

# The Mystery of the Bell Tower

Last spring, students in the Video/Film class decided to do a documentary on the tower standing in front of San Dieguito High school Academy, but they couldn't find any information about it.

Visual Arts teacher Neal Glasgow ('67) knew the bell had been rung for athletic victories, but didn't know who built it, or when. After looking through yearbooks he could only determine that photographs of the bell tower first appeared in 1961, so he asked the Alumni Association for information.

It's times like this when we wish we had a complete set of Mustang newspapers, but we don't. The old *Coast Dispatch* archives also are unavailable, until the new owner (Roman Koenig, '89) can have them digitized.

So we turned to our alumni, our best source of San Dieguito history, and soon received several excellent leads that allowed us to reconstruct a little background.

Many alumni remembered that a residential contractor and San Dieguito parent named Elwyn L. Booth built the tower. His three children were Larry Booth ('55), Mary Diane Booth ('58), and Dennis Neal Booth ('61).

According to his son Dennis, Mr. Booth remembered his high school's "Victory Bell," which rang when the school won football games and other athletic victories. He wanted to create a similar tradition at SDUHS.

He talked his fellow contractors into donating the bricks, mortar and labor needed to build the tower. "The only expense was the cost of the bell itself," said Dennis Booth during a call to his home in Florida. "It came from an old church out in the back hills of Vista or Fallbrook."

The Hi-Y Club raised money to purchase the old bell but were disappointed when they saw its dilapidated condition. They raised money to have it chrome-plated, "but it never sounded right after that," said Dennis. "The first time it rang, it went 'thud.'"

Ted Repa ('61) believes the bell made its debut at that year's homecoming football game (held Nov. 10, 1960 according to the 1961 *Hooffprint*). "I think we had a truck with the bell on a platform. We drove the truck around the track, ringing the bell. After that it got put into the tower and we rang it for sports victories."

The bell soon became an attractive target. Many alumni remembered it being stolen and/or damaged by at least one rival school. By the 1980s, the bell was too damaged to ring.

In 1986, Ila Decker Piel ('61) and her husband Jim Piel ('58) had children of their own attending San Dieguito. Like Elwyn Booth before her, she remembered fondly the bell-ringing traditions from her high school days. As co-chair of the high school's 50th anniversary committee, she led the effort to replace the bell.

She purchased a new bell from the centuries-old Taylors Eayre and Smith Ltd Bellfoundry in Loughborough, Leicestershire, for approximately \$3500, paid for by ASB fundraisers and contributions from members

of the 70th anniversary committee. She then had the bell inscribed with two lines: "The Spirit of San Dieguito" and "1936-1986". According to a *Citizen* newspaper clipping she saved, they hung the new bell in June 1987.

Remembering how the first bell had been a target for vandalism, Principal Salvador Ramirez requested that protective louvers be installed around the bell. He also promoted another bell-ringing tradition. "We used the bell primarily at graduation, ringing it once for every graduating senior."

The louvers did an excellent job in protecting the new bell, but rumors recently went around the school that the tower would be torn down during construction of the new Performing Arts Center. Not true, says Sheila Durkin, Executive Director of the SDA Foundation. "The architect's plans include our tower."

What the bulldozer won't touch, however, Father Time might. A recent inspection revealed the tower and the bell-ringing mechanism to be in need of some repair.

Some mysteries remain after our investigation; for example, what happened to the first bell? And did Mr. Booth's brick bell tower replace a wooden tower that was located in front of the gym? One alumnus remembered a tower made of wooden slats and painted white, with a plaque at the base listing athletes' names.

If anyone knows the answers, please share them with us at either (760) 753-1121 x5085 or [sda.alumni@gmail.com](mailto:sda.alumni@gmail.com).

We always look forward to hearing from our alumni, our best source of San Dieguito history.



*The bell tower as it appears today. The louvers were installed in 1987 to protect the new bell from vandalism.*