

An Introduction to Bell Collecting

Presented by



**Written for the ABA by Larry and Marjorie Glassco
© The American Bell Association International, Inc., 2015**

Published by

**The American Bell Association
International, Inc.
©2015**

**Text by Marjorie Glassco
Photos by Larry Glassco**

© American Bell Association International. All rights reserved

COLLECTING BELLS

Do you have a few bells on a shelf? Do bells attract you as you walk through gift stores and craft shops? Do you like to pick up a bell and ring it? Have you ever been curious about bells that ring around you or in your travels? Welcome to the world of bells!

Bells are among the most interesting of collectables for many reasons. Perhaps the most intriguing factor is that a bell has a voice as well as a unique appearance. It can be beautiful or mechanically interesting. It may have a history, which can stimulate fascinating research. There is astounding variety: from an early American antique school bell to a beautiful modern art class creation, from an Indonesian ox bell to a whimsical clay bell, from a fire station gong to a Christmas tree ornament. Bells range in size from miniature earrings to church bells of many tons. As collectables, they appeal to both men and women. Today's purchases of modern bells may become tomorrow's treasured antiques.

Where are bells to be found? They are as close as the nearest gift store. Anywhere you travel they may be purchased as souvenirs. They may be ordered from catalogs or manufactures, and they make great gifts from friends or family. Bells make an excuse for browsing in antique shops or attending antique shows or estate sales. And they may be traded with other bell collectors or purchased at bell conventions.

How do you display a bell collection? Most people start with a shelf or a glass cabinet. Sometimes collections grow to a wall of bell shelves. Other collectors prefer to make small displays of different kinds of bells in different areas of their homes. No matter where, there always seems to be room for "one more bell!"

SOUVENIR BELLS



Among the easiest bells to collect are those found in shops while traveling. They bring back memories of places we (or our friends) have been and they make colorful groupings. They are often the first bells in a collection and have much sentimental value.

SERIES AND LIMITED EDITION BELLS



Many bells are produced by manufacturers in annual series, especially at Christmas time. Some of these are Goebel, Bing & Grondahl, Lenox, Wallace, Fenton, Lladro and Hallmark. They are often numbered and marketed in "Limited Editions." They make fine collectables now, and they may be treasured antiques in the future.

ANIMAL BELLS



Perhaps the most common collectable bell is the cowbell. But there are many kinds of bells for other animals, like sheep and goats, and old bells can be found for turkeys and hawks. It is interesting when traveling in other countries to look for other shapes and styles of bells for different animals, such as oxen, water buffalo, camels, donkeys or reindeer. In Switzerland, sets of bells tuned to harmonize can be heard on cows in the mountains.



Other collectables are those with animals on top like figurals. A challenge is to try to find animal bells representing every letter of the alphabet.

MORE ABOUT BELLS

Bells are among the oldest artifacts known to mankind. When primitive people banged on resonant surfaces to frighten away evil spirits, bells were born. They shook gourds with loose seeds and they made rattles to accompany their dancing. Bells were put on animals so they could be located and to frighten away predators. Gradually, with the advancements of the Iron and Bronze Ages, people learned how to cast metal into useful shapes, including a cup shape in which a clapper could be suspended to produce ringing sounds. Bells were hung in church and community towers to announce time and important events. Later, in the Middle Ages, ingenious arrangements were invented by which bells could be rung mechanically.

The word "bell" comes from the old Anglo-Saxon word "*bellan*" – to bellow. Related words are "*campana*" in Italy, "*cloche*" in France, "*glocke*" in Germany and "*klokke*" in Scandinavia.

Bells may be defined as man-made objects that make a resonant sound when struck by mallets, clappers or mechanical devices. They can be divided into three "families." The first family includes **gongs** – flat or cup-shaped discs which are struck from the outside. These were originally developed in Asia. The second family includes spherical objects with loose pellets inside which developed from the earliest gourds. These bells are called **crotals**, and they have not changed their basic shape over 3500 years. The third family includes cup-shaped and open-mouthed bells, with clappers inside, which we simply call **bells**, and of which there are many subdivisions.

The following pages picture different families and kinds of bells.

GONGS



Among the oldest bronze objects found in China were bowl-shaped clapperless bells which dated from the 16th to 17th Century BCE (Before the Common Era). They were struck by hammers to produce tones. Tuned "*chungs*" (Chinese clapperless bronze bells produced mainly during the late Zhou (c. 600-255 BC) dynasty and used as a percussion instrument in ancient China) were hung in series and the sounds were meant to express "Universal Harmony."

