



She's There with Bells on...

...crafting a ringing tradition.

Near Postville, Iowa, DeeAnna Weed and husband Chuck make it their business to harness old-time holiday spirit year-round. Classic Bells, their farm-based enterprise, is dedicated to the sale and restoration of vintage sleigh bells. CW recently gave DeeAnna a jingle.

CW: How did you develop a passion for antique bells?

D: A few years ago, we decided we'd like to drive our Norwegian Fjord horses, so Chuck bought sleigh bells for them. But he didn't like the sound of the new bells, so he began collecting and restoring vintage bells.

Meantime, I taught myself the basics of leatherwork, and began fabricating new straps for the bells. We never dreamed our hobby would evolve into second careers. When not restoring sleigh bells, I'm a college instructor, and Chuck's a lawyer.

CW: How have you turned old sleigh bells into a business?

D: Part of our business is restoring heirloom sleigh bells supplied by our customers. We clean their bells and construct new leather straps for them.

We also create custom designs with our own stock of antique bells from the 1800s and early 1900s. We find them on Web auction sites, in antique shops, and at farm sales and purchase them from collectors.

CW: How do most customers put your sleigh bells to use?

D: People who own harness horses order bell straps for their animals—we've fitted bells for Miniature ponies to Clydesdales. Occasionally, we sell bells to people who use them in parades, or a carriage and

sleigh ride business.

But most of the bells are used in home décor. Many times, we'll cut down an 8-foot sleigh bell strap a customer's ancestor used, and form smaller mementos to display on mantels and doors.

CW: What does the bell restoration process include?

D: Chuck first gives the bells a gentle, but thorough, soaking and cleaning. Then he lightly polishes them. It takes the better part of a week to clean one batch. Next, I spray on coats of lacquer formulated for brass instruments, like trumpets.

CW: How do you design and construct the new straps?

D: I begin by interviewing the customer to get a history of the bells. That helps me re-create an authentic strap design. Usually, I make a draft of the strap using a computer-aided design program.



In contrast, most of my other leather working tools are heirlooms. I use antique knives for cutting heavy leather and sew it with a treadle-powered harness stitcher, manufactured in 1915.

CW: What is the history of sleigh bells?

D: Bells have been used on horses since 800 BC. According to legend, they attract good luck and scare away evil.

Horse bells have always had a practical purpose, too. People learned how to differentiate their neighbors' bells and knew who was approaching from the sound. In dark areas with narrow, winding roads, a good set of bells announced an oncoming vehicle and advised others to let them pass.

CW: Why are people so fond of sleigh bells?

D: They're a lovely, musical link to the past and a simpler way of life rich with tradition and family.

Editor's Note: For more on Classic Bells restoration, call 1-563/864-3201 or send an E-mail to info@classicbells.com. You can link to their Web site at www.countrywomanmagazine.com/links.



A jingle ball is what DeeAnna Weed (right) has with her jolly hobby. She restores old sleigh bells so accurately, you'd think they came from a 150-year-old harness shop.

