The Grand Old Bell at Holy Infancy

The Original Edifice, 1865

Tradition has dictated that the original site for Holy Infancy Roman Catholic Church at E. 4th and Taylor Sts. was donated by the Moravian Church (see *Borough of South Bethlehem Semi-Centennial, 1915*). However, a deed search revealed the property was sold to "South Bethlehem Catholics and Rev. Wood, Bishop of Philadelphia" by "**Joseph McMichael** and Wife," on Sept. 29, 1863, for $500.

The New Edifice, 1886

Designed by Phila. architect **Edwin Forrest Durang**, the new Gothic Revival church measured 67 feet by 147 feet, built of stone in the Perpendicular Style. Topped with a cross, the distinctive, centrally located 196-foot spire was lowered and modified during WWII.

James Wohlbach** headed construction, **John Stewart Allam** provided the church's carpentry work, and millwork furnished by **Ritter & Beck**—all of South Bethlehem.

Rev. Philip McEnroe ordered the bell for $550 (worth $14,000 today) from McShane Bell Foundry, Baltimore, MD. The bell arrived by rail and was installed in the tower with 95 feet of rope. Archbishop **Patrick John Ryan** dedicated the church in 1886.
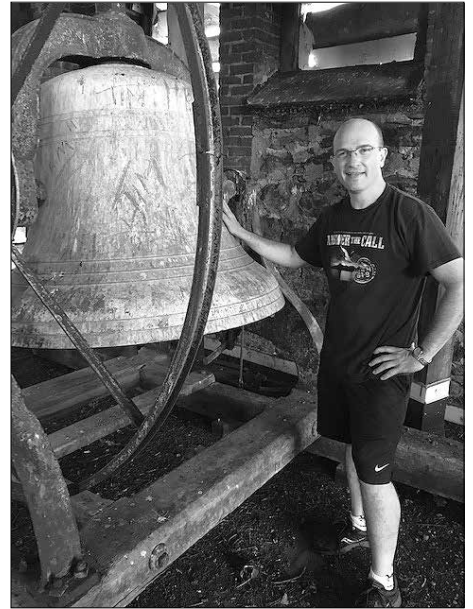
by Rosemary C. Buffington

It was May 1886, and the bright new belfry of the recently finished Holy Infancy Church impressed the local and out-of-town crowd assembled for its dedication. Perched high above South Bethlehem and the Iron Works, the 2,520 lb. bronze bell would thereafter toll for weddings and funerals, call people to Mass, and mark the slow passage of time with the *Angelus* thrice each day.

This most handsome bell was cast by the McShane Bell Company, America's oldest bell foundry, then located in Baltimore and still in operation today.

Now fast-forward . . . while silent now for many years due to degradation of its massive wooden and iron supports, **Rev. Andrew Gehringer** scaled the steps last year to inspect the 134 year-old historic bell.

Rev. Andrew Gehringer inspects the grand old bell in the Holy Infancy Church belfry. On close examination, he discovered the inscription of the bell's donors.

He photographed an interesting inscription on the bell, marking a forgotten message:

> ***"Donated to the Church of the Holy Infancy, South Bethlehem, Pa., by three friends of the Pastor and his people, May 1, 1886"***

So who were those three donor friends? Three Protestants, it turns out.

Based on a contemporaneous article in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, the three friends who donated the bell were the apex of Iron Works management: **William Thurston**, then president of the Bethlehem Iron Works, who had also founded the Children's Home of South Bethlehem after the 1882 smallpox epidemic; **John Fritz**, General Superintendent and Chief Engineer of the Bethlehem Iron Works; and **Samuel Adams, Jr.**, Iron Works executive and mining expert. The remaining cost of the church was funded by parishioners, who donated one day's wage every month— for 4 years.

Another *Philadelphia Inquirer* story at Christmas in 1908, told of a fellow who rang the bell to free himself from the locked church: *"South Bethlehem, Pa., Dec. 24. --* **Daniel Grainey** attended special services last night, and as he continued in his pew in an attitude of prayer as the congregation [walked] out, many remarked concerning his devotion. But in reality Grainey was asleep. The janitor failed to notice him as he closed the edifice, and Grainey slept on well into the night.

When he awoke, he found himself in total darkness. Groping his way to the belfry, Grainey tugged at the rope. As the ringing tones floated out on the cool night air, a number of the congregation's members gathered, some fearing that the handsome edifice was afire; others thought that their beloved pastor, the aged **Rev. Philip McEnroe**, had died.

"Finally, some brave person ventured into the church and released Grainey."

Here's hoping the Grand Old Bell of Holy Infancy may toll again some day.