



## *The Past is Prologue:*

Early Days of AGEHR: the Castle Hill Era, 1954-1959

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In our last edition of *Quavers*, we discussed Margaret Shurcliff and the New England Guild of Handbell Ringers in the first half of the 20th century. As the popularity of bell ringing spread across the country, it became clear that a national handbell organization could better serve the needs of North American ringers. From that New England-based organization, the American Guild of English Handbell Ringers (AGEHR) was born. AGEHR was re-branded in 2010 as Handbell Musicians of America to better reflect the mission of the organization.

By 1954, there were 17 bell bands who were members of the New England group. Just as the New England Guild had been established in Margaret Shurcliff's Boston home, so was the American Guild of English Handbell Ringers on June 23, 1954, when Mrs. Shurcliff became AGEHR's founding president. A 1955 edition of the AGEHR newsletter, *Overtones*, described Mrs. Shurcliff as "tall and stately and friendly. She is a charming hostess, a fascinating story teller, has a delightful sense of humor, and is devoted to spreading the art of handbell ringing. In her long years of bell ringing she has gathered up many experiences and anecdotes with which she flavors our conversation and delights our concert audiences. Both her Beacon Hill home and her summer home in Ipswich,

Massachusetts, are open to handbell ringers at all times."

The American Guild was established as "a clearing house for many groups of handbell ringers in America. In addition to acquainting local groups with their ringing neighbors, the objectives of the organization are to exchange ideas related to the selection and arrangement of music; the techniques of ringing; methods of teaching; the conducting of bell choirs; the arrangement and management of concert programs; and the maintenance of bells."

In August 1954, the first handbell festival in the United States was held in the lovely coastal town of Ipswich, Massachusetts. Mrs. Shurcliff had a summer home in Ipswich and knew the Crane family, who built the magnificent Crane Estate in 1928 at Castle Hill nearby. Margaret's husband, Arthur, was a noted landscape architect who developed several of the property's features including its most iconic element, the rolling lawn leading down to the ocean called the Grand Allée. The Crane Family donated the house and surrounding property to the Trustees of Reservations and Castle Hill became a museum in 1949, and continues to be open to the public.



The Crane Estate in Ipswich, MA, pictured from the Grand Allée, during my visit in July, 2015.

# The First AGEHR Festival

The first festival had many of the same elements we continue to treasure today in a handbell festival: a weekend devoted to handbell music, with discussions about bell ringing by members, performances, a business meeting, and elements of fun and relaxation. The New England Guild first conceived of it and provided the financial backing (\$50 after all expenses and income was accounted for), and developed the program in conjunction with the newly formed American Guild. There were opportunities for socializing at the afternoon tea on the terrace, dinner, a buffet, and a banquet, as well as the tour of nearby historic homes and beautiful gardens. Attendees who were there the entire three days numbered 26, but including the people who came for part of the time, there were a total of 41 registered festival goers.

Sessions included lectures and discussions among its members. Edna S. Lepper of Old South Bell Ringers discussed her bell experiences. [Incidentally, Old South Church continues its handbell tradition to this day with both worship music and hosting the Boston Handbell Festival every May.] Margaret Shurcliff gave some background on her vision for the American Guild, as well as told stories of her bell experiences in the US and abroad. Nancy Tufts gave a presentation about her recent visit to the Whitechapel foundry in London and showed wonderful pictures demonstrating the tuning process for handbells. Scott Parry discussed his experience working in the Whitechapel foundry, and had another session about handbell notation and composition. Parry was of the opinion that bell bands should play music specifically composed for bells, pointing to the Belgian School of Carillon music as an example. There was a spirited discussion as to relative strengths of chordal versus melodic patterns in bell music, which made it clear that bells can be used in diverse ways—semi-classical programs, traditional carillon music, and for chordal or hymnic types of compositions. There was a separate discussion devoted to change ringing, and from there the conversation continued about uses of bells by various kinds of groups.

A festival wouldn't be complete without performances, and this one did not disappoint. There was a "delightful" mini concert given by the Bell Ringers of Cape Ann, who performed three songs before a banquet. They rang memorized music arranged by their clever director, Helen

Runkle, on two octaves of bells without tables, hanging the non-ringing bells from ribbons around their necks. The big outdoor public concert given on the terrace was a stunning success. The organizers had optimistically put out 300 chairs for concert goers, but actually more than 400 local people attended. They heard a varied program given by The Cape Ann Bell Ringers, the Paul Revere Ringers, the Junior Beacon Hill Ringers, the Beacon Hill Ringers, and two impromptu groups including a couple of women who had never before rung bells until the festival. The performances included change ringing, classical, and contemporary pieces.

