

Our International Friendship Bell – a unique Oak Ridge symbol, part 6 ***An impressive casting ceremony, part 2***

(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on July 15, 2008)

Last week we saw Soutetsu Iwasawa, the master bell maker from Kyoto, Japan visiting Oak Ridge to attend a USA-Japan Rotary Friendship Conference and to view the site proposed as a home for the bell he hoped to cast. I am convinced this trip was significant to him and that he learned a lot about us while here. He interacted with many individuals and groups.

Among the most important people Iwasawa spent time with was Alvin Weinberg. I am sure they had much to discuss regarding the bell and the lasting monument they both intended it to be. The bell is said to be expected to last 4,000 years. That is about as permanent as it gets.

Through discussion and time spent together, these two kindred spirits obviously deepened their understanding of each other and grew even more committed to the task of creating a lasting monument to peace and a symbol of international friendship. The bell must have taken on a strong presence in their lives. Such dedication to a project comes only from personal and deep commitment to an idea.

While in Oak Ridge, Iwasawa is quoted in the newspaper as saying, "Oak Ridge is very beautiful and quiet. You would never imagine it is a place that made the bomb." He went on to say that the city's role in the production of the atomic bomb probably saved his life, did save thousands of other lives, ended the war earlier and was justified. Iwasawa stated that the bomb also put Japan on the road to democracy.

This is not the first such comment I have heard regarding Japan's military and their relentless stranglehold on the country as the war continued beyond reason. An invasion was in the planning and thousands of allied troops were headed toward staging areas to prepare for the attack when the atomic bombs brought a halt to the war. Only then could the Japanese hold any hope of rebirth from the tragic state they were in. The war had to end first.

Shigeko Uppulurri tells elegantly of the history of Japan that led to the aggression culminating in World War II. She explains how a country deliberately closed by the ruling leaders to the outside world created a singular culture with elements remaining even today. Yet, she also tells of the relentless military drive that almost crushed the Japanese people. The war was consuming the Japanese culture and ending it was imperative.

Iwasawa knew the importance of ending the war and understood the situation facing Japan. However, like Weinberg, he sought peace and desired that nuclear weapons would never again be required to be used. The Oak Ridge International Friendship Bell holds forth as a symbol of peace, a symbol of friendship, yet a reminder that war did happen and significant events transpired at given dates that should be remembered. Only by remembering can the past help form the future.

Paul Watkins, professor emeritus in art education at UT, gave me insight into Iwasawa's stated feelings regarding the bell. Paul stated that he was so moved by Shigeko Uppuluri's speech on the meaning of the bell that he traveled to Kyoto to see the bell cast and was one of the first people to ring the bell while it was still in Japan.

Watkins stated that the casting of the bell "was a very beautiful experience and was done with great ceremony." The opportunity to attend the bell casting is counted as a highlight of his experiences. He brought a Japanese friend, Uchida Nao, to Oak Ridge in December, 2000, during a time when the ringing of the bell was restricted, in the dead of winter, just to let Nao experience the ringing of the bell.

During his time in Japan, Watson was able to speak at length with Soutetsu Iwasawa. Regarding the perception of the bell, he stated that Iwasawa wanted very much to produce the bell as a friendship bell or peace bell. He also learned from Iwasawa that the bell held a personal meaning of regret for the actions of Japan's military leaders during the war.

So, regarding the misconception of the bell being the symbol of an apology by Oak Ridge, Paul Watson, said that "is a total misconception, the truth is just the reverse!" What a powerful observation and that knowledge Paul shares comes directly from the bell maker's personal comments to him.

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Paul further stated the bell is meant to be a sign of peace and unity. "It symbolizes humankind coming together to get beyond the past and shows that peace and hope exist now." I agree with Paul. The bell is now a part of our heritage and a worthy symbol of friendship and peace, promoting those things through remembering war, yes, but encouraging us and future generations to seek peace first.

The actual casting of the bell took place on July 14, 1993. Although cast and in its final form, the bell was still a long way and a long time from Kyoto, Japan to Oak Ridge, TN and to its final home in Bissell Park. Many helping hands were still needed and much discussion and no little controversy remained.

As my research continues, I am pleased to continue to be contacted by individuals who know the details and are willing to share them. I am also indebted to Shigeko for her continual enlightenment into the rationale for her dedication to the idea. She is a wonderful lady!

The Oak Ridge International Friendship Bell was shipped to Oak Ridge in September, 1993. In October, 1993, it was placed on display at an interim location in the courtyard of the Oak Ridge Municipal Building. In May, 1996, it was placed in its present location in the bell house pavilion in A.K. Bissell Park.

Many things took place during these three years of 1993 to 1996 that were important developments in the overall creation of the heritage we now have in the Oak Ridge International Friendship Bell. Many individuals sought to convey their deepest thoughts. Much contemplation took place. The story of the bell is full of valuable lessons we need to understand and appreciate.

Next we will examine the funding and construction of the pavilion as well as the personal thinking of Jon Coddington regarding the design of the bell house. The insights into the actual day to day decisions regarding the final construction will be shared by Hugh Bishop who managed the overall construction project.

Additionally, we will examine the extended controversy surrounding the bell. The work of the bell policy committee and the restrictions placed on ringing the bell will be included as well.

Then we will look closely at the efforts of Bill Wilcox to create an understanding that eventually served to bring to light a fuller understanding of the purpose of the bell. The plaque that resulted from his consensus gaining effort is yet another example of Bill's contribution to the history of our city.

And finally, we will see the efforts of one young lady, Elise Campbell, who succeeded in removing the restrictions to ringing the bell and brought us ultimately to the realization that the bell should be freely rung by any and all. The freedom to ring the bell is enjoyed by many and obviously much appreciated by the ever increasing number of visitors who seek it out.

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Finished bell fresh out of the casting mold with finishing touches being applied

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Pat Postma poses with the newly cast bell