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SPANISH BELLS IN NEW MEXICO

By JANE HOWE

OF all the equipment deemed to be necessary for the continuance of missionary activities, the Spanish considered the church bell to be next to the gift of speech. For seldom did any padre Franciscan, Jesuit or Dominican seek to Christianize an Indian population in New Spain without the aid of at least a hand bell.¹ It was a practice of long standing. St. Patrick's hand-bell is a greatly venerated item in the Dublin museum as is that of St. Francis Xavier in the Goa Cathedral. Later, in California, Fray Junípero Serra swung chime bells on a tree limb² and rang them over an empty land to call forth the hiding natives. So must have the missionaries in Mexico as they accompanied the explorers from Zacatecas in the south to Taos Pueblo in the north, from the Papagos in the west to the Tejas in the east.

All Spanish exploration parties were accompanied by missionaries.³ And wherever settlements were established, a chapel had to be erected.⁴ Here bells played a part of the utmost consideration and for this purpose chime bells served admirably. Ordinarily, a chime bell⁵ measures approximately 12 inches high including the crown and may vary in circumference around the lip from 35 to 50 inches. These are small enough to be carried on a mule or donkey, and yet two or more rung together may be heard a distance of a quarter to half a mile.

The Francisco Vásquez de Coronado expedition probably carried chime bells on the explorations of 1540-1, since missionaries ministered to the spiritual needs of the explorers as well as converting the natives. Be that as it may, since it is only conjecture, there is every positive indication that Don

1. An ancient custom among missionaries of all centuries.

2. H. H. Bancroft, *California papers*, p. 176.

3. H. H. Bancroft, *History of Texas and the North Mexican States*, Vol. I, p. 116.

4. Bernal Diaz del Castillo, *The True History of the Conquest of Mexico*, tr. by Maurice Keatinge, p. 100.

5. Not to be confused with a chime of bells. Bells may be of any size and number. Chime bells weigh under one hundred pounds and seldom number more than three.

Juan Oñate de Zacatecas brought a pair of chime bells into New Mexico in 1598. Such a pair has been unearthed along the Chama River near the site of San Gabriel, the first capital. Fred Harvey bought one bell; the other is in a private home within a few miles of its point of discovery.

Judging from the one remaining bell, it was probably cast in Mexico City. It is well proportioned, smooth inside and out and the inscription lettering may date from the fifteenth century: *MANIA IHOUHNIO†* At casting, it had a cross and crown top⁶ but the cross piece has been broken leaving only the scars where it once rested. The bell measures 5½ inch top, 15 inch length, 2 inch lip, and 2 inches thick. It is 18 inches in circumference at the shoulder, has a 26 inch waist and the lip or sound bow measures 49 inches. It is estimated to weigh about 60 pounds.

In contrast, another chime bell, from Pecos,⁷ is very crudely cast. It could well have been a ground-mold⁸ product, cast there at the mission. The shape resembles a clown's hat with a simple handle for the top. It is plain except for a diamond cross which irrevocably stamps the origin as Spanish. No other nation uses the cross composed of diamonds or squares for decorative purposes.⁹ The color indicates the lack of proper metals since it is not the customary green of Mexican and Spanish bells, nor is it bronze but rather a light beige. The combination of metals¹⁰ has raised the question as to whether bells were cast in New Mexico by the Spanish. With a scarcity of all metals except copper, it is doubtful if a bell could have been cast in the state unless metals from other objects such as jewelry were available. Recast bells are quite another idea.

Two such bells may be seen: at the Santuario at Chimayo

6. A sign of a royal bell. The symbol was invented by Ferdinand and Isabella as the sign of a bell cast in a royal foundry.

7. Now in the Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D. C.

8. A mold made by digging a hole in clay earth, the shape of the exterior of the bell. The core is cut from a tree trunk. Alternate layers of grease and clay are spread on each. The core set within the hole and in the space between the molten metal is poured. The gases are allowed to escape and then a cope of earth covers the bell and it cools.

9. Modern Spanish bells are so decorated.

10. 80 parts copper to 20 parts tin equals the best combination for perfect pitch.

