

SOME EARLY MINNESOTA BELLS¹

The sweet sound of bells is almost forgotten in this modern age of noise and hurry. Impatient automobile horns, screeching brakes, and clanging streetcars drown out their melodious peals. Modern means of communication and of telling time make their summons seem superfluous. To the early pioneers of Minnesota, however, bells were important and their ringing was a welcome sound in the stillness. It was a symbol of civilization to them, a link with the life left behind. "Let a traveler hear the sound of a church bell and he feels secure and knows that he is in a civilized land," wrote James M. Goodhue, editor of the *Minnesota Pioneer*, when he listened to the first church bells in St. Paul.²

The ringing of bells has for centuries called people to action in time of danger, summoned them to public gatherings, and signaled the reading of proclamations, the arrival of ships, the announcement of news. School bells have hurried the lagging feet of countless children. Church bells have admonished, rejoiced, or tolled, according to the occasion. The brazen "loud alarm bells" described by Poe have "screamed out their affright in the startled ear of night."

All sorts of bells were brought to Minnesota in the pioneer period, and bells were put to all sorts of uses. Small hand bells were used as dinner bells, school bells, and church bells. Church bells were used as alarm bells; steamboat bells became school bells. Many communities cherish, or perhaps possess unknowingly, bells that have played an important part in their history. The stories of some of them

¹ A revised version of a paper read before the annual August institute of the Minnesota Public Health Association meeting in St. Paul on August 10, 1937. Under the title "Some Historic Bells of Minnesota," the paper appears in its earlier form in the October issue of *Everybody's Health*, a monthly magazine published by the association. Ed.

² *Minnesota Pioneer*, November 14, 1850.

are recorded in reminiscences, letters, and newspapers. Some are still in use in churches and schools.

The Minnesota Historical Society has in its museum what was doubtless the first dinner bell ever rung in St. Paul, a hand bell used by Mrs. Henry Jackson when St. Paul was a mere cluster of log huts. Henry Jackson opened the first store in St. Paul in 1842, in a log cabin on the river bank near Jackson Street, which was named for him.

The largest bell on exhibit in the Historical Building came from the frigate "Minnesota," which saw active service in the navy during the Civil War. When this ship was launched in 1855 it was christened with water brought from the Minnesota River by Henry M. Rice, who was then representing Minnesota Territory in Congress. The vessel took part in the famous battle with the "Merrimac" at Hampton Roads in 1862 and in other engagements of the Civil War. For many years after the war it was a training ship for the navy. Both the steering wheel and the bell were obtained for the historical society after the ship was sold and dismantled.

Probably the earliest bells of any size to be heard in what is now Minnesota were steamboat bells. The first steamboat that came up the Mississippi to Fort Snelling was the "Virginia," which arrived from St. Louis on May 10, 1823. It was followed by the "Rambler," and in succeeding years by steamboats which bore such colorful names as "War Eagle," "Highland Mary," "Time and Tide," "Olive Branch," and "Prairie Bird." The arrival of the boat was announced by both whistles and bells. In 1847, when Harriet Bishop came up the Mississippi in the "Lynx" to open a school in St. Paul, she noted that the Indian and half-breed children playing about their homes upon the river banks "would flee like frightened deer" at the sound of the boat bell. When the boat reached the Indian village of Kaposia, the "ringing of the bell occasioned a grand rush, and

with telegraphic speed, every man, woman and child flew to the landing."³ At the white settlements also the steamboat bell summoned excited citizens to the levee. It heralded the coming of long-awaited letters, of much-needed supplies, of new settlers, and of visitors. When the "Dr. Franklin No. 2," the first boat to reach St. Paul in the spring of 1849, arrived at the landing in the midst of a thunderstorm "almost the entire male population rushed to the landing—hundreds clustered on the shore unmindful of the storm." The cause of the great excitement was the desire to hear a particular bit of news, and a great shout went up when it was learned that the bill for the organization of Minnesota Territory had become a law.⁴

