

[Richfield (Richfield Springs), Otsego Co.]

Story of Oldest Village Bell
How It Was Brought to Richfield Springs for Universalist Church in 1833
Told by Mrs. Slocum

The interesting article in a recent issue of *The Mercury*, regarding the removal of the steeple on the former Universalist Church, recalled a bit of local history concerning this old belfry and its bell.

My father, the late Norman Williamson, a descendant of one of the early families who settled in this section, gathered many facts of local interest and so from him I learned the story of the Universalist Church bell which is the oldest bell in this village and no doubt the first object of civic pride.

The Universalist Church was built in 1833 and its flourishing society decided to purchase a bell in the year following. My grandfather, Cyrus Williamson, volunteered to draw [transport] the bell from Herkimer, which in those days was considered a long distance. The church was not built with a steeple and therefore there was no place to suspend it, so on the arrival of the new bell a platform was built in front of the church and on this it rested.

It was then decided that it should not only call the worshipers on the Sabbath, but should be sounded thrice daily, at the morning, noon and evening hours. Not being suspended it could not be rung in the usual manner, so Humphrey Palmer, who lived where Ward Watson now resides, was hired to perform this task by hitting it with a sledge hammer.

Curious crowds were attracted each day, coming from miles around with all sorts of conveyances including oxen and carts. They would gaze in wonderment as they listened to the melodious tones of the bell, which in less than a year became cracked, no doubt due to the manner used in sounding it. After this accident, it had to be sent back to the manufacturer where it was recast.

On its return it was placed in a newly constructed belfry where for nearly a century it called to worship a flourishing and devout people of the Universalist faith. It tolled at the passing of many prominent citizens and rung joyfully for the marriages of many of the village youth.

A number of years ago the membership of this society became small and scattered, so they decided to disband and close the church. Later the edifice was purchased by the Jewish inhabitants for their synagogue and it has been remodeled and rededicated to that faith.

Long has the bell been silent and recently was purchased and removed by Mr. Sugarman. It is in good condition and the owner feels it is too valuable to be scrapped, therefore he hopes that some day, somewhere, it may be needed and returned to the service for which it was intended.

Mabel Williamson Slocum

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