

# **Our International Friendship Bell - a unique Oak Ridge symbol, part 10**

## ***The controversies***

**(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on August 26, 2008)**

While the Oak Ridge International Friendship Bell is now relatively controversy free, it was not always so. There was a brief history of substantial and sustained controversies that caused no little frustration. Again, only in Oak Ridge could such diverse opinion arise and be managed ultimately to the point of mutual satisfaction or at least tolerance of one another's ideas.

Let's look at the controversies one at a time and see what we can learn from them. Ted Lollis, whose research is the most thorough and well documented history of the Oak Ridge International Friendship Bell, has identified the opposition to the bell and divided them into three distinct "bell wars."

First there was the general opposition to anything "Japanese" relating to the World War II being placed in Oak Ridge. This began with a letter written to *The Oak Ridger* in 1991 after the "Friendship Bell Festival" first brought the idea of the bell to the attention of Oak Ridgers. The first complaint letter actually only addressed the cost of the bell and insisted that "taxpayer funds not be used for the bell or its shelter."

While this letter did not actually oppose the bell, soon other letters followed that strongly objected to any bell that is Japanese in concept. I must add that some of those most adamantly opposed at this early date, no longer hold that position. However, there are still small numbers of others who continue to feel strongly regarding anything Japanese, though they are fewer all the time.

The initial phrase recognizing the Manhattan Project effort originated in all good intentions by Dr. Joe Tittle did just the opposite of its intent. It restricted the meaning of the bell to the Manhattan Project alone and the bell, especially a Japanese bell, was perceived by some as woefully inadequate for recognition of that tremendous world impacting event. The Oak Ridge Commemorative Walk has proven to be a much more appropriate recognition of that accomplishment and era.

The substitution of the four dates for the unacceptable recognition of the Manhattan Project workers only served to increase the controversial nature of the bell project. Some World War II veterans again took exception to the dates and perceived that as just more evidence of an intended apology. Although it was far from the case, that made no difference as those who feared the apology were adamant that such action was totally unacceptable.

The dates included were Pearl Harbor – December 7, 1941 and Victory in Japan – September 2, 1945 on one panel and Hiroshima – August 6, 1945 and Nagasaki – August 9, 1945. These dates as announced after the bell was cast seemed to create a whole range of criticism and brought opposition from outside Oak Ridge as well as from World War II veterans in Oak Ridge.

An overriding theme was the perceived "apology" concern expressed by some World War II veterans. Never was the bell intended as such. However, no matter how hard the organizers and supporters of the bell committee attempted to reassure those who saw it so, nothing seemed to satisfy. Even when the bell maker himself indicated it was in fact just the opposite from his perspective even that significant personal gesture seemed to pass by unnoticed.

When the actual construction of the pavilion began in mid 1995, a renewed round of objections arose. First the location was questioned as the use of private land was preferred over city land by those opposed to the bell. Almost simultaneously, a cry for limiting the actual ringing of the bell began to be sounded.

Although the "noise" of the ringing was included in the opposition, obviously the people who used that argument had never heard it rung, nor were they familiar with a Japanese style bell. Never is a loud ringing noise heard from these bells. Only a low and deep resonating vibration comes from these huge bells and that vibration is hardly audible at a distance of a hundred yards from the bell.

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This strong focus on the ringing of the bell is an interesting aspect of the controversies. As I have looked at the information regarding the bell, this ringing issue seemed to be one that could easily be brought to the forefront. Even with its lack of substance, it did allow the opposition to rally around a cause that might influence some sense of control on the situation.

The attempts to get the numbers removed failed to gain any traction. The idea to leave the bell in its location at the municipal building also failed to attract any real support. The ringing of the bell did produce some measurable success for the opposition. That was needed for the ultimate consensus position. Even the decision to restrict the ringing allowed the city to move ahead.

Then again the idea of an apology was raised and some members of the opposition insisted the bell be rung only on Memorial Day. There was also an undercurrent of fear that the bell would become a gathering place for undesirable demonstrations, especially by antinuclear protestors. Interesting this has not proven to be the case and I have even been told by a leader of the antinuclear faction that the bell is not something they even identify with their cause.

On September 5, 1995, an entire Oak Ridge City Council meeting was devoted to discussion of the Oak Ridge International Friendship Bell. Twenty citizens spoke regarding the bell. Consistent voting of four to three failed to resolve anything. After three votes, the council determined to appoint a Bell Policy Committee to research the bell and develop an acceptable policy for its use.

It was at this time that Bill Wilcox entered the discussion and ultimately would provide much help toward reaching a consensus that would allow the bell to be perceived generally in a more positive light by those in opposition. He drafted a Statement of Purpose, wrote the words for the plaque and promoted recognition of the 50 years of Oak Ridge's existence as well as the developing international friendship between Oak Ridge and Japan.

The Bell Policy Committee was made up of individuals selected by city council members and chaired by Diantha Paré. The committee sought to find a compromise to end the bell controversy.

At the first meeting of the Bell Policy Committee, a compromise bell ringing restriction was agreed upon. The bell would be rung at anytime using a rubber mallet. The log striker would be padlocked and the key only made available for a limited three rings daily between 6:00 and 6:15 PM.

