

Building Bridges with Handbells

Written by Steven Mazeau, Area 1 SnagASub Coordinator

Many of us are familiar with the story of Margaret Shurcliff and her Beacon Hill Ringers. Having created the New England Guild of English Handbell Ringers (NEGEHR) in 1937, Margaret was also responsible for establishing in 1954 the American Guild of English Handbell Ringers (AGEHR) and the first American Handbell Festival, which took place at Castle Hill in Ipswich, Massachusetts. The Guild and the festival were formed for the purpose of “spreading new ideas and exchanging music, techniques and information”. This month AGEHR, now recognized as Handbell Musicians of America, celebrates 70 years.

But did you also know that here in New England, in the summer of 1944, Grace Palmer and Mary Gillette, who were affiliated with the YWCA, and Ralph Page, a square dance caller from New Hampshire, conceptualized and organized a New England Folk Festival? First held at the Boston YWCA in October, 1944, approximately 200 attendees enjoyed performances of local ethnic dance groups. This event evolved into today’s New England Folk Festival Association (NEFFA), a non-profit educational and cultural organization whose mission is “to encourage, sponsor, and preserve the traditional folk arts in New England and beyond.”

Naturally, English handbell ringing fits the bill as a traditional folk art, and on Saturday, April 20, 2024, Area 1 SnagASub Coordinator Steven Mazeau and four active members - Diane Burke and Wendy Davis from Marlborough, MA; David Olson from North Easton, MA; and Lana Salisbury from Putnam, CT - staged a hands-on “Introduction to English Handbell Ringing” workshop at NEFFA’s 80th Anniversary celebration in Marlborough.

Approximately 50 people attended the one-hour workshop. A handful of young participants had previously rung handbells or handchimes before. Many others were folk musicians or folk dancers with a clear desire to learn more. After hearing a short history of English handbell ringing and its illustrious start right here in New England, attendees were introduced to a Robert Groth “Porta-Hymn” four-ringer arrangement of “For the Beauty of the Earth”, rung first with handbells, then with handchimes.

Then everyone was given the chance to ring, from a chord accompaniment of “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star” (published in Spring 2019 *Overtones*) to a note-by-note ringing of “Happy Birthday”. As our Area 1 volunteers were packing up to make way for the “Ukulele off the Page” workshop, three attendees continued to ring. Experimenting with some of the bell sounds, they were brainstorming how to weave bells into another folk music sound that they’d been working with. How great is that?

We also learned that Margaret Shurcliff’s great-granddaughter had been present for our workshop. Apparently, she did not know how legendary her great-grandmother was in the handbell world. In this respect, our program came full circle. We also handed out a “Handbell Musicians of America Area 1 - Where It All Began” promotional sheet, created for us by Area 1 Communications Director Amy Rollins.

A great big thank you goes out to SnagASubbers Lana, Diane, Wendy and David for helping to make this event possible. Thanks to Diane for providing the 3 octaves of bells, thanks to Niantic Community

Church for loaning me the 3 octaves of chimes and thanks to David for bringing the foam. Also, a resounding thank you to all Area 1 SnagASub volunteers who venture out on the road on a regular basis. When we build that metaphorical “bridge”, whether it’s at a regional festival or just lending a hand on a Sunday morning at a church two towns over, we often make connections by “advancing the musical art” and inspiring in ways that we didn’t even imagine.

Visit our [SnagASub page](#) to find out more.