Large, flat sonorous gongs became prevalent throughout the Middle and Far East. They were brought home to English manors as exotic artifacts and gradually – in smaller sizes – came into use in halls and dining rooms.

Small gongs can still be found in gift stores, catalogues and antique shops.

CROTALS



People often call these bells "sleigh bells." They are spheres with loose pellets inside, which should be called crotals. Crotals can be cast as a single sphere, with pellets embedded in a sand core, which is shaken out after the casting. Or crotals can be made in two halves and annealed or crimped together.

Some crotals are fastened to their straps by rivets and others by running a strip of leather or wire along the "handles" on the crotals, then covering this attachment with a second strip of leather. Shapes range from perfectly round to acorn-shaped, and there can be one, two or three slits for "mouths." Some different kinds are pictured above.



Horse straps are not the only crotals. They have been produced all over the world for animals, as ornaments, and for pure decoration. The Japanese have made many crotals of clay for amulets and shrine souvenirs.

OPEN-MOUTHED BELLS



The kinds and shapes of bells with clappers are limited only by the imaginations of bell makers through the ages. First, flat pieces of metal were bent and riveted together. They had primitive clappers and were put on the necks of animals. These are still being made around the world. One form is the familiar cowbell.

When metal foundries began to cast bells, they were put in towers to sound alarms, to frighten away evil spirits, to call people to worship, and to mark the passage of time. Smaller bells were cast for altar bells in churches.

Most collections contain at least one “school bell” whose traditional shape is the stereotype of a bell. Small silver bells were commonly used on 19th and early 20th Century dining tables to summon servants. Some were made to match tableware patterns. There were also dainty bells, used on tea or dressing tables or desks. Many bells have no other purpose than their beauty or decorative appeal.

FIGURINES AND FIGURALS



A figurine is a whole figure from the head to the bottom of the skirt. Sometimes the clapper is in the form of feet. Many bronze or brass figurines were made in England and may still be found in antique shops. Newer figurines are available in porcelain bisque, some glazed and others unglazed.



In a figural bell, the figure serves as the handle of an ordinary bell. Another variation is the figurine bust.

MECHANICAL BELLS



In mechanical bells, a striker is activated by some mechanical means. In tap bells, a cup-shaped metal dome is hit by a springing arm when a finial is tapped on top of the bell. Others are activated by twisting or twirling a knob or by snapping an arm. Some ring by release of a wound-up spring, or by electricity.

Some have patent numbers, giving clues to manufacturing dates. These bells were often used at desks and store counters, but now are mainly found only as antiques.

BELL TOYS



Often a baby's first toy is a rattle, and Victorian silver and coral rattles were works of art. Toddlers push and pull bell toys of various shapes, and bells adorn many other toys to delight children. Recently, sets of tuned bells have provided an early introduction to musical notes. Bell toys are sought by both bell and toy collectors.

MOUNTED BELLS



Some bells must be mounted on a vertical surface to ring. Doorbells, servant bells, shop bells, trolley bells, yacht bells, fire-station bells, and bells used in prize fights are examples of bells which need to be mounted.

Bells with clappers to catch the wind were hung from eaves or temples in Asia, and variations of these wind chimes have been created around the world. Some are tubular chimes that have been tuned to different musical scales.

An important part of bell collecting is record keeping, since collections quickly grow beyond "memory filing." The best system is one in which each bell is numbered and has a corresponding page in a small loose-leaf notebook, in a card file, or on a computer. Then, as more is discovered about a bell, it can be added. The minimum information can include: dimensions (height + diameter of base), material, description of both bell and clapper, markings, where obtained, and cost.

BELL MATERIALS



Bells may be made of many different materials as illustrated above. **Glass** bells come in all shades and colors, either *transparent* or *opaque*. Fine **crystal** bells may be cut, pressed, engraved or etched. **Porcelain** or china bells come *unglazed* or *glazed* with designs either inherent in the manufacture, such as Wedgwood, or applied by *handpainting* or by *transfers*. Bells can be made of unusual kinds of wood, usually turned on lathes.



Bells of **clay** are fashioned by potters and may be either *glazed* or *unglazed*. They often show a high degree of individuality. The most common metal alloy used for bells is **brass**. **Bronze** is a heavier alloy often used in the Lost Wax casting process, and it is also used in casting large, tuned bells for carillons. Bronze bells usually have the finest ringing sound. **Pewter** castings allow fine detail, but they sacrifice tone. Silver bells, either sterling or plated, add a gleam to any bell collection.

