



Sleigh Bells Ring

by Sally J. Peterson

We write songs about all kinds of bells—lots of songs, starting with “Winter Wonderland” and “Jingle Bells” and “Jingle Bell Rock.” We talk about bells. “That rings a bell,” we say; or we discuss “the bell curve.” We put bells in titles: “Bell, Book, and Candle.” “For Whom the Bell Tolls,” and in nursery rhymes, too: “bells on her fingers and bells on her toes,” “ding dong bell” and “silver bells and cockle shells” come immediately to mind.



But say the words “sleigh bell,” and we all get the same picture in our minds—crisp winter night, horse-drawn sleigh, and toasty blankets, all accented by the icy tinkle of those sleigh bells in the cold air. Sleigh bells are as much a part of the American past as are the sleighs they adorn, and just the thought of them can make us yearn for that long-ago, simpler time.

Today, horse bells are used for decoration and to set a festive tone for a pleasure ride in a horse-drawn sleigh, carriage, or wagon. But

where do they come from in this electronic age? We set out to find out.

HARNESS BELLS

“There’s something about a human being and a bell,” says Moses Smucker of Smucker’s Harness Shop in Narvon, Pa., “We all seem to like bells. What’s the first thing we do when we see a bell? We have to ring it. There’s a connection there.”



For Smucker, the connection is real: a line of bells created directly for his shop, cast and hand-polished to Smucker’s own standards. “We have our bells cast for us, and then we wholesale them to harness shops and tack shops, longe-necker-basket makers, department stores, craft shops, gift shops, and Christmas stores,” Smucker says.

At this time of year, sleigh bells top the variety of bells he carries. “Our cast sleigh bells usually are solid brass, so they’ll never rust,”



shaft chimes

Smucker says. "Plated bells are made of steel with either nickel or brass plating, so eventually they will rust. We also carry a line of brass shaft chimes to put on a steel strap that attaches to harness. These can be used as door chimes or on a banister, too - they're great seasonal decorations." The bells are mounted on Wickett & Craig leathers.

Shaft chimes are solid brass and lacquered bells attached to steel straps for mounting to bottom of harness shafts. Four varied sized bells produce a beautiful chiming sound. And saddle chimes of solid brass attach to the saddle for a cheerful jingle.

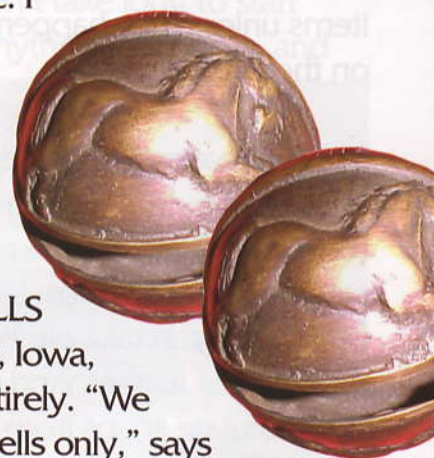
Smucker's harness bells gained worldwide recognition when they first appeared several years ago on the famous Anheuser Busch team of Clydesdale horses. Smucker's bells are still made the old way, with hand labor, just as bells were made 150 years ago. The leather straps are cut and

finished by hand and the bells are strung at Smucker's shop in the heart of Pennsylvania Dutch country in Lancaster County, Pa.

RINGING HIS OWN BELLS

Don Livingston of Bells & Sleigh Bells in Lower Burrell, Pa., has been in "the bell business" for about 30 years, he says. "I started cutting leather when I was about 10 years old, and then got into bells. I've probably been in this business longer than anybody in the United States."

Livingston crafts his own bells. "I make quite a few different designs in many different sizes," he says. Some of his varieties include horse bells, Swedish sleigh bells, and acorn bells. "Buckeye bells look like golf balls," he says. "Saddle chimes go on saddle or harness; they're about 8" square. I make open-faced bells and arctic bells with four slots." Most of his bells are chrome, solid brass, or nickel-plated.



CLASSIC, ANTIQUE BELLS

Classic Bells in Postville, Iowa, rings a different bell entirely. "We deal in antique sleigh bells only," says Charles Kelly, co-owner (with wife DeAnna Weed) and self-professed shop slave. "We've collected bells that date from 1810 through about 1940 into our inventory. We have on hand about 100 different styles and sizes—on any given day, we have about 5,000 bells in our inventory."

