



## *The Past is Prologue:*

### Handbell Ringing in the Early 20th Century

Laurie Austin, Area 8 Historian

In writing her early history of the American Guild of English Handbell Ringers (AGEHR—now known as the Handbell Musicians of America), Isabel Meldrum said that at the dawn of the 20th century, Whitechapel was casting a set of bells that would be “the first English Handbells brought to this country.” She was talking about a set of bells that Margaret Nichols (later, Margaret Shurcliff) brought from England to her home in Boston in 1902. Readers of my previous article on handbell history (2023 Winter Quavers) will know immediately that Meldrum was mistaken. Nichols was certainly not the first to bring handbells from England into the United States, but she was largely responsible for the resurgence in their popularity in this country.

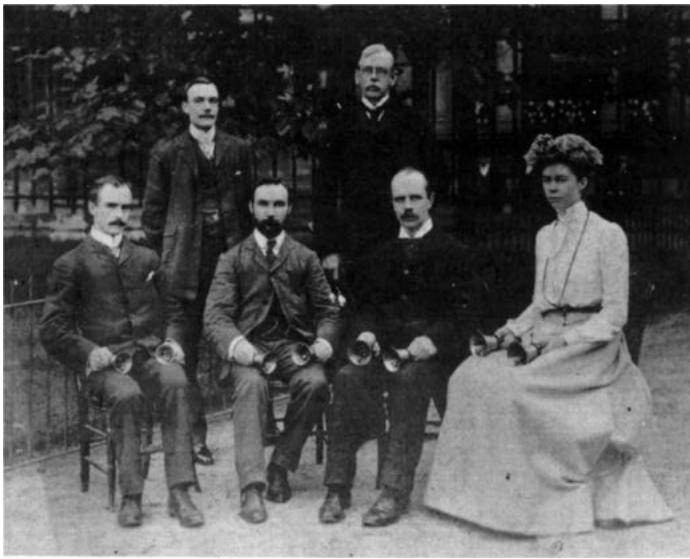
In the 19th century, handbell ringing had been a popular concert attraction that morphed into minstrel and vaudeville performing acts, and several troupes travelled across the US incorporating them into their performances. Some performances were serious attempts at making music; others were parodies on tuned cowbells. By the turn of the 20th century, handbell popularity was waning.

Enter Margaret Nichols into American handbell history. Margaret was born in 1879 and grew up in Boston’s wealthy Beacon Hill neighborhood. Her parents, Dr. Arthur and Mrs. Elizabeth Nichols, ensured she had a progressive, well-rounded education that included vocational training and advanced science classes at MIT. Margaret particularly excelled at carpentry and her love and talent for woodworking would continue throughout her adulthood. She was also a skilled tennis player, a suffragist, a pacifist during World War I, and among the founders of the Massachusetts American Civil Liberties Union.

## Margaret Nichols Goes to England

Margaret’s father, Dr. Arthur Nichols, had a keen interest in tower bell ringing, which he passed along to his youngest child, Margaret. He had grown up in Boston’s North End, ringing the tower bells at Old North Church. (Old North’s tower is better known as the place where revolutionary Bostonians lit the lanterns to warn that the British Regulars were on the march “by land” to Concord on April 19, 1775.) He first encountered change ringing in London, probably in the 1860s, when he stopped there on his way home to Boston from his medical studies in Berlin. He gained more change ringing experience on subsequent trips to England in the late 1800s. Margaret’s first tower bell lesson in Boston was c. 1900, and in 1902, father and daughter traveled to London to learn more.

I do not pretend to understand fully the intricacies of change ringing, the difference between bell peals, and the mathematic reasoning it takes to execute the more complicated variations, so I will not dwell on the details here. If you care to know more about Margaret’s change ringing accomplishments, I recommend starting with Michael Foulds’ excellent article on the Whiting Society website. To make a long story short, Margaret stayed in and around London for about seven weeks, learning more about ringing as she went, and successfully executed different peals on both tower bells and handbells with other highly skilled ringers.



The band which successfully rang two handbell peals, both Grandsire Triples and Stedman Triples, at Challis Winney's house on 17th August 1902. Ringers (front row, left to right): George N. Price (1-2), Herbert P. Harman (3-4), Challis F. Winney (5-6), Margaret H. Nichols (7-8). Margaret's father, Dr. Arthur Nichols, is the taller man standing in the back. Reprinted from "The Bell News and Ringers' Record." Image and caption info generously provided by Michael Foulds.

Margaret's feats were notable not only for her quick study and her skill, but also that she was accepted as a woman in an activity that was dominated by men. There are only a few examples of women handbell ringers in England during this period—a group called the Walford family with at least two girls performed in the late 19th century and into the early 20th century. Another woman, Ida Anderson, performed with handbell ringers in a contest that hosted 165 men and one woman in 1903. Margaret's achievements were recognized in the City of London when she was made a member of the Ancient Society of College Youths, an exclusive ringing society.

