

HAND BELLS AT MORAVIAN VILLAGE

by Janet Hofmeister



Last Spring the idea of starting a hand bell group at Moravian Village was suggested and shortly thereafter a meeting was held to assess interest in our community. About 20 people came to this gathering, where we discussed how many octaves should be purchased or rented, and who might like to try ringing.

Fortunately, since hand bells are very expensive, Dan Soos was able to locate a set of bells at West Side Moravian Church that were not being used. We are most fortunate to now have those bells on long-term loan.

Village Ringers is the name of our group. Currently there are 12 ringers, which is just right for three octaves of hand bells. Our first rehearsal was held in April 2022. We performed one time at Chapel in the Spring and we prepared Christmas music for Chapel in December.

In Europe, especially in England, large bells were rung in church towers dating to the 10th century. At least by the 15th century they were used for “change ringing”. Change ringing is ringing a set of huge tower bells (by pulling on long ropes) in a changing set of patterns. These patterns are called “peals”. But you can imagine that practicing in the cold towers on these extremely heavy bells was taxing. So the idea of practicing on smaller bells indoors was conceived. Hence: hand bells.

At first the hand bells were used to just practice the peals, but eventually ringers played tunes on the bells. A diatonic octave was being used (e.g., the white notes on a piano from C to C.)

In England, Whitechapel Company forged bells with leather clappers and leather handles. This type of bell is still used around the

world. They are the most expensive bells sold today. In 1902 Margaret Shurcliff brought the first set of bells to the U.S. Hand bell ringing has been increasingly popular and widely used ever since.

Two important companies in the U.S. that forge hand bells are located in Pennsylvania: Malmark, in Plumsteadville, and Schulmerich, in Hatfield. The set we are using is from the Schulmerich company.

Playing hand bells is a surprisingly challenging thing to do. The range of pitches has extended to several chromatic octaves. We use a 3-octave set. The larger bells are heavy, weighing 6 pounds, and our smallest bell weighs 2 1/2 pounds. Each bell rings only



one pitch, meaning that each ringer is responsible for 2 bells and their related sharps and flats. The sheet music everyone reads includes all of the parts in one, so it can be rather difficult to pick out exactly when each ringer is supposed to play. Focus and concentration are essential for this.

Ringers wear gloves to protect the bells. Oils from our hands can tarnish the bells. Moravian ringers are dedicated and try to attend each rehearsal since one missing person causes a problem. We practice ringing techniques, versatility exercises, reading exercises, and mostly music, which we work diligently to master. It is so gratifying to hear a piece beautifully rung on the bells.

Come to hear us the next time we play!