

Sometimes a flash of color or the hint of a fragrance is all it takes to elicit a string of memories and associations: the site of a red bow on a table or a scrap of wrapping paper on the floor, the scent of pine boughs or clean leather.

And in the realm of sound, for many people, all it takes is one enthusiastic ringing of sleigh bells to form a series of pictures: Currier and Ives prints, a neighbor's well-trained draft horses or perhaps grandfather's face as he drove his faithful team.

It's a common sound at the rural Postville, Iowa, home of Charles Kelly and DeeAnna Weed. Their farm-based business, Classic Bells, is dedicated to the sale and restoration of vintage horse and sleigh bells.

The months before Christmas are a busy time at Classic Bells. DeeAnna and Charles work hard to meet the orders from people who hope to have bells restored and in a condition suitable to present to a loved one as a gift. Sometimes the bells go home in as close to their original form as possible, and sometimes Charles and



Classic Bells, Postville, Iowa, receives bells of all shapes and sizes, in like-new condition to damaged almost beyond repair.

DeeAnna turn them into smaller projects destined for display in the house instead of on the horse.

"For every bell strap that we make for a horse, I'd say there will be two or three that are going to go into a home and not be used on a horse at all," DeeAnna said. Even though

the number of horses in the



Even the dirtiest bells can be cleaned - often revealing decorative etching.

United States is on the upswing, not everyone can carry on the family tradition of driving a fine team. Many times, the bells that are linked to childhood memories are now the property of people who live far from their country roots.

"You get those bells that were Grandpa's and where are you going to hang a 9 or 10-foot strap of sleigh bells?" Charles asked. "We'll take those and factor them down. Maybe they used to be 4 inches apart. We can make them an inch and a half apart; now you have a strap that's only 5 feet long and that's easy to display."

The important thing, they say, is that the heritage associated with sleigh bells remains alive. And to help in that effort, they've created a web site, <http://classicbells.com>, that probably rivals the best books written about the subject of sleigh bells. Their information and their expertise in restoring old bells has come through years of formal and informal research. When Charles first

A PASSION FOR OLD BELLS RINGS TRUE

by Kay Kruse-Stanton



Each customer's bells are tagged, with instructions on how much restoration is to be done.

started getting interested in bells, he didn't dream the fancy would evolve into a second career.

"I decided I wanted some bells for our horses," Charles said. "I just started to drive about six years ago. I thought this would be pretty cool to have." He didn't like the look, feel or sound of modern bells, so he started gathering vintage bells. He started buying them on eBay.

DeeAnna noticed the ever-growing collection, but didn't say anything until the whole back of his office was filled with sleigh bells. "So I asked, 'Dear husband, why are you buying all these sleigh bells?'" and still smiles at the memory. By that time, Charles had started actively buying and selling vintage bells, recognizing the truth of "one man's trash is another man's treasure."

From just trading in bells, they moved to a second level: recreating the antique straps and selling the bells mounted on new leather. DeeAnna is a self-taught leather worker. The response was good, Charles said, but also taught them that what people really wanted was a leather strap fashioned as close to the original as possible, with vintage bells restored and properly mounted.

"About 70 to 80 percent of our business is taking someone's old bells, cleaning them, re-leathering them, and returning them back in good form,"

Charles said. "We try to do everything historically accurate. If you buy a set of bells from us, we try to make it what you would have received if you'd gone into a shop 150 years ago."

When they receive a customer's bells, they first carefully label everything, so there is no chance of losing a part of someone's order. They examine the bells and leather to determine, as much as possible, the history of the bells. "Sometimes we don't have much information from the customer," DeeAnna said. "Sometimes bells come to us loose, and I have to do a little detective work. Based on the bells we have, bells we've seen, I may be able to form a pretty good idea of the age of the bells. Based on the age of the bells, I can form a pretty good idea of what the bell strap would have looked like."

Charles finds out what the customer plans to do with the bells. That may affect the restoration process. Will the bells be used on more than one cart? If so, DeeAnna may design



DeeAnna and Charles in the basement workshop where they work on vintage bells.



