

## **The Bizarre Journey of the Mexican Convent Bell**

The story of Santa Ana's prosthetic wooden leg is well known. It was captured by soldiers from Pekin during the 1846-1848 Mexican War and brought back home as "spoils of war." A short time later it was donated to the state and is currently among the holdings of the Illinois State Military Museum in Springfield.

Equally as curious, though perhaps not as well known, is the story of the stolen Mexican convent bell. Four soldiers from Pekin took it from a Catholic convent in Veracruz, Mexico, just a few days before they captured Santa Ana's wooden leg. The bell was originally cast in Valladolid, Spain, before finding its way to Veracruz.

### **How did it get to Pekin?**

The story as told in Charles C. Chapman's 1879 "History of Tazewell County" relates that the Pekin soldiers packed the bell with straw in an old flour barrel and shipped the bell to Pekin by steamboat. However, the March 19, 1904 edition of *The Catholic Columbian* describes a more adventuresome journey:

"They packed the bell in a hogshead of straw and directed it to Pekin, where it arrived several months later. At that time Pekin had no railroads and its traffic with the outside world was by steamboat.

The bell fell into the hands of the captain of the 'Prairie State.' He needed a bell and mounted it upon his boat, where it sounded for several years. Then one day the 'Prairie State' got into a race with another river steamer and blew up near the Pekin landing. A dozen people were killed and the bell blown off into the river. It rested there a couple of years until it was found by some youngsters in swimming."

The 'Prairie State' disaster was on April 25, 1852. While later stories placed the death count much higher, sources at the time listed a total of about 20 people killed or injured.

The 'Prairie State' story is not mentioned in the 1879 account, which came from the surviving soldiers themselves. That part of the bell's journey is probably not true. But it makes for a great story and illustrates how a tale can grow over time.

### **Bell returned to religious service**

Regardless of when or how the bell got to Pekin, it's known that it was presented to the trustees of the local Methodist church who installed it in their small wood framed church. According to Pekin's *Sesquicentennial History Book, 1824-1974*, "For 20 years the peculiar tones of its cracked chimes not only called Methodists to worship, but also sounded an alarm for local fires."

In 1867 the Methodists built a new, larger church and no longer needed the old bell. They sold it to St. Joseph's Parish and it was installed in the tower of the Catholic Church. They used it until 1904, when a new Catholic church, with a new bell, was built.

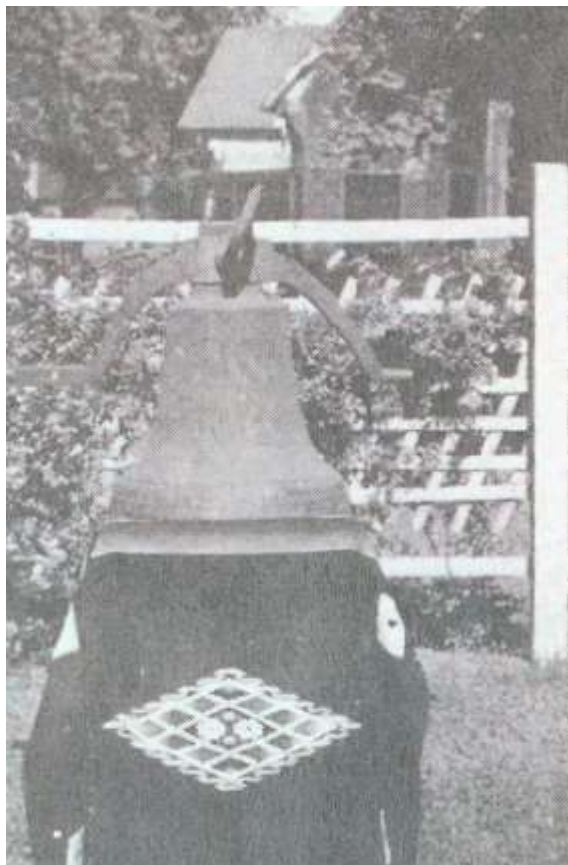
### **What Happened to the Bell?**

It is unclear what became of the bell after 1904. According to the March 19, 1904 edition of the *Catholic Columbian*, the St. Joseph parish "is erecting a fine new church, and the bell will go to the State."

Local historian William H. Bates said in his 1916 *Souvenir of Early and Notable Events* that "The bell is still in possession of St. Joseph's Society." A story in the 1949 *Pekin Centenary* said only that the bell is "no longer in use."

In a May 16, 1978 article in the *Pekin Daily Times* it was reported the bell was stored in the 1904 St. Joseph Church attic for a while. While the parish had discussed donating it to the State of Illinois, the article noted "its current location could not be determined."

Below left is a photo of the Mexican convent bell, from the collection of the late Lanson Pratt of Pekin. The photo on the right is the church bell from the 1904 St. Joseph Church. It was saved from the wrecking ball in 1966 and displayed in front of the new church. It will be relocated to an appropriate spot after the construction of the new parish center is completed in 2025.



**Sources:**

From the History Room

<https://fromthehistoryroom.wordpress.com/> pekinhistory 3:34 pm on November 4, 2016

Memories of Pekin's Mexican War Veterans by Jared Olar

From the History Room

<https://fromthehistoryroom.wordpress.com/> pekinhistory 11:29 am on July 6, 2018

Pekin's Seeds of Faith by Jared Olar, Library Assistant

Sesquicentennial History Book, 1824-1974: Commemorating 150 years of growth and development in the Celestial City by Culshaw, Robert et al. Publication date 1974; Publisher Pekin Chamber of Commerce, Pekin, IL

*History of Tazewell County – 1879* (Chas. C. Chapman & Co.)

*The Catholic Columbian*

Volume 29, Number 12, 19 March 1904

[www.thecatholicnewsarchive.org](http://www.thecatholicnewsarchive.org)

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