

Church towers Christmas concert returns to Manistee

BY VINCENT HANCOCK
Special to the Record-Eagle

As the month of December opens, an unusual Christmas event returns to Manistee — the Towering Trombones and Bell Concert, scheduled for Friday, Dec. 3 at 7:30 p.m. — part of Manistee's annual "Old Christmas Weekend."

For a second consecutive year, musicians located in the towers of two Manistee churches will perform modern and traditional carols.

Over a dozen trombone players will be stationed inside First Congregational Church, located at 412 Fourth Street.

A block and a half away and across Maple Street sits Guardian Angels church, at 371 Fifth Street. There, several teams of musicians will play the 94-year old bells housed inside. As the two groups of musicians take turns performing, an open line between cell phones connects the two towers, so that each group can clearly cue the other.

High above the streets, those brief digital transmissions cross paths with the resonant music, linking the churches' contributions together. But the two halves spring from separate, long-dormant traditions.

Guardian Angels' set of 12 bells, called a chime, was manufactured in 1910. Local lumber baroness Carrie Filer purchased the chime and offered it to her own church, Holy Trinity. But Guardian Angels Music Director Kelly Niles says that Holy Trinity refused the gift because of the ren-

ovations required to situate the bells.

When Guardian Angels expressed interest, Filer, an Episcopalian, responded by presenting them with the chime. In a time when denominations didn't mingle, such a gift exchange was exceedingly rare.

"She crossed the religious barriers," said Niles. "Her church couldn't accommodate it, so she gave it to the Catholics."

The chime enjoyed a long history of regular use, including performances every Sunday. The parish musician for 60 years and chief chime operator, Julia Jaitner passed away in 1973. The bells went silent. An electrical system was eventually installed to play the bells at Mass and on the hour, but the mechanism couldn't replace Jaitner's personal artistry.

New life for the chime came with the arrival of Kelly Niles two year ago. He moved to Manistee after directing music in Detroit area parishes for 23 years.

"The bells are the reason I took this job," he said. After assembling interested musicians from his choirs at Guardian Angels, Niles staged the first modern bell concert during last year's Port City Festival in Manistee.

The bells met with wide appeal, and were soon joined in concert by another lost tradition.

On Christmas Eve during the late 1950s, Manistee resident and veteran trombone player Jim Krolczyk would play carols with other brass musicians from



The Guardian Angels Church on Fifth Street in Manistee has 94-year old bells housed inside, and will be utilized in the Towering Trombones and Bell Concert, scheduled for Friday, Dec. 3 at 7:30 p.m. The concert also features members of the First Congregational Church.

the tower of First Congregational Church.

Though popular, the brass concerts fell apart after a

few years.

"We all got older, some moved out of town, and I don't think anyone after us continued to do it," said Krolczyk.

For eight years — going on nine — he's successfully directed a full-fledged trombone concert to warm up the crowd before the annual Saturday Christmas parade, but he felt that Friday needed music, too. After staging mini-concerts downtown for a few years, Krolczyk learned of Kelly Niles' arrival and his plans to revive the bell concerts. Krolczyk recalled his lofty college-year concerts, and the two traditions were fused into a new, collaborative Christmas event.

Last year's turnout for the inaugural Christmas concert delighted Niles.

"There were hundreds of people walking around on the sidewalks, talking and chatting," he said. "Had they been in costume, it would have been like a Charles Dickens event. It was a unique experience to see the community outside, with the wonderful atmosphere of Christmas music coming from the skies."

Niles recommends parking and enjoying the sights and sounds on foot. Part of the fun is walking the short distance between the churches.

Jim Krolczyk enjoyed learning that audience members often traveled back and forth to find the best listening position. The evening's calm weather helped considerably, and he hopes for another still night this year.

"If we get a good west wind, the best place to hear both concerts might be three blocks east. You just don't know," he said.

The musicians at both churches are prepared for primitive playing conditions. Open shutters on three sides of First Congregational's tower normally allow the sound from its own bell to carry great distances. Krolczyk's trombone crew can be heard clearly, too, but the exposure means they must dress warmly. Niles' musicians ring the bells by working a series of levers, located at a lower point within Guardian Angels' tower. Last year they still felt the outdoor chill and bundled themselves up accordingly.

Despite the temperature, both Niles and Krolczyk look forward to offering the concert again.