Classic Bells customer, Marti Phillips (Rio, Wisconsin) driving Molly, a 10-year-old Standardbred/Belgian cross, out collecting a tree with the Russian or Canadian sleigh she restored. Marti is covered with a vintage buffalo lap robe and a vintage hand-embroidered patchwork carriage robe.

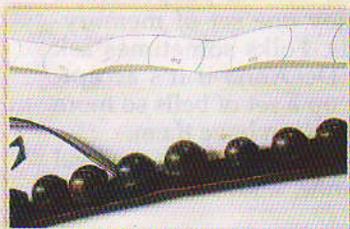
the strap with some adjustment for sizing. Will the bells be used only for decoration in the house? If so, she could change the strap a bit to make it easier to display.

With that information, the transformation begins.

First, the bells get a good cleaning. Charles and DeeAnna worked on their own bells for a couple of years, perfecting a cleaning process that does not harm the metal and leaves a subtle glossy finish. "You start with a good degreasing, to remove the old harness oil and dirt and horse sweat,"

continued on next page

DeeAnna, an engineer by training, plots the placement of bells using computer-aided design software.



The customer decides the finish of the bells—from a bright gloss to a more dull, antique look.



The finished product could be a set of bells on a leather strap designed like the original, decorative door straps of just a few bells, or anything in between.



A collar fitted with a set of bells—another option for use or display.



Classic Bells continued

Charles said. "We use nothing that is not biodegradable. We let them soak for awhile. Then we use tumblers with a gentle medium that gets them clean. They may be tarnished from age, but they're clean."

Some customers want the finished bells to maintain that tarnished look; others want them shiny as new. That determines how far Charles takes the cleaning and polishing process. The next step is to spray on a clear protective coating, formulated for cop-

per, brass and bronze. Sometimes, bells are in such poor condition that they cannot be restored. Charles and DeeAnna often are able to find matching bells in their existing stock to replace the poor-quality originals, if that's what the customer desires.

At the same time, DeeAnna will design the strap for the bells, based on the bells' history and the customer's needs. "Unless it's a very simple job, I draft the straps all out using computer-aided design," DeeAnna said. "The gap between every bell is about the same, but the bells are not the same size. The distance between the bells therefore varies, depending on the size of the bells. That may get more complicated than you'd think." Each bell strap is a unique project; there's no mass production at this stage.

At some periods in history, bells were pinned to their strap with a leather thong. Later, bells were attached with metal components. For example, pop rivets were the connectors of choice after World War II. The fasteners help Charles and DeeAnna date the bell straps they receive.

After she plots the strap, DeeAnna cuts the leather and marks where the bells will attach. There's an art in the manufacturing process. The strap is made of two layers of leather. The bells are attached to only one. Attach the bells incorrectly, and eventually the movement of the bells will destroy the strap. "The bells rock back and forth. They're designed to do that," DeeAnna said. "When they rock, it torques the stitching and eventually the stitching breaks down."

One mistake in cutting, and DeeAnna will be back at the shelves of leather, ready to start all over again.

"What we hear from a lot of people is that antique dealers don't like it when people put their antique bells on to new leather," DeeAnna said. "But if the strap is literally falling apart, and the bells are so covered with dirt and old grime that you can't even tell the design, you're not able to enjoy them to their fullest. They can be restored."

Sometimes, several people stand in line to enjoy one set of memory-carrying bells. Folks sometimes ask Charles and DeeAnna if it's acceptable to break up a set of bells so more than one person can have them.

"That is one of the issues we deal with," DeeAnna said. "People have

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this emotional reaction to bells and they're seeking advice. Sometimes I feel I almost have to know the whole story behind the bells."

Often, the happiest endings come when the bells are turned into several smaller mementos, Charles said. One possibility is making decorative door straps, each with three to five bells. They're pretty, and give off a memory-tickling chime when the door opens.

Charles and DeeAnna find that just as there are people with a set of bells and no horse to put them on, there are people with horses who would like to add bells to their outings, and don't have any to restore.

"If you don't have grandpa's bells and you want to have bells for a parade or a trail ride, we can do that, too," Charles said.