Also on this trip, Whitechapel foundry presented Margaret with a set of eight handbells. We can only speculate why, but it was probably a combination of Margaret's achievement and her father's patronage of Whitechapel for two tower bell projects he had already undertaken in Massachusetts. (Arthur Nichols would continue to use his influence to bring Whitechapel bells to the US in the years to come. All told, he helped bring Whitechapel tower bells to Boston, Groton, Hingham, and Watertown, Massachusetts; as well as Chicago, Illinois.) Margaret and her father left Liverpool for the US at the end of August, 1902, bringing the handbells with them to Boston. She expanded the set over the coming years, and it was with this set of bells that she enticed her family, friends, and neighbors to take up handbell ringing.

## Margaret Nichols Shurcliff's Relentless Handbell Enthusiasm Sparks a Ringing Movement

Margaret Nichols married landscape architect Arthur Shurtleff in 1905, and they proceeded to have six children. They made their home on Beacon Hill, and built a summer home in Ipswich, Massachusetts. The spelling of their name would be legally changed later, and for consistency I will refer to them by their later last name, "Shurcliff." Armed with skill, enthusiasm, and a small set of bells, Margaret slowly found ways to interest her friends and family in bell ringing. In 1923, Margaret, five of her children, and some friends, became members of the Beacon Hill Handbell Ringers. The Beacon Hill Ringers would soon begin their annual tradition of ringing Christmas carols in the doorways of the homes on Louisburg Square, which is still going strong to this day. They were also in demand to play other community and social engagements, and as more people heard them, the more interest they generated.



The Beacon Hill Bell Ringers play carols on Christmas Eve, 1941. Copyright (c) Richard Merrill. This work is licensed for use under a Creative Commons Attribution, Non-Commercial, No Derivatives License.

Membership in the Beacon Hill group changed over the years as the children grew up and branched out. Other people joined, left, and started their own groups radiating out from the greater Boston area. Some, like the groups at Groton School and the Whitechapel Ringers of Gloucester, concentrated on change ringing with handbells. Others, like the Quincy Bell Ringers, were corporate groups who played tunes. Another early group started at Old South Church in Boston, and Margaret's daughter, Elizabeth, started a group at Bennington College in Vermont. By 1932, a group called the American Alps Swiss Handbell Quartet was started in Pennsylvania; although they were moving away from it, tuned handbell ringing still couldn't escape the "Swiss" moniker.

## The New England Guild of Handbell Ringers - On the Cusp of the American Guild

With so many ringing bands in the area, handbell enthusiasts met at Shurcliff's home and organized the New England Guild of Handbell Ringers in 1937. The organization was formed "for fraternizing, exchanging ideas and techniques, and for circulating manuscript copies of music that was good for ringing." Starting in 1938, there were well-attended public concerts to accompany the guild's yearly business meetings.

Bell bands popped up all over eastern Massachusetts and beyond. In very short time, people who had either rung with or heard the Beacon Hill Ringers were starting handbell programs in their communities, and those groups were influencing others to start their own groups. Handbell ringing had spread west to San Francisco and north to Canada and everywhere in between. A lively exchange of information was going back and forth between the members of



the New England Guild, communicating who owned what kinds of bells, and where. Forget Kevin Bacon, we could easily play a game of Six Degrees of Margaret Shurcliff in this era of handbell history.

By mid-century there were handbells in all sorts of environments, from community performing groups, to church groups, to change ringing groups, to therapeutic music groups in medical institutions, to school groups, to advanced college and university groups. Handbell ringing was grabbing national attention, as evidenced by an article about the Beacon Hill Ringers in a December 15, 1947 article in Life Magazine.

Life Magazine ran a two-page article highlighting the New England Guild of English Handbell Ringers and the Christmas Eve ringing tradition on Beacon Hill, December 15, 1947.

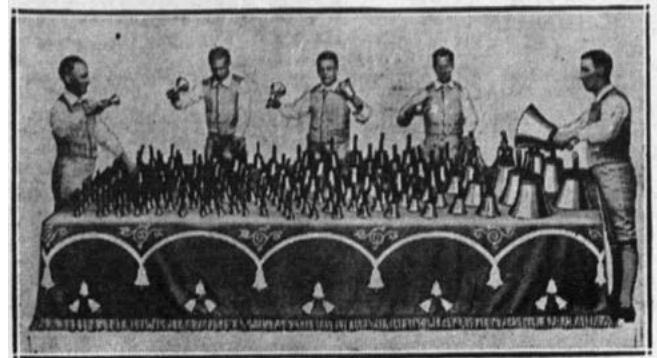
## The Scandinavian Bell Ringers Dominate the 1920s Performing Landscape

Most of the focus of American handbell history during the first half of the 20th century is on Massachusetts and the outgrowth from there. But that doesn't mean there were no handbells in our area during this time. Home grown groups were starting to bud, but before they did there was another significant touring group that was fighting the instrument's vaudeville reputation.

