

Music To The Ears



by DeeAnna Weed

For most people, the shimmering sound of sleigh bells in the distance conjures an image of fluffy snow, elegant sleighs and prancing horses. A romantic vision, yes, but these distinctive orbbed adornments also served a practical purpose—to alert others on the rough, narrow roads of the time that a horse-drawn sleigh was approaching.

Until the middle 1800s, these bells were typically only used by the wealthy who could afford to put bells on their draft, pack and riding horses. Horse bells at the time were expensive—beautifully handmade with ornate designs and often with the maker's initials carefully molded into each bell. It didn't take long, however, before America began mass producing the bells and by the end of the century, horse bells in hundreds of shapes and sizes were a familiar sight . . . and sound.

Two of the most popular styles of sleigh bells were the body strap, a long strap of bells buckled around the barrel of the horse, and shaft chimes—a set of bells attached to the vehicle shafts.

BODY STRAPS

The most common type of body strap used in the late 1800s was the New England strap, a leather belt with one or sometimes two rows of small bells as seen at the right. Up to 50 bells were used on a New England strap, which created a bright, shimmery sound that carried for long distances.

The graduated body strap was also used in the 1800s featuring one large bell in the center of a leather belt with smaller bells arranged in decreasing size on either side. The number of bells varied, but 15 to 25 bells were typical, projecting a deep and full ringing.

Buying a New Body Strap

There are many reproductions of the body strap available today. When buying a new strap, look for the same quality as you would expect for good harness and tack. The leather should be firm, supple and nicely finished. Buckles and other hardware should be brass or stainless, not painted or plated steel. If the bells are attached with a figure-eight shaped pin, the strap should have a full leather lining to protect the horse from irritation.

You can expect to pay \$150 to \$250 for a basic strap with a full lining. Beware of the "instant antique" bell straps often sold at auction to unwary and inexperienced buyers. They may look old, but these artificially-aged bell straps are not worth the \$300 and more that most are paying for them.

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Restoring an Old Body Strap

Restoration of an old body strap consists of documenting the original bell strap design, removing the bells from the strap, cleaning and polishing the bells, designing and constructing a new leather strap, and reassembling the bells and strap. Any competent harness maker has the skills and materials to do the basic leatherwork, but the real challenge is the tedious process of working on the bells themselves.

Choose a harness maker who clearly knows how to restore antique sleigh bells and their straps. Ask to see examples or pictures of the harness maker's finished restorations and evaluate the work carefully.

- Do the bells have a soft luster from gentle polishing, or are they pitted or scratched from harsh abrasives or acids?
- Are the bells clean on the inside as well as on the outside?
- Does the leather strap have finished and dyed edges and tidy stitching or rivets?
- Does the harness maker have a stock of antique bells to replace missing or damaged bells?

Also ask for an estimate of the time needed to complete the project. If the deadline is more than months away or "when I get around to it," consider taking your business to someone who can commit to doing the work in a reasonable time period. As a rough rule of thumb, expect to pay about the same for restoring a set of antique bells as you would to buy a set of new bells, unless your strap needs replacement bells or if the strap design requires an unusual amount of detail work.

DeeAnna Weed and her husband Charles Kelly specialize in restoring antique horse bells and own Classic Bells in Postville, Iowa. They can be reached at www.classicbells.com or at 563-864-3201.

Fitting a Body Strap

For a single-horse hitch, a body strap must be long enough to go around the outside of the shafts. For a pairs' hitch, the bell strap should lie outside the traces. There should also be enough slack in the strap so it does not interfere with the movement of the horse or vehicle, but not so much that a horse is likely to get a foot caught. Body straps should be 7 1/2 to 8 1/2 feet long for most light horses and larger ponies. Unfortunately, most ready-made body straps sold today are only 6 to 7 feet long, too short to fit most horses correctly. To get the extra length needed, ask a harness maker to sew or rivet a longer billet to lengthen the body strap or make a separate billet that buckles onto the body strap.

Shaft Chimes or Shaft Bells

A shaft chime is a set of three or more bells attached to a metal bracket. The bracket is usually buckled or screwed onto the vehicle tongue or shafts.

Simple styles of shaft chimes are still being made today. They sell for around \$100. Older chimes in a wider variety of styles are also affordable. Depending on condition and design, an old set of chimes typically costs \$50 to \$200.

Inspect an older chime set carefully before purchase—these chimes often have lived hard lives. Pass on a set if several parts are missing or badly damaged as replacement parts are hard to find. An exception concerns the rivets that attach the chimes to their bracket. A loose rivet can often be tightened up or replaced with a machine screw.

Most importantly, do not buy a chime that does not sound good to you, however pretty it is. Some chimes have a discordant sound, while others play a lovely musical melody. Let the sound, not the sight, guide you in your decision. □

Should the biggest bell on a graduated strap lie on top of the horse or hang under its belly?

While some insist there is only one "right" way, both ways have been used. The "big bell on the bottom" method cooperates with gravity, but this approach has two disadvantages. First, it puts the largest and most valuable bells underneath the horse where they are more likely to get dirty or damaged. It also puts the greatest stress on the most fragile part of the strap — the billet where it fits onto the tongue of the buckle. With the "big bell on the top" approach, the biggest disadvantage is that the bell strap will slide around the horse if there is nothing to keep it in place. Use a small keeper strap to attach the bell strap to the back strap (turnback) of the harness or to the gig saddle to keep the bell strap in position.



Sleigh bell made by Robert Wells of Aldbourne, Wiltshire, England, about 1800.

