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The Sound of Friendship: Shelter Island's Friendship Bell

by Don Estes

Sounds, like smells, can jog one's memories. On December 31, 2001, Carol and I were in Kyoto to welcome in the Year of the Horse. Kyoto, as many know, is not only a city of temples and shrines, it is also a city of bells. Great bells that on December 31 fill the city with their deep booming resonance as they welcome in the time we call New Year's Eve and the Japanese call *Omisoka*.

Temple bells all over Japan are rung at midnight to speed out the old year and welcome in the New Year. These bells are rung 108 times marking the 108 worldly desires of humanity. It is believed in Buddhism that these desires will be removed by striking the New Year's bell.

Interestingly, for the last 42 years, we here in San Diego have been able to participate in this same time honored ceremony. For our community, this part of the story began on December 11, 1960, when 200 people gathered at Shelter Island to dedicate San Diego's Yokohama Friendship Bell.

Our bell was the outgrowth of a post-World War II effort to bring the people of the United States closer to the rest of the world through direct people-to-people contacts. One part of this effort was the establishment of a Sister City program inaugurated in 1956 during the administration of President Dwight D. Eisenhower.

San Diego was the first West Coast city to formalize such a relationship. From the very beginning and central to these efforts were the activities of Yokohama native and later San Diego resident, Saburo Muraoka. Muraoka had come to San Diego in 1916 as a *yobiyosei issei* called to assist his father who was then farming in Chula Vista.

As the early efforts at establishing a reciprocal friendship evolved, one of the first tangible benefits for San Diego came on May 10, 1958, with the presentation of the six-foot, two-and-a-half ton bronze Yokohama Friendship Bell. Receiving the bell was a delegation visiting Yokohama headed by then mayor Charles C. Dail.

With the assistance of the U.S. Navy, the bell was shipped to San Diego aboard the destroyer tender U.S.S. *Prairie*. After a two-and-a-half year interval and several false starts, the bell was finally situated on the southwestern tip of Shelter Island in 1960.

Participating in the dedication by striking the newly installed bell were Bishop Reirin Yamada of Los Angeles, Reverend Giko Yamamoto of the Buddhist Temple of San Diego, and Saburo Muraoka. The tolling of the bell was recorded and rebroadcast in Japan as part of that country's 1961 New Year programming. In the intervening 42 years, several generations of San Diegans have made it part of their New Year tradition to be at Shelter Island for the tolling of the Yokohama Friendship Bell.

Oh, did I mention the noodles? It is also a tradition in Japan to eat *toshiyoshi soba* (also known as “year-crossing noodles”) while listening to the sound of the bells speeding out the old year. Soba noodles are eaten at New Year with a wish for good health and a long life.

So even if you can't be in Kyoto for the celebration of the New Year, you can hear the same comforting, resonating boom of a Japanese bell welcoming not only the New Year but proclaiming the friendship between two cities and two peoples. Not a bad way to start a new year when you think about it.

(Contributing to this story were Mich Himaka, Ralph Honda, Roy Muraoka, and Joyce Teague)