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ACEC Members Restore Vintage Bells

*Jingle bells, jingle bells, jingle all the way!
O what fun it is to ride in a one-horse open sleigh.*



This old familiar song has special meaning for Chuck Kelly and his wife, DeeAnna Weed, of rural Postville. Their home-based business, called Classic Bells, specializes in restoring heirloom bell straps and creating custom designs with antique bells. The weeks leading up to Christmas bring a flood of inquiries and last minute orders from people seeking a gift rich in history and tradition.



Chuck Kelly and his wife, DeeAnna Weed show two of the body straps they have restored in their at-home business, Classic Bells. Although the business is run from rural northeast Iowa, they have customers from as far away as England. News of their business is spread by Internet, displays at craft shows, and advertising in various horse journals.

Although Chuck originally comes from Keokuk and DeeAnna was raised in Ute, a small town in western Iowa, they ended up here in scenic Northeast Iowa. Chuck practices law in Postville and DeeAnna is a computer and science instructor at Northeast Iowa Community College, Calmar. The couple purchased several acres northeast of Postville and proceeded to convert an existing 1915 timber-frame barn into a home. Their home is filled with the warmth of antiques, original barn beams, and family pets. The view from their window shows the beauty of the valley in its splendor, each season more beautiful than the last.

Their business of restoring bells all began when Chuck decided he'd like bell straps for use on his own horses. He looked at new bells but was not impressed with the quality. The problem with buying a higher quality antique set of bells was that he couldn't find anyone who would restore them. The obvious solution? He and DeeAnna bought quality old bells and learned to do the restoration themselves.

They read everything they could find about bells and their history. Horse bells not only warned pedestrians and other drivers of an oncoming team as early as 800 BCE, but they also were believed to bring good luck, protect against evil, and flaunt the owner's wealth and status. Today harness bells are used for decoration and to set a festive tone for a pleasure ride in a horse-drawn sleigh, carriage, or wagon. Many people enjoy owning and using vintage bells manufactured in the days

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when horses and bells were an integral part of people's daily lives.

It took Chuck and DeeAnna six to eight months to perfect their method of cleaning the bells. They began working with the pin type bells first because they did not have to be riveted. This bell has a shank, which slips through a hole in the leather strap and is then held in place by a figure-8 bell pin made of heavy wire. DeeAnna estimates that approximately two-thirds of their work is restoration using vintage bells from their inventory or bells which the customer has provided. Often a customer has a bell strap that has been in the family for years and wants it restored.

The remaining one-third of their work is creating custom designs. A gentleman from New Orleans ordered a bell set to wear with his Mardi Gras costume. That set included a cummerbund-style belt, wrist cuffs, and ankle cuffs all studded with a total of sixty bells, which ensures he will be seen AND heard. Another custom order was from a professional percussionist in Houston, Texas, who wanted sleigh bells that were more attractive and authentic than the inexpensive reproduction bells he had been using. DeeAnna shipped a variety of bells to Houston so that the musician could hand select the twenty-eight he thought would give a clear, true sound. These bells were shipped back to Iowa where the husband and wife team attached them to a hand-turned walnut handle made from wood grown on their property. To the best of their knowledge, there are no other percussionist's bells commercially available of this design and quality.**eighty-four**

As Chuck and DeeAnna show pictures and samples of their creations, their enthusiasm is contagious. DeeAnna explains with pride how they strive to create an attractive high quality product that is made to be used. Extra details, such as hardware made of high quality brass, copper, and stainless-steel, and straps cut from vegetable-tanned bridle leather, with edges dyed to match, all combine to become a bell strap that customers can use, display, and treasure for many years. Asked what they enjoy about Classic Bells, both excitedly say that it's been fun and it's something they can continue to do after retirement. The won-

derful friends they've made, customers who want to get to know them personally, are an extra bonus.

Although their business is based in rural northeast Iowa, Chuck and DeeAnna have spread the word through the use of the Internet, attending craft and horse shows, and advertising in publications such as *Draft Horse Journal*. Their web-site, created and maintained by DeeAnna, was

launched in October of 2002 but already Classic Bells has had customers from all over the country. The business has bought and sold bells from as far away as England. Chuck, who takes care of most of the inventory purchasing and the financial aspect of the business, says that people are now contacting him with bells for sale.

Do they offer any advice for other couples who are contemplating a new business? "If you are planning to work with your spouse, make absolutely sure you can work well together and communicate," Chuck says. "It helps to compartmentalize the tasks so that each person has his/her own job." Both say it's also important to have a designated work area to be able to walk away from the job.

What's the best part of operating Classic Bells from their home in northeast Iowa? "Just look out that window," they both answer with a smile!

You can contact Chuck and DeeAnna at Classic Bells, P.O. Box 370, Postville, IA 52162; email: info@classicbells.com; phone 563-864-3201; or visit their website at classicbells.com.



DeeAnna Weed demonstrates how she laces a narrow bell strap through a wider liner strap before attaching the restored vintage bells. Straps made at Classic Bells are constructed of high quality bridle leather and can actually be used on horses or for decorative purposes.

