



The two largest bells in the carillon of the First Plymouth Congregational Church.

BELLS

From the intersection of Randolph Street and Capitol Parkway, the Nebraska State Capitol Building and the carillon or bell tower at First Plymouth Congregational Church look like parent and child.

This is attributed to the overpowering size of the State Capitol building in contrast to the small, but equally beautiful carillon at the Plymouth Congregational Church, 20th and D streets. In fact, the two are more like siblings since they were built about the same time, the 1930s.

"It's almost like they belong together," said Ray Johnson, who plays the bells in the carillon.

Along with the church, the carillon, or "singing tower" as it is nicknamed, was built in 1930 and dedicated in 1931. The architect was H. Van Buren McGonigle of California. Deemed as one of the most unusual pieces of architecture in Nebraska, the carillon is the only one of its kind in the Midwest.

With the exception of smaller carillons in Western Nebraska, Lawrence, Kan. and one at the University of Nebraska-Omaha, no other bell tower has the re-

quired 26 bells to be called a carillon. First Plymouth has 48 bells in its carillon.

From the inside out, the structure has six levels. The basement area contains classrooms, the second level holds the pastor's office. A television studio is located on the third level. The fourth level is open.

"The winding steps to the fourth level could be sort of bad if you're afraid of heights," Johnson said.

On the fifth level, Johnson plays the bells, which were cast in the Taylor and Sons Foundry in Loughborough, England. The bells are on the sixth level.

On the outside of the 171-foot brick tower, the intricate 20-sided structure looms to the sky amongst the huge trees that give the neighborhood its historic character.

The weaved iron-like grill, near the top of the tower, allows passers-by a peak at what the bells look like. Sculpted figures of biblical evangelists Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are at the four corners of the tower.

The elevation of the characters is symbolic of paying homage to the four authors of the New Testament, an integral part

of Christian worship and life, Johnson said.

Part of this worship, Johnson said, includes the playing of the bells.

Even for the least religious-oriented folk the structure commands authority and a certain amount of respect.

If one is driving in the vicinity of 20th and D streets on Sunday morning, they may catch an earful of the thunderous chiming of hymns, Bach and Mendelssohn.

Johnson, once a University of Nebraska-Lincoln student, has been playing the bells at Plymouth's carillon for 27 years.

"Myron Roberts, an organist at the church here, asked me to play the carillon," Johnson said, "I asked what was that (a carillon)."

Roberts, who was a professor at UNL, told Johnson that a carillon was a bell tower which contained at least 26 bells. The carillon at the church contains 48 stationary bells.

"I said sure, I'm willing to try anything once," Johnson said of his invitation to play the carillon.

"I must have enjoyed it because I'm still doing it," he said. Johnson has been playing the

carillon for Plymouth Church longer than anyone.

Although he gets a token payment for playing, Johnson said his reward is more spiritual.

"It (playing) is part of my worship," Johnson said.

It's nice to know, Johnson said, that "it (the bells) calls them (the congregation) to church. It gets them into the right frame of mind."

Besides the regularly scheduled playing fifteen minutes before and after the two Sunday services, Johnson plays for weddings, funerals and any special events at the church, upon request.

An automatic clock plays the Westminster chime every quarter of the hour and chimes at the top of the hour.

The bells, made of bell metal, copper and tin, are tuned according to the chromatic scales so they can make music.

The carillon is going to be redone this fall at a cost of \$250,000. Some of the bells, Johnson said, will be taken out of the frame, by lifting the top of the tower off with a crane. The top 24 bells will be replaced with

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The Carillon

Stories by Lisa Donovan • Photos by Connie Sheehan