

# Going up the tower

## Wheaton's wedding tradition continues with young lovers

by BRIAN CLARK and ALLISON SHELLEY



KAREN YATER AND KEITH WALKER get ready to ring the bell.

the first day of orientation. After a few months, the friendship had quickly developed into a more serious dating relationship.

"God really placed him in my life at a time when I really needed him," says Karen.

"I was really attracted to Karen by how much God was moving and changing her," adds Keith. "She is a great friend—the best friend I'd ever had."

The two were engaged at 12:45 a.m. on Jan. 31 in a field near Karen's home in Monticello, Ind. As per the tradition, the two had now climbed the steps

Both seemed rather innocent when they went to ring the bell.

Karen was in a giggling mood and Keith was rather quiet, but both were obviously excited.

The couple stood in the vaulted stone chamber that comprises Blanchard Hall's bell tower on the Wheaton College campus. The floor and old wooden staircase in the room were covered with dust, and a single rope swung slowly from a small hole in the middle of the

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—Keith Walker '97

### TOWER

- ♥ Added in 1871
- ♥ Third story of center section was enlarged to accommodate 14 dormitory rooms. These originally housed men, but later women after a boarding house was built at the southwest corner of the campus.
- ♥ The current bell, which rings a Bflat, served to declare events of importance. Today it is rung primarily to announce student and alumni engagements and weddings. For engagements it was rung 3 sets of 7 and 7 sets of 3 on one's wedding day.

ceiling.

But the most striking thing about the room was the walls.

They were covered with names—the legacy of marriage and engagement memorabilia from Wheaton couples past who had, for decades, been coming to this tower to announce their betrothal. Everything from tennis shoes to photographs and articles of clothing were hung next to the names of those who had rung the bell and left their mark.

Now, Keith and Karen were preparing to do the same.

Keith Walker, a sophomore at Wheaton from Saudi Arabia,

of Blanchard tower to announce their marriage plans to the Wheaton campus and make it "official."

The tradition of the tower, which was completed in 1872, is that engaged couples chime three sets of seven rings to announce an engagement, and married couples ring seven sets of three to announce their marriage. Wheaton students of all classes, grad students, and even alumni have returned to the tower to fulfill this time-honored tradition.

No one really knows when the tradition began. Wheaton College reference archivist

# Tower

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David Malone says that the earliest records of the bell-ringing tradition are from the late '40s, but some names in the tower date back as far as the early 1900s.

"I'm sure it probably just evolved from someone just ringing the bell for a wedding and the tradition continued," says Malone. "There are layer upon layer of names up there."

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—Ruth Cording

The bell served many functions in early years of the college. In the past, it called students to rise at 5 a.m. and sent them to bed at 10 p.m. The bell also signaled the beginning of classes, summoned worshippers to service on Sunday, and alerted firemen to an emergency before the days of 911, according to several articles in the archives.

One legend describes how anonymous pranksters coaxed a calf into the bell tower. Following a wild clanging, a janitor found the excited calf tied to the bell cord by a long rope. Even the campus literary magazine, the *Kodon* (Greek for "bell"), is named in honor of the tower.

Ruth Cording, archivist at the college from 1962-70, says that former Wheaton President Dr. V. Raymond Edman used to

speaking very seriously to the parents of his students about the tower tradition.

"He said, 'We really don't encourage all this romantic business. We don't need to—it does itself,'" explains Cording.

However, the tower has changed a little since the time when the bell rang for Cording and her husband. Remodeling done on Blanchard Hall was completed three years ago, and the uppermost area of the belfry was closed off to students wishing to get a "tower view" of the campus. The bell cord now hangs through a hole in the ceiling.

"The remodeling was done from 1988-90, and they closed off the actual belfry area," says Malone. "However, they maintained all of the original marriage memorabilia."

Belfry or no belfry, Keith and Karen continued the tradition on their night in the tower. The two rang the bell excitedly—three sets of seven—and kissed between each set.

Before leaving, they left their mark on the tower. With a ballpoint pen, Keith wrote the following words on the drywall next to the outer door: Keith Walker + Karen Yater, 2/9/93." Keith says that, "now that we know about it," on their next trip up the tower the married Walkers will bring something more memorable.

And when do the two plan to be married?

"We're not telling anyone the specific date, but it is before graduation," says Keith.