

The legend of the Bell Tower

By LES HAMASHIMA
Tar Heel Staff Writer

I climbed up the black, wrought-iron ladder bolted into the North wall and poked my head through the opening in the ceiling into the room above. Each brick wall of the tiny cubicle was dominated by a 9-foot wide, translucent clock dial made of glass. A red, steel pedestal in the center of the room supported a small electric motor that radiated a spindly arm to each of the massive dials. I pulled myself up into the room to get a closer look, and as I walked over the cement floor, carcasses of flies and wasps crunched under my shoes. The room was warm and musty in this most recognized, and least traveled, landmark in Chapel Hill: the Morehead-Patterson Memorial Tower.

The tower, commonly known as the Bell Tower, is the result of persistent efforts by John Motley Morehead III, an industrialist and founder of the Morehead Foundation. In the late 1920s, Morehead wanted to donate

musical chimes to be placed in South Building on the UNC campus. The UNC Board of Trustees rejected his offer because Morehead stipulated that the name of South Building be changed to Morehead Hall in return for the gift. The trustees felt that the name South Building had already reached historical and traditional significance.

Morehead tried again the next year, offering the same donation but in a different location. Construction of the library was nearing completion and the plans called for a copper dome to be fitted over the rotunda. Morehead proposed that his tower of chimes be placed on top of the library instead of the golden dome. William M. Kendall, consulting architect on the library project, argued that fitting the library with a smooth copper dome would be more aesthetically pleasing than a tower. Also, the University librarian, Louis Round Wilson, said that it would be difficult for students to study in the library with bells clanging overhead. Morehead's donation was refused.

The University finally agreed to permit Morehead to build a structure directly south of the new library. Morehead contacted Rufus Lenoir Patterson II, an inventor and friend, and proposed that they make a donation jointly in honor of their families. Enthusiastically, Patterson agreed and construction began on an elaborate campanile of Italian and Roman design that would cost almost \$1 million to build.

On Nov. 26, 1931 — Thanksgiving Day — the 172-foot Morehead-Patterson Memorial Tower was officially donated to the University. Frank Patterson, then associate editor of the *Baltimore Sun*, presented the Bell Tower to N.C. Governor O. Max Gardner, who received the gift on behalf of the State and the University. The tune "The Bells of St. Mary" was the first public performance of the carillon.

Since the dedication of the Bell Tower, song selections have changed, and many old traditions have died. The most requested songs in 1947 were "Chopsticks" and "La Cucaracha," said Kenneth Ross, who was Master Bellringer that year. His name and those of 25 other Master Bellringers are inscribed in gold-leaf on a plaque inside the tower.

