

“I’ll Be There with Bells On”

By Ken Major



I unearthed the bell above at a private residence in Danby, Vermont, in 2016. It is a well-preserved example of a late 18th to early 19th century design which could have been used for anything from livestock to a door ringer. That said, my efforts to pin down its date suggest it is may be part of a set of bells from a Conestoga Wagon (see picture below). These covered wagons were the tractor trailers of their day. They were pulled by teams of four to six oxen or specially bred horses and were able to carry up to 12,000lbs of goods over long distances. They are a quintessential if forgotten part of the colonial and early United States landscapeⁱ. In addition to being a vital part of trade, they also contributed at least one linguistic expression still in use todayⁱⁱ.



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The available references suggest that the “teamsters” (also called “drivers,” “regulars,” and “wagoners”) were a rather salty lot, prone to fistfights and drinking, and that some interesting subcultural norms developed over the century or so that this profession existed in American culture.ⁱⁱⁱ Oddly, the bells which Conestoga wagon horse teams wore suspended above their harnesses were a principal expression of the teamsters’ identity and pride. When a wagon or its horses became stuck or otherwise disabled the driver had to formally request the help of another, and if successfully assisted had to give his bells

up to the rescuing driver. In a rather emasculating example of public shaming, the rescued man “lost the right to use bells until he, in turn, had rescued another team in trouble.”^{iv} Such was the weight of this potential embarrassment (and relief at arriving with bells intact) that the larger culture adopted the saying, “I’ll be there with bells on,” essentially promising a trouble-free journey. Over 200 years later this phrase remains in routine use, though in my experience more typically to convey enthusiasm for an event rather than as a way of warding off a mortifying lack of self-reliance.



(public domain)

ⁱ Brian Wright, “The Conestoga Wagon: The Colonial Workhorse,” *Colonial Sense*, http://www.colonialsense.com/society-lifestyle/signs_of_the_times/conestoga_wagon.php

ⁱⁱ “Conestoga Horses and the Bells,” *Explore PAHistory*, <http://explorepahistory.com/odocument.php?docId=1-4-77>

ⁱⁱⁱ Emma Paterson, “Conestoga Wagons, Part 1 – How built and used, wagoneers, horses,” *Radnor Historical Society*, September 21st, 1951 <http://radnorhistory.org/archive/articles/ytmt/?p=125>

^{iv} Emma Paterson, “Conestoga Wagons, Part 2 – Teamsters, King’s Highway, “There will be bells,” *Radnor Historical Society*, September 28th, 1951 <http://radnorhistory.org/archive/articles/ytmt/?p=126>