

Our International Friendship Bell – a unique Oak Ridge symbol, part 5

An impressive casting ceremony

(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on July 8, 2008)

At the end of the last installment in the history of the Oak Ridge International Friendship Bell, several individuals were identified who actually traveled to Japan and saw the bell being cast. Shigeko Uppuluri had led that group. Many were individuals studying the Japanese language in her program at the University of Tennessee.

An exception was Herman Postma who accompanied his wife, Pat. This trip, and especially the casting of the bell, had a singular and significant impact on Herman. It prepared him for the time when Alvin Weinberg would need him to take over the task of seeing the project to completion.

This trip to see the bell cast marked a major turning point in the bell saga because of the fortunate presence of Herman Postma. Shigeko considers this one of the many “lucky” coincidences that moved the bell project along.

Also along were the mayor of Oak Ridge, Ed Nephew and his wife, Marese. The bell casting ceremony and the warm reception afforded the mayor by the Japanese made a lasting positive impression. He was a staunch supporter of the bell project from that time forward, citing its virtue and defending the idea of a friendship bell.

The casting ceremony had to be a bit strange to the American visitors, who likely did not know what to expect. Undoubtedly the whole event was intriguing to observe and held special meaning to all present. The bonshoo (temple) style Japanese bell was cast using traditional casting methods, is approximately 4.8 feet in diameter and 6.7 feet tall, weighs approximately 8,250 pounds, and is cast of solid bronze (85 percent copper and 15 percent tin).

The addition of parchment containing written prayers and mulberry sprigs to the precise molten mixture of tin and copper, as well as other ceremonial items must have made it obvious that this bell casting ceremony was special. Pat Postma said she was “awed by the ceremony” and participated in the prayers, the bowing and the clapping of hands.

The added intrigue of two unique artistic panels designed by Susanna Harris made this bell even more unusual. I am convinced it held special meaning to Soutetsu Iwasawa, the master bell maker, who considered this achievement the “high point in his career.”

Iwasawa directed the flawless casting process. The bell was born amid ceremony and with pride. The visiting observers must have been in awe at both the process and the elaborate ceremony. Traditional Japanese ceremonial activities were recorded with modern photography and videotaping equipment – a mixture of ancient and modern cultural images.

Can you imagine the scene? The Oak Ridge Mayor, Ed Nephew, dressed in his blue suit. Bell maker, Iwasawa, directing the actual casting process and a priest in his red ceremonial clothing reading a blessing as the bell is cast. The many visitors and television media observed each step. The casting process and ceremony lasted most of an entire day.

What must have gone through Iwasawa's mind when he was finally able to cast this special bell? He was casting a bell of worldwide significance – an international friendship bell – one of a kind. What joy, what a sense of accomplishment. He said, “It is the most important thing I have ever done.”

Iwasawa must have seen his place among the great bell makers secured with this first such bell commemorating World War II. The Oak Ridge International Friendship Bell was the first such monument to be located at a Manhattan Project site.

Earlier I mentioned that Herman Postma accompanied Pat on this trip and that Shigeko was concerned for his reaction to the trip as well as how she would keep him interested in things she had planned. She

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need not have worried. As you will likely recall, Herman obviously soaked up information like a sponge and seemed to always find the essence of everything he became involved with or experienced.

His reaction to this bell casting ceremony was no exception. He filmed the entire ceremony and later created a fully edited video program documenting the experience in professional fashion. No less would be expected, huh.

Yet the most important part of his reaction was yet to come. When Alvin Weinberg asked him to take the lead in completing the project, he was ready to do so. He came into the project at a vital time and personally devoted enormous energy and enthusiasm to see it to its completion. We will see more of his personal dedicated efforts later. Now, let's return to Iwasawa and his relationships with Oak Ridgers.

Earlier, in April 1993, Iwasawa had visited Oak Ridge and gone to the site where the bell would eventually reside. He had observed the significance of the site as he noted the two streams that joined near the site. Those streams held special meaning to him as they represented the joining of two cultures and the commitment for peace by both. Therefore, he saw the location as perfect for the bell.

He had visited with Jon Coddington, designer of the pavilion that would house the bell. So he was aware of the eastern and western influences incorporated in the design. He also met with Susanna Harris, artist who designed the two panels featuring symbols of Tennessee and Japan. He understood the shared influences of the two panels and appreciated the unique nature of adding these panels to the traditional Japanese bell design.

Among other events while in Oak Ridge, Iwasawa, also a Rotarian, attended a USA-Japan Rotary Friendship Conference held June 11 and 12, 1993. This major conference was attended by the Japanese Ambassador to the United States Takakazu Kuriyama, U. S. Congresswoman Marilyn Lloyd, Rotary International President-elect Robert Barth of Switzerland and three former Rotary International presidents.

The focus of the conference was on understanding the cultural differences, identifying ways to overcome barriers and promoting increased interaction through student exchanges, sister cities, Rotary conferences and cooperation. Bill Sergeant, long time Rotarian, who has been recognized for his role leading Rotary International's worldwide effort to eliminate polio, presented an "Oak Ridge Rotary Resolve" of friendship, understanding and tolerance, interdependence and cooperation between Rotary clubs in this country and Japan.

It was at this conference that Tom Hill, Rotarian and chair of the Oak Ridge Community Foundation presented a check to Iwasawa as first payment on the casting of the bell. Hill also acknowledged the contribution made by the master bell maker by substantially reducing the cost of the bell.

The visit to Oak Ridge was a huge success for Iwasawa and I am sure created lasting friendships. Next we will explore the developing relationship between Alvin Weinberg and Soutetsu Iwasawa and continue examining the implications of this unusual bell, cast in Kyoto, Japan and placed in Oak Ridge, Tennessee.

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A priest blesses the pouring of the bell



Foundry workers manage the casting process and film it