Steamboat bells differed widely in tone. George B. Merrick tells how he, as a boy, learned to distinguish the various whistles and bells; if a boat was one of the regular packets he did not need to see it to name it. "A boy that could not distinguish by ear alone, a majority of the boats landing at the levee from year to year," he says, "was considered as deficient in his education. There was one" bell, he continues, "the music of which will live in my memory so long as life lasts. The tone of the 'Ocean Wave's' bell was deep, rich, sonorous, and when heard at a distance on a still clear night, was concentrated sweetness. Were I rich, I would, were it a possibility, find that bell and hang it in some bell-less steeple where I might hear again its splendid tones, calling not alone to worship, but summoning for me from the misty past pictures indelibly printed upon boyish



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A BELL ADVERTISEMENT

[From the *Minnesota Teacher* (St. Paul),
September, 1872.]

³ Harriet E. Bishop, *Floral Home*, 60 (New York, 1857).

⁴ *Pioneer*, April 28, 1849.

senses.”⁵ The “Ocean Wave,” a side-wheeler built at Elizabeth, Kentucky, in 1854, was destroyed by fire at Frontenac in 1868. Since its roof bell was the “sweetest toned bell on the river,” several men wanted it. Unfortunately, when it was salvaged from the wreck it was found to be cracked; but with skillful mending a fairly good tone was obtained, and it did service on several other steamers until it finally disappeared down the river.

The Minnesota Historical Society has also in its possession the bell of the “Argo,” which in 1847 was running as a regular packet between Galena and St. Paul, making side trips to Stillwater. In the fall of that year it sank at the foot of Argo Island above Winona, and the following year its bell was salvaged and sold to citizens of Stillwater, who placed it on their schoolhouse. Thus it became one of the earliest school bells in Minnesota. Eventually it was cracked and broken and no longer useful; and in 1879 the Stillwater board of education had it inscribed and presented it to the historical society. A steamboat bell found its way also to the belfry of a schoolhouse in Excelsior. It was first used on the “Phil Sheridan,” running between St. Louis and St. Paul, and was said to be a gift of some southern women who came annually to Minnesota on that boat. When the “Phil Sheridan” ceased active service the bell was secured for use on the “Belle of Minnetonka” and its silver tones became a familiar sound to summer residents on the shores of Lake Minnetonka. Citizens of Excelsior secured it for a schoolhouse when the “Belle of Minnetonka” was dismantled.⁶

A bell salvaged from a sunken boat hangs in the chapel of Calvary Cemetery in Mankato. It was not a steamboat bell, but a church bell ordered from Germany for a chapel

⁵ George B. Merrick, *Old Times on the Upper Mississippi*, 33 (Cleveland, 1909).

⁶ Randolph Edgar, *A Record of Old Boats*, 30-33 (Minneapolis, 1933).

somewhere in the West. When the steamboat that carried it sank in the Mississippi, the bell was lost with it but was later salvaged and sold to the missionary at the Winnebago Indian Agency in Blue Earth County. After the Sioux Outbreak, the Winnebago were removed from Minnesota and the mission was abandoned. The bell then went to the Church of Saint Peter and Paul's in Mankato. After serving as a church bell for a few years, it became the call bell in a parochial school. Finally it was placed in the cemetery, where it has tolled for many years.⁷

The missionaries who labored among the Indians when Minnesota was still an unsettled wilderness felt the need of bells. Without them they sometimes had to go from tent to tent to call the congregation together at church time. Some brought small bells with them. Father Francis Pierz at Grand Portage in 1838 had a little bell with which he gave the signal for morning and evening prayers. John F. Aiton, who, with his wife, came to Minnesota in the summer of 1848 as a Presbyterian missionary to the Sioux, brought with him a hand bell which served as a church and school bell in many places—first at Red Wing, where it summoned the Indian boys and girls to school, and later in Indian mission schools at Kaposia and Yellow Medicine and at a school for white children at Lake Prairie in Nicollet County. It remained a keepsake in the Aiton family for many years, and it was finally presented to Macalester College. Another hand bell, which was used to call people to church services in early Stillwater, is said to be preserved by the descendants of William T. Boutwell, who is reported to have walked up and down the streets of the village ringing his bell when it was time for his congregation to assemble. Stephen R. Riggs and his wife, who lived for a time at the Lac qui Parle mission in western Minnesota, secured a bell for the little church of unburnt brick which was built in

