

Treasure in the tower

The giant City Hall bell, silent for more than 70 years, came to life again on Thanksgiving Day, 1999 thanks to donations from a generous group of Milwaukeeans. A team of bell ringers who pulled in unison to give voice to the big bell were seen around the world on CNN television news.

Some fascinating local folklore centers on the big bell that was silenced in October 1925 by Milwaukee Mayor Daniel Webster Hoan. Although ringing the bell was reputed to have caused structural problems in the tower—none of which can be substantiated—some local historians believe that Mayor Hoan actually wanted the bell silenced because its rich, deep tone irritated his migraine headaches. According to another report, the bell-ringer/custodian's job was eliminated to save money and he and his family subsequently had to move from their one-of-a-kind apartment in the city hall tower. Today nobody lives in the tower and little remains of the apartment.

A century ago the bell was a virtual celebrity that captured the attention of an estimated 1,000 tourists a month who climbed the steep tower stairs to see it. Some couples were so impressed with the bell that they exchanged their wedding vows beneath it. The bell is the largest ever made by Milwaukee's Campbell Centennial Company that went out of business many years ago. Today the bell ranks as the second largest ever made in America.

The 11-1/4 ton giant measures 8'-7" in diameter at its widest point and was rung for the first time from the City Hall tower on New Year's Eve, 1896. It is just about the same size as the renowned *Big Ben* bell in England's Parliament tower. Milwaukee's bell was also nicknamed *Big Ben* but then renamed *Solomon Juneau* in 1922 as a tribute to the City of Milwaukee's first mayor. The Liberty Bell in Philadelphia, incidentally, is only about 1/10 the weight of Milwaukee's big bell.

All of America's bell makers have gone out of business and new bells are imported from the few European bell foundries still in existence.

On the cover, master bell-maker Henry Campbell sits inside the huge bronze bell that his firm made for the Milwaukee City Hall in 1896. *County Historical Society Photo*

Bells are manufactured by pouring molten bronze, which is a combination of about 80 percent copper and 20 percent tin, into a special mold. The process is called casting and sounds deceptively simple but in practice it is a demanding, labor intensive task and even the most experienced makers never know for sure how a bell will sound until it is tested.

If a newly made bell does not sound right, the manufacturer will break it up, melt the pieces back down, and cast the bell again in hopes of getting better quality sound. The first two attempts to cast the Milwaukee City Hall bell ended in failure and each time it was broken up and melted down. The third casting, however, produced the masterpiece that we hear today. Installing the bell in the tower was a monumental task that was done without the help of a crane. Four men reportedly worked more than 16 hours turning a capstan device that raised the bell just a fraction of an inch at time.

The recent restoration work, done by John and Gene Witkowiak of Milwaukee, included fixing some accessory parts in and around the bell, and installing a special automatic ringing system that now tolls the hours with a huge cast iron hammer mounted along side of the bell. For special events, however, the bell can be rung manually in a grand style by using a rope to swing a massive 500-pound clapper into the bell's soundbow. The bell is now lighted at night and an excellent viewing point is one block north of City Hall in front of the Marcus Center on North Water Street.

Inscribed on the bell are the names of the Mayor, common council members and other city officials in 1896 and the following message:

When I sound the hours of day
From this grand and lofty steeple,
Deem it a reminder, pray,
To be honest with the people.

The giant bronze bell is nothing short of a national treasure. Whether it strikes the hours to dutifully mark the passage of time or jubilantly rings to commemorate a significant event, its restoration has brought a grand tradition back to Milwaukee just in time for the new millennium.