During the business meeting, there was unanimous agreement that the festival was a great success and it should be continued the following August, again at Castle Hill in 1955, with a goal of increasing registered attendance from among the concert goers. Indeed, Castle Hill would be the site of the festivals for the first six years, from 1954 through 1959, a time of great growth and change in the organization. Some of these festivals were attended by Albert Arthur Hughes and Annie Lilian (Smith) Hughes of the Whitechapel foundry, and to expand membership, AGEHR was able to get a list of names of everyone in the US who had purchased bells from them. One attendee of the 1955 festival estimated that maybe 100 people came, and remarked it wasn't as well attended as it could have been because of a polio scare and a recent hurricane. The 1956 festival had 140 full time attendees for the three days, over half of whom were young people.



**The first AGEHR Festival in Ipswich, MA.**

# Bessie Erb Assumes Leadership

Bessie Erb took the reins of AGEHR in 1957, when Mrs. Shurcliff resigned due to health. Margaret Shurcliff died in February, 1959, and the last Castle Hill festival would be held in memory of her great contributions to the instrument. By 1959, the 266 registrants actually exceeded Castle Hill's maximum capacity of 200 people. At that festival, a plaque created at the Whitechapel foundry summarized Mrs. Shurcliff's contributions to bell ringing, and was dedicated and installed in her memory at her Ipswich home.

When AGEHR was first established, there were no handbell-specific music publications. Bell ringers were also music arrangers by necessity. As bell sets mostly ranged from one to two and a half octaves and weren't standardized, most music would have to be adapted by its ringers to fit their particular range of bells. Scott Parry's 1957 book, *The Story of Handbells*, included a survey of bell owners which revealed there were less than a dozen bell sets in the U.S. that exceeded three octaves. This prompted a lot of discussion about what kind of music was appropriate for bell ringing. To stimulate music publication, the music committee of the AGEHR made lists of suggested songs in several categories that would be well suited for bells. Examples of songs in each category included: folk music—*The Ash Grove*; vocal music—*Annie Laurie*; sacred music—*Ring Out, Ye Crystal Spheres*; instrumental music—*L'Arlesienne/Farandole*; music of the theater—*Barcarolle* from *Tales of Hoffman*; early clavier music—*Siciliano*; and piano music—*To a Wild Rose*.

Parry discussed the particulars of arranging music in his book. In his discussion about dampening the sound of a bell, Parry

thought that damping should be used sparingly—employing it only when the harmonies change, or for staccato effects. Because of the bell's sustained nature, he believed chords should be established by the minimum number of bells necessary. Parry suggested that three bells at a time was generally sufficient.

One thing to realize at this time period is that conventional music notation (as we are accustomed to today) was only one way of writing bell music. There was also numerical notation, with numbers to denote the note on the scale, written vertically to denote chords, and with accompanying written notes about the meter. And there was literal notation, which is similar to numerical, but the note letters are written vertically to show chords. The history of bell music notation is fascinating and deserves its own article—so I will return to this in a later issue.

An *Overtone* article from December, 1958 triumphantly proclaimed that “the year 1958 will always be remembered as the year handbell music was actually put on the market. It had been sold by our own arrangers for several years, but not until this year did the music publishing houses begin to produce music for handbells. Choral Services, Inc., brought out Richard Litterst's arrangements of hymn tunes; Harold Flammer, Inc., published Alinda B. Couper's arrangement of Leontovich's ‘Ukrainian Carol of the Bells’ for voices and bells; and J. Fisher and Brothers published Mrs. Couper's ‘Pastorale for Organ and Handbells.’” With this announcement, the national AGEHR organization had achieved one of its major goals within five years of its creation.

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## Our Area at Midcentury

An early 1955 AGEHR membership directory lists 46 groups and individuals that year, including some from what is now Area 8. Also around this time, Scott Parry published his survey of bell ownership. He asked the name of the director/organization, their address, how many bells they owned, what range of bells were owned, what manufacturer, and whether any bells were on order. In this period, it was still common to purchase the diatonic bells and add the semitones as necessary. Our own Area 8 archives also list some of the pioneers from this period. From these sources comes a compilation of some of our area's earliest adopters of handbells.

### Illinois

Mrs. J.A. Middleton, Jr., Whitechapel Bell Choir, 8964 Pleasant Ave., Chicago, IL.

James R. Lawson, University of Chicago, Societas Campanariorum. As of 1957, awaiting delivery of two octaves of Gillett & Johnston bells. He served as the carillonneur of the 1959 festival, and assumed librarianship at the University of Chicago for AGEHR's new Margaret H. Shurcliff Library of Handbell Music, which was dedicated at the festival.

Richard Litterst. Attended early festivals in Ipswich, directed choirs at Second Congregational Church in Rockford, 1959-2002. He was an early arranger for handbells, and his music was the first to be included in the registration packets for the festival attendees in 1958. Later served AGEHR in several capacities, including Music Chairman, National President, and Area 8 Chair. He taught many workshop classes, directed at area and national festivals, and was an honorary life member of AGEHR.

## Iowa

Frances Keck brought handbells to Iowa in 1958. She established a church program in Des Moines.

## Kansas

Joyce Wentz, Atchison, KS. Taught bells in the Atchison schools as early as 1954. Her group performed for the southwestern Music Educators National Conference in Hutchinson in 1955. She is remembered for working hard to further bell ringing in schools.

