



# The Past is Prologue:

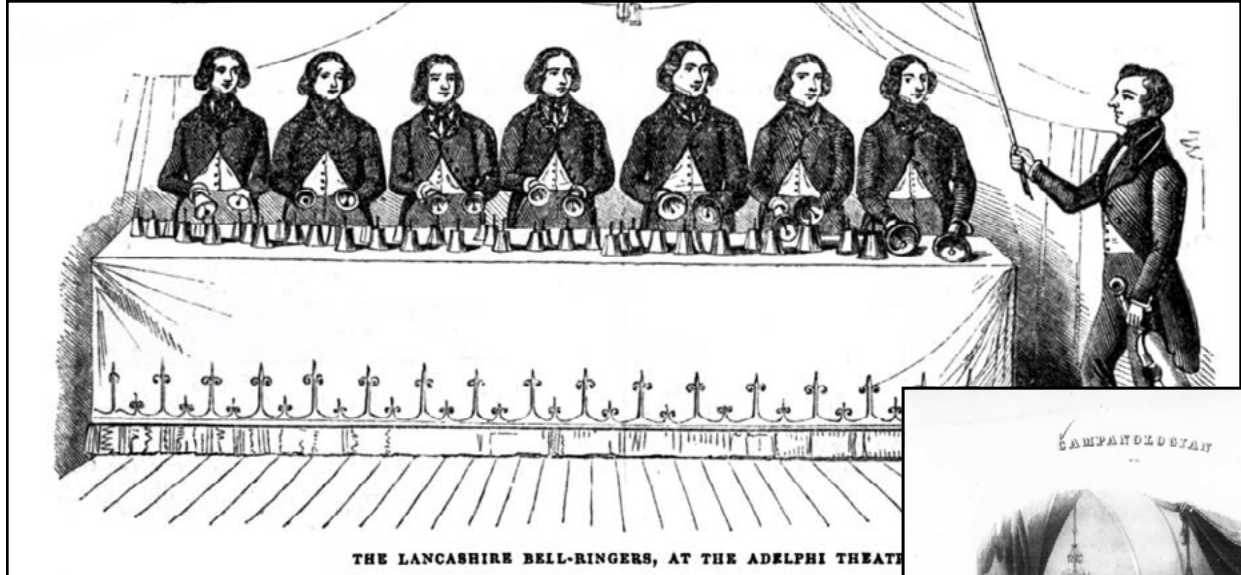
## The Early Era of Handbell Ringing in the United States

Laurie Austin, Area 8 Historian

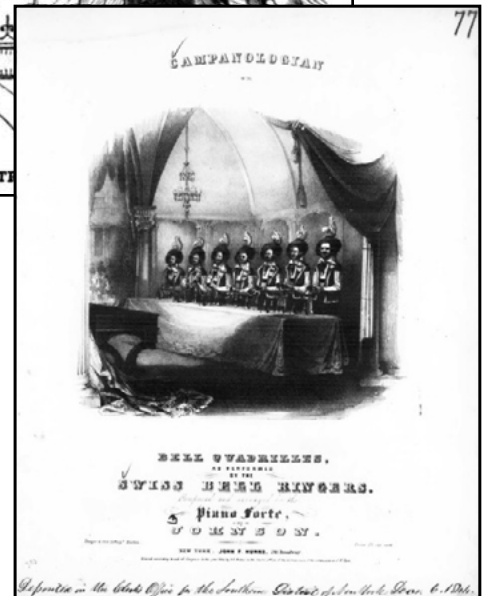
With the 70th anniversary of Handbell Musicians of America coming up in 2024, we will use the next several issues of Quavers to look at the history of handbells, particularly in what is now Area 8. Long before there was a national handbell musicians organization dividing our country into various regions there were handbell performances all around. This article will attempt to cover the early history of our instrument in the US, and particularly in Missouri, Iowa, Illinois, Kansas, and Nebraska.