⁷ Wilhelm von Festenberg-Pakisch, *Die St. Peter und Pauls-Gemeinde in Mankato, Minnesota*, 55 (Mankato, 1899).

1841. Mrs. Riggs wrote to her mother in 1846: "You will, I think, feel gratified to know that there are some things pleasant and encouraging here, notwithstanding the discouragements. The sound of the church going bell is heard here—the bell which we purchased with the avails of moccasins donated by the church members."⁸

The church of St. Boniface, erected in the thirties, had as members many Catholic voyageurs who lived in the Red River Valley. St. Boniface was beyond the present borders of Minnesota, but since the voyageurs played such a colorful role in the fur-trade period of its history, the poem written by Whittier about the bells of this church seems to belong to this state. In it the call of wild geese, the Indian's yell, and the voice of the north wind mingle with the tones of the bells as they come to the voyageur.

The voyageur smiles as he listens
To the sound that grows apace;
Well he knows the vesper ringing
Of the bells of St. Boniface.

The bells of the Roman Mission
That call from their turrets twain,
To the boatman on the river,
To the hunter on the plain.⁹

It is known that at least one bell foundry existed in Minnesota. This was established in 1864 by William Bleedorn, a native of Germany, at Watertown in Carver County. Bleedorn seems to have specialized in the manufacture of cowbells, which he shipped to all parts of the United States. His foundry operated until the early nineties, and was said to have had an annual output of from three to five thousand bells.¹⁰

Two large church bells came to St. Paul in November, 1850. One was cast at the world-famous Meneely foundry

⁸ Stephen R. Riggs, *Mary and I: Forty Years with the Sioux*, 102 (Chicago, 1880).

⁹ John G. Whittier, "The Red River Voyageur," in *Home Ballads and Poems*, 151 (Boston, 1860).

¹⁰ *History of the Minnesota Valley*, 384 (Minneapolis, 1882).

at West Troy, New York, and the other at the Hanks foundry in Cincinnati. Andrew Meneely, who established his foundry in 1826, had so improved on earlier methods of making bells that his products were in demand throughout the world. His chimes were particularly sought after and won many prizes at fairs and exhibitions. He was able, it

Church Bells and Town Clocks.

AN experience of more than 25 years has given the subscriber an opportunity of obtaining the various combinations of metals, the heat requisite for securing the greatest solidity, strength and most melodious tones.

Church, Factory, and Steamboat Bells, constantly on hand, and *peals* of any number furnished. Those of Trinity Church, New-York, were completed at this Foundry; also the Fire Bells, which are the largest ever cast in this country. For several years past, the highest premiums have been awarded by the N. Y. State Fairs and American Institute. 1031 Bells, averaging 603 lbs each, were cast during the two past years. Improved Iron Yokes are attached, and Springs affixed to the Clappers, which prolongs the sound. Yoke Frame and Wheel complete, can be furnished if required.

Theodolites, and all sorts of Levelling and Surveying instruments on hand.

ANDREW MENEELY.

