

Mariemont TOWN CRIER

NOVEMBER 2023 • MARIEMONT, OHIO • VOLUME XLVIII, No. 3

Oh, Hear the Bells Ring!

By CAROL SANGER

For 94 years, on summer Sundays and national holidays, on special occasions and sometimes in the early gloom of a winter afternoon, the carillon bells of the Mary M. Emery Memorial Carillon have rung out, telling the story of Mariemont and its unique history.

Midway up the 100-foot tower, built by Isabella Hopkins in 1929 in memory of her sister, Mary, there is a room with a massive keyboard. Its keys are the size of broomsticks and its broad pedals resemble those on an organ of Olympian proportions. It is from this room and this instrument that the carillon's harmonious notes are struck.

But the real story of Mariemont's carillon doesn't lie in the height of its historic tower, the massiveness of the keyboard or the size of the 49 bells it controls. No, the real story is the dedicated men who, over the years—in weather good and bad and on occasions joyous and sad—have sat before that keyboard and caused those bells to peal.

Richard D. Gegner fulfilled that role masterfully for 50 years before his health gave way and he stepped away on sabbatical in 2017, retiring officially a few years later. His friend and colleague, Richard M. Watson, brought his impressive talents to Mariemont, beginning in 2005 and remaining as carillonneur through 2021.

Two Richards—one known as Dick and the other as Rick—that together accounted for more than half of the carillon's musical legacy.

Dick Gegner began his career as a carillonneur when Rev. Gene Crawford asked him if he'd like to move on from the church organ and try his hand (literally!) at the carillon. He said yes, but when he first set eyes on the keyboard he asked, "Where do you turn it on?" only to be told "You don't." He then knew he had a lot to learn.

To better grasp the subtleties of carillon music, where a forceful strike of the keyboard with the side of one's hand is needed, and the harder the strike the louder the corresponding bell will sound, Dick took summer lessons in campanology at the University of Michigan for two years. There, he also played the university's carillon and became proficient.

Beginning in 1967, Dick alternated Sundays with Albert Meyer, a retired engineer from the Baldwin Organ Co., who was then the Mariemont carillonneur. This tag-team approach to handling Sunday concerts eventually would transition to his 20-year relationship with Rick Watson, beginning in 2005.

"It's a unique instrument, not typical at all," Dick, who also spent 34 years as a music teacher at Bethel-Tate Elementary School, says of the carillon.

That simple truth could explain why the ranks of carillonneurs remains small, and many of the 148 carillons across the country are not played regularly. The Mariemont carillon is distinctive because of its history of continuous play, including the computerized chiming of the hour that marks the passage of time throughout the day.

Like Dick, Rick Watson also began his carillon career by playing the organ.

Growing up in Madison, Wisc., he began taking lessons while still in grade school. His



Rick Watson – 2019



Dick Gegner – 2001

teacher was a local woman whom he said, surprisingly, had a pipe organ in her home. Rick

cont'd on page 4

VILLAGE

Oh, Hear the Bells Ring! (from front page)

picked it up quickly. Coordinating choirs and foot pedals seemed to come naturally to him. So during high school, while playing the organ in various community churches, he was introduced to the carillon—different from a pipe organ, but still familiar with its keyboard and pedals.

From there, Rick went on to major in organ music at the University of Wisconsin, where his father was a professor in chemical engineering. His mother was an accomplished artist, albeit with what Rick described as “modest” piano skills. (He says she would have agreed!) While at the university, Rick served as assistant University Carillonneur from 1963-68.

From Madison, Rick moved to Birmingham, Ala., where he taught music for six years at a small Baptist college. He subsequently wound up in Cincinnati after taking a position with the Verdon Bell Co. as director of the Cast Bell, Chime and Carillon Division in 1973. It was there that his deep knowledge of bells was needed, ultimately leading him to partner with Bill Meeks in founding Meeks, Watson & Co. in 1991.

Located in Georgetown, Ohio, the company specialized in everything from bell founding to chime and carillon building and restoration. These were skills much needed and fully utilized when he joined with Dick Gegner 15 years later as carillonneur in Mariemont.

Here, serving also as Coordinator of Carillon Maintenance, Rick discovered the 1968 keyboard, treble action, and bell clappers in dire need of replacement. The original 1929 components also had reached the end of their useful life. So in 2007, the Thomas J. Emery Memorial, owners of the carillon, commissioned a wholesale renovation of the carillon and its bells, which range in size from 19 to 4,800 pounds! (The largest is named Boudon and is inscribed with Isabella Hopkins' original 1929 dedication: “To the youth of Mariemont, in memory of its founder.”)

The restored carillon debuted in its present iteration in 2008.

Both Richards talk fondly of their years at the carillon keyboard, sometimes playing duets where one would take the upper end of the keyboard and the other the lower. They were buoyed by children's concerts—called Lollipops & Balloons—every August and the enjoyment regular Sunday concerts brought to so many

families who would gather in Dogwood Park to picnic and enjoy the music.

“We like to see people sitting in the park area, but we'll also have people in their yards and on their decks listening,” Dick says.

From his home on Settle Avenue, regardless of the weather, Dick would walk over to the tower to play. It was a commitment he took seriously, climbing multiple flights of stairs to the playing and practice room midway up the tower. He recalls one snowy winter's day when that commitment was truly put to the test.

“I was playing, but I didn't know if anybody was listening,” he says. It was only the next day when he received a call from a resident on Fieldhouse Road who told him how much she enjoyed the concert, sitting with a fire blazing in her hearth and the front door open to the elements – and the welcoming sound of the bells of Mariemont. To Dick, this made it all worthwhile.

Both Richards are retired now, and the carillon keyboard has passed into younger hands, but the mark they left on Mariemont will be remembered and celebrated on those special holidays and Sundays in the park for years to come.



SIBCY CLINE

MEGAN WILLIS
812-320-8933
9-Year Mariemont Resident

MOLLY ZUCKERBERG
513-545-7050
12-Year Mariemont Resident

Hey, Neighbor!

Our local expertise can help you achieve your goals. Reach out today to start your home buying or selling journey with us!



SCAN TO SEE RECENT
HOME SALES IN
MARIEMONT!