Classic Bells specializes in restoring vintage horse bells, with an overall goal to produce well-made, heirloom-quality bell straps and other bell-related items that customers can use,



display, and treasure for many years. "We do not make bridles, saddles, harness or other items unless they happen to have vintage bells on them," Kelly notes.

That still leaves Classic Bells plenty of bell-related latitude. "We can match bells for customers. We can restore customer's bells. We can make rump straps, body belts, and neck collars. We can take old bells and put them on new, usable leather. And we can create historically accurate straps from 100-150 years ago.

"Sleigh bells are kind of the ultimate luxury horse item," Kelly comments. "If you've spent tons of money restoring an old sleigh, it really needs sleigh bells." And Classic Bells has them. How did he and DeAnna get started? "We have Norwegian Fjord horses, and we wanted old bells for them," Kelly said. "We didn't like the new bells."

"This isn't the day job yet, but it's my passion; I have a hard time knowing when to

shut up." Classic Bells has been a business for about three years—years filled with collecting bells and information about bells. In fact, that's where DeAnna comes in.

"My wife is a graduate engineer," Kelly says. "So we turned her loose with the Internet, a computer, and a problem. That's how we were able to figure out how to clean bells, how to polish them without destroying them, how to get them off the straps.

We have a couple hundred pieces of old leather straps; we can recreate them."

Together, Kelly and Weed have studied bell straps and bells, many of which are close to 200 years old. They've learned the construction methods, the leather and the hardware that are historically correct and long-lived, and those that are not.

Sometimes they do take a few liberties if they think modern materials are better or if the old methods are impractical (they use solid brass buckles and other fittings rather than the steel hardware used in the 1800s). But Classic Bells' owners always choose hardware styles as close to the originals as they can find.

They pride themselves on paying careful attention to the details. "The cut edges of every strap are creased, rounded over, burnished, and dyed, so the strap feels nice and looks good," Kelly says. "As a finishing touch, we

always provide a matching hanging loop or ring so it is easy to display a bell strap with pride and elegance.”

“DeAnna created our website and handles our photography,” Kelly adds. “We do quite a bit of buying and selling over the Internet, much of it through eBay. In addition, we have an army of dealers and friends with lists in their back pockets of what we’re looking for. Some people contact us through our website, too (www.classicbells.com); we get them from everywhere.”

Up to this point, Kelly says, Classic Bells has been selling its wares and services primarily to individuals looking for restoration. “It’s our experience that most harness-makers are looking for new bells,” Kelly says, “but we’re always happy to work with anyone who needs bells.”

A BIT ABOUT BELLS

Is there a difference between a sleigh bell and a jingle bell? Nope, according to an article by Valvert Lucius Fox that appeared in the Winter 2000 issue of Rural Heritage Magazine. “I always thought “jingle bells” was merely the name of a song,” Fox wrote. “It is not. The term refers to round cast bells, each with a jinglet inside, as opposed to an open bell with clapper. Jingle bells are the usual bells you will find on harnesses and sleighs, and may be used in various ways to adorn horses.”

Saddle chimes, on the other hand, Fox says, are open bells, “like half of a sphere, with a clapper. I always think of Russia, where sleigh horses wear saddle chimes on their saddles or back pads. Sometimes the clapper is on the outside of the bell, but more often it is on the inside.”

If bellringing your horses and sleigh sounds pretty good (and it will), Fox offers this admonition. “Before you load down your horse with bells and set to, here’s a thought: If your horse has never had a load of bells on him, he might not cotton to the idea right at first. If you load him with all manner of bells and hook him to your best cutter, you might arrive at where you’re headed a lot quicker than you like or you just might not end up there at all.

“So it’s a good idea to bombproof your horse by putting a passel of bells on him [before you go out for a drive]. After all,” Fox warned, “All horses are bombproof, except when they ain’t.” Fox suggested that you “harness your horse, load him up with the bells, and work him in the round pen to let him get used to the sound before putting him to that beautiful cutter. Your caballo won’t take long to start liking the sound and rhythm of the bells, and



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