

Bell of the Nation

The Liberty Bell Visits Watkins Glen

by Gary Emerson



A crowd waits at the Watkins Glen Northern Central train station in 1904 to see the Liberty Bell.

In 1904, seventy-five thousand school children in St. Louis, Missouri signed a petition requesting authorization from the Philadelphia city leaders for the iconic national symbol, the Liberty Bell, to be transported to the Pennsylvania Exhibit at the Louisiana Purchase Exposition in St. Louis. The request was granted, and for people along the way it offered a chance to see the Liberty Bell in person as it passed through their town, perched on a special rail car. It was a unique opportunity to see and experience an important object of our national history, and it was Watkins Glen's good fortune to be one of those stops as the Liberty Bell road the rails to St. Louis.

The train carrying the bell left Philadelphia on June 3rd headed for its first stop in Elmira, New York, where at 7 a.m. the next day the train would stop for twenty minutes. From Elmira it would head north then west to stop in Rochester and Buffalo. The train was scheduled to arrive in

St. Louis by June 8th.¹

The village of Watkins Glen buzzed with excitement at the chance to see the famous national symbol on its journey, but that enthusiasm was dampened by the news that the bell would only stop for a short time in Watkins Glen. Local papers still touted the coming of the Liberty Bell and urged people to come see the symbol of liberty. The *Watkins Democrat* informed local readers that the “Liberty Bell will pass through Watkins, on its way to the Louisiana Purchase Exposition, on the morning of June 4th, on the Northern Central Railroad, at 8 o’clock a.m., and will stop here five minutes to give the people a chance to look at the sacred old relic.” The newspaper described the special car that transported the bell. It was a specially made flatbed car with extra suspension to provide a smooth ride, and it had brass railings along the side as well as many American flags as decoration. The *Watkins*



The Liberty Bell sits on its car at Watkins Glen on June 4, 1904.

Democrat assured people that the car’s design would allow everyone a good view of the Liberty Bell, and that some people would even be able to go onto the car and view the bell up close.²

On Saturday, June 4th, the train chugged in on time after stopping in Elmira, and a large crowd greeted its arrival in the village. Many people from Catharine and other nearby towns traveled to Watkins Glen to get a glimpse of the honored relic. It was reported

that the train was “greeted by half the population of the village and a large contingent from the surrounding country.” The train had passed through Montour Falls on its journey to Watkins Glen, but no stop was planned there. Residents of Montour Falls still showed their respect for the venerated bell by standing along the tracks to gaze upon it in wonder and wave as it slowly passed through the village.³

In expectation of a large crowd, the Watkins Glen Board of Trustees took steps to accommodate the many people by extending Porter, Decatur, and Perry streets all the way to Seneca Lake. The Board even requested that the Northern Central Railroad place proper crossings over their tracks where those street extensions met the tracks (so that carriages could cross the tracks easily), and to keep railway cars away from the area to provide more open space for the crowd. Because the train would only stop for five minutes, the village made no special plans to greet its arrival with a band or other arrangements.⁴

The train had several Pullman cars along with the flatbed carrying the 1-ton bell. The Pullmans housed 24 city councilmen and selectmen from Philadelphia along with four Philadelphia policemen accompanying the bell to St. Louis. The atmosphere on the train was quite jovial as the men chosen to escort the bell enjoyed good food and cigars.⁵ One Watkins Glen newspaper reported, “The party attending the bell evidently were having a first class good old fashioned outing, with plenty of everything wet, dry and smoky to keep up their spirits on their merry-go-round from Philadelphia to St. Louis.” The flatbed car allowed access to come aboard and walk along either side of the bell, but because the stop in Watkins Glen was only for five minutes, just a few lucky souls had the chance to ascend the railcar to see the bell up close as the tall, burly policemen, in their dark blue uniforms with shiny brass badges, stood guard near the bell.⁶

The guards and others testified to the great respect people showed toward the bell. The Liberty Bell inspired many people to project a special reverence toward it. An observer at the St. Louis exposition reported that many viewers felt compelled to touch the bell, and men removed their cigars and hats when approaching it. Some even spoke to the bell. One man watched as an elderly woman approached the bell in the Pennsylvania exhibit in St. Louis. She placed her wrinkled hand upon the bell and said, “God bless you, dear old bell. This is the fourth time I have touched you today, but now I must leave you. Goodbye.” Surely, many of the people in Watkins Glen felt the same emotions while gazing upon the bell, as their minds drifted back in time to the early years of America’s creation when an ideology of freedom and democracy was still an uncertain dream hoping to forge a nation. They could see and touch something from that founding moment, whose peal was once heard by the likes of Washington and Jefferson, and it filled them with awe. Luckily for those who came to pay respects to the Liberty Bell in Watkins Glen, modern science provided them with something to capture their historic moment: a Kodak camera. The Watkins Democrat reported that “a good many snap shots with kodaks were taken.”⁷

The five minutes passed quickly, and soon the train began pulling out of the station. It would make other stops that same day in Penn Yan, Canandaigua, Rochester, and Buffalo as it steadfastly made its way to St. Louis. But, many people in Schuyler County would remember the day they saw the Liberty Bell, and wished they could have heard it ring one more time.



Photos courtesy of J.R. Dill Winery, Hector

Endnotes:

- 1 *Philadelphia Inquirer*, May 19, 1904.
- 2 *Watkins Democrat*, May 26, 1904; *Watkins Express*, June 9, 1904; *Elmira Star-Gazette*, June 3, 1904.
- 3 *Watkins Democrat*, June 9, 1904.
- 4 *Watkins Express*, June 9, 1904; *Montour Falls Free Press*, June 2, 1904.
- 5 *Philadelphia Inquirer*, May 6, 1904.
- 6 *Philadelphia Inquirer*, September 2, 1904, The Philadelphia newspapers proudly published the photographs of some of the quartets of police officers chosen to guard the bell at various times during the trip. All the officers chosen were large men over six feet tall; *Watkins Democrat*, June 9, 1904.
- 7 *Elmira Daily Gazette and Free Press*, August 3, 1904; *Watkins Democrat*, June 9, 1904.