

I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day

By **BILLY HOLLAND**
Columnist

Most people have read or at least heard of a man named Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807-1882). He was a literary giant in his lifetime and is still known today in many circles as “The Children’s Poet,” as several schools around our nation are named in his honor. You may remember some of His original works, which include Paul Revere’s Ride, The Song of Hiawatha, and Evangeline, and was also the first American to completely translate Dante Alighieri’s Comedy. As one of the fireside writers from New England, he is regarded as the most popular poet of the nineteenth century.

On July 9, 1861, tragedy struck the Longfellow home. His wife, Fanny, was near an open window, placing locks of her daughter’s hair in a packet, using hot sealing wax to secure it. It was never known whether a spark from a match or the sealing wax was the cause, but suddenly her dress caught fire, and she was engulfed in flames. Henry was sleeping and was suddenly awakened by her screams for help. He ran into the room and immediately tried to smother the flames as best he could, first with a rug and then his own body, but the damage from the burns was very severe. She died the next morning.

Henry’s burns were so extensive on his face and hands that he was unable to attend his



wife’s funeral. The scars on his face made shaving nearly impossible, so he allowed his beard to grow, which became associated with his image. The anguish within his soul was beyond what anyone could fathom. His family could see his suffering in his eyes, and they observed his long periods of silence. At times, he feared that he would be sent to an asylum on account of his sorrow.

A couple of years later, in 1863, there was another crisis when his son Charles Longfellow, without telling his family, boarded a train headed for Washington, D.C., to join President Lincoln’s Union army to fight in the Civil War. On the first day of that December, Henry was dining alone at his home when a telegram arrived with the news that Charley had been shot and was being transferred to the Rapidan River. Henry immediately set out to search for his son and arrived by train on December 5th. He was alarmed when informed by the army surgeon that his son’s wound was very serious and that Charles would most likely be paralyzed. Longfellow, as a 57-year-old widowed father of six children, was not only witnessing his country fight a war against itself, but his oldest son had been struck down on the battlefield.

Although he was admired for his gift of communicating the human experience, Longfellow still yearned for divine peace, which only God can give. On that Christmas Day in 1863, he heard the Christmas bells ringing in Cambridge and the singing of “Peace On Earth,” but he considered the division and violence in his country to be in

direct contradiction with a joyous holiday. He sat down and desperately tried to reflect on the joys of knowing that God is not dead or sleeping, and that He is the only one who can heal, save, and give hope to the soul. He was never considered a hymn writer; however, the poem he wrote on that day expresses the agony about the dark condition of a nation, and was later set to music by Englishman John Calkin. The result is one of our most beloved Christmas carols, “I Heard The Bells On Christmas Day.”

There is a theme of passion and determination in the poem that expresses how an attitude of confidence and trust in the Lord can overcome fear and hopelessness even in the midst of bleak despair. The Civil War was in full swing, and the devastation from the battle of Gettysburg still gripped the nation in a state of trauma. He must have asked himself how we can have peace on Earth and goodwill toward men in this war-torn land, where brother fights against brother and father against son? Yes, the days were grievous, but he includes in one of the stanzas, “The wrong shall fail, the right prevail!” In these words, we sense a man crying out to God in prayer, just as many of us today pray for this world to stop the hatred and the evil, and for all people to be unified in God’s forgiveness and love. This reminds us that eternal peace and harmony shall one day be established when the Prince of Peace shall reign forever.

Read more about the Christian life at billyhollandministries.com

Visions of Sugarplums Dance Only in My Head

By **ANNE CARMICHAEL**
Columnist

We all have that fantasy of what Christmas is supposed to be like in our heads. There’s a Norman Rockwell painting of a lovely little snow-covered village with town folk who care deeply for each other. They are gathered in the town square, singing Christmas carols around a bonfire, sipping cups of hot cocoa, and wishing each other Merry Christmas, peace, joy, health, wealth, and all things bright and wonderful in the coming year.

As the holiday approaches, we reinforce our vision of the perfect Christmas by watching hours of Hallmark movies and striving mightily to create the version that lives in our dream world. We try to stick to traditions put in place generations ago, which may or may not be feasible in our present-day lives. Just like a jigsaw puzzle that has been passed down from one generation to the next and moved from one house to another during moves, there are lost pieces, a jumble of pieces, and Christmases that no longer fit the way we think they should.

There never was a truer quote than that which I repeat frequently ... "Life is what happens when you’re busy making plans." At no time is this truer than the prequel to the Christmas holiday season.

Life doesn’t wait for Christmas to end before it steals those we love in the middle of the night. Life doesn’t care that the loss of a loved one or a critical illness will leave an empty chair at your carefully arranged holiday dinner table ... as well as a massive hole in your heart.

Likewise, the acts of others can impact your life. Divorces, family arguments and estrangements, moves to far-away places, and financial stress can impact your mood and how you perceive the Christmas holiday.

Sometimes it’s Mother Nature who unleashes forces that damage your property, regardless of the time of year.

These and other unplanned and unexpected events may affect your ability to deal appropriately and effectively with family and friends during the holiday. These factors can cause mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, and even substance abuse.

But thankfully, the human spirit is innately resilient. When life gives us lemons, we instinctively start making lemonade. Oh sure, we have to wallow a bit and cycle through all the stages of anger, sadness, and hopelessness. But eventually, we usually persevere. We dig deep and discover just one ounce of pride, and we become independent.

