They are the heartbeat of Iowa State — these bells that have rung for 100 years. The chimes tick off the passage of time every 15 minutes, with an unfinished little tune that makes us anticipate the booming resolution that we know will come every hour. Few of us know the words to the tune (“Lord God of Hosts, be with us yet, Lest we forget, lest we forget”) but every Iowa Stater knows the melody. And we’re not about to forget.
THE Bells of IOWA STATE
CELEBRATING A CENTURY: 1899-1999
THE STANTON LEGACY

IT WAS MAY 1872, and one day after Edgar Williams Stanton received his diploma from Iowa State College, he was asked to join the mathematics faculty. Thus began a lifetime of service to his alma mater that included heading the math department, leading the Division of Industrial Science as dean, and serving as acting president on four different occasions.

He was popular with his students, who called him “Stany.” Wrote one of his students, “Prof. Stanton was the finest teacher of mathematics I have ever seen. He was universally loved by everyone who had the privilege of knowing him.” – George Washington Carver.

For their first two years of marriage, Stanton and Margaret Price MacDonald lived in Old Main, the administrative building that also served as dormitory. He and Margaret were a team. She shared his love for the students of Iowa State, and was often called upon by the college physician to assist with student illnesses and emergency operations.

Margaret died at the age of 50. Stanton could think of no honor more befitting her memory than bells that would speak to faculty, students, and townspeople alike. When Stanton died, his second wife added 26 bells to the 10 he had purchased in Margaret’s memory. The tower and its bells became known as the Edgar W. and Margaret MacDonald Stanton Memorial Carillon. The Stantons’ spirit of devotion to the bells of Iowa State lives today in the 27 people who volunteer their time and resources as members of the Stanton Memorial Carillon Foundation.

100 YEARS

THE 10 LONG-AWAITED bells had arrived. Although university officials cared deeply about the fact that the bells were the first-ever scientifically tuned bells in North America and were certain that their delivery from England to Iowa was historic, two facts were the most salient: The bells were really big. And it was really cold out.

An unnamed expert had promised to oversee the bells’ installation, but when the beautiful but mammoth hunks of copper...
AGO: THE BEGINNING

When the final bell had been installed, one of the workers, a student named D.C. Thomas, picked out a simple rendition of *Home Sweet Home*. Professor Edgar Stanton heard the melody, admitted that he couldn't tell one tune from another — it sounded good to him — and asked Thomas to be the official “chimer.”

There was no immediate dedication of the bells. The winter of 1899 was one of blizzards, extreme cold, and a severe typhoid epidemic.

(TIMELINE)

1898
Iowa State constructs the Campanile using administrative funds.

1899
Edgar Stanton donates the first 10 bells in memory of his late wife.

1929
Following Stanton's death, 26 bells and a playing console are added in his memory.

1930s
The clock pendulum and weights are replaced by an electric motor. The lighted, translucent clock faces are installed by the class of 1933.

1954
The Stanton Memorial Carillon Foundation is established. It remains active today.

1956
13 additional treble bells and a new playing console are purchased by the Stanton Foundation.

1967
The fiftieth bell is added.

1970s
The first floor of the Campanile is paneled and the playing cabin is insulated, heated, and air conditioned. The tower's exterior is conditioned.

1992
The Foundation's Partnership for Prominence Campaign and an endowment provide for much-needed renovation funds.

1994
Renovation is completed, including a new roof, brick repair, new clock movements, and a digital control system to coordinate the operation of the clock and chimes. The bells receive new clappers and are redesigned and repositioned. New playing and practice consoles are purchased.
JIM WILSON AND his wife Alice were homeless and jobless when they left Ames and Iowa State College in 1931, in the depths of the Depression. They had a newborn baby, a toddler, a precarious Chevrolet, a tent, and $212. And that was it.

Wilson's teaching job in the English Department had ended abruptly when a new department head asked the young instructor to get some English credentials if he was to continue teaching. Wilson, as he was to write later, "told Dr. Derby what I thought of graduate study in English and what it did to folks who might otherwise have been good teachers," and packed his sparse bags.

The family headed east, where Wilson had secured a few paying lecture gigs. They set up their tent on the shore of Lake Michigan in the Indiana Dunes State Park, and began searching for a place to live until Wilson's first lecture date, three months away. Alice washed the kids' diapers in a five-gallon can, while Jim creatively secured food.

They found their perfect house — a little green shingled cottage in an acre of oak woods in the Lake Michigan Dunes. But the price was $1,600, with a $100 down payment. It might as well have been $50,000. The family kept looking.

