From steepleys to towers, chimes provide link to history

By STEPHANIE GAUTHREAU

Romanticized in literature, music and art, bells and their towers occupy important places in a community and the hearts of its people. The LSU Memorial Tower, for example, is a symbol of the state's university and, for many, a sentimental reminder of their alma mater.

Church bells summon the congregation to worship, denote joyous occasions such as weddings and religious feast days and mark the passage of time and the passing of members of a community.

Attorney Onie Brown tells the story of how bells may have saved a man's life.

Christmas season 22 years ago, Brown was pleading with a jury not to send his client to jail for murder. When Brown suddenly found his closing argument accompanied by the strains of "Silent Night," the sound of the chimes from the now-defunct Baton Rouge Savings and Loan on North Boulevard flooded into the courtroom, making Brown's plea better than any words could.

"The jury was mesmerized," he said. "Here I am pleading for this man's life, telling the jury they couldn't send him to jail at Christmas time. He had little children and they had no mother. Then the bells start playing "Silent Night."

"I stopped for a minute. It brought everything down."

The verdict: Not guilty.

Brown insists he had not timed his argument to coincide with the bells, which usually sounded only on the hour.

"It was a malfunction of the bells, but it couldn't have occurred at a more opportune time," Brown said.

"I thank the Lord for it."

The bells of St. Joseph's Cathedral hold personal and historical memories for Carmen Enard. Enard remembers climbing the steeple stairs in the 1950s with her then-boyfriend J.B. Enard, who was in charge of winding the tower's clock. Enard's father, Paul, had installed the clock in 1933. For years, a member of the family wound the clock once a week. From this vantage point, Carmen McGuire and her future husband observed the burial of Huey P. Long.

"We watched from the little archways in the steeple, and we could see it just like we were standing over the burial site," said Enard, recalling that the Capitol grounds were covered with "a blanket of people" for the burial.

"Being a young high school student, I wasn't much on the burial. But I remember the excitement it caused all over the city and the state."

Enard said winding the clocks took about an hour to 90 minutes. J.B. Enard turned a large iron wheel with a crank until it rolled the weights to the top of the church.

The steeple holds romantic memories for Enard, who recalls watching her boyfriend in the archways on her way home from St. Joseph's Academy. She said the steeple offered an unobstructed view of downtown in the 1950s, before the advent of taller buildings.

Today, the clocks are wound electronically, as they have been since the 1950s. The cathedral's bell tower has three bells, the first of which came from the Virginian, a steamboat that sank in the river in the 1860s, said the Rev. Frank Oster, pastor of St. Joseph's.

(The cathedral's bell tower gave Carmen McGuire Enard an unencumbered view of Huey Long's burial on the Capitol grounds.)
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Before the 1891 construction of the steeple, the bell was kept on a wooden scaffold. The other two bells did not arrive until 1960, and the three were first rung together on May 17, which was Pentecost. According to the custom of the day, the two new bells were named. The larger one, which weighs 1,910 pounds, was named Joseph, and the smaller, the weight of which is not documented, was named Agnes Alice.

"They will continue the Easter hymn in praise of the risen Christ" is inscribed on the larger bell. The three bells are electronically rung before Sunday services. The middle bell is rung alone for the Angelus—a call to prayer that is issued three times a day, weekday services, weddings, funerals and special events.

Uter said bells traditionally worked as alarm clocks of sorts—they were rung an hour before the service, again a half-hour before the service and again moments before the service. Now, St. Joseph's Cathedral's bells are rung five or ten minutes before the service.

The alma mater, hymns, classical and patriotic pieces and Christmas carols are in the repertoire of LSU's Memorial Tower. Built in 1923 and dedicated in 1926, the tower originally had chimes that were played manually. These were replaced in 1949 by carillon chimes, which were controlled electronically. A new carillon system, or stationary set of tuned bells, was installed when the 175-foot tower was renovated in 1960.

The carillon played automatically from special rolls that operated the tone generating system. The current system, which replaced the bells with speakers and the rolls with tapes, is controlled electronically and has been in place since 1979. Music is played at 6 p.m. every day except Sunday, when music is played at 7 p.m. A Westminster peal—hour strike sounds the quarter hours. Eight exterior speakers amplify the music through the campus. Until a couple of years ago, the tower provided refuge for barn owls.

Most Catholic churches ring their bells at 6 a.m., noon and 6 p.m. to call people to prayer. This form of devotion is known as the Angelus, a prayer said in honor of the Incarnation. The word "Angelus" is taken from the word angel. Churches also ring the bells after weddings and for funerals.

Campanile originated in Italy, where they were built to hold the bells that summoned worshippers to church services. They often stand apart from the church and are sometimes connected to the church by arcades.

The first campaniles were built in Italy in the 4th century A.D. They became popular again after the 1920s. Campaniles have been attached to town halls, where they sometimes functioned as lookout posts. In some towns, they are featured in courthouses and, less frequently, in banks.

Walt Whitaker, a service representative with the Verdin Company, which services and installs bells, carillons and clocks, said many Baton Rouge churches have moved to electronic carillons, which play taped music and allow for extensive repertoires like that of LSU's Memorial Tower. In most cases, the churches with real bells have them rung electronically.

The bells of First United Methodist Church and St. James Episcopal Church are rung manually. There are at least 18 bell towers in Baton Rouge. Most of them house three bells. Some have only one. The tower at First Presbyterian Church has five bells. The bells at First Presbyterian play the Westminster Chimes every quarter hour.

Whitaker said bells no longer are cast in the United States. The United States once had several foundries that produced bells, but since their demise, most bells used in the United States are obtained from Holland.