Not to say that the memories of Christmases past and thoughts of what might have been aren’t always lurking in the shadows, trying to steal whatever happiness we’ve found on our journey, but we fight back by making new traditions. Somehow, we manage to find a dream that we never planned or



even wanted and it puts us on an even better path than we originally envisioned.

Whereas you used to make lists of things you wanted for Christmas, you find happiness in giving and watching others’ joy at receiving your gifts. Finding just that perfect gift for someone else fulfills you.

Instead of letting memories engulf you and drag you down into the mire of sadness, you share the stories of Christmases past with younger generations, and they, in turn, will share them for generations to come.

The saving grace in aging is that humans are wired to LIVE. That’s why ambulances race with lights and sirens blaring, and EMTs and paramedics provide lifesaving techniques until they reach the help of doctors and surgeons who make personal sacrifices on holidays to ensure that you have more time with your own loved ones.

Neonatal units give newborns a chance to experience long and happy Christmases for many more years.

Agencies such as police, firefighters, air traffic controllers, food and drug safety, suicide prevention, and health centers and gyms are all in place to protect our lives and to ensure that we LIVE them to the best of our ability.

So, while it is unlikely that this Christmas will ever meet your expectations 100 percent, regardless of what life has dealt you, you have it within your power to make it the best it can be.

At first, you may need to set reasonable goals. If you have just recently lost a loved one, don’t expect to feel up to parties and big family get-togethers. But don’t isolate yourself completely, sit home, and dwell on what might have been. Commit to one-on-one time with a friend or family member. Maybe just spend Christmas morning watching a beloved grandchild’s wonder and magic as they open gifts and see their joy when they realize Santa and the reindeer ate all the cookies and carrots they left for them.

No one will expect you to have shopped this year, and most will be very understanding if you are overwhelmed and need to cut the visit short.

There are so many platitudes about Christmas ("It is better to give than to receive." "Tis the season to be jolly," "Time with family and friends is the best gift"), but I will not bore you with all those seasonal quotes, because they may not be true for you this year. I have lived through many of life’s ups and downs and learned many accidental lessons. I won’t tell you that Christmas is a stocking full of sugary goodness.

What I do want to leave you with this holiday season is HOPE and RESILIENCE, and the promise that no matter what life has thrown your way, you will get through it, and it may just be far better than any Christmas you had in mind.

Merry Christmas to all!

The Best Free (or Cheap) Tech Tools for Small Businesses

By **CHRIS HALL**
Columnist

Running a small business often means wearing every hat—owner, bookkeeper, marketer, scheduler—sometimes all before lunch. With tight margins and limited time, many local businesses put off new technology, assuming it’s expensive or complicated. The good news: plenty of simple, affordable tools are designed to help without breaking the bank.

WHY FREE TOOLS MATTER

Free or low-cost tech tools can save hours each week, reduce costly mistakes, and help small businesses look more professional. Used wisely, they level the playing field—letting a one-person shop compete with much larger operations without adding overhead.

BOOKKEEPING & INVOICES

What this solves: tracking income and expenses, and getting paid on time.

Popular options include Wave, Zoho Invoice, PayPal Invoices, Square Invoices, and basic Google Sheets templates. These tools can create invoices, track payments, and keep records in one place—often at no cost.

Best for: Sole proprietors, trades, farms, and service businesses that need simple, clean records.



10-minute setup tip: Start by creating one invoice template with your logo and contact info. Send your next invoice digitally instead of on paper.

MARKETING & SOCIAL MEDIA

What this solves: Staying visible without spending hours online.

Tools like Canva make flyers and social posts easy. Meta Business Suite helps manage Facebook and Instagram in one place. Buffer and Mailchimp offer free tiers for scheduling posts and sending simple email updates. A Google Business Profile is essential for local search visibility.

Best for: Retail shops, restaurants, home-based businesses, and anyone relying on local customers.

10-minute setup tip: Update your Google Business Profile with current hours, photos, and a short description—many customers check this before visiting.

INVENTORY OR SIMPLE OPERATIONS TRACKING

What this solves: Knowing what you have, what’s selling, and what needs restocking—or tracking jobs and supplies for non-retail businesses.

Retailers may use Square for Retail or low-cost Shopify plans. Others prefer Sortly, Airtable, or Google Sheets to track products, tools, or weekly tasks.

Best for: Boutiques, farm stands, makers, and service businesses managing parts or supplies.

10-minute setup tip: List your top 10 products or supplies first. Don’t try to track everything at once—start small.

SCHEDULING & APPOINTMENTS

What this solves: Reducing back-and-forth calls and no-shows.

Options like Google Calendar appointment schedules, Calendly, Square Appointments, and Setmore let customers book available times online—often with free plans.

Best for: Hair stylists, trades, consultants, fitness instructors, and anyone who works by appointment.

10-minute setup tip: Block your real availability first, then share your booking link with one regular customer to test it.

Imagine a small-town handyman. He sends invoices through Square, tracks weekly jobs in Google Sheets, uses Calendly to let customers book estimates, and posts before-and-after photos on Facebook using Canva. None of it costs much—but together, it saves hours and looks professional.

A FEW SMART CAUTIONS

Keep passwords strong and turn on two-factor authentication when available. Back up important data, even if the tool is cloud-based. And resist the urge to use too many apps—one tool that works is better than five you never open.

START SMALL AND BUILD

You don’t need to overhaul your business overnight. Pick one category—bookkeeping, marketing, inventory, or scheduling—and try a tool this week. Small steps add up, and the right tech can give you back what every small business owner needs more of: time.

Letters to the Editor

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