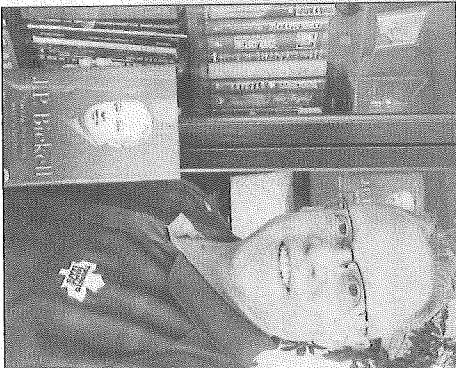
directors.

That box is now owned by Graham MacLachlan, who spearheaded the book telling his cousin's remarkable story.

There are countless biographies of Conn Smythe. This is the first telling the multifaceted, fascinating story of J.P. Bickell.

His greatest achievement may have been construction of Maple Leaf Gardens. In the depths of the Depression, he put his own money into the \$900,000 project, cajoled investments and got unions to work 24 hours-a-day by offering shares.

Toronto Star columnist Milt Dunnell wrote, "it was Bickell, according to Smythe, who re-



Above, Graham MacLachlan, a cousin of J.P. Bickell helped

research, edit and do interviews for a new biography on Bickell because he wants Canadians to have an appreciation of a man who left an indelible mark in the worlds of business, sports and philanthropy. Above, left, Bickell's mansion beside the Mississauga Golf and Country Club, known as Arcadia, was featured in Construction Magazine in May 1927. Bickell, shown far left, on his steam yacht Vacuna, was a familiar site on Georgian Bay. And left, Bickell (left) helps lay the cornerstone of Maple Leaf Gardens Sept. 22, 1931 with Ontario Lieutenant-Governor W.D. Ross.

plenished the pile of blue chips for the hard-pressed Garden dreamers. He had the right connections among the people with folding money and he went to work on them."

Much like Bickell, MacLachlan did the behind-the-scenes spadework to make sure his story was told.

He culled files, conducted interviews, sourced historic photos that enliven the volume and recruited "hockey writer of record" Kevin Shea and author and musician Jason Wilson to co-write.

Bickell hosted numerous lavish Jay Gatsby-style parties at the Mississauga mansion

known as Arcadia, bringing together guests from the worlds of business, sports and film. His good friend Premier Mitch Hepburn, who once held a news conference on the veranda, was a regular.

MacLachlan has photo albums filled with party photos full of the era's celebrities. The mansion included a bowling alley, indoor pool, ornate library, elevator and movie theatre.

Tians of industry and government met there often. "There were probably more meetings held at 1993 Mississauga Rd. to develop Canada than there were in Ottawa," MacLachlan laughs.

When Bickell died in 1951, Conn Smythe created a 14-carat gold cup honouring Bickell whom he called the "cornerstone" of the Gardens' construction.

It was to be awarded periodically to those maintaining a "high standard of excellence" to the organization. Mississauga's Johnny Bower has won it three times. It hasn't been awarded since 2003 when Pat Quinn won. Bickell's profile wasn't higher because he valued privacy and wasn't a self-promoter.

He surrounded himself with trusted, competent friends and mentored the next generation of magnate/philanthropists including Ted Rogers, Roy Thomson and Jack Kent Cooke.

If Bickell built a business empire in life, he built a charitable one in death.

More than 100 pieces of his Arcadia collection are in the Art Gallery of Canada.

He established a remarkably flexible personal foundation of \$13.1 million which has generated \$160 million in grants, including \$76 million to SickKids hospital.

Proceeds of book sales go to Camp Bickell in Timmins, one of the few things he put his name on.

"I hope this book will allow him to take his rightful place," says MacLachlan. "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."