

AU's carillon: Something didn't ring true about historic bells

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For over 60 years Alfred University proudly claimed that some of the 47 bells in its campus carillon are the oldest in the western hemisphere, dating back to 17th century Belgium. Now, however, a Dutch expert provides definitive evidence that the bells in Alfred's Davis Memorial Carillon are not historic relics of old Europe, and that those who brought the bells to Alfred University in 1937 were victims in an international con game. The bells are counterfeit, the story of their journey to this small campus in rural southwestern New York one of "deceit and avarice," concludes Andr Lehr, a Dutch bell expert and world renowned carillon authority. Laurel Buckwalter, university carillonneur, will present the story at this week's Bergren Forum, scheduled for 12:10 p.m. Thursday (Jan. 29) in Nevins Theater, Powell Campus Center. Her talk is entitled, "Heavy Metal Fraud: The Story of the Davis Memorial Carillon." Lehr's findings are published in the Journal of the Dutch Carillon Museum in a November 2003 article titled, "Concerning a Bell-Maker Who Counterfeited Bells and a University That Lost its Critical Sense." The Alfred alumni and faculty who presented the bells to the University thought they were getting "a historic carillon from Old Europe," said Lehr. In fact, the shipment contained newly cast bells passed off as originals. Today, Buckwalter plays and cares for the unique instrument a series of bells supported in a four-story steel framework. She said while Lehr's report is upsetting, it is not the first time the bells' authenticity has been questioned. In fact, the bells were barely out of their packing crates in 1937 when some in Alfred started asking questions. Among them was the late Dr. Lloyd Watson, a chemistry professor at Alfred who spearheaded a community and alumni-based fund drive to bring a carillon to the campus. "There was a letter from Watson right away, and it was rather sharp in tone, asking where the bells came from, asking for documentation," said Buckwalter. But World War II broke out in Europe, Watson and a key European connection died, and efforts to trace the bells' origins were interrupted, then forgotten. Buckwalter discovered Watson's letter and other details of the deception when she was named carillonneur in 1994 and started researching the instrument. Her probe led her to Lehr, who had published his suspicions about the authenticity of the Alfred bells in a book back in the 1950s. He agreed to revisit the matter. "Lehr decided that he would try to finally settle the issue and I was in favor of that," said Buckwalter. "I felt it was time for the truth to be evident." Watson and others in Alfred set out to buy new bells from Belgium bell-makers, said Buckwalter. They entrusted much of the overseas legwork to Charlotte Greene, a wealthy Boston woman who traveled frequently to Europe and knew Jef Denijn, a world-famous Belgian carillonneur. Greene put Alfred in contact with Denijn and Omar Michaux, a business partner of Belgian bell-maker Marcel Michiels who, Lehr concludes, swindled the Americans. Michiels offered to sell the Alfred group old bells that he had acquired, including 18 bells cast in 1674 by Pieter Hemony, whose name is revered in the carillon world. "The Hemony name is akin to the Stradivarius name in violins," said Buckwalter. The old bells would cost twice as much as new ones, but Greene urged the Alfred group to take this rare opportunity to acquire a piece of Old World history. Michiels said it would take some time to retrieve the Hemony bells from various locations. In fact, Lehr asserts, Michiels was buying time while he cast counterfeits. The Hemony bells are obvious fakes, "sloppy" imitations, said Lehr. They were poorly tuned and their ornamental features crudely executed. The shipment to Alfred University included the fake Hemony bells as well as 16 bells that Michiels said were made in 1737 by another respected Dutch bell-maker, Joris Dumery. But there is now doubt about the authenticity of some of those bells as well, said Buckwalter. How did Michiels get away with it? Why didn't the respected Denijn, the Alfred group's overseas ears and eyes, see what was happening? After all, he saw and heard the bells in a demonstration and certified them before they were shipped. Denijn's age may have been a factor he was an elderly man at the time and there is even speculation that the bells he saw were not the ones sent, said Buckwalter. And although Watson and others in Alfred raised questions, it would have been awkward to voice them too loudly. The community was giddy with excitement over the acquisition. "Everyone was pleased and proud and excited. To wonder if the bells were really what they thought they were would have been a pretty hard thing to deal with," said Buckwalter. Besides, she said, the notion would have seemed preposterous. "Most people, even experts in the carillon world, would have said, 'Who would cast counterfeit bells?'" Buckwalter doesn't think the news will change the community's affection for the carillon, which rings out across campus several times a week. "To people who remember it as part of their college experience, who associate the sound of the carillon with being in Alfred, I don't think it will make any difference," she said. What's more, it now allows her to replace about 12 bells that have poor ringing quality, but were held onto because of their perceived antiquity. Buckwalter has already received a cash gift to replace one bell and will look for donations to replace the others. She is

not sure what will happen to the bells that are removed, noting they might be suitable as church bells or might be of interest to a museum.