Bill Wilcox presented the committee with his draft of a purpose statement for the bell. It was welcomed and seen as a vehicle for compromise and consensus building within the community. The wording for the plaque written by Wilcox and accepted by the Bell Policy Committee and ultimately by the Oak Ridge City Council reads:

### **FRIENDSHIP BELL**

This bronze bell was designed in Oak Ridge and cast in Japan in 1993 to serve as a symbol of the bonds of friendship and mutual regard that have developed between Oak Ridge and Japan over the past fifty years... Friendship made so much more meaningful because of the terrible conflict of World War II which Oak Ridge played such a significant role in ending. This bell further serves as a symbol of our mutual longing and pledge to work for freedom, well-being, justice, and peace for all the people of the world in the years to come. Given to the people of Oak Ridge on the occasion of their 50<sup>th</sup> birthday by the Oak Ridge Community Foundation and friends in the United States, Japan, and other nations.

1996

Oak Ridge, Tennessee

Born of War, Living for Peace, Growing through Science

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This wording for the plaque was approved by City Council in February, 1996. Also approved was a Statement of Purpose drafted by Bill Wilcox. In this document the "meaning of the bell" is spelled out.

It was this document that allowed the two divided segments who were most engaged in the debate, those supporting the foundation's position and those opposed to it, to settle on a common ground – at least one that was accepted, if not exactly what either side fully desired.

Oak Ridgers worked to address such a strong disagreement and ultimately brought consensus on a course of action.

The specific wording crafted again by Bill Wilcox included: "...It is the desire of city Council, on behalf of all the people of oak Ridge, that for years to come the Friendship Bell will send these messages and serve these two important purposes:

**"FIRST – To celebrate the past 50 years of growing friendship and peace with Japan... SECOND: To express for the future, the profound longing and commitment to work for the freedom, well-being, justice, and peace for all the peoples of the world.**

The Statement of Purpose also included, "...The Friendship Bell will serve as a continual reminder of our dedication to put our science, technology, and humanity to work in the future together with friends everywhere to building the perpetual peace we all long for – striving for understanding, good health, good environmental stewardship, well-being, and for justice for all people of the world."

On March 4, 1996, the bell was transported from the temporary storage location in the courtyard of the municipal building to the pavilion under construction. On May 3, 1996, the bell was dedicated.

Next we will discuss the religious implications of a "Buddhist Bell" or is that what we really have? We will see how a young teenager Elise Campbell came to the rescue of the bell in a yet a different way.

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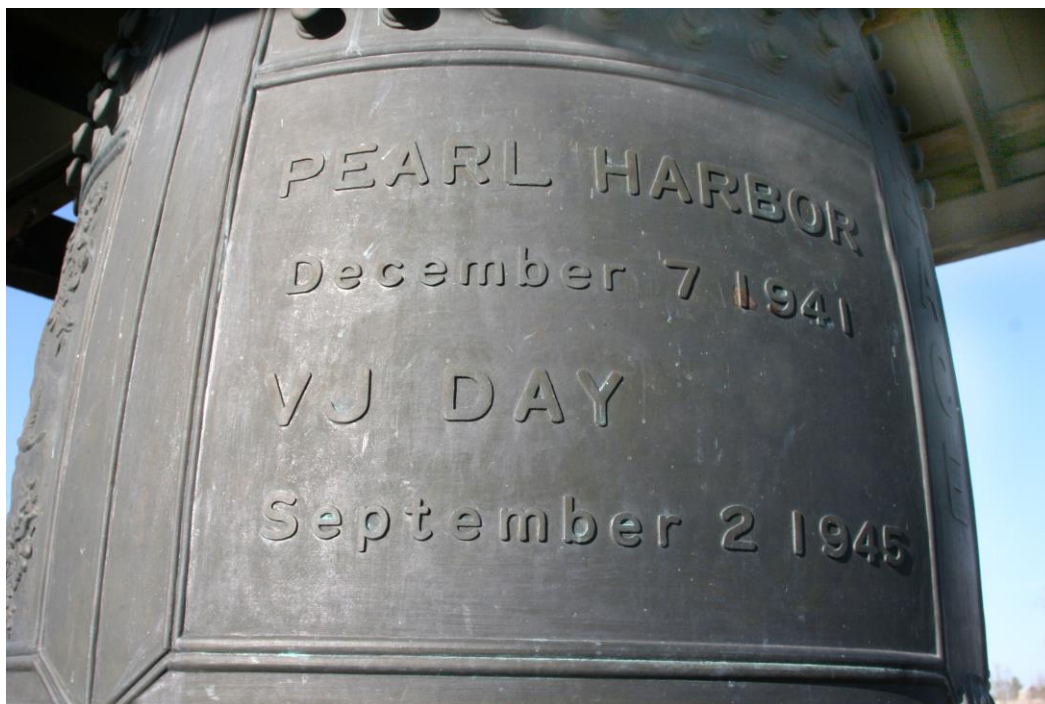
Bill Wilcox stands beside the plaque he authored that helped reach consensus on the purpose of the Oak Ridge International Friendship Bell



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Controversial dates for Pearl Harbor and Victory in Japan



Controversial dates for Hiroshima and Nagasaki