

The Guardian, Charlottetown, Mon., Jan. 3, 1972

ACROSS THE ISLAND

Sound Of Bells Days Recalled

By NEIL A. MATHESON

I WONDERED Christmas week, as I watched, listened and read some of the references to Christmases of the past, how many people remember the bells of Christmas Day. The bells I refer to were used and heard through the winter, not only at Christmas times.

Haydn Pearson wrote several years ago in his column datelined Greenfield, New Hampshire:

“If it is true that customs and activities go in cycles, it is time for renaissance of bells in the countryside. Half a century ago” he wrote “we knew when it was dinner time by the ringing of farm bells across the fields.

“Up and down the road you heard them; the pleasant notes came faintly from farms across the valley.”

I think dinner horns were used to call the men folk from the fields when I was a boy. I cannot recall the bell ringing for that purpose. In that respect the people in my area must have been different.

Hayden’s background was different to mine, but he had some really interesting memories to paint in his word picture.

Mr. Hayden had some most interesting recollections; I’ll tell you about them in more detail in a future column.

Sleigh Bells Recalled

MY RECOLLECTION of bells center more on the bells worn on horses in the days when a sleigh ride was just about the most pleasant part of country living and certainly one of the most romantic.

There were many kinds of bells used for this purpose – some sort of bell was a necessity, to let people walking along the roads know that a horse and sleigh were approaching them.

Bells varied from the small bell that sometimes hung from the hame strap on the lower or larger end of the horse collar, to the string of bells that circled the horse’s body – they also went around the shafts – and the gongs or chimes, as some people called them. Then there were the “Gongs” as some of my Rose Valley neighbors called them.

There was the short strap to which four of the bells, or “gongs” were attached; they sounded pleasing musical notes as the horse trotted along the road.

Some of the long strings that encircled the horse’s body, usually just back of the Pad, were plain bells. Other strings had various tones and types of bells, and they were pleasing to the ear.

Then there were the shaft bells or chimes that were mounted on the sleigh shafts, usually a little in front of the cross-piece to which the small swing was attached. Their tones were usually most pleasing to the ears.

I am missing some types of bells, of course, for this is but a hurried look at this aspect of the colorful past. If some readers recall some other types, please write to me about them.

And that reminds me that Keith Kennedy was recalling for me last week a phase of country life which I had almost forgotten. He was referring to the "pitches" on the snow roads and the "slues" along the road where the sleigh slid sideways, particularly if there was a slope to one side as one travelled along the road.

If the "slue" was sharp enough it would cause the sleigh to tip, and throw out its occupants, particularly if the sleigh was the jaunting-sleigh, or cutter type. A box sleigh, or pung, as some called it, was much less likely to tip over.

And The Cow Bells

BACK TO the bells for a few lines, there was the bell that was worn on a cow, so the farmer could find the herd when milking time came. This was back in the days when the cows "went to the woods" as it was called or if there was a sizable piece of wooded land in connection with the pasture field.

The tinkle of the bell, or the loud ring of the bell when the bell cow was trying to chase flies with her head, would give the animal's position away.

Sometimes the bell cow was foxy and we were sure she was purposely keeping her head and neck quiet so we, who were looking for her and the rest of the herd, could not locate their presence.

The thought of bells was started by that impressive performance Jeanie MacKenzie put on with her Bell Ringing Chorus. This young lady came all the way from British Columbia to teach at UPEI. She comes from the Cardigan MacKenzies, her uncle told me earlier this year.