

The Bells Tolled.....For Me!

It was my 19th birthday, a Sunday in mid-October 1953, and there would be no celebration. I was in my sophomore year at a small college in Minnesota. Birthdays at college would be just like any other day, because students had other interests and weren't aware of the personal milestones of their classmates. The only acknowledgement of my birthday was a card and gift from my parents who lived four hundred miles away.

I was observing the day studying in my dormitory room. At 3 p.m. I needed a break and walked out of my room and ran into Bill. He lived across the hall and was a happy-go-lucky young man. He had curly brown hair and always had a smile on his face. He was the kind of guy I could get along with—down to earth and gregarious. I asked if he would like to take a walk to check out the campus for any activity. Bill agreed, and we left the dorm.

It was a beautiful, Indian summer day in the Upper Midwest. The skies were cloudless, with a clear, deep blue color. The temperature was in the 70s. The leaves in the maple trees had started to turn color to various shades of reds and yellows. It was an idyllic, peaceful day.

The campus housed about 900 students, and we didn't see a soul. We walked toward Willis Hall, the oldest building at the college, constructed in 1872. Willis was a three-story building, which included a clock tower at one of its exterior walls. The tower rose

well above the main structure. Just below the pointed top of the tower were four large faces of the clock, each on a different side of the square tower. The building was undergoing major reconstruction, being converted from a classroom building into a student union. The thick outer walls of the building, made of tan colored stone, had been left intact, but a large portion of the interior had been gutted.

The building was open, so we went inside. All three floors were in a state of construction with interior walls partially finished. Finding nothing of interest on the main floors, we decided to climb a dark, narrow stairway to the clock tower.

Reaching the top of the stairs, we walked into the clock tower where the area was about 20 by 20 feet. We were standing on a platform, and in the middle were five large bronze bells, surrounded by a railing. They looked very old and were coated with a dark green patina. The largest bell was more than three feet in diameter and weighed over 1000 pounds. The others were incrementally smaller, with the smallest about 20 inches in diameter and weighing about 200 pounds. The top of each bell hung rigidly from timbers, with the bell opening facing downward. Near the outside of each bell was mounted a heavy striker that sounded the bell. There was a handle on each of the strikers. If a handle on a striker was pulled toward the railing and released, the striker would be in free fall and impact the bell. The clock had not been operating because of the construction, and the mechanisms to release the strikers had been disconnected. When the clock was operating, the bells would chime every quarter hour; on the hour, the largest bell was also struck to identify the hour. On the platform's exterior walls were

large open louvers, allowing the sounds of the bells to be heard at a considerable distance.

I suggested to Bill that we ring the bells in celebration of my birthday. He hadn't been aware it was my special day. He nodded, so we walked slowly around the platform, each of us pulling the strikers back and letting them fall. The noise of the bells was deafening—and we were not playing a tune! It was a jumble of off-key sounds, resembling noise made by a toddler beating the keys of a piano. We continued our march of mayhem for about 20 seconds. Through the louvers, we could see students leaning out windows of the senior men's dorm, shouting for us to stop. The bells had become a major distraction on campus.

We quickly decided to leave; fearing students or faculty staff might confront us. We raced down the stairs, reaching the landing on the first floor, and to our horror, saw the Dean of Men. He was leaning against a wall, pipe in his mouth, with smoke curling above his head. The Dean was standing on one leg, with the other leg bent, the sole of his brown shoe on the unpainted wallboard. He was a tall, athletic-looking man of about forty years old, wearing a light blue cardigan sweater and light tan golf trousers. He was the ultimate picture of "cool." He was the cat who had cornered his prey. There was no escape.

The conversation was short, and one-sided. "What do you men think you are doing?

I will see you both in my office tomorrow at 4 p.m.!"

The Dean had a reputation for being tough. Breaking two of the college's nonacademic regulations would result in suspension from school: drinking alcohol in the dorm, or driving or maintaining a motor vehicle within 20 miles of the campus. He went out of his way to find offenders. In just over a year at the school, several of my friends had been suspended for violating both rules. One evening, with several faculty members in his auto, the Dean chased a student's car over farm country roads until he identified the driver. His quarry had run out of gas! The student asked for a ride back into town. "No" was the reply. My good friend had to walk several miles back to town for help. The Dean suspended him for 10 days.

Bill and I were worried about being suspended. At the appointed time, we reported to the Dean's office. It was another short discussion, but I was able to mention it was a birthday celebration, which got out-of-hand. He chewed us out for our immature behavior and warned us not to see him again under similar circumstances. In parting he said, "The next time you feel like celebrating, go down to the dining room kitchen and borrow some pots and pans. Take them deep into the arboretum and beat them to your heart's content!" We had beaten the rap!

It was my first and last formal meeting with the Dean. I was fortunate to fly under his radar for the next two and a half years.