### Arrival from England

Tuned handbells probably made their first appearance in the US in the form of an imported traveling bell band. In the 1840s, bell bands in England were very popular. Our story involves the Lancashire Bell Ringers, who at that time traveled around England performing in concerts and winning handbell competitions. The drawing below, showing seven ringers and a director, was used to promote their appearance at the Adelphi Theatre in London.



This is the group that caught the eye of the great American showman, P.T. Barnum, when they were both touring in Ireland in 1844. He brought them to the United States re-branded as the mustachioed, poofy-hatted “Swiss Bell Ringers” during their American tour. An image of these “Campanologians” (those who study campanology, and another name that they went by) appears on the front of a piano adaptation of their music that is now in the collection of the Library of Congress. The notation at the bottom of this music says it was deposited in the clerk’s office of the southern district of New York, December 6, 1844.



If you're curious at what their music may have sounded like, check out one of their quadrilles, the finale called *The Village Green*. (You can download this music from the Library of Congress [here](#).)

Newspaper advertisements show that the Swiss Bell Ringers debuted at Niblo's Garden in New York, September 12, 1844. "After producing a great sensation in New York" they moved along to other mid-Atlantic locations such as Calvert Hall in Baltimore where you could see them perform for 50 cents a ticket. The Star newspaper explained "the music is produced by the ringing of these bells, which are passed with incredible rapidity from the hand of one performer to the other as the exigencies of the tune require. In this way, the most difficult overtures and combinations of harmony are executed, with astonishing precision and beauty of effect."

Newspapers show their Baltimore appearances were written up in places as far away as Charleston, SC and New Orleans, LA. In October, the Swiss Bell Ringers appeared in a series of concerts in Boston at the Melodeon. These ads mention that they are assisted by a violinist of great skill; newspapers in other locations mention they are accompanied by a flutist. When they went to Washington, DC in December, they played at the White House for President Tyler. Their tour continued into the southeast United States, to New Orleans, then Ohio. All told, the Lancashire Ringers, billed as the Swiss Bell Ringers, toured the US, Canada, and Cuba for almost three years, but I cannot find evidence that they came as far west as our area.

A group as popular and hyped as the Swiss Bell Ringers was bound to produce imitators. The first I found was in a June 14, 1845 newspaper article. It seems there was a bit of drama when the Campanologians (the original Swiss Bell Ringers) and the Campanologian Band of Brothers both appeared at the same time in Cleveland, OH. "The originals at once offered to decide the capabilities of each by giving a concert at once—both bands to give a performance, and the public to decide; but the Brothers declined the challenge and left the place." I love the idea of a handbell ring-off!

A June 22, 1845, article published in New Orleans suggests that when the Swiss Bell Ringers recently performed in Buffalo, NY, they found that a rival group had performed there before them. At this point they were unmasked (in print) as not being Swiss, but in fact being the Lancashire Ringers from England.

It is likely that these same Campanologian Brothers, also referred to as the Band of American Bell Ringers, were the rivals mentioned. Massachusetts papers in July of 1845 were reporting that these American Bell Ringers had just toured "the west" and Montreal. (In 1845, Ohio counted as "the west.") Around the same time, a New York newspaper was announcing in the same column that the Swiss Bell Ringers were appearing in Portland, Maine, while the Campanologian Brothers were appearing in Albany.

THE VILLAGE GREEN. 7

No. 5. **FINALE.**

(Bell Quadrilles.)

**Ding, Dong.**—The Campanologians recently visited Buffalo, N. Y., when they found that a rival company of "native artists" had been there before them, claiming to be as good as the genuine Swiss Bell Ringers, and asking patronage on the score of their nativity. The Simon Pures issued a card denouncing the "counterfeit presentment" as an imposture and humbug. Several of the presses in that vicinage have taken the home-brewed article under protection, and denounce the foreign band in turn as impostors—they claiming to be Swiss, when in fact they are Lancashire English weavers, who never saw the land of Tell. The quarrel is a very pretty one as it stands, and we have no doubt the respective parties will ring the changes upon it as long as it proves profitable to do so. We think it altogether unlikely that the American bells can be silenced. The Yankee company is composed of mettlesome fellows.