West Troy, N. Y., July, 1850. 2-131f

MENEELY'S ADVERTISEMENT

[From the *Pioneer*, September 5, 1850.]

was claimed, to predict with accuracy the weight and tone of each bell that he cast, and hundreds of churches purchased his rich, mellow-toned bells. His advertisement was printed in the *Minnesota Pioneer* during the summer and fall of 1850. "Mr. Meneely's bell was the first proper church bell that was ever hung in Minnesota," wrote Goodhue, "and to the editor's ears, its tones were peculiarly sweet, as it reminded him of the fact that the said gentleman had patronized our paper by advertising, and by paying in ad-

vance.”¹¹ This bell was purchased for the First Presbyterian Church, which had just been erected at the corner of Third and St. Peter streets. Two days after it was in place in the belfry another bell arrived for it, an unexpected donation from the maker, George L. Hanks of Cincinnati. The Hanks foundry also had a wide reputation for church bells and chimes, and cast some very large bells for city use. The Presbyterians quickly made arrangements to sell the bell they had purchased to the Methodist church on Market Street. The following Sunday both bells were heard, no doubt stirring nostalgic memories in the hearts of many churchgoers. Goodhue wondered what the Indians in their tents across the river thought about them. He prophesied that in a few years “these sounds would be heard winding along the valley of the Minnesota, across the plains of Nebraska, and echoing among the Rocky mountains, and over the Pacific waves.” When the first official Thanksgiving Day in Minnesota was celebrated on December 26, 1850, the new church bells added much to the observance of the day by pealing merrily at sunrise and sunset.

At St. Paul church bells were sometimes pressed into service as fire alarm bells. In 1854 an ordinance was passed requiring that in case of fire all church bells should be rung diligently by the sextons for twenty minutes, unless the fire was extinguished sooner. The penalty for failure to do this was a fine of two dollars. As there were several church bells by that time in different parts of the town, they were an effective means of rousing not only the volunteer firemen but all the townspeople. One writer records that “Everyone turned out when the fire bells rang. Unless the fire was of sufficient volume to be readily located, the uptown people

¹¹ *Dictionary of American Biography*, 12: 532 (New York, 1933); *Pioneer*, November 14, 1850. In the fall of 1856 a “fine toned bell weighing 675 lbs., from the celebrated manufactory of A. Meneely & Sons of West Troy, N. Y.” was purchased for the First Congregational Church of Winona. *Winona Republican*, November 11, 1856.

would be seen rushing downtown, and the downtown people would be seen rushing uptown; in fact, general pandemonium prevailed until the exact location of the fire could be determined.”¹²

Mankato has a church bell which served as a fire alarm as well as a general community bell, announcing the arrivals of steamboats, the opening of court, and the call to political and military meetings. During the Sioux Outbreak of 1862, a guard was placed near the bell to ring it in case of an attack by the Indians. It called the people together to hear news that came from the Civil War battlefields. Since it was first hung at the schoolhouse, where the church services were held, it served also as a school bell. The women of the Presbyterian Church bought it in 1857 with money raised by church suppers and bazaars. For a time it hung in a frame at the steamboat levee, where it was particularly useful as a community bell. When the First Presbyterian Church of Mankato was built in 1864, the much-used bell was placed in the belfry and it was thenceforth a regular church bell.¹³

Bells with historic backgrounds and bells evoking memories of student activities are to be found at several Minnesota colleges. In 1928 a tower was erected on the campus of Macalester College and in it was hung an old bell said to have been purchased by the Reverend Edward D. Neill and used for many years in the House of Hope Church. Dr. Neill was the founder of both the church and the college. In a tower of the “Old Main” building at Hamline University is a bell that called students to classes for many years. James J. Hill presented to the St. Paul Seminary a bell from one of the first locomotives of the Great Northern Railroad.

¹² Frank Moore, *Reminiscences of Pioneer Days in St. Paul*, 54 (St. Paul, 1908).

¹³ *Mankato Daily Review*, March 30, 1910.

Goodhue's prediction that the sound of bells would soon be carried westward with the advance of settlement was fulfilled. Bells were the accompaniment of cultural growth and commercial progress. Their ringing from churches, schools, steamboats, and locomotives proclaimed the conquest of the frontier by the sturdy pioneer.

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MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY
ST. PAUL



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