

Belfry

By Alexander Saxton

From Ptarmigan Magazine: the Spring Issue, 2024.

Headline: THE BILLIONAIRE & THE BELL

Dek: Developer's death rings a familiar tune

It's tough to open a restaurant in Toronto. Asher Farb should know. For nearly a decade, the now-38-year-old wunderkind has masterminded the founding of feted establishments such as *Bar Giaguaro*, and *Maison Demimonde*.

Thirteen months ago he met disaster for the first time since *54-40* went under in 2016.

Belfry was to be the jewel of Farb's restaurant empire. Located on the 60th floor of Colby Tower, the vistas alone justified extravagance. While sipping their ninety-dollar old-fashioned, Toronto's great & good would be able to gaze out upon the far-flung darkneses of the Toronto Islands; the wide silver of the lake at twilight. The menu, on its textured paper, was crafted by the tattooed hands of none other than *Green Goose's* Matt Spencer, who you'll be able to catch on HBO's *The Pit* this fall. It featured 'updated Canadian classics', including bison steaks and braised venison chuck burgers. Just like we used to enjoy at Grandma's house, I'm sure. Interior design was masterminded by the Montreal firm Blackout, and incorporated sleeknesses of midcentury wood and brass, along with a subtle sacramental theme: the red lanterns in their wrought-iron sconces were salvaged from a de-sanctified Anglican church (now condos), as was the restaurant's centrepiece: an enormous 49 hundredweight black bronze bell, suspended from a thick beam over a pool of water.

Funding for the restaurant came from a small number of handpicked investors. Notable among them was real-estate developer Richard Boegaard, Jr., 64, who died on the restaurant's opening night.

The Billionnaire.

Not far from Holland Marsh, Fenstoke-St-Peter's ('Saint Pete's', for those in the know), has slightly more people today than it did when Richard Boegaard's father, also named Richard Boegaard, moved there after the war. But St. Pete's has had an uneven half-century.

"Throughout the '90s and '2000s this town was hollowed out. Completely." Rebecca Gates has lived in Saint Pete's since she was a child. She saw the small farmers get bought out by the big ones, and then deindustrialization carry off most of what remained of the jobs. "People just left. The heart went out of this community. When they tore down the church... that was the end of it. It's only since the pandemic people started to come back. But mostly they commute. They live here, but their lives aren't here."

Rebecca remembers Richard, though.

“He was a nice boy. Small for his age. Always very quiet. I knew his father was in real estate, but Richard was always... oh, head in the clouds. He'd sit in the church for hours and draw the stained glass angels. Such a good eye for detail! I thought he was destined to be an artist. Never would have thought he'd become, you know, *Richard Boegaard*. Never in a million years.”

The Bell

Sometime around 1746, a dutchman named Van Zeyl arrived in London. Van Zeyl was a bellfounder by trade, and his arrival in England was shrouded in controversy. According to those with contacts in the low countries, he'd fled across the channel shortly after the murder of a high-ranking member of the States-General. Van Zeyl, it was rumoured, had been sleeping with the man's wife.

Nevertheless, the bellfounder was, according to one contemporary, “a tall & comely man, charming in speech, pleasing in hygiene, & masterful in the art & science of casting bells.” Perhaps unsurprisingly, bellfounding was a trade where good looks (and apparently, hygiene) were not universal. And so Van Zeyl, this 18th-century Hemsworth of the bell trade, found people willing to put his skills to use in London.

I'm driven to ask: if Van Zeyl was a murderer, then was the killing personal or political? He was an outspoken supporter of the House of Orange, and his flight from the Netherlands came only a year before the dutch republic was overthrown, and the House of Orange reinstated.

Perhaps it doesn't matter. Van Zeyl would never live to see the restoration either way. Less than a year after his arrival in London, the trunnion on a crucible broke while Van Zeyl was recasting an antique bell.

The molten bronze splashed, and a bolus of liquid metal caught him in the stomach.

It took him several days to die.

The Boegaards

Two-and-a-bit centuries later, another Dutchman was attending Upper Canada College.

If you ever saw Richard Boegaard interviewed on TV, or read profiles of him in the financial pages, you might be forgiven for thinking his was the story of the 'Canadian Dream': a hardworking immigrant's son who made good.

And appealing though this narrative may be, the facts tell a slightly different story. It is true, as Boegaard once said on Lang & O'Leary, that his father arrived in this country "with no property, nothing at all." It's also true, however, that six months *after* his arrival, Boegaard Sr. purchased a large property outside of Fenstoke-St.-Peter's. No mere postwar bungalow, the house in question was a stone manse which had once belonged to the lieutenant governor.