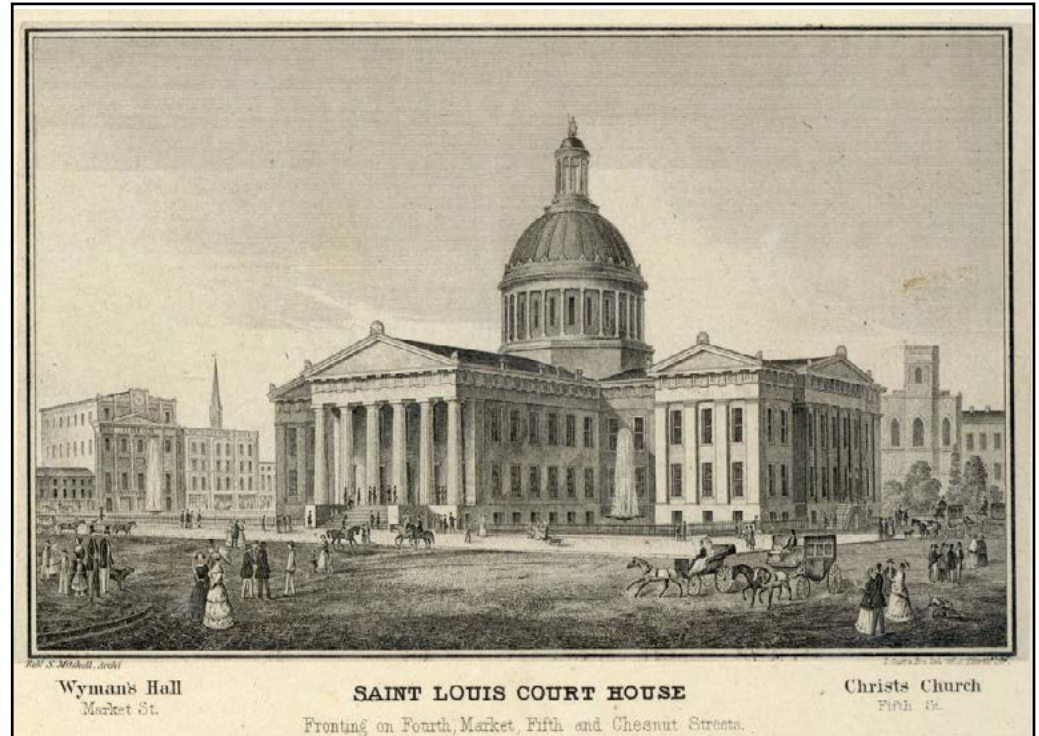


In fact, the “Swiss Bell Ringer” moniker became a generic way of describing tuned handbell ringing in the US. Rather than the specific name of a group, it became more of a musical performing concept. It is also the reason why instruments that are rightfully called “English handbells” were erroneously referred to as “Swiss” for so long.

## What About Area 8?

Of course Area 8 didn't exist back then; actually, Iowa, Kansas, and Nebraska weren't even states yet when the first handbells arrived in our region. As far as I can tell, it was another group also called the Campanologians or Swiss Bell Ringers who was responsible for bringing bells to our area in the mid-19th century. The earliest evidence I could find was an appearance at Wyman's Hall on Market Street in St. Louis in June of 1850. Their performances were in such demand that they added three concerts there. They moved along to Hannibal, MO in July, where the newspaper described them as being under the direction of Herr Conrad Freebertshyer. (I found this name spelled several different ways, but I am assuming all of the various spellings are the same person, and the same group.) They also visited Quincy IL, and Keokuk, Burlington, Davenport, and Dubuque, IA around the same time. To put this in perspective, realize that Iowa became a state only in 1846, four years earlier. In other locations, bell bands directed by Herr Freebertshyer were also called “Germania Bell Ringers.”