Remember that stock of bells that took up the back half of Charles' office? That collection has grown, and shows no sign of disappearing. Charles actively seeks out vintage bells, and when the right number of the right type appear, DeeAnna turns them into something.

"We do western breast collars for saddle horses," Charles said. "With less than three bells, it's not going to do you much good, but more than nine and people are going to think that Santa Claus is coming down the trail."

They've made rump straps for trail horses, small bell straps for cart-pulling ponies, and special-order straps of most every size and description for miniature horses through Clydesdales.

They always caution customers to use care in introducing bells to their horses. "Some are a little spooky about bells at first, then get used to them. Others never seem to settle in to it, while still others seem to take to them right away," DeeAnna said.

"Some horses seem to take pleasure in them. It's rhythmic, and they seem to enjoy it. They're in charge of the sound, and they seem to like that." For the most part, people seem to enjoy them, too.

"If you think about a sleigh bell's sound, there is this sort of discordant, appealing, joyful noise about them," she said. "Part of that is the different tones and different sounds that each bell makes."

New bells tend to be heavier and have a more consistent sound, DeeAnna said.

"With the older bells, most of them don't ring—they clunk or clank or whatever. They don't have a pretty little 'ding,'" she said. "I think most people are surprised by that. It's the combination of that with all those little bells that provides the tone that we think of when we think of sleigh bells."

Bell straps on horses are mostly for fun these days, just as, for most people, a wintertime sleigh ride is mostly for fun. Years ago the bells served a purpose. People learned to differenti-

ate one neighbor's set of bells from another's, and knew from the sound who was approaching the homestead. In the dark or in areas with tight corners, a good set of bells announced an approaching vehicle far enough in advance to give a second vehicle a chance to pull off the road and wait for the other vehicle to pass safely.

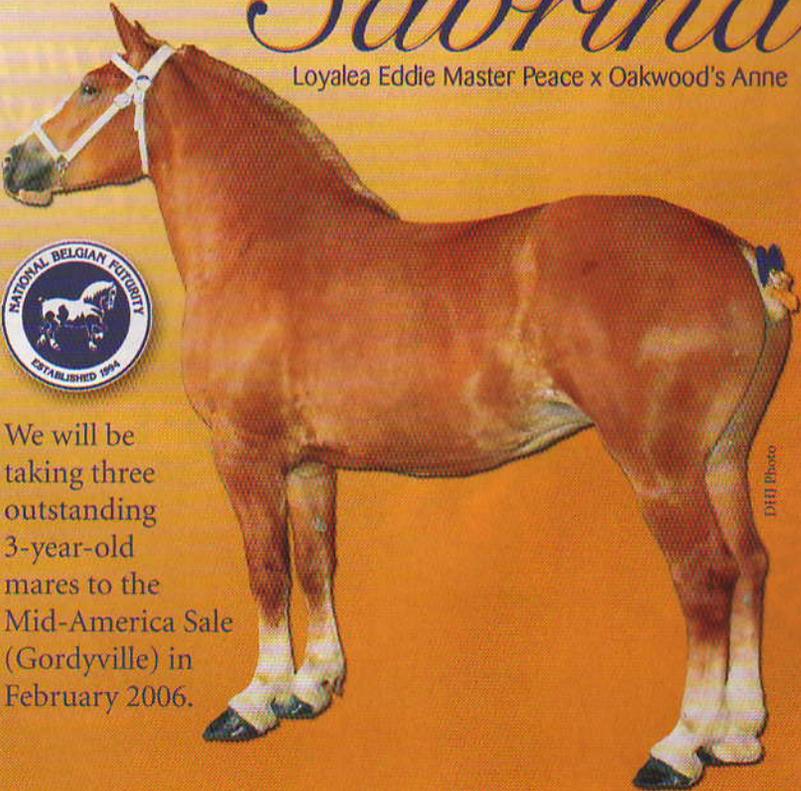
"They were utilitarian—but always musical, always fun," Dee Anna said. "And they still are."

Better to ask twice than to lose your way once.

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