

# Old Fire Bell Becomes Treasured Keepsake

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"Hang on to the bell, Nellie," goes the old English song. Santa Cruz firemen are not concerned about Nellie or her father. They just want the bell.

What bell?

Appearing in the minutes of a city council meeting on March 18, 1878 was the following item:

"Councilman Skinner of the Third Ward reported to the council the weight and prices of fire bells he had inspected in San Francisco, suitable for this city.

"On motion the clerk was instructed to order a fire bell from W. T. Garratt of San Francisco, at a weight of 860 pounds and a cost of \$490."

By April the bell was paid for according to the minutes, which also reported that \$80 was paid to Police Chief Robert Liddell for March; \$2 for Manuel Antonne for working on the streets one day with his team of horses.

The new bell was hoisted atop a new city hall on Front street facing east, on a site now occupied by the court house annex (see photo). Here was located the first of two volunteer fire companies of Santa Cruz and their horse carts.

On the roof, in a special cupola, hung the bell. Then it was rung by a pull roop and clapper.

The large cast iron bell was a heavy thing and the city dads got to worrying that maybe it was too heavy for the building. So in the early '80s they had built a high wooden tower nearby.

Its last home was in another tower at the rear of the Church street firehouse, now the back of Leask's department store. It rang its last around 1940 when the present main fire house was built on Center street.

During its last stages of use an electronic hammer struck the side of the bell when an alarm system was triggered.

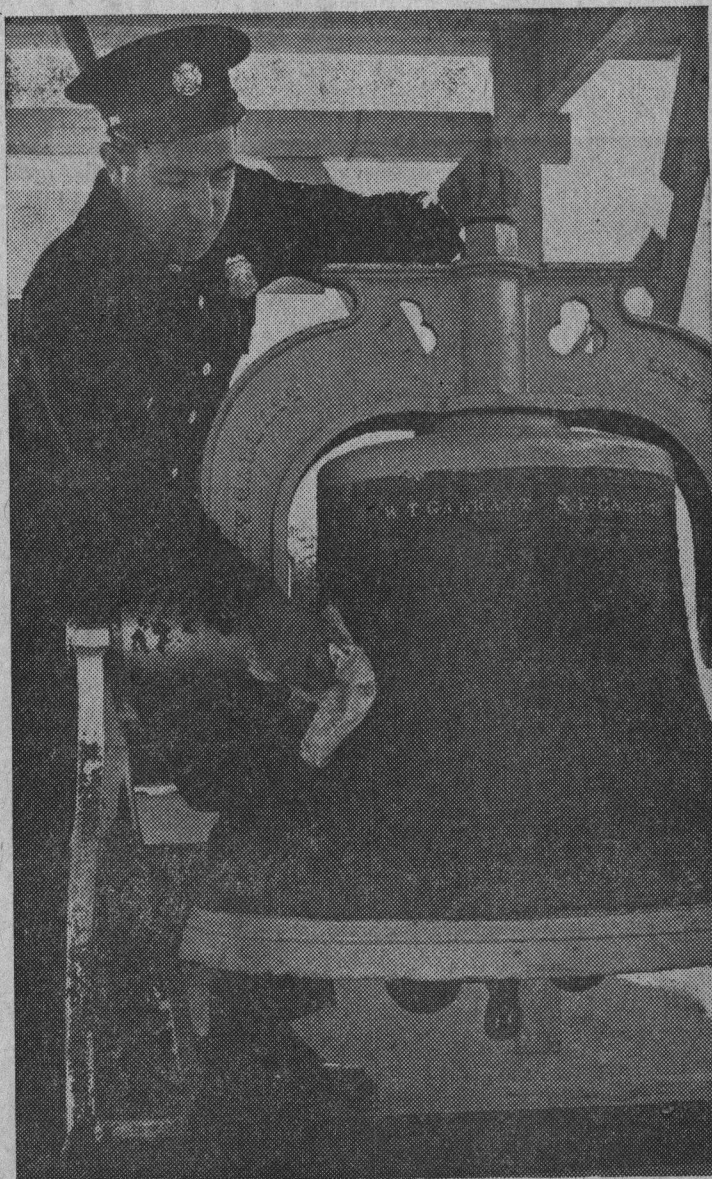
Fire Chief John T. Sinnott, who has served as a fireman for 37 years, said he remembers hearing the bell sound while he was in Soquel.

City Clerk Jack Miller, who dug into the old council minutes, said the bell used to sit in front of the present fire house. But kids would come along at night and give it a whack and make the sleeping firemen jump from their beds upstairs. It was moved to the back where it now rests.