THE AMERICAN BELL ASSOCIATION

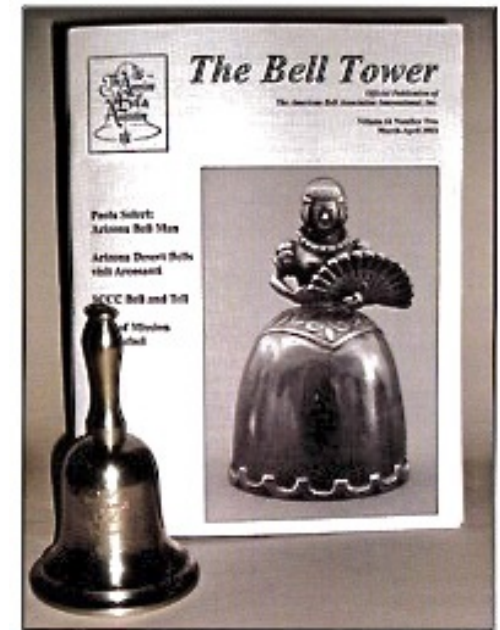
The worldwide organization of bell collectors is the American Bell Association International Inc. There are over 35 regional and state chapters that meet during the year for programs about bells, fellowship, trading of bell information, and sometimes bell sales.

There are also annual ABA conventions hosted by different chapters across the country. They are scheduled over four days, usually during the last week of June or the first week of July. Outstanding bell-related programs are offered, a local tour is included, and a "Bell Exhibit Room" plus a "Bell Auction" offer collectors opportunities both to sell and buy bells.

An official American Bell Association Bell made of fine pewter (pictured above) is available for purchase.

Another reason for bell collectors to join ABA is the publication of *The Bell Tower*SM. This bi-monthly magazine is full of bell information and pictures, including local, regional and national events, and researched bell articles and stories. It has become one of the best resources for learning about bells.

You are cordially invited to become a member of **THE AMERICAN BELL ASSOCIATION®**.



For more information, contact:

The American Bell Association

11748 N Via De La Verbenita
Oro Valley, AZ 85737-7293

<http://www.americanbell.org>

Membership Chairman:
membership@americanbell.org



***The General Grant Bell
The official symbol of the ABA***

HOW GENERAL ULYSSES S. GRANT'S BELL BECAME THE SYMBOL OF THE AMERICAN BELL ASSOCIATION

The second annual convention of the American Bell Association was held in St. Louis, Missouri, in 1947. At the close of that convention, Mary Alter Collins asked a member, Augusta Littman, if the group might go to her house the next day to see her bells. Mrs. Littman responded, "Why, of course!" She opened her home to the 30+ members who attended the convention, and on 11 hour's notice, she served them lunch as well!

After lunch, her guests wandered around the Bell Room and Mary Collins mused aloud, "It would be so nice if we had an 'official bell.'" At that point, Mrs. Littman picked up a rare Chinese gong and asked Mary how it would do. After examining the bell carefully and complimenting Mrs. Littman on her offering, Mrs. Collins seemed hesitant to accept it.

Hearing the conversation, Hazel Young, who was to be the next president, spoke up and said, "Well, I think it ought to be something more 'American.'" Augusta then picked up the General Grant Bell and handed it to Mary!

One can't help but wonder how it was that Augusta Littman had General Grant's bell in her collection. When Captain Grant resigned from the army, his father-in-law, who owned a large plantation, gave the Grants a portion of this land on which to live. They built a four-room log cabin, from which Ulysses S. Grant made regular trips to St. Louis to sell cordwood and eggs, and to bring back supplies for his farm.

As a young boy, Mrs. Littman's father worked in his father's bakery. It was one of his tasks to see that Captain Grant's weekly order of 12 sacks of stale bread for his livestock and chickens was placed in Grant's wagon. After the Captain had delivered his produce, visited his many friends, and returned to the bakery, he was worn out. Augusta's father had lined the bottom of the covered wagon with the sacks of stale bread and then placed the tired Captain on top of them, tie the horse's reins around the whip-socket and started the team of horses, who, fortunately, knew their way home!

When Ulysses Grant retired from farming, he offered a choice of a gift of appreciation to Mrs. Littman's father to thank him for his kindnesses. Augusta's father chose General Grant's bell.