The Scandinavian Bell Ringers, also known as the Temple Carillon Players, was a male quintet of Swedish bell ringers who toured the country off-and-on from 1923-1932. Newspapers show they appeared throughout what is now Area 8 between 1924 and 1931. The Brookfield Suburban Magnet, in their 1924 advertisement for "An Unusual Concert" says that the Scandinavian Bell Ringers had spent an entire week making records for the Victor Company while they were on the east coast before making their way to the middle of the country. I couldn't find any 1924 recordings, but you can hear their 1928 Victor recording of a waltz, "Beautiful Star of Heaven" [here](#) on the Internet Archive.

An early 1924 article said they played a set of 125 bells; a 1926 article says the group of five ringers played a set of 189 bells, not seen since the “Swiss Bell Ringers some fifty years ago.” In 1930 they were playing “the largest collection of musical bells in the world.” The Oak Park Leaves revealed that they were using a new set of 200 bells, made from the specifications of the players at a firm in England, an ancient firm, “the only firm which today can make perfect bells.” A 1931 article in the Chariton Leader suggests the group had worn through two sets of bells and have had to return to London to get more. Another article confirmed they were playing on Mears & Stainbank (Whitechapel) bells. Their 189-bell set was valued at \$2000 in 1931, which in today’s dollars is about \$38,500.

Since their first appearance in 1923, the Scandinavian Bell Ringers played for over 300,000 people in the US, giving over 1200 concerts coast to coast. Wherever they played the praise was unanimous. Their director, Alfred Josephson, was called “masterly” and each member of the quintet “an artist” or “geniuses.” In a 1930 article, the manager of the group, J. Holmstrom, explained that the Swedish ringers learned to ring handbells after an English group had toured their country in the late 19th century and left a set of bells for them to ring. The Scandinavian ringers were originally from Helsingland, Sweden, but they were so well received in the US that they settled down in Jamestown, NY and used it as their home base. They took at least one break to return to Sweden and tour Europe around 1927, but returned to the US and resumed performances here until spring, 1932. I believe they went back to Sweden for good in 1932. Later articles called the group the “Temple Carillon Players” but I haven’t yet figured out why they went by two names.



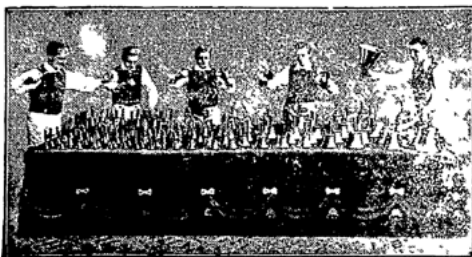
**THE FAMOUS**  
**Scandinavian Bell Ringers**  
 The Greatest Bell Ringers  
 in the World  
 WILL GIVE A CONCERT  
 At the CITY HALL

An ad for an appearance in the Scandia Journal (KS), April 1, 1926.

**GALVA NEWS, GALVA, ILLINOIS**

**SCANDINAVIAN BELL RINGERS AND LOCAL ARTISTS TO GIVE CONCERT TUESDAY NIGHT**

On Tuesday evening, January 26, at 8 o'clock a concert program will be presented at the Lutheran church by the Scandinavian Bell Ringers, an organization of musicians which is unique at the present time. They will be assisted by local artists, Mrs. Helen Headland appearing in cello solos, accompanied by Miss Edith Nordgren, and Miss Marie Cronk in vocal selections. This concert company of five Swedish musicians present a performance different from anything in America since the visit of the celebrated Swiss Bell Ringers some fifty years ago. They use a set of 189 specially constructed bells, ranging in weight from a few ounces up to 18 pounds. They were made in England by a firm which builds bells for the great European cathedrals, and took a year to make. The musicians appear in native Swedish costumes. Press reports state that they have appeared before over three hundred thousand people since coming to this country, the audiences numbering as high as 5000.