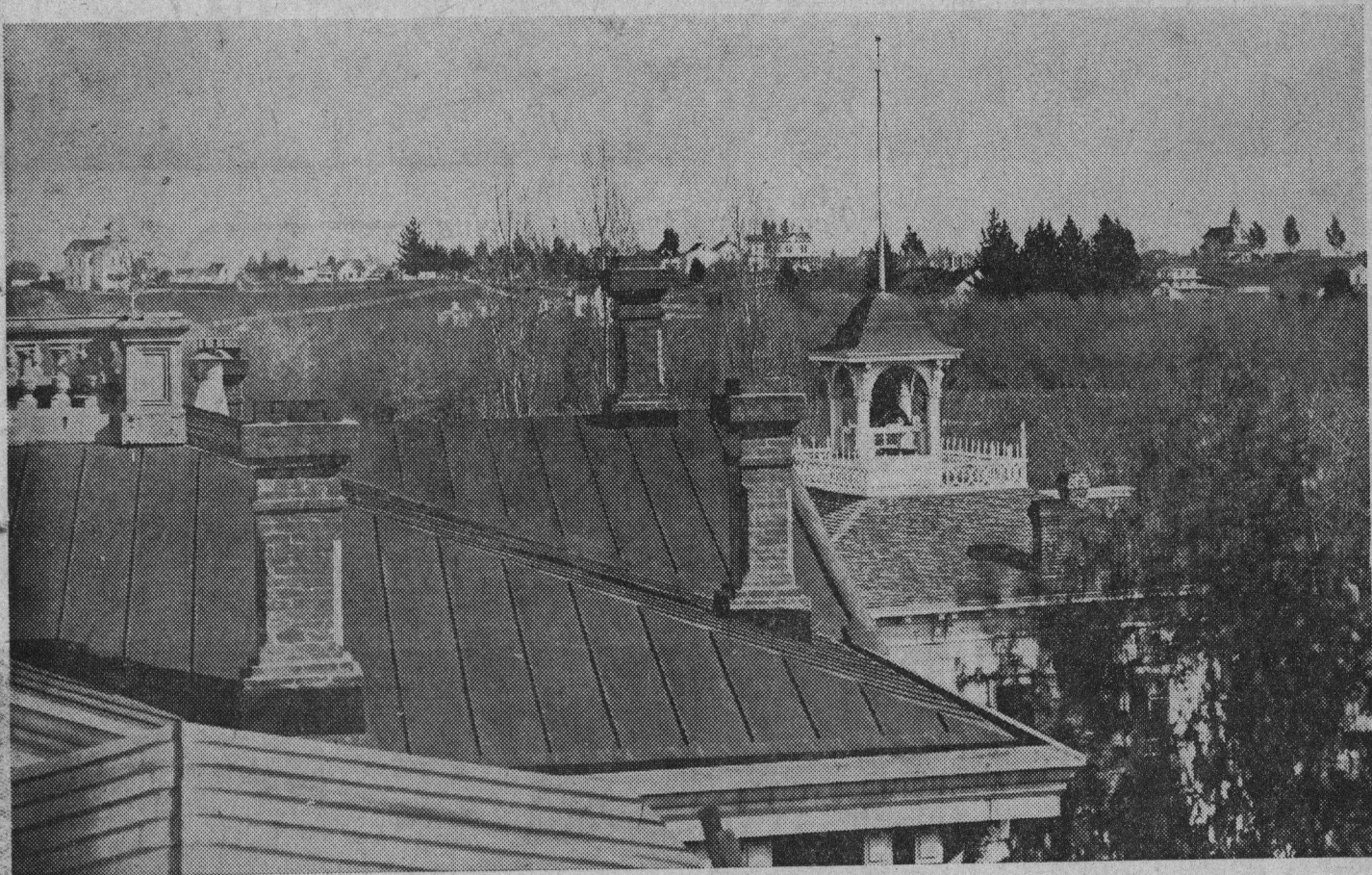
Miller said several parties have tried to purchase the bell, including the granddaughter of Garratt, the maker.

Most recently, officials of the Messiah Lutheran church approached the authorities about the relic for their new building on High street. Still, no dice.

The firemen believe it has a future in the trade. Someone can visualize it at least as a sentimental keepsake — maybe at the future firehouse on the University of California at Santa Cruz campus.



THE ORIGINAL Santa Cruz fire bell that called the volunteers to their stations now is a sentimental relic kept behind the main Santa Cruz firehouse on Center street. In use for 62 years, it was silenced in 1940 when the present firehouse was constructed. The city is keeping it around for future use, either as a museum piece or even for practical purposes. Fireman Harry Mayo, above, keeps the rust off of it.



FROM 1878 to the early '80's the old fire bell hung in the cupola of the the Santa Cruz city hall on Front street. This picture was taken by C. Aichberg before the bell was moved to a wooden tower nearby. Building in foreground is the courthouse which was built in 1867. Aichberg took this picture from the roof of the Ely building where he had his studio. Large structure on the hill, at left, is the old Branciforte school on Soquel avenue, now the location of Santa Cruz hospital. There still were many residences on Front street in those days (see right foreground) with orchards running behind them down to the river.