This 1854 drawing of the Saint Louis Court House shows Wyman's Hall on the left. The Swiss Bell Ringers performed here four years before this drawing, as the dome of the court house was still being built.



Interestingly, in 1853 the Democratic Banner of Davenport, IA reported that the “Swiss Bell Ringers have purchased a large tract of land in Iowa, and intend taking up residence there, after having finished their farewell tour of concerts.” I gather this is the same Freeberthyser Swiss Bell Ringers group that introduced bells to our area three years before. After 5+ years of touring throughout the country with their musical troupe, they retired with on their accumulated fortune. And much like the farewell music tours of today that are really not the end, “after a retirement of seven years” they appeared again at the Mercantile Library in St. Louis in early 1861.

The 1922 obituary for Martin Freeberthyser said he was the last of the Swiss Bell Ringers, whose family had settled in Dubuque, IA after immigrating to the US from Switzerland in 1848 and touring the country as a famous theatrical troupe. He died at his home in Pinckneyville, IL. His funeral was in St. Louis and he was buried in Valhalla Cemetery there. So Area 8 can rightfully claim some fairly deep handbell heritage in this country.

But the most famous and apparently long-lasting American bell band was born when the Peak family musicians decided to branch out into bell ringing. The Peak (sometimes Peake) family had been traveling around New England performing vocal music as early as April 1845, and it appears they started incorporating bells into their act as the Peak Family Swiss Bell Ringers in 1852. This version of the Peak Family continued to perform on handbells across the country into the 1870s. Sadly by 1882, William Peak, the family's manager, father, and leader, was reported to be in jail as a vagrant. The newspaper reported that, “two years ago he was worth \$100,000 but now he is a pauper.”

A similar report in 1885 said the Peak family parents were now inmates at the Courtland County poor house near Homer, NY. Between lavishing large sums on their children, giving to charity, and making poor business investments, their considerable fortune was lost. In today's dollars, that would be about \$2.9 million, which suggests that his musical act was very successful for more than three decades.

Fortunately, Mr. Peak must have recovered somewhat because a decade later he was reported happily playing music and showing off his "remaining chime of French musical glasses" at his home in Brooklyn, NY.

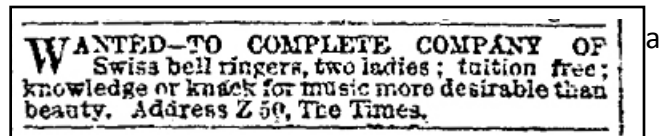
It seems clear that the "Peak" name was co-opted by other bell band groups, because they continued to perform at venues around the country even though the original Peak family management was no longer involved. It looks like the younger members of the Peak family went on performing with other groups but still used the Peak name. The younger William Peak married into the Berger family, and they frequently performed as Swiss Bell Ringers under the Peak and Berger names. Incidentally, when the younger William Peak finally settled down, he lived in Chicago for many years.

It is difficult to keep track of the various 19th century touring bell bands because they had similar names, and often the same groups appeared throughout the region on their tours. Here's a sampling of what I was able to find in each state.

## Missouri

In what is now Area 8, the Peak Family Swiss Bell Ringers were the second act to appear in the newly built Lockridge Hall in Kansas City in 1859. They traveled there by steamboat and performed for two nights. They returned to KC in 1866 to perform for two nights at Long's Hall. Both the Smith Bell Ringers and the Peak family appeared in Sedalia in 1869. The Smith Bell Ringers moved on to Springfield after, but perhaps should have stayed away. "As bell ringers, we cannot do the public the injustice to praise them." The entire troupe was advised to find another vocation.

