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MARI WITTUM - BELL COLLECTOR

Written by June Grayson

Photographed by Richard Grayson

Automatic electronic bell and buzzer systems control the back-to-school activities of today's children. No longer can you find a one room school with a prim and pretty school mistress ringing her own school bell to mark the hours and call the children from play.

Although she is too young to remember the days of the country school, Mari Wittum owns several antique school bells. She has a big silver bell with a black handle from the Eighteenth century. When the teacher rang that bell, the children knew that they had better start running if they were to get to school on time. She also owns several smaller school bells, the kind that used to sit on the upper corner of the teacher's desk to call the class to order. She even has one bell shaped like an apple, perhaps a gift of a grateful pupil or hopeful parent. "That's a cutesy bell," explains Wittum. "It was probably made in the 1940s or 1950s, when bells became decorative rather than practical."

Wittum started her bell collection when she was five years old. An only child, she attended antique auctions on the weekends with her parents. Her father collected pulleys and her mother collected metal banks. "I wanted my own subject," says Wittum, "and I picked out a little metal bell before an auction began. My mother told me - 'fine, we will bid up to five dollars for it, but if it goes over that, I'll stop and let the other bidders have it.' It did go over five dollars so the other lady won the bid.

"After the auction, the successful bidder came over to talk to us. 'Your daughter is so good that I want to give this bell to her as a present,' she said. 'I have a granddaughter just her age and if she had been here in your daughter's place she would

have screamed and cried."

Wittum has 92 metal bells, her favorite kind. "I chose them when I was young because they wouldn't break." She has received other kinds of bells as gifts. Bell collectors almost have to specialize by material or category. The first bells are as old as mankind - made out of clay and fired perhaps while a woolly mammoth roasted over a caveman's fire. Every culture had its own bells.

Ancient people believed that bells had special powers. The Hebrew Bible noted that bells were among King David's processional instruments when he brought the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem. His horses wore bells to ward off evil spirits. Prophets and high priests sewed bells into their garments. Biblical bells were "crotal" bells, shaped like the ancient Chinese bells and our old sleigh bells: metal spheres containing loose pebbles.

The most important use of bells was for signaling. The Greeks decorated their homes with bells. Greek warriors had small bells concealed in their shields. When the captain made nightly rounds, each soldier had to rattle his shield to show that he was guarding his post. For the same reason, Roman sentries had to wear bells on their breastplates.

Bells called people to worship, tolled the hours, announced events, and regulated the daily routine. (Clocks did not come

into widespread use until the Seventeenth century).

Bells have been treasured as patriotic symbols. The Liberty Bell, the traditional symbol of U. S. freedom, bears the motto, "Proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof" (Leviticus 25:10). Commissioned in 1751 and hung in 1752 in the Pennsylvania State House, the colonists had to hide the bell when British forces entered Philadelphia during the Revolutionary War. It cracked irreparably when it was rung for the last time in 1846 for Washington's birthday.

The ancient Chinese were the first people to make chimes, a sequence of bells tuned to a seven note scale. We call sets of at least 23 tuned bells carillons. Groups of two or more free-swinging bells "peal." One bell rung in repetition is said to "toll."

Metal bells were first made by forging and riveting. Casting of molten metal began in the Bronze Age, beginning about 3,000 B. C. The great Gothic cathedrals of the Middle Ages all had their bell towers.

The world's largest bell, The Tsar Bell of Moscow, weighed 200 tons when it was cast in 1733. It never rang because it was cracked by fire in 1737.

Glass, porcelain, and pottery manufacturers have made bells in every shape, color, and form to gratify collectors. The Victorians used bells to call their servants and announce afternoon tea. Collectors especially prize sets of bells such as those featuring the Sunbonnet Girls. Baby rattles can be consid-

ered another form of bell.

Beast of burden bells, tied around the necks of pasturing animals so that strays could find their way back to the herds, hold a special nostalgia for our rural past. Who can think of Christmas without sleigh bells, another form of a crotal bell or rattle? Train bells are very collectible - and expensive - now.

"You won't find many cheap bells for sale any more," warns Wittum. "When I started to collect, I was able to buy most of my bells for around five dollars. I had to pay \$65.00 for the last bell I bought a few months ago."

New bell collectors should visit museums to see bell collections and read reference books, such as "The Collector's Book of Bells," by L. Elsinore Springer, Crown Publishers.

If you visit the Kane County Flea Market the first weekend of every month, look for Mari and Alec Wittum in the main building, where they sell their homemade candy. Or stop at their candy store featuring children's penny candy and homemade chocolate candy in the Warehouse, Century Corners, St. Charles.

They'll be there with bells on.

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