

At around 5:00 a.m. Sunday, October 6th, I heard the sirens. Knowing they had to be close but not knowing their destination, I sat up in the dark, and I remember a small faint mixture of hope and dread at this early morning auditory intrusion. As I learned of the fire and the damage to Gunnison I knew I wanted to write something. Gunnison is the view out of my office window, my wife Agnes and I were married in Gunnison. What follows is, I suppose, an open letter about Gunnison, no more important or informed than one man's pausing over a building that figures into his memories, and no less important than an epistle (which is very conscious about being an epistle) about remembering place.

The morning after the fire the view from the office window was of students stopping, leaning back,



aiming their smart phones and photographing the damage from the fire. To be young and to be online, gathering photos like rosebuds, whereas those of us who grew up unencumbered by a mobile device look to the ingenuity of those who saved things, who collected with curious unmet strangers in mind. I retired to our Vance University Archives and Special Collections and the materials there on Gunnison Chapel . Boxes. In the archive the institutional memory of the Chapel is assembled in photographs, programs, a few letters, a typewritten history, descriptions of the stained glass windows for a celebration of the stained

glass windows, and Kodachrome slides. This photograph of Gunnison with what might be Buicks and Packards and Studebakers from the 1940's is one of the many photographs that convey Gunnison's centrality: spending time in the archive with the Gunnison material steps outside of an architectural period¹ . Perhaps this photograph captures the iconic quality of Gunnison as a place of gathering, uncontested by time, symbolic of gathering in the name of a university's community.

What each member of the Laurentian Community misses in these days after the fire has, I suspect, to do with personal experience and what may have brought them to Gunnison. Looking out my window now is remembering the spire and the weather vane². Perhaps because my father wrote on folk art and his work included a number of weather vanes as examples of artistic eye and skill, I think on the vacant space over the damage. In a history of the chapel Edward J. Blankman wrote the weather vane was a gift of Foster ('18) and Caroline Gunnison and bore the inscription "Foster Gunnison" not for the gift bearer, but rather for the first child christened in the chapel³. A weather vane is like a sun dial: sculpture with work to do. The photograph I found of the weather vane taken through tree branches absolutely captures the obvious but very important fact that the rooster was the highest point of the





chapel. The basic visual function of a spire is getting parishioners and passers-by to look up, the parishioners and passers-by of Gunnison saw the “Foster Gunnison” rooster cataloging the wind. At this writing there is only the wonderful clear Canton blue sky, and an obvious empty place. That the weather vane collapsed after the fire is for me the void, the real pang when I look out over my right shoulder and see the chapel⁴.

That sentence perhaps betrays more of a sense of loss than is appropriate. As noted by Dr. Fox

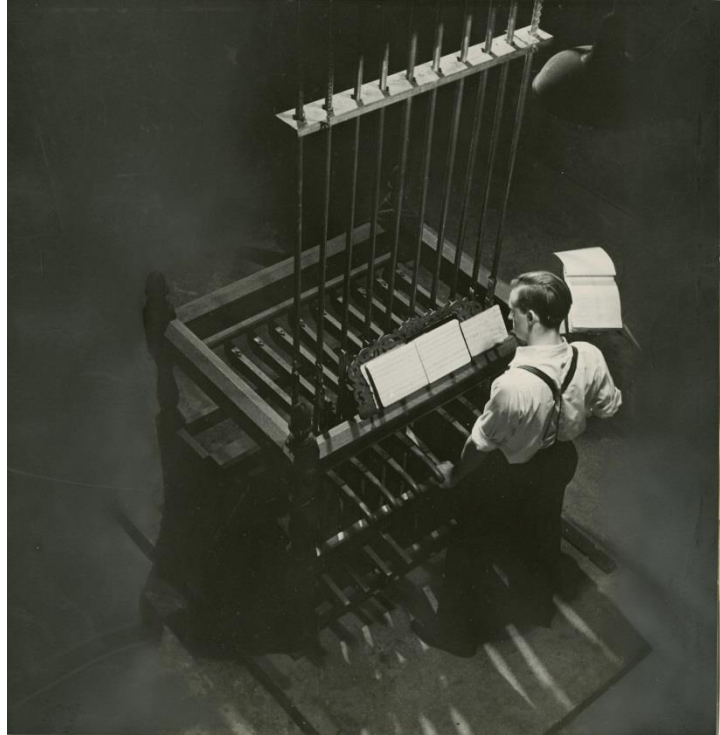
the Canton Volunteer Fire Department joined by firefighters from Potsdam, Gouverneur, Rensselaer Falls, and Morley saved the chapel structure itself. The chapel windows are in place, and while they will be dimmed perhaps, while the chapel is closed, their work (like a weather vane) continues on in campus life. Writing of Gunnison in a guide to the chapel windows (and the story within the stained glass) Stuart Winning ('22) observed:

There are few days, if any, when there is not a student or a group of students or visitors who find their way into this chapel to meditate, to sort out things, to reflect on such problems as they may have or just wandering about to enjoy and observe a bit of history or philosophy as are seen in these windows and much more, for here is the place where we gather to share our joys, to confer our honors, and to share our sorrows⁵.

