

A festival with some appeal: Alfred's Bellebration

6/01/06

First she was the Guiding Light of the Stoplight Festival in 2004, then the Lady of the Lake for the Lake Alfred Festival in 2005. Now Alfred University Theater Professor Becky Prophet appears to be the Belle of the Ball as she rings in this year's version of a community get-together: A Bellebration. Scheduled for 5:30 p.m. Friday (June 2), the Bellebration will celebrate the Bells of Alfred, explains Prophet. A walking tour of the village will begin at the intersection of Main and Pine streets where the village's only traffic light is located. First stop will be Hinkle Memorial Library at Alfred State College to hear the chimes of the bell tower, then it will be on to the Alfred Seventh Day Baptist Church to hear the steeple bells rung by Doug Clarke, and the handbell choir, led by Lana Meissner. Next stop on the tour is the "ap-pealing" Village Hall, which is in the process of being restored, then the group will proceed up Pine Street to the lobby of Alfred University's Alumni Hall to view the bell that once hung in the tower atop the hall, but is now located in the lobby. Built in 1851, Alumni Hall is the oldest structure on the University campus and was restored in 1985. The group will then proceed to the Davis Memorial Carillon on the Alfred University campus for a concert by AU carillonneur Laurel Buckwalter. Built in 1937 as a memorial to Dr. Boothe Colwell Davis, who was Alfred University president from 1895 to 1933, and his wife Estelle Hoffman Davis, the carillon is itself the stuff of legends. When the original 35 bells arrived from Antwerp, the University alumni and village residents who gave the funds for the carillon were assured by a foremost authority on carillons that some of the bells dated back to the 17th century. In truth, the bells were frauds, freshly cast and shipped to the United States. Fakes or not, the Alfred University alumni loved the sound of their bells, and rallied to replace the frauds with newly cast bells, which will be dedicated as part of the University's Reunion next weekend. The final stop for the Bellebration is the Village Band Stand to hear the ringing of the A.E. Crandall Hook and Ladder Co. bells, as well as to have a potluck dinner. (Bell peppers and ring bologna are sure to be featured.) The evening will conclude with the showing of movies with a bell theme. Souvenir containers of "parsley, sage, rosemary and chime" will be available, as well as T-shirts, designed by artist Craig Prophet. Proceeds from the sale of both will benefit the community's bicentennial celebration, planned for 2007-08. So how did the Belle of the Ball arrive at this year's festival theme? "In the past, bells have signaled danger," Becky Prophet chimes in. "Ancients used the sound of bells to ward off plague and pestilence. Some even used bells to ward off evil spirits. Tolloed bells mark solemn moments. Pealed bells lift our hearts with their swinging rhythms. Bells mark time. Bells are festive. Bells are joyous. Bells resonate through our lives, through our culture." The idea of a Bellebration is particularly apt for Alfred because, as Becky Prophet explains, "We have bells that are as old as three centuries, and some that were cast as recently as a year ago." Between the Hinkle Bell Tower on the Alfred State College, the Davis Carillon on the Alfred University campus, and the church bells, the sound of bells marks the time in Alfred as it does in few other communities. "But I'm not sure we have ever celebrated them - all of them - in one resounding evening," said Becky Prophet.