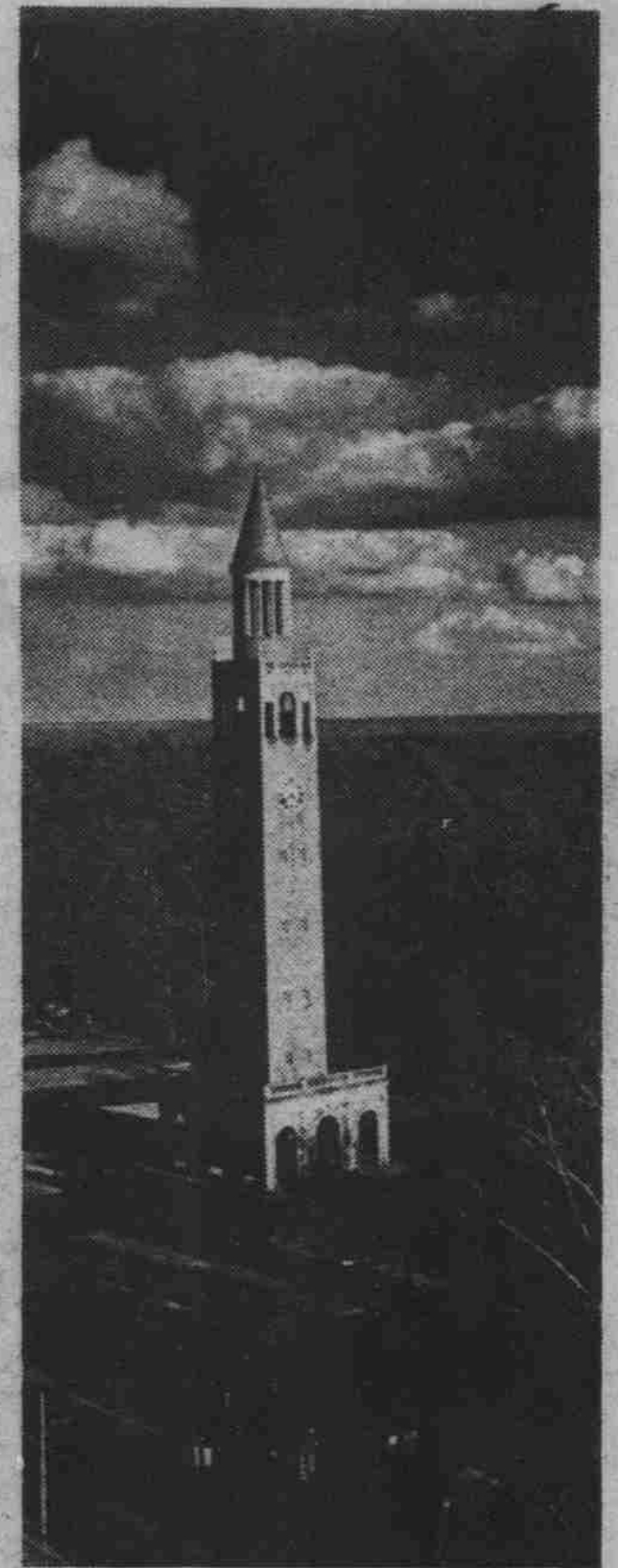
There is no official bellringer anymore because the chime system is programmed by a spindle player, similar to the operation of a music box. There are nine selections, including "Greensleeves," "Scotch Medley" and "Way-faring Stranger."

The 12 original bells are still used, but by modern standards the musical ability of only 12 bells is poor. Al Marien, a recently retired UNC music professor, said in an article for the *Alumni News* that the Bell Tower has "more value as an antique than a musical instrument."

Major John Yesulaitis, director of the UNC University Band, is one of the few interested in the welfare of the Bell Tower's chimes. "I took this over because no one else wanted to," he said. Yesulaitis is also dissatisfied with the limited number of notes because there are many tunes beyond the chimes' range. He would like to purchase additional bells and believes that with the addition of 23 bells the system could become one of the most significant in the South. The cost of such a project this year would be about \$80,000, he said.

Some of the musical qualities may be lacking, but the physical structure of the Carolina-brick and Indiana limestone tower is in fine condition, said Ed Sanders, maintenance superintendent of the physical plant. He said that vandalism is not a problem because "they'd rather do something to the Old Well or South Building."

On one occasion Sanders was concerned about the welfare of the grounds. "In the late 1970s the Bell Tower was the meeting place for the High Nooners. The High Nooners were



The Bell Tower

pot smokers that gathered around the Bell Tower at noon to get high and celebrate the tolling of the 12 strikes of noon. Sometimes there were up to 1,200 people around the tower trampling the boxwoods." Embarrassed UNC officials and police scared most of the High Nooners away by snapping pictures of people at the gatherings and threatening to give the photographs to newspapers.

At dusk, the shadows of the arches that line the open arcade fall across the golden-brown granite slab of dedication. Carved into the crystalline stone are the words: "To perpetuate the memory of those members of the Morehead and Patterson families who have from the foundation of this University been associated with its activities as trustees, teachers of students..." At 9:06 p.m. the 12 bells, each inscribed with the name of a Morehead or a Patterson, chime their final melody of the day over the campus of UNC.

BLOOM COUNTY

by Berke Breathed



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