Sorting things out is a solitary activity, it is a group activity, sorting out is a give and take of knowing where to look for something and finding things through serendipity. Winning's description of the aura of reflection in Gunnison is information seeking itself—finding the circumstances wherein comes clarity, and it is a wonderful evocative paragraph about seeking out Gunnison, the quiet, the windows illuminated in the afternoon light. It is a wonderfully evocative paragraph of what the SLU Community is waiting on, as we wait on the chapel's reopening.



For most Laurentians it's the current loss of the Chapel bells that is the most acutely felt loss. The first public gathering after the fire was "The Bells Will Ring Again," and the Outing Club of course rang hand bells as part of the immediate collective response to what happened⁶. Christopher Kenney ('96) is the Director of Education at the McKinley Presidential Library & Museum, and he was a bell ringer when on campus. While a student he researched the history and practice of bell ringing at St. Lawrence. He writes, "My feelings, and I think the feelings of all chimers are best expressed by the last paragraph of an article about the bells. The story, written by Ann Harvey '49, appeared in the April 1949 edition of *The Laurentian*. 'The chapel bells are but a part of the whole pattern of life here at St. Lawrence, but a much more influential part than most students realize. For many alumni have said that of all the different memories connected with this college, the one that has remained throughout the years most persistent, clear, and unaffected by the passing of time is that of the chapel bells pealing out across the campus in the early dusk of a winter afternoon.'"



Within the chimes of his research Mr. Kenney uncovered the following about the chapel bells—

Irving Bacheller, an 1882 graduate of St. Lawrence and author of such novels as *Eben Holden* and *Silas Strong*, donated the chimes to St. Lawrence in memory of his beloved wife, Ann, who had died a short time before. Bacheller showed the love he had for his wife by having an inscription placed on the largest bell in the chime system:

*To Ann Bacheller Musician, Wife, Comrade.
My love for her put a new song in my heart.
Therefore let the singing of these bells be the
voice of my gratitude.*

Since those first notes were played many changes have occurred at St. Lawrence. However, the technique of ringing the chimes has gone virtually unchanged since the first notes were played in the spring, 87 years ago. Also in the spring of 1994 the chime system received a major overhaul. Much to the displeasure of the ringers, the beautiful wooden rods were replaced with cable and the leather straps were removed. Other adjustments were made, and the bells are much easier to play. The "old system" required 20-25 pounds of force to get a good sound. That requirement is now only 10-15 pounds. One of the technicians remarked that "now girls can play the bells," which was ironic because at the time three out of the five players were women.

On September 11, 2001 the bells were tolled from 12:00 to 12:05 p.m. along with others in the area as a tribute to those that had died. Following 9/11 God Bless America was regularly played before the school songs.

As noted, Mr. Kenney was a bell ringer and he shared a short narrative of his experience and perspective on bell ringing :

I arrived on campus in the fall of 1992. Like almost everyone I had heard the bells but thought that it was either automated or, if there was a person playing them, it certainly was not a student. How wrong I was! I remember receiving a phone call one evening in February. It was Virginia Murdoch '94, and she asked if I was interested in learning to ring the bells. Jennifer Wootton '94 and she were going abroad for the fall 1993 semester and they would need one more person to play the bells. I replied with an enthusiastic YES! The next day I made the climb to the bell tower, thinking that the stairs would never end. My intentions were only to watch the first day, but soon I was playing.

