

Historic Church Bells - Schertz (Comal Settlement) Contributors

The first German settlers to South Central Texas brought with them a strong commitment to their individual religious persuasions. Among the first acts of the New Braunfels settlers upon arrival at the settlement grounds was to conduct a religious service in thanksgiving for their survival and arrival. Both Protestant and Catholic worshipers saw a need for establishing churches within the community. The result was the construction of First Protestant Church (circa 1846 – cedar log structure) and Saint Peter and Paul Catholic Church (circa 1849 – Black Walnut structure). An important church architectural element to both religious persuasions was a carry-over church design feature from their former German village experiences. That feature was a tall church spire that capped a sizeable rectangular chamber serving as the church bell tower. Prominent church spires and bell towers have dotted the German countryside for generations. The sound of the church bell signaled the gathering of the faithful to religious service, ceremonial occasions, and occasionally telegraphed impending dangers. Like so many other traditions and symbols that accompanied the German immigrants, church bells survived as important adornments to the stone and mortar churches that were raised in God’s honor. Two settler families (one Protestant and one Catholic) of our north Schertz territory (formerly known as Comal Settlement) were instrumental in assuring church bells became a part of their respective church design.

The first instance of church bells being introduced to a Comal County community church was the donation of a set of twin bells to the First Protestant Church of New Braunfels, Texas in 1836. The donation was made by the German noblemen’s society (“*Verein zum Schutze Deutscher Einwanderers in Texas*”) which sponsored the first group of settlers to Texas shores in the 1840s. The family entrusted (by the then Commissioner General for the Society in Texas, Prince Carl of Solms-Braunfels) with delivering the set of bells to New Braunfels was the Carl and Elisabeth Schaefer family. The Schaefer, their eight children and the two bells left for Texas from the port of Bremen, Germany aboard the *Brig Johann Dethardt* on September 16, 1844. In March 1845, the Schaefer family arrived in New Braunfels with the initial group of settlers and participated in the town’s dedication ceremony on April 4, 1845. The bells were rung at the dedication ceremony. During the early days of the New Braunfels settlement the bells were used to call the men of the colony to work, children to school and citizens to Protestant worship services. In later days, the bells were hung in the tower of the First Protestant Church and used as church bells. Today, the bells are on display on the front lawn of First Protestant Church, New Braunfels. Undoubtedly, the task of transporting the bells fell to the older boys of the family (Friedricke -21, Johann Carl -19 and Philipp -16). The Schaefer family eventually became a founding family of the community of Comal Settlement which today is a portion (north sector) of the City of Schertz. The Schaefer/Sahm family farm remains in the ownership of Schaefer/Sahm family descendants.



Bell Tower in front of First Protestant Church (Seguin & Coll St., New Braunfels)



Twin Bells hanging in bell tower



Plaque on bell tower commemorating bell tower and bells cast in 1834 at Braunfels, Germany

The Comal Settlement community was one of the first farming colonies established by original first founding families of New Braunfels. Both Protestant and Catholic families established their farms along the Comal Creek at a spot eight miles south of New Braunfels. These families were people of faith and they initially made the trip to their respective churches by horse and buggy each Sunday to give thanks to their God for good health, good weather and good crops. The Catholic families of the community longed to have a church facility within the village where daily mass, feast day celebrations, weddings and funerals could be celebrated without having to make the long and sometimes difficult journey to New Braunfels. The religious commitment of the Catholic community was such as to petition the San Antonio Catholic archdiocese for permission to build a chapel at Comal. The Archdiocese agreed and the work to raise the funds for the chapel began among the Catholic families of Comal. The dream of a community chapel was realized with the dedication of Saint Joseph's Chapel on May 25, 1905. One of the Catholic families most committed to the furtherance of Catholic religious life was the Friesenhahn family (mother – Anna; sons – Andreas, Nicholas, Jacob and Heinrich Syring). Forty-six descendants were born of the four sons. Most remarkable, in terms of Catholic religious devotion was Andreas and his wife Placida who parented twelve children, five boys and seven girls. Four of the girls undertook vocations as Catholic nuns and taught school all of their adult lives. Andreas and Placida, besides being instrumental in seeing Saint Joseph's Chapel built, undertook the work and expense of assuring that a proper church bell was added to the beautiful Gothic Revival chapel created by the master architect Leo M. J. Dielmann. The Friesenhahns sought out one of the premier foundries of its time (Meneely and Company) located in Troy, New York for the bell's casting. The 800-pound bell was cast in 1909, shipped to Comal and put in place that same year. The bell has sounded thousands of times since and remains a source of spiritual comfort for citizens of the community.



Reproduction of bell structure as seen within the St. Joseph's Chapel bell tower



Saint Joseph's Chapel Bell Tower



800 lb. Meneely Bell at Saint Joseph's Chapel



Inscription on the bell "Meneely & Co., Troy N.Y. Donated: Andrea & Placida Friesenhahn 1909"