The Peak family visited Louisiana (MO), Marshall (twice), and Jefferson City in 1873. Leavitt's Swiss Bell Ringers appeared in Savannah in 1874. Denlam's Bell Ringers appeared in Sedalia in 1874. Saint Louis hosted the Peak family ringers in 1875, where for a week "they afforded great pleasure to the patrons" of the Theatre Comique with the superior character of their performances. From St. Louis, the Peak family went to Rolla. Hannibal hosted what was billed as the Original Lancashire Bell Ringers in 1875, but somehow I doubt they really were. The Leavitt group was again touring in late 1875-1877 in Oregon (MO), Marshall, Lexington, and Linneus, Butler, Sedalia, and Independence—all to good reviews. Will L. Smith's Swiss Bell Ringers appeared at the Music Hall in Kansas City in 1886 with "Humpty Dumpty" pantomime that drew large audiences to several shows. In Liberty, the newspaper announced that "Smith's bell ringers will tintinnabulate at the opera house."



Also in 1886, a want-ad for two women bell ringers appeared in the Kansas City Times, that thankfully stressed that musical talent was more important than looks.

Another group called the Arion Swiss Bell Ringers performed at the Ninth Street Museum and Theatre in Kansas City, MO in 1887. A handpicked group of nine theater employees from across KC appeared at the Fountain Theater Club in Kansas City in 1888. There was a distressing story from August of 1888, when a nine year old girl, Docka Pihlgren, a child cornetist performing with the Peak family for the previous two months, died of overwork in KC after having gone through a summer tour of Kansas. In 1892, a KC newspaper was expressing the hope that Mr. Fred Berger would revive his troupe of bell ringers the next season. "There is loud demand for this charming kind of entertainment, a kind that has practically been out of vogue for many years." Presumably, the Faust Brothers Vaudeville Show featuring the London Bell Ringers at the Gilliss House Hotel in KC in 1897 was not the kind of charming entertainment that the paper was hoping for.



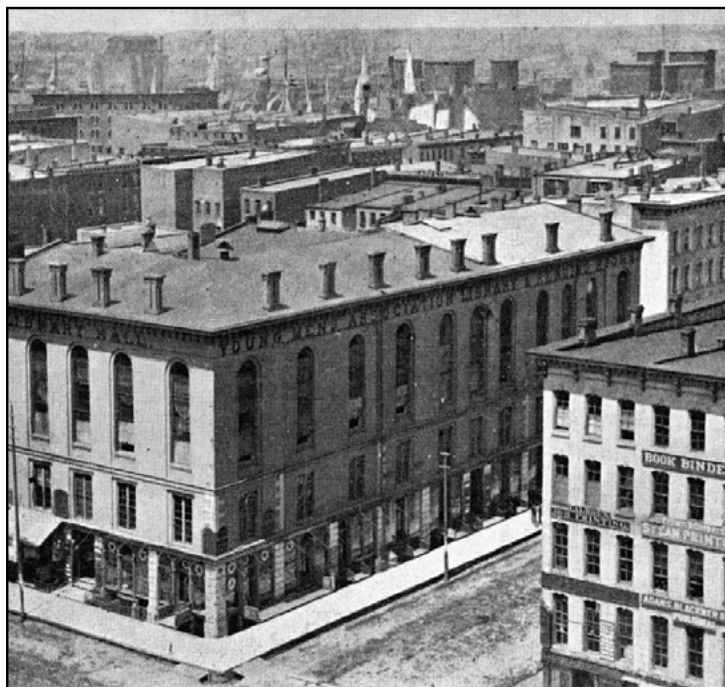
## Iowa

Dubuque hosted a group of Swiss Bell Ringers (but not the “original” ones) in 1853. Burlington also played host to the Swiss Bell Ringers (but these were the original ones, meaning the Freeberthyser group) in 1853. The Peak family “Germanian” Bell Ringers appeared in Keokuk and Davenport in 1855. Marshalltown hosted the Almondbury Hand Bell Ringers in 1857. The Peak family came to Davenport and Burlington, and were still performing occasionally around the state 10 years later. At the Courthouse in Des Moines in 1867, it is mentioned that they were assisted by the celebrated Berger family.

