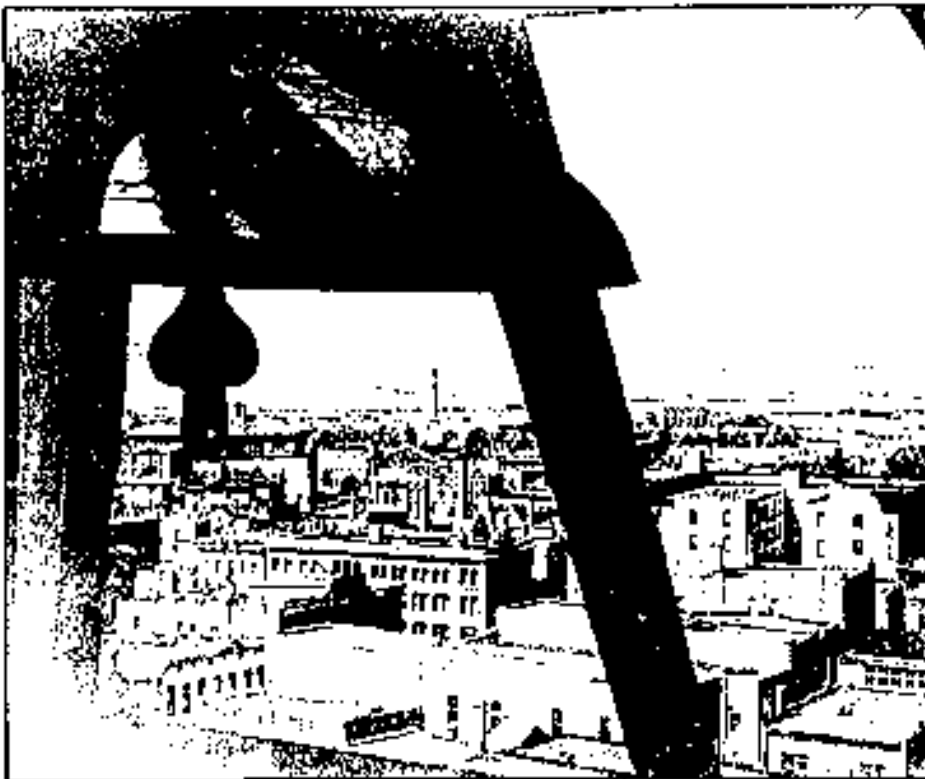


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***MORE QUARRIES FROM  
LAST CHANCE GULCH***

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# **Helena's first fire bell began career on steamboat Tacony**



*Helena's much-traveled fire-alarm bell—like the Tower itself—remains a symbol of the town's commitment to its historical past.*

Since the construction of Helena's original Fire Tower in 1874, two bells have served long terms on Tower Hill. In fact, for a time in the 1940s, both bells occupied the Tower. The historical confusions concerning Helena's fire bells only begin here.

The city of Helena erected the large claxon - the Grand Silver Bell currently located in the south

approach to the Civic Center - in 1886. It replaced the storied bell currently located in the Tower. That smaller bell proved remarkably well-traveled: and it almost failed to return to Helena from its last trip!

Helena's first official fire bell began its career on a steamboat. Cast of iron by the Gould Manufacturing Company of Seneca Falls, New York, the bell carried typical riverboat figures: 33 inches in diameter; about 700 pounds, including the frame. In 1864 craftsmen in Paducah, Kentucky, mounted it on the newly constructed side-wheeler Tacony. This 293-ton packet operated out of St. Louis. It made its first trip to the upper Missouri in 1866, reaching Fort Benton in mid-June.

The Tacony's 1869 Missouri River run, however, proved a disaster. First, low water made it slate-season ascent difficult. Then - as the steamer reached Big Dry Creek (now under Fort Peck Lake) - its crew seized the vessel and its cargo for nonpayment of wages. For months long-distance legal wrangling swirled around the owners, the Lexington Railroad and Transportation Company. Finally the Missouri's slush ice trapped the Tacony, and Deputy U.S. Marshall William R. Norris arrived to secure the vessel and what remained of its cargo.

