

Discover more treasure along the Trail

By Deborah Reinhardt Palmer

One of the joys of travel is discovering tucked away treasures and interesting people. These opportunities are plentiful along the Shawnee Hills Wine Trail. On a recent two-day trip, I found two treasures that are too good to keep to myself.

HISTORIC BELL HILL

Many residents of Cobden and surrounding small communities know about the house on Bell Hill. This lovely Southern home dates to the 1850s and has endured fire, the passing of time and owners, hard luck and plenty of good times. I wish I could speak to this house to hear the stories it might tell me.

Bell Hill's original owner, James Bell, made a fortune in timber after the Civil War. The home's current owner, Julia Todd, is a gracious woman originally from Kentucky who works as an interior designer and operates the inn with the help of her son, Todd Suwana. Julia and Todd live at the house, which gives an overnight here the feeling of visiting one's favorite aunt.



Todd Suwana and Julia Todd welcome guests to beautiful Historic Bell Hill in Cobden. Deborah Reinhardt Palmer photo

There are four bedrooms, each beautifully decorated with antiques or reproductions. Yet the inn is not at all pretentious. Instead, there's a gracious comfort offered

to guests. Whenever possible, original items to the home—such as the coat hooks found in the upstairs ballroom bath—can be found in various rooms.

The ballroom suite on the third floor can accommodate a traveling group or family with ease. There's a king-sized bed and three twin beds. Interesting items are tucked in the rafters of this floor, including remnants of a

Page 1



leather trapeze once used by a pet chimp kept by former owners of the house. During the Bell family's era, the third floor was used to entertain guests during lavish parties.

Grant's Suite is an elegant room for couples that includes a large bathroom with a balcony and whirlpool. Gen. Ulysses Grant stayed with the Bell family at the house. Two rooms—Miss Bell's and Metiney's (Julia's daughter)—have feminine charms and private baths. The Todd Parlor, also on the second floor, is a quiet place for reading or playing cards and opens to the large balcony that has a splendid view of the valley. It's a great escape with a bottle of local wine and a few good friends.

Walk the grounds and enjoy the gardens and vistas. Although it's not accessible to guests, the old barn, Julia said, contains carved directions to Chicago and is believed to be a part of the Underground Railroad.

A full Southern breakfast is served in the sunroom—the newer addition to the home that replaced a failing back porch. We enjoyed coffee, milk, juice, bacon, cheesy eggs, toast, fruit and chocolate chip pancakes on fine china. Julia is a lovely hostess and a joyful woman who can tell you about area shops, markets and restaurants. She operates her inn with love, care and gracious expertise.

Historic Bell Hill is on the Shawnee Hills Wine Trail just off U.S. Highway 51 on Bell Hill Road. Rates are \$150 per night and include the full breakfast. A sign at the entrance identifies the driveway to travelers. For more information, call (618) 697-0326 or visit www.historicbellhill.com.

Page 2