

Bells Will Be Ringin'

**Pleasant pealing
from Stetson
Chapel is just one
of Jeff Smith's
accomplishments.**

*Jeff Smith holds a miniature
version of the bells he helped
bring to Kalamazoo College's
Stetson Chapel more than
25 years ago.*

By Kit Almy

WHAT IS FOUND in Kalamazoo but nowhere else in Michigan, yet exists in almost every town in England?

The answer is the set of eight church bells in Kalamazoo College's Stetson Chapel, which are hung for a special type of ringing called change ringing. Developed about 400 years ago in England, bells in change ringing are rung one after the other in continuously changing sequences, producing a cascading sound rather than traditional tunes. Such bells are found in the United Kingdom and in former British colonies. While there are more than 5,000 sets, called rings, in the U.K., there are only about 45 in North America.

Jeff Smith's introduction to change ringing was through Dorothy Sayers' mystery novel, *The Nine Tailors*, in which much of the plot revolves around a bell tower. Unlike most people, Jeff's involvement has gone far beyond reading. Not only does he ring, but he was instrumental in bringing these unique bells to Kalamazoo.

Jeff grew up in rural Georgia and graduated from Emory University in Atlanta. He served four years in the Navy during the Korean War, and after his discharge he worked for a summer as a camp counselor in Maine. There he met his future wife, "a really nifty Bryn Mawr girl named Carol Parker."

He enrolled in graduate studies at the University of Wisconsin, where he earned a doctorate in mathematics. In 1961, Jeff joined Kalamazoo College's mathematics faculty.

A little over a year later, a friend from the University of Wisconsin recruited him to take a research position at the Carnegie Institution for Science in Washington, D.C. "Even though we came to Kalamazoo thinking we'd like it and did like it, I'd never done anything but go to school my entire life and I thought it might be nice to get my hands a little bit dirty, and so we decided we'd go off for a year or two and see what it was like," Jeff says.



This bell is "rung up" and ready for change ringing, where it will swing back and forth in a nearly 360-degree arc.

A year or two turned into five, and during that time, the Washington National Cathedral dedicated a ring of 10 change ringing bells. The cathedral was recruiting new ringers and Jeff thought, "Sure I'd like to learn to ring, whatever the heck that is." Jeff was bitten by the ringing bug.

While Jeff was in Washington, Kalamazoo College's Larry Barrett persistently urged him to return to the college. In 1967, with one child in tow and another on the way, Jeff and Carol moved back to Kalamazoo, and for about a decade, Jeff didn't give bell ringing much thought.

In 1977, trying to come up with a

Change ringing is a feature of weddings at Stetson Chapel.



fun, yet challenging subject for a two-week freshman orientation course, he decided on a study of mathematical group theory that focused on change ringing.

Although change ringing originated on tower bells, it can also be practiced on handbells, a much more portable and inexpensive alternative. Jeff persuaded chapel dean Robert Dewey to buy a set of handbells and visited ringing friends in Washington for a crash course in

change ringing on handbells.

The students in that freshman class enjoyed it but few stuck with ringing for long. "But what they did do was recruit other people, because they were talking about it or sitting fumbling around on campus, (and) naturally curious people would come up and ask," Jeff says.

Over the next several years the course continued to be offered, and a number of students — including the naturally curious passersby — became serious ringers. The handbell band soon became a fixture on campus.

Due to the high visibility of change ringing at the time, when college officials began looking for a gift to celebrate the school's upcoming 150th anniversary, Jeff had a lot of support for his proposal to install a set of bells in Stetson Chapel's empty tower. The college funded a study

to determine if the tower was architecturally sound enough to support eight bells weighing several hundred pounds each. After experts gave the approval, it was a matter of raising funds to purchase and install the bells. Board of Trustees Finance Chair and Anglophile Dr. Maynard Conrad made it his personal mission to raise

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a large portion of the needed amount. In 1983, the college's sesquicentennial year, new president David Breneman gave the project the final go-ahead.

Whitechapel Bell Foundry in London cast the bells that year, but they were not installed until the following spring. The college held a festival, organized by Conrad's wife Gene, celebrating the event with many English details such as double-decker buses and morris dancers. Meanwhile, a band of seasoned change ringers were ringing a peal (about three hours worth of ringing) to dedicate the bells. Jeff says, "A grand

time was had by all. The dedication itself was — people who were around still talk about it — one of the nicest that ever happened on the college campus."

Since then, the bells have faded somewhat from public view, but the ringing tradition has thrived. Altogether, more than 100 people have learned to ring at Kalamazoo College, including many students, as well as faculty and staff, alumni and area residents.

Change ringing is just one of many activities Jeff has pursued over the years, "at various levels of intensity," as he puts it. He has taken up such diverse pursuits

Confessions of a Change Ringer

I DON'T TELL EVERYONE this, but I am a change ringer. It's not that I'm embarrassed; change ringing is just not easy to explain.

