

Liberty bell may sound again in city

■ Historic artifact may be restored within the next two years, conservator claims.

By FRANK WHELAN
Of The Morning Call

It was noon on July 8, 1936, and Allentown's Center Square was alive with people. Shoppers hurried in and out of H. Leh and Co.'s department store, guests gathered at the Hotel Allen and office workers headed for lunch.

Then, over the din of traffic and humanity came a loud clang. City police looked around for a fleeing bank robber. Pedestrians turned their heads, waiting for fire engines to come roaring past. Shoppers, fearing Leh's was on fire, ran into the street.

But to everyone's surprise, the bell ringing had nothing to do with either fires or law breakers.

On the steps of Zion's Reformed United Church of Christ stood sexton George Nonnemacher. He was ringing the old Allentown Liberty Bell that hung in a niche over the church's door.

Nonnemacher was acting at the request of Zion's pastor, the Rev. Simon Sipple. It was Sipple's way of honoring the first reading of the Declaration of Independence in Allentown, which had taken place at that very spot, day and time 160 years before.

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According to local tradition, the bell had called together the residents of the frontier Pennsylvania-German settlement to hear that they were part of a new nation. Unfortunately, Sipple had failed to tell local officials or the press of his plan.

Now, 63 years later, Sipple's successors — Zion's pastor, the Rev. Bob Stevens, associate pastor LaVerne Passman and the Liberty Bell Shrine — hope that soon they will once more be ringing Allentown's Liberty Bell.

They are planning a series of exhibits over several years that will focus on the bell and its roots in local history.

One exhibit, "Allentown's Liberty Bell and the Sesquicentennial Celebration of 1926" will open Thursday and run to Aug. 31.

It covers the bell's appearance at the Sesquicentennial International Exposition in Philadelphia in 1926. Local collectors Kurt Zwinkl and Glenn Koch and Philadelphia have donated items for the display, which was put together by shrine tour guide Josh Fink.

Zion's took the first step in the project on Feb. 12 when it had T. Scott Kreilick, an architectural conservator and metallurgist from Oreland, Montgomery County, remove the 230-year-old Allentown Liberty Bell from its niche over the entrance to the shrine, where it had hung since Allentown's bicentennial celebration in 1962. From 1927 to 1962 it had hung over

Zion's front door.

On Feb. 22, Kreilick issued his preliminary report. The bell itself, cast in 1769 by Bethlehem's Moravian bell-maker Matthis Tommerop, is "in reasonably good condition." It has some chips and dents, but they do not cause major concern.

The iron clapper, which was added in the 1920s when the church reacquired the bell from its owner, Joseph Ruhe, and the iron stock added at the same period to hold the bell in place are badly rusted. Kreilick noted that the rusted spots could damage the bell. "As iron corrodes it expands significantly," he wrote in a report. "The expansion of the iron oxides will crack the weaker bronze."

Plans are under way to restore the rusted parts.

Prime NDT Services Inc. of Whitehall donated a free radiographic (X-ray) test of the bell to check for hidden cracks. And Clark Production Associates of Bethlehem Inc. donated a two-man crew to film the test. On April 9, the test was done, and the bell showed no cracks.

But the bell is still not quite ringable. "We had hoped we would be able to ring it on July 4 at our Celebration of Independence Day service," said Passman. "But there are a lot of things that we have to learn about bell ringing techniques, so it probably will not be until next year." But the bell will be on display at the shrine along with the exhibit throughout the summer.

The Liberty Bell Shrine, Church and Hamilton streets, Allentown, is open noon to 4 p.m. Monday through Saturday. For information, call 610-435-4232.