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FEATURED

Bellissimo! Historic bell lands at Broadview

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Annette Klinzing, executive director of Immanuel Bible Foundation, holds a photo taken inside the bell tower on the grounds of Broadview Mansion in Normal while looking out a window that overlooks the tower. The foundation, which is based at the mansion, is working with Second Presbyterian Church in Bloomington and the town of Normal to display the church's bell at Broadview's tower.

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DEREK BEIGH, THE PANTAGRAPH

NORMAL — Broadview Mansion seems to be attracting historical honors.

Six months after the property at 1301 S. Fell Ave. in Normal was added to the National Register of Historic Places, it will welcome an historic guest: the 1-ton bell that rang above Second Presbyterian Church in downtown Bloomington for more than a century.

"They attended Second Presbyterian," said Annette Klinzing, executive director of the mansion's Immanuel Bible Foundation, of the mansion's original owners, Bird and Margaret Van Leer. "It's like it was meant to be."

Second Presbyterian will lend the bell to the foundation started by Margaret Van Leer, and the organizations are working with the town of Normal, which contributes to the mansion's upkeep, to build a 4-foot-by-4-foot display at the base of Broadview's bell tower.

"I just thought, there ought to be a more complementary place for a historic bell," said David Strand, a church member and president of the foundation's board. "That tower is a pretty prominent piece of Bloomington-Normal, and it would be representative of one of the largest bells that previously hung there."

Normal's Historic Preservation Commission approved the project Tuesday, and the project is set to be completed this spring.

Klinzing hopes to restore the bell, which shows significant deterioration, but no plan has been finalized.

“The cost will be borne jointly by Immanuel Bible Foundation, private gifts and the town of Normal,” said Strand. “The expenditure from the town, and the whole project, will be minimal. ... I can’t give you an exact figure at the moment, but we’re certainly talking less than \$10,000 for the whole project.”

Both the bell and the tower have long, illustrious histories in the Twin Cities.

Church members are unsure whether the bell, which was manufactured by New York's storied Meneely bell foundry in 1868, was used in their first building, but it became a fixture of downtown Bloomington after a new Second Presbyterian Church opened in 1895.

"The bell was rung every Sunday for services as well as for weddings, and it would have been heard by the whole community. It was loud and regular," said Jeanie Wendt, chairwoman of the church's Heritage Committee. "There even was a New Year's Eve service held every year here, and the youth of the church got to go up and ring the bell at midnight."

Church members also don't know precisely when the bell stopped ringing, but it was at an inspector's request in the 1970s. The bell stayed in the tower until the church was demolished in 2004, but the replacement building has no tower.

After that, the bell was briefly displayed at one of the new church's entrances, but its wood display started decaying, and it was moved to the private, outdoor Felmley Dickerson storage area, said Strand.

Broadview's tower played briefly but strongly: after it was finished in 1939 and dedicated by Margaret to Bird, it played music on a 10-bell system, the smallest being only 2 pounds.

The bells rang twice a day, playing hymns heard by south Normal, across the Illinois Wesleyan University campus and beyond.

"(Margaret) would look out the window and decide what to play that day," said Klinzing of Van Leer's later years. "It was her peace."

After the bells were removed in 1979 and replaced with an audio system, they were lost or destroyed, Klinzing said. Today, even the audio system is quiet.

Second Presbyterian's bell will be displayed at the tower with two inscriptions: one describing its history at the church, and the other the mansion's story.

"The following inscription was engraved on one of the original bells that hung in the Broadview Mansion bell tower," the latter plaque is expected to say:

"Dedicated to the glory of God and in loving memory of Bird Calladay Van Leer, 1867-1933, by his wife, Margaret Langstaff Van Leer, 1939. Make a joyful noise unto the Lord. Come before his presence with singing."

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