

## **Echoes of Cranston first appeared in the Cranston Herald during the 1950's**

### **The Print Works Bell Still Rings by Wilfred Stone**

Here is an "Echo" that will be literally an echo to many hundreds of Cranston people, and an echo that still goes on, every morning and noontime, at one of the biggest manufacturing establishments in our city.

The Cranston Print Works bell has rung the morning, noon, and closing hours of labor for perhaps a century. For the hundreds—the thousands—who have spent their working hours in the historic plant it has meant the cheerful call to fruitful labor, the welcome peal to the lunch hour, the time when work was ended, and the rest of the evening could begin.

And perhaps there have been these in times of lesser prosperity have heard in the bell only the reminder that while others had work, they did not.

So the mill bell, typical mentor and guardian of so many mill villages throughout the land, has more than the interest that it is just a bell. It is the companion and helpment of the people, day and night.

The Print Works bell is probably the one survivor of such bells in Cranston, as it is indeed the bell of what has been the largest industry of its kind in town. And because of the singular interest in the history of the famous Print Works, this bell stands alone among all such instruments there may be anywhere among us. This bell has survived the schoolhouse bells, the fire bells of other times, even the locomotive bells that were the expressive voice of the now departed steam engines.

It seems a little unfortunate that we do not know more of the actual history of the locally famous bell.

It would be a joy to record that it weight so many hundred pounds, that is was case by some famous bell founder, that is was hoisted to its stone tower at such and such a date and spoke forth its first message on such and such a day. And it maybe be that every one of these things is so, but our forbears in earlier Cranston were not much given to recording matters as we could wish they had been.

Always There

It is enough that so long as I can remember, and so long as the memory of such older people as I have been able to consult, the bell has always been there. It faithfully rings its warning at 10 minutes to six in the morning and again at 10 minutes to seven. These are warning peals, to hurry the—tardy workers from their homes.

My house is more than a mile away, and yet on many a summer morning, when windows are open, I hear the stately peal of the old bell, and such thoughts come to me as I have tried to set down in the lines I have just written.

And I can remember how many of the neighbors of other years have heard that summons that called to them to their work bunches or their machines. My father worked in the Print Works long before I was born, and that is more than the Scriptural three score and ten. My sisters worked there when I was very small boy.

It happens that I have never worked there, but through the years I have talked with many of the oldtime help—printers, machine tenders, carpenters, painters, machinists—all the varied staff that goes to make up the working force of such a big establishment.

In its oldtime hey-day, the Print Works was the center of about everything in the neighborhood. Three spur tracks ran from the railroad to the works, one of them to the old Brick Store, the Print Works help bought everything – practically – that they needed for their living.

## Brick Store

It is an old tradition that company help could trade at the store buying anything they wanted for their households, the cost to be deducted from their wages at the end of the month. Sometimes, also, it might be deducting at all for wage might have been consumed by the needs of the growing family, as Father had no pay to bring home.

However, on the whole it seems to have been a pretty good system for although I have often heard people tell about it, I have never heard it said with any measure of complaint. That was the way it was, and that was that.

My father was no longer employed at the Works, but I remember being told that when I was a small baby my mother walked from Knightsville to the Brick Store with me in her arms. There she bought a high chair—for a dollar. I think—and carried it back home, with me in it.

I can just barely remember going as a child into the store, where there was everything there. One day a man away off in another room was talking in a very loud voice. I was told that he was 'telephoning' but it was many years before I had any conception of what it meant.

It must have been a pretty methodical life that the mill people lived in those times.

Days in the mills, evenings in the little diversions that were common two or three generations ago, retiring early, and rising again at the sound of the bell. The 10 minutes-to-six-bell may have a good summons to get up with an hour for breakfast before starting for work. The 10 minutes would get almost anybody there from the village, where most of the help lived in the early times. Not so now, of course, when so many come from a distance, by their own motor cars.

And the commander, the monitor of it all, was the Print Works Bell.

If you didn't through the gate before the bell stopped ringing, you had to go through the office, and some say you were "docked" so many minutes as a penalty. That was the oldtime job now performed by the time clock.

The old bell still rings its summons at 5:50 and 6:50 in the morning and proclaims the coming of the lunch hour at noon. However, with the different shirts that are now in force, there is no more need for the six o'clock peal, We should certainly miss it if the Print Works Bell did not ring at all.

## Fire Bell Too

There was one office, which the old bell used to perform that was not strictly keyed to the getting up-and -getting-to-work habits of the people. It was the long used as a fire bell. In the old Print Works days, the company had an excellent fire steamer on hand at all times, and many of the employees belonged to the Cranston Print Works Steam Fire Company. My father was once a member.

The bell summoned the members in case of fire and it is said to have been a pretty serious thing if you didn't hear it.

I have seen the fire steamer at work, and I can swear that it was a pretty powerful outfit.

John Bigbee, long time Town Sergeant and Chief of Police was also engineer of the steamer. He told me once that it would deliver an inch stream with 90 pounds pressure at the nozzle, and that it would "rip off shingles." My father could tell you something of its power, for once, when the steamer was fight a fire at the old Narragansett Race Track, he suddenly found himself in front of the stream and sprawling on the ground.

And so the old bell, which has so long "had its day," still has its days now.

There is no hint that it will cease to peal. And what our forbears have failed to record in the history of things about the plant and about town as well, the old bell could tell if it could talk. What a time of energy and activity in the "time of the Spragues."

### If It Could Speak

What long continuing tales it could tell of the many years under the Knights, and the lifelong career of Gen. Lyman B. Frieze, manager, who lived in the Mansion to the age of 90 and more, a genial, well informed, and respected character. He had been Adjutant General under Governor "Bill" Sprague and probably knew more "ins and outs; of the "Sprague" business and the Sprague families than anybody else.

The old bell could tell, doubtless, of those lean years, between the Spragues and the Knights, about the litigation after the failure that had such far-reaching effects. Of the return of activity, piping times of peace and dulling moments of depression. The old bell has carried the feelings and the hearts and hopes of four or five generations--and what it could not say if it could only speak our everyday language.

Just now it daily calls to work some 800 employees, with more than half of them coming from Cranston.

A recent meeting of our Cranston Historical Society was held at the Print Works, where we were hospitably entertained by Public relations Officer Dwight Owen.

As he and others conducted us through the shop, and we saw great endless ribbons of beautiful patterns of cotton cloth flowing through the machines, we thought what a colorful story the bell really has to tell.

Beneath its rather drab array of stone buildings there is a flying, flowing life of beauty and color. And this means not only in the brilliant dyes that adorn the colorful cloth, but it means also the lives and spirits of all who work there.

The mill bells calls a summons—"Get up and come to work."

It also tells when there is prosperity and abundance, and it glad to tell it.

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