

When the Bell Tolloed Again:
A Medieval Funeral Custom in New Concord

“ . . . therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.”
John Donne (1572-1631)

In 1845, a steamboat sank on the Tennessee River not far from New Concord. The Masons purchased the bell for their lodge, which occupied the second story of the village's Union Church. The bell was installed atop the Church building to be used in various ways, one of which was based on a practice common in Christian churches since the Middle Ages: to ring the church bell to announce final rites for a deceased member. So it became the practice for New Concord funerals and burials to ring the village bell as many times as the deceased resident was years old.

Years later when the Union Church was razed to make way for a school and a church, the bell was moved to the top of the school building and rang to begin and end the school day and to change classes. Sometimes if the bell's rope was pulled too hard, the bell would become inverted and the clapper could not function. The students loved it when that happened.

In 1862, seventeen years after the bell was rescued from the water, Joseph Walker Montgomery was born to Monroe and Minerva Stubblefield Montgomery. In 1891, Joe narrowly escaped when five other young men drowned in a seining accident on nearby Blood River. A year later, Joe married Annie Maude Locke, and they became the parents of nine children. On Christmas Day in 1914, Maude died suddenly of pneumonia. From the belfry on the Union Church, the bell tolled 43 times at the funeral and burial of Maude Montgomery.

As the years passed, Joe and Maude's son Locke fought in World I; and four sons--Bob, twins Charles and Paul, and Frank--all fought in World War II. Joe was elected to the Calloway County School Board, was a pillar of Sulphur Spring Methodist Church, and, as his years increased, became a sort of village patriarch.

As the Christmas holidays approached in 1959, "Mr. Joe," as he was respectfully called at age 97, was confined to his bed. After Thanksgiving, the New Concord High School Beta Club visited the Montgomery home and sang Christmas carols from the front porch.

A month later, Mr. Joe died. Ringing the village bell for the final rites of a community member had long since ceased. But Mr. Joe had not forgotten that 46 years earlier at Christmastime the bell had tolled for his wife, and he requested that the bell ring for his last rites.

Kelly Smith, custodian at the school, went up the ladder to the belfry. He removed the clapper and simply began to strike the bell as the funeral procession left Mr. Joe's house, a mile from the Church.

Afterwards nobody was sure how many times the bell had actually sounded. But did it matter? At Mr. Joe's request, the bell had rung again. For him, as it had for Maude.