Council Bluffs papers went into “ecstasies (sic) of praise” over the performance of the Peak Family bell ringers in 1868, it being the “best entertainment ever witnessed” in the city. The Swiss Bell Ringers returned to Des Moines in 1869 to perform three performances at Moore’s Hall with a vocal group called the Alleghanians. The Peak Bell Ringers were back performing around Iowa in 1874 and again at Dohany’s Opera House in Council Bluffs in 1888.



Left: Dohany’s in Council Bluffs, IA, illustrated in 1887, where a later version of the Peak family ringers appeared in 1888.



View of Metropolitan Hall in Chicago taken in 1855. The Peak family ringers would perform here in 1859.

**Y, DECEMBER 5, 1867.**

Miscellaneous.

**COURT HOUSE!**  
GRAND CONCERTS OF THE  
**PEAK FAMILY!!**  
Vocalists, Harpists, Violinists, and  
**SWISS BELL-RINGERS,**



Assisted by the Celebrated  
**BERGER FAMILY!**  
Solo Instrumental Performers.  
**THE LARGEST TROUPE OF BELL-RINGERS  
IN THE WORLD!**  
**Silver Cornet Band!**  
Composed principally of Juveniles, under the Direction of FRED. BERGER.  
**TWO NIGHTS ONLY!**  
**THURSDAY & FRIDAY EVENINGS,**  
December 5th and 6th.

SCALE OF PRICES:  
Tickets, . . . . . 50 cts.  
Reserved Seats, . . . . . 75 cts.  
Tickets for sale at Mills & Co.'s Book Store, and at the News Depot in the Post-Office.  
Doors open at 7 1/2. Commence at 7 3/4.  
J. C. GOODBURN,  
Business Manager.  
Dec. 2-dtt\*

The ad that appeared in Des Moines, 1867.

## Illinois

The Chicago Tribune in 1853 announced the return of the Freeberthyser Swiss Bell Ringers, after they had played for packed audiences in Chicago the previous month. The same group also performed in Quincy. The Peak family appeared in Quincy in 1854, 1855, 1857, and 1859. The Peak family was also in Freeport in 1857. Chicago newspapers in 1859 suggested that the Peak Family Ringers appeared twice in the city that year, the second time at Metropolitan Hall where they apparently debuted a new set of silver bells. The following year they returned again. The Freeberthyser Swiss Bell Ringers came to Chicago in 1861 on their “oops, not retired” tour. The Peak family was back in at the Academy of Music for “classic parlor entertainment” 1872, and again in Chicago in 1876. A group called the Royal Bell-Ringers visited Chicago in 1882. Elsewhere in Illinois, newspapers announced performances of the Peak and Berger family bell ringers in Freeport in 1867 and Elgin in 1878.

## Kansas

Atchison played host to the Peak Family Swiss Bell Ringers in 1860 (before Kansas was a state!) at Holthaus Hall, and again in 1866. The Swiss Bell Ringers appeared in Leavenworth in 1864. The Swiss Bell Ringers appeared in 1886 at Dunning's Opera House in Kansas City, KS. The White Cloud Chief announced in 1868, "The celebrated Alleghenians and Swiss Bell Ringers are now in this State. We hope they will not imitate the Peake Family, two years ago, in visiting only the cities; but that they will give all a chance to hear them, and come around this way. To our taste, there never was music produced equal to the bells; and those who have never heard them, have missed a rare treat." Lawrence hosted the Peak Family Swiss Bell Ringers in 1869, and again at Liberty Hall in 1870. The Burger family performed in Lawrence in 1871 at Frazer's Hall to eager listeners.

The decade of the 1870s brought a considerable amount of bell ringing to Kansas, though not all of it was good. Residents of Emporia had a less than pleasant encounter with the Smith bell ringers in 1871. The stinging commentary of the review said, "one bugle blast from the Berger troupe is worth the whole Smith programme." Ouch!

