

Indianola bells rich with area history

Each has an interesting history, the old bells of Indianola.

There are at least six known to exist, two in Victoria, three in Port Lavaca, and one in Cuero.

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One that was in the news this week 75 years ago was the bell from the Catholic Church that was destroyed by the 1886 storm, the final blow for the old port city on Matagorda Bay. The bell was buried on the beach by the storm until it was partially exposed 43 years later by high tides from a small hurricane in 1929, it being



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Henry Wolff Jr.

retrieved by Frank Montier.

In reporting on the find, the Victoria Advocate on July 24 noted that the bell was "in a splendid state of preservation."

It would be displayed at the Montier Café in Port Lavaca, later at the Shellfish Restaurant and, along with an old fire bell from Indianola, is now on display outside the restored 1858 Half Moon Reef Lighthouse next to the Bauer Community Center on State Highway 35.

Another old Indianola bell in Port Lavaca was from a Methodist church, it having been saved by a black woman, Malinda Harris, after the 1886 storm. That was the final blow to old Indianola after the devastating storm of 1875, many of the surviving residents by the time of the second storm having already moved to inland locations. When a group of Methodists from Victoria came to get the bell for their church, "Aunt Malindy" would not give it to them. Later, after she moved to Port Lavaca, she loaned it to the Episcopal Church until the Methodists built a new church, after which she became the only black communicant of that white



Henry Wolff, Jr./Victoria Advocate

Two of the bells from the old port city of Indianola are displayed outside the Half Moon Reef Lighthouse at Port Lavaca. On the left is a fire bell, the other from the Catholic Church having been buried on the beach by the storm of 1886. It was uncovered by a small hurricane in 1929.

congregation, becoming a Sunday morning fixture quietly sitting on a back pew.

The old Methodist Church building at Port Lavaca was torn down in 1956 with a new church being built several blocks away, the bell being left behind. Urged to do something about it by L.E. Gross, the men's Sunday School class raised \$300 to have it moved to the new church. There it remained for years beneath a rotting tarpaulin until a new sanctuary was built in 1974 and the bell was restored and placed on a brick platform where it would once again summon worshippers to Sunday services.

Most visible of the Indianola bells in Victoria is the large and beautifully polished bell in the courtyard of the First Baptist Church. It had been toppled from a steeple, blown or washed into the bay by the 1875 storm. While it is not certain just when or how it was recovered, possibly by fishermen, it is believed to have been

brought first to Port Lavaca by boat and then to Victoria by ox cart. It was placed in a structure outside of a new church building at the corner of Main Street and Common (now Goodwin Avenue) around 1878.

Another Indianola bell was brought to Victoria after the storm of 1886 for the Palestine Baptist Church, it being donated by the widely known black clairvoyant, Annie Blackley.

One that did not start out at Indianola as a church bell is a small one among three in the Spanish mission-styled open bell tower at St. Mark's Lutheran Church in Cuero. While familiarly known "as the little prayer bell," it came from a sinking ship, the steamer "Reliance." A fire broke out during a dinner party aboard the vessel at the Indianola docks, and the ship sank. The little bell that had heralded its arrival earlier in the day went down with the ship.

The Morgan Steamship Co. allowed the Lutheran Church at In-

dianola to retrieve the bell and it summoned the congregation to worship until the Civil War when Union forces occupied the town. Yankee soldiers climbed the steeple and stole the bell with plans to ship it North to turn it into bullets. One night when the soldiers were asleep some men of the congregation sneaked to where it had been stashed on the beach, loaded the bell on a wheelbarrow and then carried it by wagon to a spot farther down the beach to bury it.

It would remain buried for some 27 years, until 1889 when the Lutheran congregation at Cuero built a new church and needed a bell. Many former inhabitants of Indianola, having moved to Cuero following the 1875 storm, knew of the bell, and a search party was organized with the help of George Wasserman, who had been among those who had buried it. They found it, only slightly tarnished.

After the donation of a larger bell by Caroline Fuhrmann, the smaller bell was given to the Cuero Fire Department and was used to summon volunteer firemen until a modern alert system was installed years later. Once again the bell would be rescued, after church member Joseph Pannen found it in a trash pile behind the fire station.

In an article on June 13, 1871, C.A. Ogsbury, editor of the Indianola Bulletin, described the bells of Indianola as being "loud in their voices" on Sunday mornings and other days devoted to religious services.

"Nothing is more cheerful on a bright Sunday morning," he further commented, "than to hear the church bell pealing out its deep-toned invitation to the house of God."

Some in use, others no more now than relics of the past, each bell is a reminder of the glory days of old Indianola.