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The School Bell

The history of Morongo's bell makes a fascinating study of facts or romance as one wishes. Here are several accounts of the origin of the name Bell Post Hill, and the reader is requested to take his choice.

About the year 1836 or 1837 a party of settlers, hearing of the splendid grazing country about where Geelong at present stands, determined to bring their stock and settle, choosing for their camping ground the hill that now bears the above name. They selected this spot for several reasons, the principal one being its proximity to the Moorabool River, which was immediately under the hill, and again, that they might have a good 'lookout' in case of danger from the natives, who, at that time, were very numerous and not to be trusted. They had not been long on this spot when they were alarmed by the information that several tribes of blacks had held a grand 'corroboree' the principal business being the disposal of the settlers and the appropriation of their goods—'Jumbuck' and 'Bulganna'.

An old savage, Benbow, King of Werribee, sat on their council and after making himself master of their blood-thirsty design came straight away and told the white man. The settlers, not knowing the exact date of the contemplated visit, and being obliged to tend their own flocks and herds, after some consideration, hit upon the expedient of erecting a large bell, which fortunately, they had in their possession, so that the camp keeper, seeing the approach of danger, could sound the alarm, when they would all rally round their comrade.

The day at last came. The man who had charge of the camp, seeing a mass of blacks approaching, immediately sounded the alarm. The natives, hearing the boom of the bell, and thinking perhaps it was the 'bulgan carney' (devil) turned tail, and soon made themselves scarce, and well they did, for the settlers instead of rushing to their mate's assistance, hid themselves, so it is said, in the scrub which at that time surrounded Corio Bay.

The watchman at the camp, finding himself deserted by his cowardly comrades, felt so disgusted that he took the bell from off the post and threw it into the Moorabool River.

Old Benbow has long since gone to the great hunting ground. The Bell Post for aught we know, still stands to mark the spot where the scene of our story is situated and the legend says the toll of the bell can still be heard at midnight on the anniversary of the time at which it was cast into the River.

Messrs Anthony Cowie and David Stead landed in Melbourne from Tasmania early in 1836 bringing with them a shipload of stock and a large ship's bell. On arrival at Corio they chose land on a gentle eminence several miles to the west of Geelong, because of its proximity to the Moorabool River, which runs immediately under the

hill and because it gave a good outlook in case of danger from the Aborigines, at that time very numerous and not to be trusted.

As a precaution they erected the ship's bell on the property and from that year the district was known as 'Bell Post Hill', a name it retains to this day. It is recorded that on one occasion when the bell was rung as an alarm and when the shepherds heard the sound:

*Some hid in rocks that o'ershadowed the sea
And one in the trunk of a hollow tree
The rest all fled we know not where,
But none of them ventured the Bell Post near.*

The effect on the Aborigines is described by a versifier:

*Stopped for a moment, with a terrified air,
They thought that the spirit of evil was there,
And away they all fled, nor halted outright,
Till they reached a dark lake by the gloaming
of night.*

This was probably the first alarm bell to sound in Port Phillip.

Melbourne,
17th October, 1927

Dear Mr McPhillimy,

. . . . However, I can give you the authentic history, which you can rely upon as being absolutely correct, although there are many accounts related by others.

The bell was a ship's bell secured by Mr David Stead, of Cowie and Stead, who occupied the land as a squatting station in the early settlement of Victoria, about 1837 or 1838, and it was erected by him on a hill where the school now stands, and, in those days, was called Bell Post Hill. It was used by Mr Stead, some say to warn men to come in on the approach of hostile blacks, others say it was used as a warning to the other squatters in the district, but I think the former was more likely. A good deal has been written about this bell and from various accounts published about it, there was some uncertainty concerning it. Some say that no bell was ever erected on the hill referred to, another authority stated that it was erected on the banks of the Saltwater River, but, there is no doubt whatever that the bell was erected on the hill where the school now stands by Mr David Stead. When Mr Stead left the colony in 1859 he arranged with my father to have the bell repaired. It was accordingly sent to Hobart, because there were then no means of having it repaired here, and when it was returned, it remained in Strachan & Co's Bonded Store for many years, and was there used to call the men from the front Bond to the back Bond when delivery of goods was required; so that you can see it has had its uses for most of its time. Mr Stead's representative in Geelong made application to my father to get possession of the bell, but for some reason, my father persisted in retaining it, and when I joined my father in business, on his death it came into my possession. Knowing that Mr S. V. Stead, son of Mr David Stead, had some interest in the bell, I suggested that we jointly present the bell to the Public Library, Melbourne. It was afterwards sent to an Exhibition of Geelong Relics, and finally, when the Presbyterian Girls' School recently acquired Bell Post Hill site, at your suggestion that the historic bell should be returned to its original site, it was accordingly presented to the school in our joint names.

You can take this as the true account of the bell, because I have known of the bell all my life, and, from what Mr Stead learnt from his father about the bell, you can be assured that this is a true and correct history of a very old relic.

Yours sincerely,

H. STRACHAN

Melbourne

22.10.1927

Dear Sir,

I am very pleased to hear that the old ship's bell which my father purchased at Hobart in the year 1836 has come home again from its wanderings. It was designed to call the shepherds home, and I trust that future generations of girls of the college will not develop any active dislike to it because of too early and too vigorous ringing on winter mornings!

With best wishes for the College and all connected with it, I am

Yours very sincerely,

S. V. STEAD

The bell was in the news again on Sunday, October 14th, 1953. It disappeared. The first knowledge of this was given to the mistress on duty at 7.50 a.m. The first call to seniors is given at 5.50 a.m., the second call to juniors at 6.20 a.m., by means of a handbell, and the first sounding of the 'big bell' is at 7.50 a.m. for breakfast. A girl was sent to ring the bell but she returned with the statement, 'the bell's gone'. The reply was obvious, 'It has not, I sent you to ring it', whereupon the child had some difficulty in defining 'gone' to a mistress with visions of burnt porridge and no diners. However, 'gone' it had. At first, reactions were of general hilarity but, later, with police, local radio station news items and a column in the *Argus*, the seriousness of the theft began to be realized.

On Tuesday, the 16th October, Miss Shaw received an anonymous letter which gave directions to proceed to third base on the baseball oval, walk a given number of paces south-east and 'DIG'. Sure enough, the cut sods were lifted, soil was removed and there was the bell. Most of the school turned out to watch the Assistant Sports Mistress lift it out.

The culprit's of the exploit went undiscovered.

Slanderous rumours stated that a certain school's cadets' officer had recently shown his men how to dig a hole by carefully cutting the turf with a spade, placing dug out earth on a tarpaulin, putting the object to be buried in the excavation, filling in, replacing the cut turf and carrying away the extra soil so as to leave no trace, which was an interesting coincidence.

Mr Stead says that the bell was to summon shepherds to the station for supplies or in case of danger: today, it recalls schoolgirls for study, or for supplies or in time of danger. The idea remains much the same.