Presumably the citizens of Emporia had a better experience the next year when the Peak Family Original Swiss Bell Ringers under the personal supervision of Wm. Peak, Sr. appeared for two nights at Bancroft Hall in 1872. After Emporia, they traveled to Troy and White Cloud. The Smith group appeared in Salina in 1874, but this time they were well received, and when they appeared in Wichita a couple weeks later they were also applauded.

In 1876, the Leavitt Bell Ringers made multiple appearances. Their arrival was announced, "Bell ringers are always fashionable, and this company is first class. They have a cornet band, orchestra, lady vocalists, and humorous singers; these, with the music of silver bells, make an entertainment of rare merit, and one that should be well patronized. They may be engaged at reasonable rates by churches, societies, lodges, etc., by conferring with the Agent who will be one week in advance of the party." They "travel by their own conveyance, and parade the streets with four horses and an elegant band wagon which contains a band of 7 pieces. They also give an open air concert in the evening, before the exhibition, thus giving the citizens two free entertainments." Thus, we find them in Troy, Emporia, Iola, and Hartford. Iola pronounced them, "real good," and Hartford said, "it was the best and sweetest music we ever listened to." But Emporia didn't seem to think they lived up to the hype. "The Leavitt bell ringers had a good house Monday night and gave a passable exhibition. Some of the singing was very ordinary, and the bell ringing cannot begin to come up to that of the Bergens (sic) and the Peaks." Thankfully, the people of Iola and Emporia, as well as Fort Scott and Lawrence, were treated to a Peak family tour just a few months later. The Lawrence paper dwelled on their longevity, saying it was the Peak's 57th season of touring, and they've added new attractions as the age required. They were "considered to be the best 'Bell Ringers' in the world." It appears to be a theme throughout the articles I read that the Peaks and their Berger counterparts consistently performed at a high level.

The Andrews bell ringers appeared in Salina in 1877, creating "considerable fun" and "gave some good music." Later that year the Leavitts were back. They appeared in Salina giving "a fair entertainment...the bell ringing was good." They also appeared again in Iola and Belleville. They had competition from Smith's bell ringers, who appeared in Hutchinson and Troy also in 1877. The Alleghanian bell ringers were also around in 1877. They had a rather unpleasant visit to Dodge City that involved a manager drunk on whiskey and a much-delayed performance that wasn't very good when it finally did commence. Let's hope their appearance in Emporia a week later was better.

The Smiths were back in Troy, Atchison, and Salina in 1878, while Oakes's Bell Ringers and Concert Troup visited Lawrence, Salina, and Atchison later that year. The bell ringing tide seemed to ebb and flow after this, bringing few in the early 1880s, but picking up again in the middle of the decade; likewise in the 1890s.



The Peak Family performed multiple times at the first Liberty Hall in Lawrence, KS.



## Nebraska

A group of Hungarian Bell Ringers performed as part of Carter's Zouave Troupe in Omaha in January, 1867, before Nebraska was officially a state. The Peak and Berger family bell ringers appeared in Nebraska City and Omaha in 1868, and Lincoln in 1870. The Peak Family Swiss Bell Ringers made their way into Falls City and Lincoln during their 1872 tour, where they were advertised as "The Largest Troupe of Bell Ringers in the United States—The Largest Set of Silver Table Bells, 7 1/2 Octaves, Chromatic scales, (the finest tuned and the best in tune)—The most perfect set of silver staff bells and best staff bell." Miss Fanny Peak served as the bell soloist.

