

# A bell-ringing tradition returns to Westford

By GORDON B. SEAVEY

WESTFORD — Silent for nearly a quarter of a century, the big bronze bell in the tower of the former Abbot Worsted Company mill at Forge Village will ring out once more.

This time its sound is to remind the townspeople that Westford will be celebrating the 250th year of its founding come September 23. But for a hundred years, the ringing of this bell was to sound the curfew at evening's end, usually at 9 o'clock.

At the suggestion of the Westford Historical Commission, The Murray Printing Company, which now owns the huge complex, quickly came forward in support of the idea.

Soon the bell will ring briefly each evening, floating symbolic sweet sounds throughout the Stony Brook Valley and across nearby Forge Pond.

Old residents have missed this quaint custom of "sounding the curfew" which the Abbot family, from the earliest days after its founding of the mills in Westford in 1855, had encouraged.

The ringing of the curfew is an old French custom, meaning the time for the lights in the village to go out, and the fires covered at night.

The Abbots, among the town's earliest settlers, were of English ancestry. It would seem that they borrowed the bell-ringing conception from the custom William the Conqueror introduced to that country in the Middle Ages.

When the first Abbot mill was founded in Graniteville in 1855, the management made the ringing of a bell as a "good night" message. Unfortunately for the sleepy head in the morning, the bell clanged as an alarm clock to notify the mill worker that there was work to be done. This was usually at 5.30 a.m.

THE BELL which will be used during the pre-anniversary observance is one which was cast just a century ago. It came from the Boston foundry of William Blake & Company, formerly H. W. Hooper & Co., and is dated A.D. 1879. The Hooper Company was a successor to the Paul Revere foundry.

This bell is located in the cupola of the four-story ornate tower, of a mill building erected in 1910 on the site of the original Horseshoe Nail factory and faces the mill dam and raceway. It is known that over the years officers of the old company prided themselves on their concern for the town's beauty and so this lavishly designed tower, for an industrial building, is not surprising.

An alloy of tin and copper, the bell is 15 inches wide at its top, the mouth is 29 inches wide and its height is 22 inches. The thickness of the metal is about an inch, and its weight has been forgotten.

A wooden wheel, 44 inches in diameter, is attached to a shaft at the top of the bell. A stout rope around the wheel, when pulled, swings the bell forward; its weight brings it back. When moved in a sufficiently wide arc, a metal clapper suspended inside strikes the edge of the bell. This causes the metal to vibrate and the musical note is emitted.

JOHN A. WALANTIS, president of The Murray Company, quickly endorsed the suggestion when approached. Although he had never heard the nice tone of the bell, silenced in 1956 when Abbot Worsted ceased operation, he liked the idea. And now that he has tested the bell himself, he likes it all the more.

He prepared immediately to "grease the wheels" by asking plant engineer Robert A. Allard to inspect the bell tower and the supports for the heavy bell and its base.

Reactivation was not an arduous task.

All that was needed was to lubricate the shaft bearings and to test the swinging action of the bell itself. A new rope extends to the ground floor to permit the bell-ringer, usually

a night watchman, to sound the curfew.

Wallace MacQuarrie, assistant to the selectmen, recalls that he pulled the rope many times when he was employed by Abbot and on his way home at night.

With an official blessing from the selectmen, the curfew is now ready to be sounded each evening. No request was made to revive the early morning ringing.

**BELLS PLAYED** an important part in Westford's early life.

Ringling of the town bell not only brought people to worship and town meetings, but was used to announce a death and as a fire alarm.

It is thought that a belfry once stood near the head of the common which housed a bell to be used also as an alarm in case of an Indian attack. Fortunately for Westford, this concern was not needed. No doubt this bell sounded when Westford men met on the Common in the early hours of April 19, 1775, to march on Concord.

In 1793, the town voted to build a "belfree at the west end of the meetinghouse & in the same form as Chelmsford." This meetinghouse, to replace one recently destroyed, was the town's third and construction started the next year and the dedication came the following year.

The bell in the meetinghouse was tolled when news arrived of the death of President Woodrow Wilson. It rung again, at the time Abiel J. Abbot, the prominent industrialist, died in 1921.

Probably the most important bell in town is the one made by Paul Revere for the original Westford Academy building, dated 1794. Later, cracks appeared (possibly from husky ringing on the 4th of July) which affected the quality of tone. It was then recast by the Hooper foundry. This bell now is on exhibition in the lobby of the new Westford Academy on Patten Road.

There are many graduates of the Academy who recall Principal William C. Roudenbush pulling the bell rope to summon students to class in the morning and again after lunch. This he did for 25 years. Then, there was husky Mattie Crocker, who, as principal of the Frost School, shook a loud bell from a second floor window, calling students from recess on the Whitney Playground.

A **MINIATURE HURRICANE** in 1977 toppled the steeple above the cupola and weakened its supports at the second Academy building, now the Roudenbush Community Center, causing removal of that bell. It is now in storage awaiting placement in the town museum. The bell was a gift of John W. abbot, and weighs 1,200 pounds.

Many old-timers will recall "Recitation Days" in school and in the town hall. A favorite "Piece" was a poem by Rose Hartwick Thrope, who was mostly known for "The Curfew Must Not Ring Tonight." Here's a stanza which came forth from the lips of budding elocutionists with much expression and swinging of arms:

"Long, long year I've rung the curfew from that gloomy, shadowed tower;

Every evening, just at sunset, it has told the twilight hour;

I have done my duty ever, tried to do it just and right,

Now I'm old I will not falter, Curfew it must ring tonight."

Westford's observance of its long history will mean that much nostalgia will appear, blended with the new.

Listen at eventide.

The soft, rich tone of the "Good Night" bell, sifting through the village and the valley at dusk, will be a new experience to many, but one memory which is surely to endure for many more years to come.