Despite Norris's precautions, the 1870 spring breakup of Missouri River ice ripped holes in the Tacony. Federal officers authorized the sale of the wreck for salvage in 1871. Andrew Jackson Edwards, a Helena justice of the peace, successfully bid \$150 for the hulk and spent the better part of a year freighting his booty to Helena. Among Edward's prizes was the Gould bell from the Tacony's bridge.

The fledgling community of Helena already had suffered devastating fires in 1869, 1871, and 1872. In 1873 the Gulch's businessmen subscribed to purchase the Gould bell from Edwards. They erected it on a wooden frame beside their

watchman's original lookout platform on Tower Hill. When construction of the current, more substantial Fire Tower finished in 1874, volunteers erected the Gould bell beneath the penthouse.

For better than a decade, the Tacony bell provided Helena with yeoman service. However, as the community grew, civic leaders decided that the Tower needed a larger alarm bell - one that could be heard in the ever-spreading neighborhoods. On March 24, 1886, workmen lowered the Gould bell from the Tower, to replace it with the Grand Silver Bell cast especially for that purpose.

The Tacony bell next moved downriver, to Great Falls. The young settlement's leaders believed an alarm bell essential to their new fire department. So, in October, 1887, Phil Gibson (son of Great Falls' founding-father Paris Gibson) purchased the Gould bell from the city of Helena for \$150 and hauled it away.

The bell served Great Falls well for several years, until that town's growth also dictated its replacement with a large bell. The Great Falls Fire Department installed the bell at the rear of its truck house during the 1890s. Then, for a number of years, the bell sat as a display piece in Black Eagle Park.

Heleneans made one attempt to retrieve the Gould bell from the City of Great Falls at the turn of the century, but received a harsh rebuff. In 1939, as the community's 75th anniversary loomed, Helena civic leader Jack Haytin again investigated the possibility of purchasing the bell.

Following some spirited name-calling and vitriol, members of the Great Falls City Council voted to give the bell to the people of Helena as a gesture of friendship.

On May 10, 1939, in a short, simple ceremony, the Electric City's Mayor Julius J. Wuerthner affected the formal transfer. Helena Mayor Albert J. Roberts, future-mayor (1940-1946) Haytin, with Marguerite Greenfield and Marie Southworth of the Helena Landmarks Association (then raising money to restore the Fire Tower), accepted the historical gift on behalf of Helena. Mayor Roberts remarked (*Helena Daily Independent*, May 11, 1939): "The People of Helena are glad to have it returned in such a delightful way and especially when we are making very definite preparations to celebrate the

75th anniversary of the discovery of gold in Last Chance Gulch. In the future, whenever it may ring out, let its voice proclaim amity and good will between the cities of Great Falls and Helena."

During the 1940s, after the Helena Landmarks Association successfully had raised money for repairs to the Tower, city laborers replaced the Gould bell in its 1874-1886 home - perched above the 1886 Grand Silver Bell. In 1950 a lightning fire weakened the structure and, for safety, the Fire Department removed both bells from the Tower. The Grand Silver Bell moved to the Civic Center, and the Tacony bell remained in city storage.

In the early 1970s, members of Soroptimist International of Helena adopted the Fire Tower as an on-going community-service project. Their initial determination was rewarded in 1972 when the Tower received listing on the National Register of Historic Places. On Dec. 15 of the same year, crews and equipment donated by the Montana Power Company and the Rogers Mining Company raised the Gould bell to its current seat, on an intermediate platform beneath the Tower's penthouse.

Helena's much-travelled fire-alarm bell - like the Tower itself - remains a symbol of the town's commitment to its historical past. Because of the kindness of Great Falls residents and the dedication of the Soroptimists, the bell long will overlook a community it first protected more than 120 years ago.

*As in the preceding column about the Fire Tower, the author's research into the Tower's bells has relied significantly on the expertise and assistance of Soroptimist committee chair Delores Hill, local-history expert Eula May Hall, and Parks Department Superintendent Rich Lynd. Without their kind perceptions and suggestions, the many and confusing stories involving Helena's several bells would have remained total mysteries to me.*

*Dave Walter has been employed by the Montana Historical Society for 15 years and currently is the Society's research librarian.*