



*Photo Courtesy of Mary Swander*

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## Belltower Triptych Part I: Ding Dong

MARY SWANDER

“**Y**ou find a school bell, Mary, and I’ll make that tower,” Joe, the Amish carpenter, told me one day when I met him on my bike on the gravel road that runs between our houses.

The Amish had just had their Fairview School Reunion at my house. They had filled a table with old songbooks, report cards, and photos of the schoolhouse cut from newspapers. One of the photos captured many of the then young neighbors walking up the lane, swinging their lunch buckets. A six-year-old Joe headed toward the steps where the teacher stood pulling the rope of the bell in the tower. Until I saw that photo, I had never known that the schoolhouse where I now live had housed a bell tower. Instantly, I wanted it restored.

And Joe was the guy to do it. But Joe was extremely busy running his own farm and his carpentry business. The Amish rarely say no. They say they’ll “think about it”. Or they’ll ask you to “check back in a couple of months.” Or, they’ll stall you out by giving you a task that they know is next to impossible to accomplish. Authentic antique school bells are hard to find. I’m sure that Joe figured my pocketbook or patience would soon run out.

First, I tried to find the original bell. One rumor said that the local auctioneer had it in his barn. But he had paid \$400.00 for the bell twenty years before. That was way beyond my budget. Another rumor said that the bell was in the museum in town. That was way beyond my control. So, I combed the newspapers for auctions and huddled together with other bidders in the rain and the snow, looking for a school bell. I found dinner bells and hand bells and sleigh bells, but no school bells.

Friends told me about collectors. I made phone



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calls and found church bells and fire station bells, and even a couple of real school bells that were priced three times as high as the auctioneer's. I got on the Internet. I found several moderately priced bells, but the shipping put them beyond reach.

I became discouraged and thought that maybe I would never find the right bell. I drove by Joe's place and waved and smiled, not wanting him to know of my pending defeat.

Then one Sunday afternoon a friend called me

from his cell phone. He was on I-80 and had just stopped at a flea market in Des Moines. There he had spied a school bell in good condition for \$75.00. I hopped in my car and drove four hours round trip, bought the bell, brought it back to the foundry at home, had it sand-blasted and painted. I pulled into Joe's lane with the rehabbed bell in the back of my car.

"Joe, Joe," I said. "Take a look at this! Isn't it perfect?"

"So, you've found a bell," was all Joe said. 🌿