The program which will be presented in Galva follows:  
 1 Scandinavian Bell Ringers  
 (a) Last-piel Overture, Op. 7:4 Keler Bela  
 (b) Intermezzo (Rococo) W. Alecter  
 (c) Landkjending Eduv. Grieg  
 2 Mrs. Helen Headland, Violoncellist  
 (a) The Swan Saint Saens  
 (b) Gavotte in D David Popper  
 Miss Edith Nordgren, Accompanist.  
 3 Scandinavian Bell Ringers  
 (a) The Iron Count K. L. King  
 (b) Evening Chimes Marzian  
 (c) The Blacksmith's Shop in the Forest Parlow  
 Intermission  
 4 Miss Marie Cronk  
 (a) Vocal Solo Selected  
 5 Scandinavian Bell Ringers  
 (a) Svenska Folkmelodier (Swedish Folk Songs) arr. O. Arno  
 (b) Vagsvalp (Dashing Waves) Knut Soderstrom  
 (c) Bjorneborgarnes March.  
 (d) The Star Spangled Banner  
 Tickets have been placed on sale at Hoegren & Swanson and Johnson Brothers' grocery stores.

The Scandinavian Bell Ringers appeared in every state of Area 8 during their almost 9 years of touring in the US, often visiting the same city multiple times. They were frequently hosted by churches, schools, city halls, and colleges—particularly in locales that had residents of Scandinavian heritage.

In Illinois they visited Princeton, DeKalb, Brookfield, Chicago, Moline, Galva, Bloomington, Oak Park, and Sycamore. In Iowa they visited Sioux City, Burlington, Fort Dodge, Ottumwa, Algona, Swea City, Albert City, Spencer, Swedesburg, Chariton, Ogden, and Pomeroy. In Nebraska, they visited Oakland, Aurora, Omaha, Holdrege, Ceresco, Swedeburg, Wahoo, Stromsburg, Lincoln, Concord, Wakefield, Valley, Pender, Wayne, Rosalie, Blair, Walthill, Tekamah, Wausa, Osceola, and Hartington. In Kansas they visited Scandia, Lindsborg, Axtell, Clay Center, and Salina. In Missouri, they visited Kansas City a few times, but I can't find evidence of any other locations.

This article includes an example of the repertoire in its description of an upcoming appearance of the Scandinavian Bell Ringers appeared in the Galva News (IL) on January 21, 1926.

Their concerts were frequently structured to include a mix of local musical talent and their own music. They would open with a set, then the local musicians would perform during the middle interval, then the ringers would return to play the last set. Their repertoire adapted a wide assortment of songs by European and American composers, including Scandinavian pieces, popular music, classical favorites, marches, minuets, and spirituals. The musicians wore “neat costumes consisting of knickers, white shirts, black bow ties and patent leather slippers.”

The Oak Park Leaves went into great depth about an upcoming performance, saying “The Mission of the Scandinavian Bell Ringers in America is to reveal the extent of their accomplishment, the boundless range of bell music, the perfect musical consonance obtainable, the rhythmic expression and charming resonance. Ordinarily the suggestion of bell-music is received with a mental reservation. Curiosity is aroused rather than the anticipation of unalloyed pleasure. But under the spell of these five men all other impressions are lost in the delight which follows the superb artistry displayed.” This group was demonstrating across the country that handbells could be taken seriously, just like any other musical instrument.

## The Momentum is Building

In the first half of the 20th century, there were still no formal instruction books or handbell music publications in the US. Handbell ringing on a local level was starting to take hold, and examples of skilled handbell ringers were touring the country proving this music could draw a crowd. There was an increasing need for something more than a once-yearly regional meeting to exchange ideas. In our next article we will finally explore the first American handbell festival, and the early days of the American Guild of English Handbell Ringers.

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## Tuned Handbell Manufacturers Operating in the Early 20th Century

### ENGLAND

Whitechapel Bell Foundries (AKA, Mears & Stainbank), London, at least 1805 (probably earlier)

J.F. Mallaby & Co., by 1822 – 1914

Bond & Sons, Burford, 1828 - c. 1940

John Taylor & Co., Loughborough, c. 1860

White & Sons, Appleton, c. 1867-1925 (limited handbell work thereafter)

John Warner & Sons, London, by 1876-1922

Shaw, Son, & Co., Bradford, by 1871-1912

Gillett & Johnston, Croydon, by 1881-1954

James Barwell, Birmingham, 1886-1918

Llewellyns & James, Bristol, by 1892-c. 1912

William Moore, Salisbury, 1900-1930

Alfred Howell, Ipswich, c. 1900-c. 1915 (limited handbell work thereafter)

William Haley, London, 1922-1927

Thomas Miller, Birmingham, by 1928-1940

### UNITED STATES

Rowland Mayland, Brooklyn, NY, 1866-1942

Edward Street, Hartford, CT, 1880-1920

J.C. Deagan & Co., Chicago, IL, 1890-1920

Foundries changed names over time. Names given are how they were known in the 20th century. Foundries made all kinds of bells, including tower bells, ship bells, clock bells, and house bells. Dates given are approximately when they are known to have produced tuned handbells.