And then one day, a manila envelope arrived from the Iowa State Alumni Association. Just before he left, Wilson had submitted music and lyrics in a contest the association was conducting for a new school song. (Although the contest was just for new lyrics, Wilson, deciding the old tune was even worse than the old words, had characteristically rewritten the whole thing.) The letter inside informed the young writer that his song had tied for first place with one by a professional Chicago composer. The association was sending the manuscripts back for last-minute tweaking before the final judging.

But Wilson needed a piano. So he drove into a nearby town, found the most imposing house he could, and asked the grandmotherly woman who answered the door if she had a piano. "Oh, yes," she answered. "We already have one."

"I don't want to sell you one," Wilson answered. "I need one for myself — for a little while."

When he explained why he needed her piano, the woman flung open the door, exclaimed that her daughter was the former head of the Home Economics Department at Iowa State, and invited the family in not only to play the piano, but for breakfast as well. While Alice and the kids ate ham and eggs, Jim worked out a few improvements in the harmony of The Bells of Iowa State.

Ten days later, Jim received a check for $100. His song had won. The check was immediately endorsed to the owner of the little green cottage in the woods and the family moved in.

A year before his death in 1995 at the age of 93, Wilson was an honored speaker at the rededication of the Campanile, which had inspired his song. "I'm gratified that I've been able to leave a few significant footprints during my journey through life," he told his audience. "Next to fathering three fantastic children, I think maybe the most important thing I ever did was to write The Bells of Iowa State."
THE DISSONANCE DEBATE

TODAY, MUSICIANS CHOOSE, perform, and listen to carillon music with a great deal more sophistication than Iowa State's early amateurs.

Bell music is unique and not for everyone, says Tin-Shi Tam, ISU professor of music and carillonneur. The bells' metallic material produces overtones that are different than those produced by any other instrument. The combination of notes that result from a bell (even a perfectly tuned one) is a minor third — which makes the melody sound out of tune.

But an interesting thing goes on in the brain of the bell-listener, says Jeff Prater, composer and ISU professor of music. The ISU student, as he plods to class, seemingly oblivious to the tune chiming from central campus, is actually engaged in a sophisticated but unconscious process.

"Apparently, the brain 'hears' the tune, compares it to the overtones it's accustomed to, reacts with 'that's really strange!' and supplies information (missing notes) based on what it expects, rather than what's really there," says Prater.

"The music of the bells gives the listener a sense of uncertainty. It's no wonder that bells are associated with death and mystical rites of passage; the music is kind of other-worldly."

But in the early days of the Iowa State bells, there was apparently a little too much uncertainty. With only 10 bells to play on a lumbering chime mechanism, untrained players demanded more from the creative brains of their listeners than could be reasonably expected.

Writes Ira Schroeder, carillonneur for 38 years, "In 1931 when I arrived to play the carillon, there were still reverberations of considerable unhappiness with the playing of the 10 bells. I was told time and time again about poor rhythm and wrong notes. I was told that if there was a note in a melodic line for which there was no bell, some chimers would substitute another bell or just leave it out."

THE BELL PLAYERS

THEIR INSTRUMENT IS THE MOST PUBLIC OF ALL INSTRUMENTS, BUT THEY ARE INVISIBLE. THEY KNOW THAT MANY OF THEIR LISTENERS AREN'T EVEN AWARE THAT "THERE'S SOMEBODY UP THERE." THEIR MUSIC IS A GIFT.

Co-carillonneurs
SEAMAN KNAPP COULDN'T say no. His fiancée, Laura Storms wanted him to teach her how to play the carillon. Knapp, a nephew of carillon benefactor E.W. Stanton, was the official student player. So together, they climbed the tower for bell lessons. The year was 1906.

But when Laura Storms announced that she was ready to perform and Knapp asked his uncle's permission, he was stiffly told that "a girl can't do it." Knapp responded with a proposal. The next noon he and Laura Storms would take turns playing. If his uncle couldn't tell the difference, Laura was in.

They did. Stanton couldn't. Knapp and Storms were co-carillonneurs until they graduated.

Glasses and shoes
Ira Schroeder was hot. He was also invisible, high in the tower on that summer Sunday afternoon in 1932 – so what the heck. He placed a towel on the bench so he wouldn't slide around, and stripped down to his glasses and shoes. When he heard footsteps, he thought it was the janitor.

He turned to face two women. "They were obviously very startled," said Schroeder, in a 1991 interview. "I said, 'Well, you picked the lock or managed some way to get up here, and now I'll just have to ask you to leave.' As they did, I heard one say to the other, 'And to think we drove all the way from Cedar Rapids to see this!'"

A lighter touch
By now, Tin-Shi Tam, Iowa State's fifth carillonneur, is accustomed to the reactions of many of the visitors who laboriously climb the 80 steps to her tower. "I thought," they gasp, "that you'd be...bigger."

Although the petite Tam acknowledges that it takes strength to play the carillon, improved mechanization has allowed a lighter touch. Trained on the organ and piano, Tam is one of only a few female professional carillonneurs.

