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HOT CENTERPIECE

Church bells resume ringing in full at Millwood church

By MICKEY POWELL The Winchester Star
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Troy Williams, a technician with The Verdin Co. of Cincinnati, Ohio, puts the bells at Christ Church in Millwood back full service.

Submitted

MILLWOOD — The gently rolling hills in this Clarke County village are alive with a richer sound of music.

All 12 bells in the tower high above Christ Church are tolling again, most having been silent for several decades.

In 1963, family members donated the carillon to the Episcopal church in remembrance of Elizabeth M. Byrd and her granddaughter, Betsy Gilpin, who died in a car accident three days after her 4th birthday in 1962 — and just four days after her grandmother passed away.

Their deaths so close together were a hard adjustment for the family, recalled Tom Gilpin, who was Byrd's grandson and Betsy's brother.

The nine bells that were installed accompanied three that remained in the tower following a 1947 fire that gutted the church.

Yet only four of the bells have sounded during roughly the past 40 years, said the Rev. Matt Rhodes, the church's rector for the past three years. To his understanding, he said the others somehow got disconnected when a keyboard was installed to control the system.

Reconnecting the bells was long on the church's to-do list. However, it somehow never got done as the congregation and clergy focused on projects deemed more urgent, such as starting a community food pantry, making church facilities more easily accessible to disabled worshipers and installing a new septic system, according to Rhodes.

Gilpin and his wife, Jean, who attend the church, recently made a large donation to cover the repairs and refurbishments necessary to put the carillon fully back into service. He and Rhodes declined to specify the amount given.

Nevertheless, "it was a very generous gift," Rhodes said. "It bowled me over, to say the least."

Gilpin envisioned his grandmother and sister being sad that the bells had not fully tolled for so long. So he and his wife "decided it was a donation we wanted to make now," he said.

The Verdin Co. of Cincinnati, Ohio, a world-renown bronze bell manufacturer, recently completed the restoration project with help from Waterloo Electric Services in White Post. Not only were the silent bells reconnected, but exterior hammers were installed on the outside of the bells. They produce the same sounds as hammers installed inside bells.

During a service on the morning of Aug. 30, worshipers at the Gothic Revival style, stone-built church on Bishop Meade Road heard the refurbished bells for the first time. Rhodes kept the project a secret until then.

“It came as a surprise to everybody,” he said, noting that several people were overcome with emotion upon hearing all of the bells chime again.

“They sounded wonderful,” Gilpin said. “My wife and I felt more than gratified.”

Having 12 bells, which basically cover a full octave, gives the church the ability to play a broader range of hymns, including ones for special occasions, Rhodes said.

About 300 hymns now are programmed into the electronic system, he said. If others ever become desired, the church’s organist can use the keyboard to put them into the musical library.

Hymn selections will be rotated “so people won’t get tired of hearing the same ones every day,” Rhodes said with a chuckle.

Bells chime on the hour between 8 a.m. and 6 p.m. daily. After the chimes at noon and 6 p.m., hymns play for five minutes.

Hearing the bells is like hearing his grandmother and his sister speak again, Gilpin said.

“I think these bells to be their voices for the hope and happiness of our church and our community,” he said.

Millwood is an unincorporated community that is home to many of Clarke County’s oldest historic sites, including the Burwell-Morgan Mill and Carter Hall. The church itself dates to the 1830s.

Residents have told Rhodes they enjoy hearing the bells again, especially amid uncertain times due to the coronavirus pandemic.

“In certain respects,” he said, “it helps the church continue to be a source of stability for the community. Even when things seem to be at their worst, hearing church bells is a reassuring thing.”

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