

Our International Friendship Bell - a unique Oak Ridge symbol, part 11

Oak Ridge International Friendship Bell and religion

(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on September 23, 2008)

One part of the controversy surrounding the bell that existed as an undercurrent for all the time the bell was being considered, cast and installed was the fact that the bell could be considered a religious "Buddhist Bell." This issue took on a whole different tone after the bell was installed when a lawsuit was filed contesting placement of the bell by the city because of the perception of one individual regarding the bell being a religious symbol.

I have singled out this aspect of the controversy to deal with separately after looking at the other issues. I am relying heavily on a research paper by Miriam Levering of the University of Tennessee titled, *Are Friendship **Bonsho** Bells Buddhist Symbols? The Case of Oak Ridge.*

The suit against the City of Oak Ridge, alleging the "Friendship Bell" is a Buddhist symbol and the mere presence results in an endorsement of the Buddhist religion, was filed in Federal Court in February 1998. Ultimately both the local District Court and the Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals ruled in favor of the city.

Evidently the suit did generate in-depth discussions regarding the separation of religion and state as well as just what constitutes a religious symbol. Eventually the court still ruled that the Oak Ridge bell actually was a traditional Buddhist bell. However, the court also ruled that the raised relief panels and dates on the bell made this bell distinctly different from religious bells such as those used in Buddhist temples. In addition, there wasn't a Buddhist Temple anywhere near the bell. Therefore, the Oak Ridge bell had no religious significance.

I wondered about the 148 nodules or knobs placed on the top section of our bell. They are arranged in groups of seven rows of five knobs above each panel with four groups of two between panels. I found that large Buddhist temple bells had 108 knobs in an area near the top. The Japanese Buddhist "Peace Bell" at Manhattan's United Nations Headquarters has 108 knobs. Some older temple bells have 112 knobs.

In Buddhist religion there are 108 defilements or worries which direct several symbolic actions or determine the number of things such as steps to the temple. The idea is to remove the defilements or worries from one's life by pausing at each step to pray. Another method used to remove the 108 defilements is to ring the bell 108 times.

The older temple bells with 112 knobs represent the sacred 108 defilements and the four directional Buddhas. However, in my research I was unable to find any reference to 148 of anything. I wonder why our bell has that number of knobs. These protrusions are also said to aid in the sound transmission when the bell is rung.

Miriam's concluding remarks state eloquently the uniqueness of the Oak Ridge International Friendship Bell. She said, "In my view, there is no doubt that in Japan the pan-Asian *Bonsho* bell is associated with Buddhist temples. The absence in Japan of walled cities meant that these pan-Asian bells were not used often for secular time-keeping purposes, or for ringing out warning that the gates were about to be closed, as they were in China. But it is also clear that no Buddhist temple would want to display and use the Oak Ridge bell. The bell is covered with non-Buddhist reliefs and inscriptions which convey its meaning in its context, the context of Oak Ridge, Tennessee. This bell belongs to the new genre of peace, friendship, and commemorative bells, not to the genre of temple bells. It speaks of Japaneseness, of building bridges between nations and cultures, of peace that has grown up following a war, and of the desirability of working for international peace."

This is also a good place to state my personal perception of the Oak Ridge International Friendship Bell. After all the research I have done and all the helpful and interesting people I have met, my feeling remains the very same as I initially had when Emily Mitchell first mentioned that Hiroshima had a bell.

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I thought, wow, how great it is that Oak Ridge has a Japanese bell. How typical of Oak Ridge to seek friendship with a former enemy of our nation. How typical of Oak Ridge to openly seek international peace while supporting the only method existing to maintain such peace – nuclear weapons.

It seemed to me to exemplify the spirit of Oak Ridge to include an international friendship bell in the culture of our city. It seemed to me only fitting that such independent thinking and such progressive ideas should come from Oak Ridge. The world is a far better place now because of Oak Ridge and the scientific discoveries made here.

Oak Ridge is unique in all the world – a scientific marvel. There is no other place that comes close. Merely the words “Oak Ridge” convey this. Nothing else is needed. It is much like Elvis. Only a first name is needed. No one ever assumes “Oak Ridge” might mean some other place than Oak Ridge, TN. What comes immediately to mind for all the world when those two words are joined is great scientific accomplishments, great pride and great international relationships. We can be proud of our international city. We can be proud of our International Friendship Bell.

The pride in accomplishment that each of us share who live in the city of Oak Ridge or work in the government facilities as well as support facilities is something that the rest of the world finds hard to comprehend. It is most difficult to explain. The seeming dichotomy is actually complimentary. That is hard to grasp, yet is natural for Oak Ridgers.

Unless one has lived through the struggles of war, understands the life and death reality of fighting for freedom, knows someone who has laid down their life for our rights and our freedoms, such radical thoughts as seeking international peace while doing everything possible to assure, through a strong nuclear deterrent, the real absence of fighting and terrorism, one cannot fathom the depth of comprehension such rational thinking represents. Only in Oak Ridge can this exist, because only in Oak Ridge has world changing discoveries continually been a way of life.

To conclude the history of the bell, we should examine how the restrictions on ringing the bell came to be removed. The consensus reached by the Bell Policy Committee on the ringing policy resulted in a workable path forward that allowed the city to accept the bell and the controversy to subside. This was put in place on May 3, 1996, after the dedication ceremony. The policy remained in force for five years.

A comment made by one of the members of the committee at the time has proven prophetic. It was observed that the bell would accomplish its purpose even though restricted to when it could be rung. A prediction was made that in a few years everyone would ask why there was ever a quarrel about ringing the bell and that the bell would be rung freely by anyone and everyone who desired to do so.

Elise Campbell succeeded in bringing that about. At the time she was an eighth grader at Robertsville Middle School and with encouragement from Herman Postma took on the challenge of removing the restrictions for ringing the bell. At the time the bell's palm log striker was padlocked and could only be unlocked by special permission and then only between 6:00 PM and 6:15 PM daily when it could be struck only three times.

A request Elise submitted asking permission for Sweden's royal family to be granted an exception to the rule was approved and a few weeks later on May 7, 2001, City Council approved the removal of the entire section of the city's code of ordinances pertaining to the Friendship Bell Ringing Policy. The bell was free to be rung by anyone and everyone who desired to do so – just as predicted five years earlier. And now more than seven years later, the bell is very much a part of the Oak Ridge heritage. It is one of our tourist attractions along with the Secret City Commemorative Walk and the American Museum of Science and Energy.

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If you want to learn more about various bells around the world, a great web site has been developed by Ted Lollis: http://peace.maripo.com/p_bells.htm

Bell maker Sotetsu Iwazawa, at age 70, on January 26, 1991, on the Kyoto's TV Evening News, said, "I was very moved when I heard about the people of Oak Ridge wishing for peace through the expression 'Born of War, Living for Peace, Growing Through Science.' I hope the sound of the ancient bell will be the sound of prayer for friendship and peace for all the people of the world."

I think Iwazawa would be proud of the way his bell has become a part of Oak Ridge and that he would find the "ancient bell" sounding all kinds of things as it is tolls for each person ringing it regardless of who or why.

The Oak Ridge International Friendship Bell – TRULY IS *a most unique Oak Ridge symbol.*



Knobs grouped 35 per panel and 8 in pairs between panels – not the religious number 108