Mrs. Howard Parsons, Chanute, KS. As of 1957, awaiting delivery of almost two octaves of Mears & Stainbank [AKA Whitechapel] bells.

Mrs. Lewis M. Edwards, 223 W. Sixth St., Concordia, KS. As of 1957, owned 1+ octave of unknown bells.

Paul Lefever, Manhattan, KS. Directed a bell choir at First United Methodist Church in Manhattan, 1957-1960. (see also Missouri)

Florence Marlow, Prairie Village, KS. When she moved to Prairie Village in 1956, Marlow immediately started an adult group called the Mello-Bells, and in the next six months she was directing two bell choirs at Village Presbyterian. After her attendance at the 1955 Castle Hill festival, Florence was inspired to help organize and had groups that performed at the Southwest regional festivals in 1957-1959, in Oklahoma, Texas, and the KC area. In 1959, she traveled alone to the national AGEHR festival at Castle Hill and was subsequently elected the organization's secretary. (see also Missouri)

## Missouri

Paul S. Lefever, Linwood Presbyterian Church, Kansas City, MO. In 1952, he directed a choir for a short time in KC using his own bells. As of 1957, owned 2.5 octaves of Mears & Stainbank [AKA Whitechapel], additionally awaiting delivery of 2 more octaves. (see also Kansas)

Florence Marlow, the Blue Bells, 474 Catalina Ave., Webster Groves, MO. Marlow's first 13 bells cost \$150, and arrived in Missouri in January, 1953. The day after they arrived she gathered her friends for a luncheon to show them the bells, and the Blue Bells were born. Sixteen days later they had a performance. As soon as the first bells arrived, she immediately ordered more to fill out the two octaves. At that point, everything she knew about bell ringing came from whatever she could find in the library and exchanging letters with Mrs. Shurcliff.

Florence Marlow finally met Margaret Shurcliff in person when she visited Massachusetts in June, 1954. At that point she learned about the upcoming first festival but wasn't able to return a few months later to attend it. The Blue Bells, under the direction of Florence Marlow, attended the second Castle Hill festival in 1955, where they learned more of what could be possible with bells. They were the only group from our region to attend this festival. In 1956, Marlow moved away from the St. Louis area, but the Blue Bells continued. The Blue Bells were an instant success, appearing on St. Louis television and radio programs, and also got involved with the 20th and 21st National Folk Festivals in 1954 and 1955. When Marlow moved back to the St. Louis area in 1959, within three months she had organized at John Knox Presbyterian Church in Florissant, two bell choirs who rang at Christmas that year. (see also Kansas)

Pauline Underwood, Presbyterian Church of Butler, MO. As of 1957, owned 2 octaves of Mears & Stainbank [AKA Whitechapel] bells.

Emily Balsler, Manchester, MO. As of 1957, awaiting delivery of 2 octaves of Mears & Stainbank [AKA Whitechapel] bells.

Gladys Walker, Peters Memorial Presbyterian Church, St. Louis, MO. As of 1957, awaiting delivery of 2 octaves of Mears & Stainbank [AKA Whitechapel] bells. Walker started the first church bell choir in the St. Louis area at Peters Memorial Church, formed in December, 1954. Later served on the AGEHR national board.

Annalou Raffels, St. Louis, MO. As of 1957, awaiting delivery of 1.5 octaves of Mears & Stainbank [AKA Whitechapel] bells.

David Workman, Kansas City, MO. Performed on handbells for most of his professional musical life. He was employed in the 1950s by the University of Kansas extension to visit schools and community groups across several states, doing handbell demonstrations and performances. Workman started manufacturing handbells in KC in the 1950s. [Stay tuned for a future article about this.]



The Blue Bells in 1953, left to right: Winnie Mosby, Nolan Callicott, Florence Marlow, Estell Ehrhardt, and Emily Balsler.

## Nebraska

Richard W. Litterst, First Central Congregational Church, Omaha, NE. As of 1957, awaiting delivery of 2.5 octaves of Mears & Stainbank [AKA Whitechapel] bells. (see also Illinois)

Roger Arnold, Central Congregational Church, Omaha, NE. Took over the choir after Litterst left in 1959.

Mrs. E.L. Meek, Omaha, NE. As of 1957, owned 1 octave of Mears & Stainbank [AKA Whitechapel] bells.

## Our Region Will Soon Take Center Stage

By 1960, AGEHR was expanding so much that they decided they needed to regroup before hosting another national event. Instead, they were trying to find ways of promoting regional events in 1960. It makes sense, then, that AGEHR divided the country into regional areas in 1960. The states in what is now Area 8 first belonged to Areas V (Illinois) and VI (Iowa, Missouri, Nebraska, and Kansas). In our next article, our region takes center stage, when St. Louis hosted the first national festival after the Castle Hill era.

## Sources Used

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Area 8 Scrapbook #5, Area 8 archives, including the reminiscences of Florence Marlow.