"Music connects souls and touches our hearts, even more so when it's live," said Niles. "The carols that we have are tremendous treasures and everybody knows them."

Those who don't, are learning. Niles has begun teaching his players' children how to ring the bells.

Krolczyk is pleased. "It looks like we've created something that will be a tradition for a long time," he said.

Both churches will be open to the public during the hour-long concert, and will provide warm drinks and snacks for a free-will offering.

Vincent Hancock is a local freelance writer.

Clydesdales coming 'round to Manistee parade for first time in 18 years

BY GAYLE CRAMPTON
Special to the Record-Eagle

Manistee's Victorian Sleighbell Parade is always a treat.

True to its theme, the parade uses almost no electricity, and the horsepower is provided by actual horses.

County farmer Larry Reed's team of sturdy Belgians pulls the big sled, with the town's 30-foot Christmas tree aboard, the length of River Street. Brilliant sparks fly from the steel runners, illuminating the night. As the cheers and mitten-muffled clapping of onlookers mingle with the clapping of hooves and the creak and jingle of harness, it's easy to believe, for a few minutes, that when the merriment concludes you'll head for the long ride home under a layer of furs in your own buggy.

Each winter since its inception 16 years ago, the Sleighbell Parade has drawn thousands of enthusiastic observers; each year, the sturdy, placid Belgian draft horses have been the

stars of the show. This year, however, the Belgians will be facing some equally sturdy competition. For the first time ever, their upper-crust cousins, the Budweiser Clydesdales, are coming to town.

This is not a small event. Budde Reed, owner and general manager of the Ludington Beverage Company, was able to bring the Clydesdales to Ludington (about 30 miles south of Manistee) in 1986, to celebrate their family's 50th year in business.

"When they left that time, the handlers said 'Take a good look at (the team) — it'll be another 50 years before you see them again.' They're in really huge demand," said Reed. "We've been asking for them every year."

Securing the world's best-known draft horse team was (finally) the coup of Reed and David Yarnell, director of Manistee's Chamber of Commerce. As coups go, it's a fairly impressive one. Most of the Clydesdales' appearances are brief;

they're in town for two or three days and in the public eye for only a few hours as they march down Main Street and loiter for pictures. After (usually) a private day of rest, it's back into their caravan of trucks and off to the next crowd of cheering, picture-snapping fans.

This time, however, in testament to either the sales ability of Reed and Yarnell (the pitch included a local landscaper's offer to haul off the horse manure), or the appeal of this area, the team will be here for a week. Not just any team, either. Manistee will be hosting the best of the best, the premier "St. Louis hitch," Budweiser's top string — who, Reed learned, even pulled rank over the other teams and requested this trip themselves.

The Clydesdales arrived, escorted by police with lights and sirens, Nov. 29. They'll be stabled at the Axchem building in Manistee's industrial park, where some Manistee locals will be keeping a careful

eye on them.

"When I found out we needed to provide security, I thought at first we'd have to hire the Pinkerton Agency," said Reed.

It turned out that the team just needed observation for injuries or illness.

"They told us that horses are like people — if they develop a cough, we want to get a vet over to take a look."

David Yarnell chose people that he felt could be trusted to watch the horses very, very closely. He put out a call to the local 4H troupe, finding numerous volunteer horse-sitters. Denise Peters' children Michael and Maria, 10 and 14 respectively, will both be logging time down at the

Industrial Park.

"There'll be adults there too, but the kids will be walking, bathing and grooming the horses," said Peters. "It should be great for my kids, they've done a lot of that with the steers they've raised for 4H."

The Peters run a dairy farm, and have kept chickens and pigs as well as cattle.

"We've had all kinds of things — everything but horses. Though my daughter keeps saying we should get one."

Peters says that while both children are looking forward to the experience, "Maria is really horse-crazy. I know she's going to have a great time."

The Budweiser Clydesdales will be appearing in both Ludington's Spirit of the Season parade (6:30 p.m., Friday, Dec. 3) and in the Victorian Sleighbell Parade (5:30 p.m. Saturday, Dec. 4). On Sunday afternoon (Dec. 5, the world-famous horses will be "at-home" from 1 to 3 p.m., for any members of the public that would like to visit them at their Axchem "barn" in Manistee.

For further information on Manistee's Victorian Sleighbell Parade or the Budweiser Clydesdales' visit, contact the Manistee Area Chamber of Commerce 723-2575.

Gayle Crampton is a local freelance writer.



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