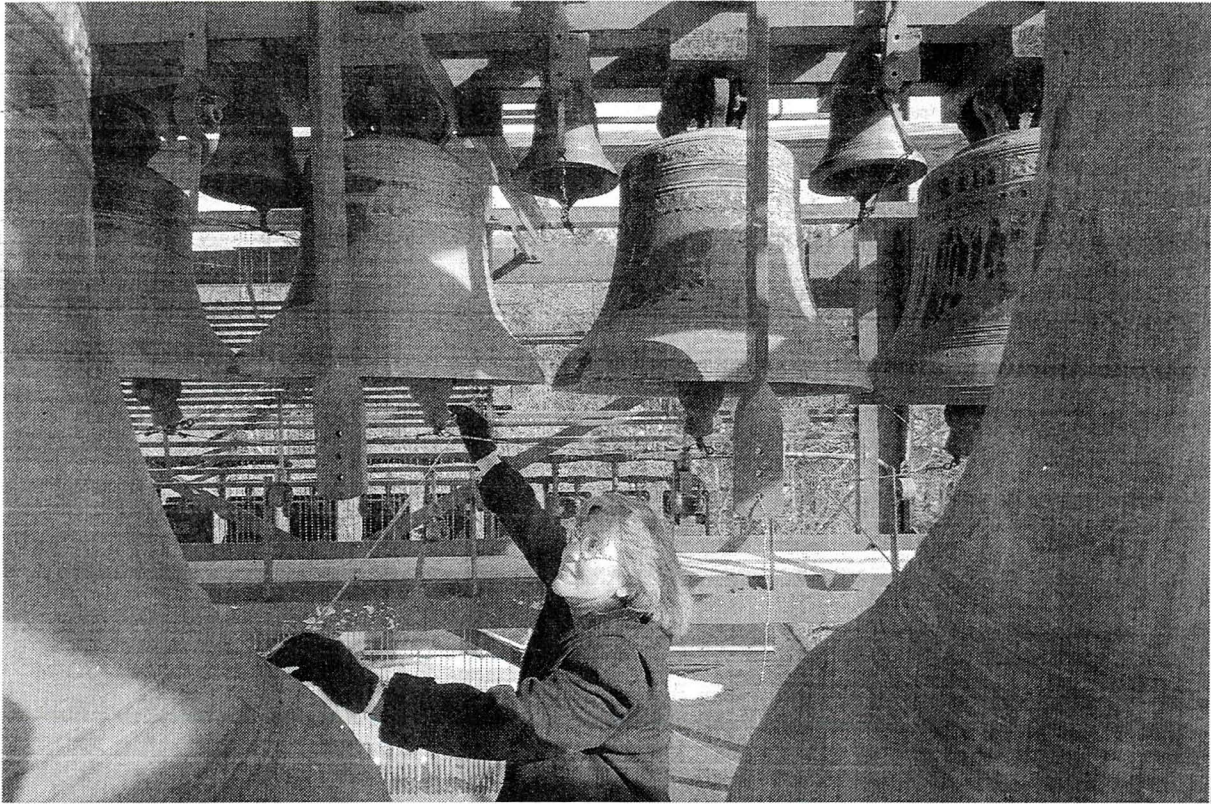
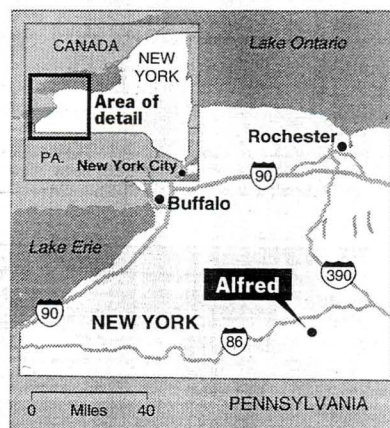
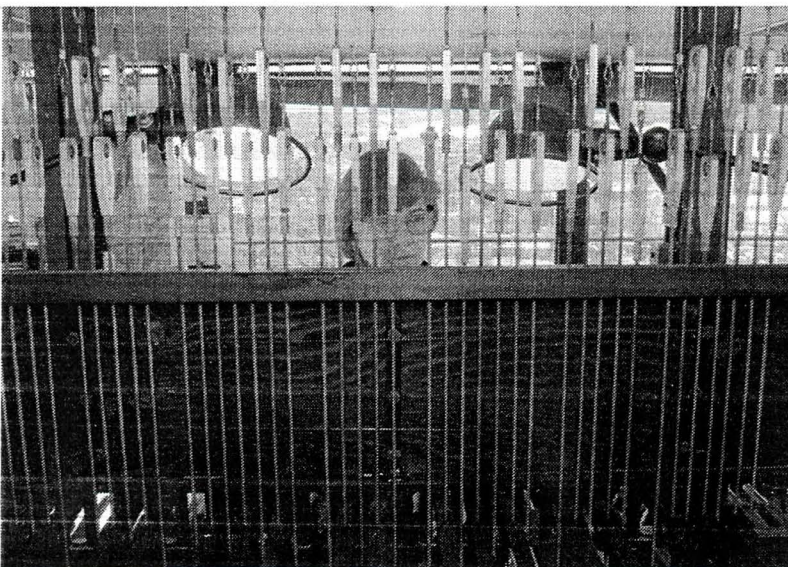


Beloved Carillon May Ring True, but Its History Doesn't



Chris Rank for The New York Times

Laurel G. Buckwalter, the carillonneur at Alfred University, had questions about the authenticity of the bells. Her research helped lead to the conclusion that they are clever counterfeits, not 17th-century originals.