Not always is the date correctly written as the 7 is made in four ways: 7 ^ □ ^ . Each carries a diamond cross. Decorations vary somewhat from squares to small tree-like ornaments but the over-all appearance is so uniform as to make it possible for positive identification from the ground.¹⁴

The bells are in various states of preservation. Irreparable harm has been done by the Indian boys chosen to ring the bells for services. They hammer the sides with granite rocks, or, as in one pueblo, with iron cannon balls, for the bell clappers have disappeared. At Cochiti,¹⁵ the rocks are worn smooth and resemble frozen fruit packages while at Picurís a wire has been wrapped around a suitable sized rock and this is swung at the bell. Under this sort of treatment the lettering is nearly obliterated. In fact, it seems to be the goal and has nearly reached accomplishment at Cochiti where the bell is smooth with only the date clearly visible.

There is no uniform pattern as to the care of the bells. At Taos Pueblo, rebellion headquarters in 1680, the "old bell" is now hanging in the new church. It has every indication of being an ancient one. The fire from the bombardment of the former church in the Mexican War and subsequent rough treatment has all but obliterated the lower half of a beautiful diamond cross. There are rope holes and the inevitable story seems, in this case, to be true. This concerns the fact that the bell was damaged when the church burned. The Pueblo Council decided it should be kept out of sight until a more peaceful time. Evidently that is now. The bell first appeared in the Community House and then fourteen men, aided by pulleys, heaved it to a newly constructed tower where it is now pointed to with pride. Close examination of the bell will doubtless bring out the date but due to cement and other obstructions, it must be a future project. It is so hoped for if it proves to be a pre-1680 bell, it may be classed with those few remaining in the state, namely at Isleta (1632), Ácoma and Laguna (both 16th C.)

14. Pueblos which own 1710 bells are: Picurís, Santa Clara, Santa Ana, San Ildefonso, Cochiti, Zia, Ácoma, Laguna and Jemez. One more is in a curio store.

15. This bell has a sheath of gold on the underside of the lip. Gold is also visible in the crown.

It would seem that at the pueblos most anti-Spanish in 1680, the bells received the best treatment.¹⁶ At Ácoma there is a 1710 bell and another purported to be cast in Spain in the 1500's. This bell is by far the most outstanding to be seen in the Southwest. The bronze is superbly blended so that a touch of the finger-nail initiates vibrations which are resonant and sweet, and so loud as to be heard over the pueblo. The rope holes are bolted. The bell is devoid of any inscription but there is a perfectly formed cross of squares reaching from the shoulders to the lip. Inside each square there is a cross of daisy petals. Another bell cast in Spain is to be seen at Laguna. Since many persons from Ácoma joined in the formation of this pueblo in 1699, Ácoma probably donated the new church one of their bells. It is there with a 1710 bell.

Mention has been made throughout this article of inscriptions. Without them, the work of the bell archeologist is immeasurably impeded. If the inscription includes the date, the age of the bell can be figured for sometimes a date may be incorrect. Witness the ever raging controversy over the "San Jose" bell in the San Miguel Church in Santa Fe. Because of the type of alphabet used, many historians maintain that this bell is a 19th C. product, while others, equally expert, hotly deny this. In the case of the 3 and the 8 in a date, file marks should be sought and are clearly visible at times, such as on the "Maria" bell at the Museum in Santa Fe.

There are several bells in New Mexico pueblo churches which must be labeled as "mavericks." They have no status because of lack of proper identification or their casting place is unknown. One of these is at Trampas. Another hangs at Isleta. This bears the date 1632 which is nearly erased by the constant striking of granite on metal. At Truchas is a bell much resembling a Spanish one to be seen at Mission Inn, California. The New Mexican one has the only Latin inscription discovered in the state: S DEI. Another bell is that which

16. Otermin and his captains reported on the state of each bell discovered on the attempted reconquest 1680-82. See C. W. Hackett, ed. *Revolt of the Pueblo Indians of New Mexico and Otermin's Attempted Reconquest 1680-1682*. Mention is also made by de Vargas of bells. See Jessie Bromilow Bailey, *Diego de Vargas and the Reconquest of New Mexico*.

was sold from the Rancho de Taos Church. Fire scarred and battered, the bell has smooth lines and may be Spanish.

Other bells in New Mexico need investigation. Some of the Pueblo Indians so jealously guard their treasures as to make it impossible to gain the necessary permission for study. While in others the bells are allowed to be beaten to death, to be sold, to be thrown out simply because they represent the old era. But no new bell can replace a Spanish one which has been treasured for centuries.