

History of handbells, submitted by Karen Kaskie

Handbells weren't originally meant to play tunes. They came about in connection with European bell towers. The ringers sounded those bells by pulling on ropes and creating patterns of notes rather than melodies. It's called "change ringing." The neighborhoods near the churches did not appreciate the loud practicing, so handbells were developed so the ringers could practice inside.

As bell ringers began to realize the musical potential of handbells, semitones were added to form full chromatic sets, enabling performers to play familiar melodies. By the middle of the 18th century, group "tune ringing" was a favorite diversion in England, and soon nearly every village had its band of bell ringers.

In a handbell ensemble, each ringer has anywhere from two to six bells and the music is simply divided among all the ringers, which means they better all be there for the rehearsals and performances.

Handbells came to America from England in the nineteenth century. And it may have been thanks to P.T. Barnum, who engaged a group of English ringers for an American tour, provided that they grow mustaches, wear colorful clothing and allow themselves to be billed as "Swiss bell ringers." So they were probably not female ringers!

Handbells at Lands Church were donated by Harvey and Frances Twedt in 1974, with three octaves given. The low "F" and "G" bells were donated in 1978 in memory of Arthur Gubbrud. Lands Church also has a set of chimes, which were donated by the Orvin and Evelyn Fossum family, in memory of Orvin, in 2009. Pam Gillespie has played the handbells at Lands for 50 years! Arthur Gubbrud was her Grandfather and Orvin and Evelyn were her parents. The Lands handbell choir is honored to be playing again, in honor of the 50th Anniversary of the bells. The Schulmerich bells have been refurbished in the last few months. We hope you will enjoy hearing the bells, as much as we are enjoying performing with them!



Where did the song “Jingle Bells” come from?

Legend says that the song made its debut in 1850 in Medford, Massachusetts, composed by James Lord Pierpont. Pierpont was a native of the town and wanted to write something to commemorate the town’s annual sleigh races around Thanksgiving. He published the song in 1857 under the title “One Horse Open Sleigh.” It had three verses in addition to the one we typically sing today and details a young couple who go riding and tip their sleigh in a snowdrift. As its popularity increased, the song became simply known as “Jingle Bells,” referring to the jolly refrain.