The New York Times

Generations have grown up listening to the carillon at Alfred University in western New York.

By MICHELLE YORK -1

ALFRED, N.Y., Feb. 19 — For decades, bells have resounded over the countryside, an audible postcard of this bucolic college town in the foothills of the Allegheny Mountains.

They have risen above the student chatter at Alfred University, serenaded youthful accomplishments and tolled for people in the surrounding valley who had lost a loved one.

Some have reveled in the music, carrying picnic baskets to the foot of the carillon tower on campus. Some never paid notice, spending their college careers thinking the bells came from a tape recording.

But anyone with an ear for music would agree: these bells were always a little off tune.

College officials have now discovered why.

Instead of buying bells made in the 17th century by a Dutch man so talented he was considered the master of the bell world, the alumni in the 1930's bought cheap copies from two men who faked authenticity to profit about \$5,000. "I'm a little sad because the people of Alfred sacrificed so much," said Laurel G. Buckwalter, the university's carillonneur whose casual research eight years ago led to the plot's unraveling.

Alfred's alumni began searching for a carillon in the mid-1930's. "Just think how a set of bells in a tower on the campus would flood this whole valley with music, and what an influence for good and beauty this would be in the lives of the students," Estelle Davis, the wife of a former college president, Booth Colwell Davis, said at the time.

Alfred was not a moneyed or well-connected place, making the search for the bells more difficult. People in the valley tended to be craftsmen who worked with reddish terra cotta bricks that are still seen on rooftops, and Seventh Day Baptists who founded the university and first wanted a carillon to usher in their Sabbath. Using their academic connections, the alumni found a pair of European bellmakers who said they could fashion together a carillon set that would include 18 bells made by Pieter Hemony in the 1600's. "Hemony bells were the most harmonious bells ever made," said Mrs. Buckwalter. "They were really, really significant treasures."

The sellers, Marcel Michiels and Omer Michaux, were eager to part with them because of the growing threat of Hitler. In wartime, bells were stolen from churches, melted and recast into artillery.

The alumni paid \$10,000, about twice the amount of lesser-quality bells. The set arrived in 1937, making Alfred one of the few colleges and churches in North America to have a concert carillon. "I was about 10 when it came to the campus," said Carol Burdick, who grew up here and later taught at the university. "They were a part of every Christmas Eve, every New Year's Eve. People would toll the bells and I'd wonder who died. When there was a birth in the village, they'd play a nursery rhyme. I can't say everybody loves them. Many people don't. But it was another way to connect the community."

In 1994, Mrs. Buckwalter became Alfred's third carillonneur. She

learned to transfer her piano and organ skills to the series of levers and pedals that pull the bell clapper, and to toll bells with a rope, miming Quasimodo in "The Hunchback of Notre Dame."

Her husband, a biology professor, could hear her playing from his office across campus, as could people in the valley, who wandered onto their porches to listen.

But she was curious that Alfred's bells were not internationally recognized, and upon investigation, she became suspicious. "My secret hope was that they were genuine. I had a tiny thought maybe they weren't authentic," she said.

She went to the university's archives, where she discovered a series of letters that showed that others had had doubts. As soon as the bells arrived, the university wanted to know why an inscription had been chiseled off.

The United States consulate in Belgium intervened on Alfred's behalf, but the sellers and an expert certi-

fied that the bells were authentic.

Alan Littell, 74, a public relations officer for the university from 1968 to 1984, said he also had concerns. "Something didn't feel right, didn't compute," he said.

Mr. Littell also dug through records and found that a Dutch bell expert, Andre Lehr, had written the university in 1958 when researching a book about Pieter Hemony and his brother Francois. The brothers kept excellent records, and all of their bells were accounted for in other carillon sets. The university assured Mr. Lehr of their authenticity.

In 1977, Mr. Littell decided to contact the expert and send photos and statistical information. Mr. Lehr, who had done more research in the meantime, wrote to say he had concluded that the bells were counterfeit. "I did nothing with the letter but put it in a file," Mr. Littell said. "I had no way to determine the accuracy of what he was saying." But from then on, when I wrote about the bells I didn't say they were the work of

Pieter Hemony, but 'attributed to the workshop of Pieter Hemony.'"

Suspicious died down until Mrs. Buckwalter began searching through records and gradually found the pieces of correspondence. She located Mr. Lehr, the former curator for the Dutch Carillon Museum. He agreed to settle the matter.

His research unearthed an incriminating letter from the seller, Mr. Michiels, in which he asked to borrow the plaster casts of the Hemony bells, just before the Alfred transaction.

"I was disappointed," said Mrs. Buckwalter. "The Alfred alumni based their decision on the word and reputation of these gentlemen."

But she still plays the carillon. There is not much talk of replacing the copies, and most people do not care that the bells are neither famous nor historic.

"I didn't fall in love with them because they were the sounds of Belgium," said Ms. Burdick. "I fell in love with them because they were the sounds of Alfred."