Brownville hosted an unidentified group of Swiss bell ringers in 1874. The next year the newspaper noted, "since the completion of the railway to this place, Brownville is favored with most of the travelling shows." Thus the Leavitt Bell Ringers made an appearance there at the end of December, 1875. Here, as in other places I've seen, the star of the Leavitt show wasn't necessarily the bell ringers, but a comedian named Harry Eads. Brownville was treated to a high-caliber performance by the Peak Family of Bell Ringers in 1876, starring a well known Nebraskan musician, Prof. D.C. Smith. The Leavitt Bell Ringers and Harry Eads were back in 1876, and they also traveled to Falls City and Fairbury on this tour. In 1877, the Andrews Family Swiss Bell Ringers appeared in Lincoln before they moved on to Ashland; and the Leavitts were back in Harbine and Brownville. Here we learn a tidbit about the Leavitts that I had not previously seen—they had multiple companies that performed under the Leavitt name, so that they could be performing in different places at once. In this case, the concert was given by Leavitt's Bell Ringers Company No. 2, and "owing to the fact that Company No. 1 had been here only three weeks previous but a small audience was in



Funke's Opera House in Lincoln hosted the Arions Swiss Bell Ringers for a week in 1885 and 1886; and Smith's in 1887.

attendance." As in Kansas in this year, we see the Smiths also putting in an appearance in Brownville.

An unspecified and apparently untalented Swiss Bell Ringer group made their debut at City Hall in York in 1878, "their performance last evening was a sorry one and will be their last in all probability." They made a similarly bad impression on the people of Wahoo, who called them a fraud. The Oakes Bell Ringers made their way into Plattsmouth in 1879. Lincoln attracted the Royal Hand Bellringers and Jubilee Singers of London in 1883, when the "large and appreciative crowd was more than delighted with the rich mellow tones of the metallic cups."

The Alleghanian Vocalists and Swiss Bell Ringers caused a minor kerfuffle in Omaha and Central City in 1884 when they complained during their performance at their lack of patronage. The Arions Swiss Bell Ringers performed for a week at the Opera House in Lincoln in 1885, with a change of program every evening to attract a returning audience; later in the year they appeared for four nights in Hastings. It was obviously a success because they returned back to Lincoln for another week in 1886. When the Arions group performed in McCook in 1886, the review mentioned the absence of a key member and how inferior the performance was to the one the year before. Both the Oakes and the Smiths came through Lincoln in 1887 within a month of each other. Another Swiss Bell Ringer group appeared in Omaha in 1891 and again in 1898.

## The Nadir of Early Handbell Ringing

When William Peak died in 1899, his obituary suggested that his family did a great deal to spread the popularity of handbells in the 19th century, having visited every part of the United States, often repeatedly. Mr. Peak died in Brooklyn, NY, and his death was reported in the Kansas City Star and in numerous papers across the country. One article said, “bell ringing, like minstrelsy, had its day and in recent years bobs up only occasionally in vaudeville entertainments.” It is important to acknowledge that during this time period, bell bands appeared in shows that frequently included racist blackface performances that perpetuated harmful stereotypes in the name of comedy. This is part of the history of our instrument.

By the turn of the century, handbell ringing was very passé. Certainly bell band acts didn’t die away completely, but they tended to be relegated to one of several acts in a Vaudeville show rather than their own standalone performance. As late as 1921, a bell troupe called “Normalcy” was performing in vaudeville picture houses in Western Kansas. In 1922, “Holland Bell Ringers” performed a concert live on WDAF radio in Kansas City that featured bells of different types, harps, cymbals, saxophones, and a variety of “novel instruments characteristic of Holland musicians.”

This is where things stood with handbell ringing in the United States until Margaret Shurcliff brought new energy to the instrument in Boston in the early 20th century. The story will continue in our next edition of Quavers.

*Author’s Note: I would like to applaud the considerable resources available through the Mid-Continent Public Library’s online research databases. Most of the articles used in this piece were accessed through their America’s Historical Newspapers and NewspaperArchive databases, but I also used others. I would also like to acknowledge the research posted online by William Butler and Peter Jensen Brown. A proper written history would have full footnotes and citations for each of my claims above, but I have chosen to forgo that for the sake of space. If you have any questions about my sources, please feel free to contact me at [historian.area8@handbellmusicians.org](mailto:historian.area8@handbellmusicians.org).*