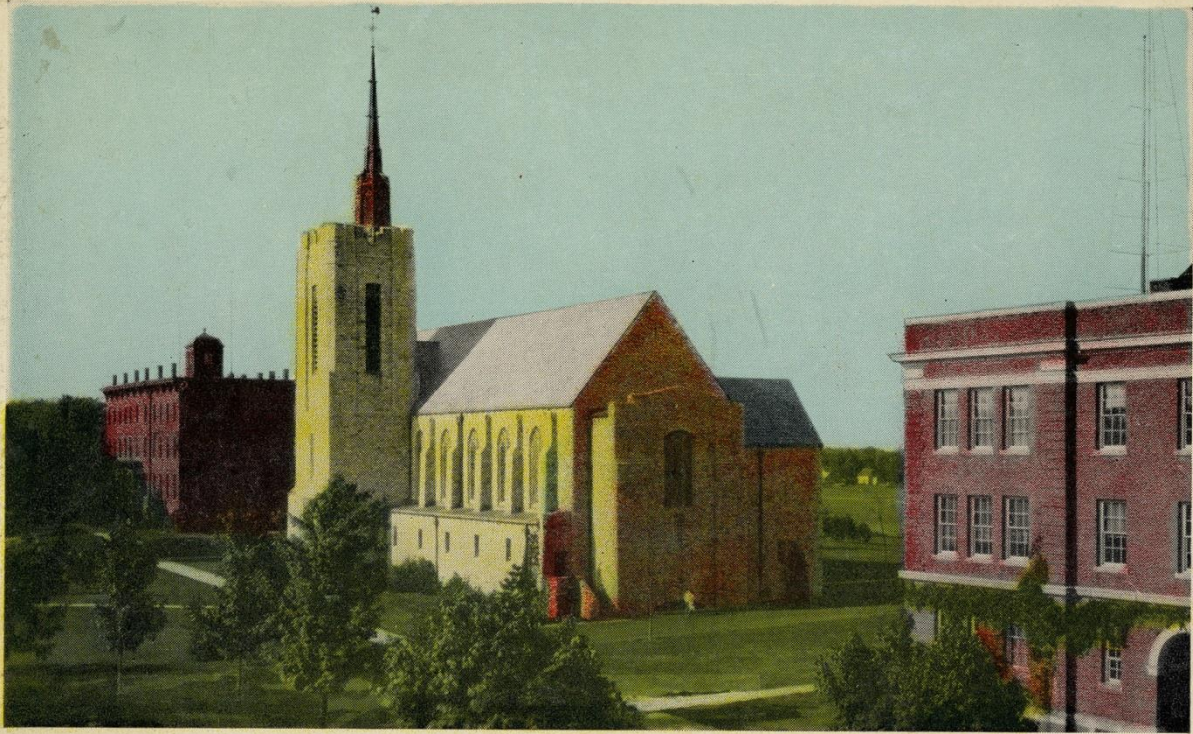
My biggest challenge was to ignore the fact that each mistake I made could be heard throughout the entire campus and community of Canton. The spring of 1994 found **five** people in the bell tower. Jenny and Virginia having returned from London, Patricia Garland '96, who had been playing the same time I had been, Matthew Gardzina '95, and myself. We had many good times, especially on Fridays when we would all go up and ring, and play many duets.

My sister Heather '97 soon began ringing and took my place after I graduated. The two of us returned to the tower in October 2001 when she was married in Gunnison and after the ceremony played the bells in her wedding dress⁷.

Chaplain Kathleen Buckley has spoken to the campus community about the people far and wide who have reached out to share their thoughts about the fire in one discourse space or another. I posted to Facebook "Our Wedding Chapel, Agnes and I are thinking of you..." (the post got a *Like* from Kathleen). For so much of St. Lawrence's history, the narrative of community reaction to an event such as this would not have been dispersed to the digital cloud, but rather would have been in letters. The reflections would have been mailed, and upon receipt become collectable. Letters become their own destination, and keepsakes like these postcards of Gunnison become a mosaic of a collective memory: distinct one to the next but in a collection a time, a place, a mood. The fact that letters are not interactive is their value, is their voice someone having written not knowing whether they'll be liked, saved, or even the chance they might be studied. These postcards of Gunnison are museum pieces given they were never mailed, but they also suggest remembering St. Lawrence in letters home, letters to other college bound friends, or souvenirs of a visit to campus. Words to tangibly resurrect memory, conclude this letter then with a memories of Gunnison committed to postcard⁸.

ON CAMPUS OF ST. LAWRENCE UNIVERSITY, CANTON, N. Y.

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THE CAMPUS, ST. LAWRENCE UNIVERSITY, CANTON, N. Y.





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- ¹ *Gunnison Chapel*. N.d. Photograph. Owen D. Young Library Special Collections and Vance University Archives, Canton, New York.
- ² *Gunnison Steeple*. N.d. Photograph. Owen D. Young Library Special Collections and Vance University Archives, Canton, New York.
- ³ Blankman, Edward J. *Gunnison Memorial Chapel*. N.d. TS. Owen D. Young Library Special Collections and Vance University Archives, Canton, New York.
- ⁴ *Gunnison Chapel*. N.d. Photograph. Owen D. Young Library Special Collections and Vance University Archives, Canton, New York.
- ⁵ Winning, Stuart A. and Frank Piskor. *Windows of Gunnison Memorial Chapel, St. Lawrence University*. St. Lawrence University Libraries, 1988. Web. 1 Nov. 2013.
- ⁶ *Bell Ringer*. N.d. Photograph. Owen D. Young Library Special Collections and Vance University Archives. Canton, New York.
- ⁷ Kenney, Christopher. "Chapel Bells." Message to Neal Burdick. 14 Oct. 2013. E-Mail.
- ⁸ *Gunnison Chapel*. N.d. Postcards. Owen D Young Library Special Collections and Vance University Archives, Canton, New York.