You may not have heard of change ringing, but you probably have heard it if you watch much PBS or tuned into the recent royal wedding on television. It sounds like random chiming of bells but is actually an intricate and ever-changing sequence of notes.

I had never heard of change ringing before I came to Kalamazoo College, but it seemed worth checking out. By the time I graduated I was hooked for life. I felt like I was contributing to an important, historic part of campus life — Kalamazoo College has the only change ringing tower in Michigan. More than that, the activity is at once physical, mental and social — and it's fun.

Almost anyone can learn to ring, from pre-teens to senior citizens. Still, it's not as easy as it looks: it takes several lessons to be able to control a bell safely.

Briefly, this is how it works:

Each bell is mounted on a wheel attached to a rope which passes through the belfry floor to the ringing room below. As the

ringer pulls the rope, the wheel turns, causing the bell to swing and the clapper to strike the side of the bell.

It takes about two seconds for each bell to strike once because it swings full circle, so we can't play ordinary music, unlike on a carillon or chime. Instead, the bells are rung in a different order each time, starting from a descending scale. The sound produced when each bell has been struck once is called a "change."

The most basic form of change ringing involves one of the ringers, the conductor, directing pairs of bells to change position. We primarily ring "methods," defined sequences of non-repeating changes. A method is a set of rules that determine which bells change

The author, far right, practices handbells with other ringers.



as bicycle racing, flying model airplanes, and throwing yo-yos and tops.

“Some people would say I have a very short attention span,” he says. “(But) I don’t see myself as skimming the top off of these things especially, and I try to stay with stuff long enough that I can actually get involved and figure it out.” Jeff observes that many of his activities restrict the participants’ possible actions, yet result in the creation of something beautiful or complex.

Not surprisingly for a mathematician, Jeff loves formal structures. “I realized that one of my favorite courses in

By Kit Almy

place each time. Ringers use squiggly diagrams called “blue lines” to learn methods, which vary widely in complexity.

Despite the fact that each bell weighs hundreds of pounds, the momentum of the bell does most of the work. The ringer just needs to make small adjustments to the speed in which the bell is ringing.

You don’t need to be a weight lifter or a math whiz to ring bells, but you do need patience and concentration. It’s like meditation — you forget about everything else when you’re ringing.

When I ring I feel like I’m part of a machine that is half human, half mechanical. My bell and I are one component of the machine working in synchronization with the other ringers and bells to produce a unique, mesmerizing sound. As it is for Jeff Smith, this intense cooperation is a large part of what I enjoy about ringing. Since other ringers are key to being able to ring at all, we always welcome new learners.

If you’re interested in learning more about change ringing, visit www.kzoo.edu/ringers where you’ll also find practice times and contact information. 📞

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high school apart from geometry ... was Latin," he says. "It is a beautiful formal structure. You can predict how things are going to come out, but you can still have a lot of creativity and explore things within these very severe restraints."

In change ringing mathematical rules determine how the bells are allowed to change order. Still, despite these restrictions, composers of change ringing — though they have nothing like the freedom of musical composers — choose pleasant sounding sequences of changes and discover how to achieve them.

While in Washington, Jeff also discovered Indian fighting kites, which he describes as a simple, single-string kite that "operates by magic." Although he never fought his kites, he was intrigued by the challenge of first making one fly and then constructing his own. Like change ringing, he says, "It's a very primitive structure within which people are doing amazing things."

Jeff's deepest passions seem to be musical. "The viola was a very big part of my life for a very long time — from when I was in college up to basically when the bells came," he says. During his stint in the Navy he played with the Honolulu Symphony. In Kalamazoo he was a fill-in violist with the Kalamazoo Symphony



One of Jeff's recent pursuits is competitive top throwing.

Orchestra and played regularly with the Bach Festival orchestra. However, he really lived for string quartets and claims he mostly played with orchestras to recruit quartet players.

Both change ringing and playing with a quartet share an aspect of teamwork and congeniality. "It takes a kind of intense cooperation that is difficult to experience, I think," he says. "It's not a common thing to be able to feel that you are so totally involved in other people's activities, so completely dependent on them, so desperately wanting yourself not to be the one that causes it to crash."

Most recently, Jeff has been absorbed with playing the button accordion. He first encountered one years ago

when he had been hired to play viola in the orchestra for a visiting Polish dance troupe. At the rehearsal the dancers came out with an accordion accompanist. "He had a pipe in his mouth, was wearing a smoking jacket, and had this accordion about this big. And he could just turn Miller Auditorium upside down with that damn little thing," Jeff says.

"I thought ... it would be wonderful to be able to make that kind of music all by yourself."

The button accordion is bi-sonoric, which means each button plays a different note depending on whether it's being pushed or released — yet another example of the interplay between limitation and creativity which Jeff finds captivating.

"This notion of a lot springing from a little, being able to operate creatively within severe structures, severe restrictions, that has a lot of appeal for me, and I think I'm not unusual in that regard. I think a lot of people have admiration for that kind of economy, that kind of elegant structure that gets erected on a very slim foundation." 🐦



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