In the past, the daunting nature of the tower favored male players. "If you go to visit some of the carillons in Europe, you see that Iowa State's carillon is actually very easy to get into," Tam says. "Many other carillons have old towers, with an average of 300 steps. And sometimes they don't even have steps. Sometimes you have to climb up wooden ladders – and climb across the attic of a church."

Tam, who arrived at ISU in 1994, teaches carillon to about six students every semester. This year, she had her first female student.

"I try to wipe out the concept that playing the carillon is just pounding on the keys – that you have to play it loud and you can't do anything else. Carillon music can be expressive and musical."

One of Tam's goals is to make the carillon and its music more accessible to students. Anyone is welcome to visit during her noon performances, and on Fridays she takes requests. (She's been asked to play Chicago's "Color My World," and even "Chopsticks.")
TRADITIONS

IT'S A PRETTY good guess that the stately Edgar Stanton would have been nonplused at the tradition that grew from his generous gift. He was confident that the chimes would inspire students to holy thoughts, writing in a letter to the Board of Trustees in 1895, "I would have our college chimes such that they will turn the thoughts of student and teacher for the moment from daily cares to holier thinking..."

But every Iowa Stater knows that one of the most important functions of Stanton's gift is to serve as the place where an Iowa State student truly becomes an Iowa Stater. (The earlier tradition that specified that a woman becomes a coed when she is kissed has been broadened to include men as well.) This magical transformation takes effect when a couple kisses under the Campanile. The best time is the stroke of midnight.

Mr. Stanton would have really blinked at the later elaboration on the old tradition. If one of the students is a virgin, a brick will fall out of the Campanile. Dick von Grabow, carillonneur from 1973 to 1991, reported that in his tenure, there were no errant bricks. "One time, though, I came down and found a whole bunch of Styrofoam bricks scattered around on the ground."

Bell Players
Student bell-ringers, 1899-1931
Ira Schroeder, 1931-1969
Bruce Eberle, 1969-1971
Tin-shi Tam, 1994-present
MISSING A BEAT

AS STEADY AS IOWA STATE'S HEARTBEAT HAS BEEN, ITS PAST 100 YEARS HAVE NOT BEEN WITHOUT SOME FLUTTERS AND MISSED BEATS.

1936
ONE OF THE first crises for the bells came in 1936. The second set of bells had been successfully installed (bringing the number of bells from 10 to 36), and 50,000 people – the largest crowd ever to congregate on campus – had attended the dedication.

And then a religious group on campus began fighting fiercely for a small chapel to be built on central campus, next to the Campanile.

Those who understood that Dean Stanton and past President Beardshear had selected the Campanile’s site so that the sound would not be distorted by other buildings, fought just as fiercely for its continued isolation.

They won, and today it is unthinkable that any structure would ever mar the visual beauty of central campus, or deflect the sound of the bells.

1991
The years had taken their toll. The Campanile and bells needed major renovation – to the tune of $350,000. But not only could the university not afford the repairs, it couldn’t even afford to replace retiring carillonneur, Dick von Grabow. It was a time of tightened belts and budget cuts. In May 1991, for the first time since they rang out 93 years before, the bells stopped.

But heartbeats do not stop without attracting attention. And one of the earthlings paying a lot of attention was a disc jockey named Kenn McCloud, who locked himself in the silent Campanile, played Louie, Louie, and vowed not to come out again until he had raised $10,000 – enough to pay a guest carillonneur.

ISU students brought McCloud pizzas, hamburgers, and good cheer. They also brought him money. The story made national news, and alumni throughout the country began to contribute. The five-day lock-in eventually resulted not only in students, staff, townspeople, and alumni contributing $10,000 – but in the beginning of a major crusade. The campaign that followed raised the balance of the money needed for renovations and a carillonneur. It also prompted a million dollar endowment that ensured the tower and the bells' continued health.

And the first piece to be played by newly-hired carillonneur Marilyn Anderson? Why Louie, Louie, of course.
IN THE LATE 1980s and early 1990s, former ISU students Thomas Sutherland, '56, and Terry Anderson were Lebanese hostages. Iowa State and the nation kept a vigil over the men, as their years in captivity grew. Every year on the anniversary of their kidnapping, the Campanile bells tolled.

On Nov. 18, 1991, six years after he had been taken hostage, Sutherland was released. During the first press conference after his release, Sutherland told the world, "I was very, very moved when I heard on Voice of America a recording of the bells of Iowa State, which I particularly appreciated hearing when I was a student there on campus."

"So when I heard them ring out 72 bells on the occasion of my 72nd month in captivity, I was extremely happy. So to Iowa State, I would say, 'Keep the bells ringing.'"