So we know Richard Boegaard Senior had money. Where that money came from is anyone's guess. With so many records lost during the war, Richard Sr. is a ghost, up until the point where he shows up in Canada.

But of course, in a country like ours, money isn't always enough. Parish records show Boegaard Sr. was affiliated with the Dutch Reform church when he first arrived in Canada. Then, sometime around the mid-50s, he seems to have abruptly converted to Anglicanism.

Perhaps he just saw the light. But conversion certainly seems to have improved his prospects. Two years after joining the local parish he was married to the daughter of a member of provincial parliament. Two years after that we find him in a photograph taken at Toronto's exclusive Albany Club, shaking hands with Conservative Party leader George A. Drew. Then, in 1974 we find his son, Richard Boegaard, Jr., enrolled for one year at Upper Canada College. Three of his classmates from that year would go on to be cabinet ministers.

Maybe Richard Jr truly did feel like he started out with nothing. Born and raised in the country, he might have felt out of step with his more urbane classmates at UCC. There are institutions with warmer reputations, after all.

Andrew Barnett-Charles (MP, Westlake-Croal), was a classmate and friend of Boegaard's at UCC. Like Rebecca Gates, he remembers Richard as a quiet young man who mostly kept to himself.

Unlike Rebecca he never remembers him drawing.

The bad end of Ishmael Sadler

Around a century before Van Zeyl fled to London, a roundhead Fifth Monarchist named Ishmael Sadler lined thirteen people up and had them shot in the town square of Chipping Hayes, a swampside village in East Anglia. According to Daniel Fairstowe in his monumental textbook, *Campanology*, this was at least the third time Sadler had turned his soldiers' guns against the innocent. It would be the last.

Being opposed to what they saw as the idolatry of religious symbols, the roundheads routinely broke stained glass windows and defaced religious murals. Hardliners -- and Ishmael Sadler was a hardliner -- extended this intolerance even toward such objects as church bells.

As it happened, the church at Chipping Hayes was locally famous for its height and fine stonework, and its belltower housed a notable bell. This instrument was dated 1238, and the inscription around its curve read, "*Abat pomas madde me / Fro the quaynt-bronce of THURCYTEL, þe bloody belle of Abat Wulfistann.*"

'Wulfstan' is an Anglo-Saxon name, so the bell may already have been several centuries old by 1238. 'Bloody bell', of course, rings ominously. It may be that Thurcytel's name was already tightly connected with violent death by the time that bell was recast in the thirteenth century.

Ishmael Sadler, of course, didn't stop to consider the bell's history. He sent his men up the tower to cut it down.

And when they sawed through the rope, down it came, smashing through three floors of dry timber and sending a hail of splinters through the tower's open door. Not splinters like the kind you pull with tweezers, but like the kind that killed sailors on Napoleonic battleships: slivers the size and width of your arm.

One of those splinters buried itself eight inches deep into Ishmael Sadler's throat.

But the bell was broken. It would be an entire century before a dutchman named Van Zeyl would be hired to refound it.

The Building-Boom

Men like Richard Boegaard do things the right way. They don't launch risky ventures right out of school. They graduate with honours from Queen's University and find themselves an entry-level position at a reputable firm. They learn the ropes, develop skills, work long hours, and climb their way up through the ranks. Then, when they're ready, they strike out on their own.

When men like Richard Boegaard 'make it' it's because they're smart and decent and hardworking, not because of any connections or advantages they may have. To suggest otherwise would be unfair, even slanderous. Libellous, technically, if you printed it in the pages of Ptarmigan magazine.

Richard Boegaard did things the right way. After graduating with honours from the Queen's University School of Business, he found a job at the development firm Goldenrod and Associates. David Goldenrod was an Albany Club associate of Boegaard's father, but of course was not responsible for hiring decisions at the firm. After five years working for Goldenrod, Richard and a school friend found some family members willing to invest, and pooled their resources to buy a small set of rental units. People who knew them then, describe a cycle of frugal living, new capital, and further acquisitions. Once Richard's portfolio was in the low tens of millions (in 1980s dollars), he partnered with a business associate to purchase and develop a strip of farmland outside of Brampton. Single family residential homes. In other words, Sprawl. That project turned out to be profitable, so he did it again. Rolling the debt forward as you're

supposed to do (unless you're the sort of person society tells to avoid debt), he gradually built his portfolio until its sheer value dwarfed any of those debts.

Where did Boegaard's capital come from? Almost exclusively from other private investors, some of them, like Goldenrod himself, Boegaard's father's friends. Where did those investors get their money? Almost exclusively from their own real estate deals or speculative investments. And where did the money come from to cover the start-up costs of those archaic deals? Here we enter the realm of speculation, but those midcentury Albany Club photos show Richard's father brushing shoulders with Colbys and Kincaids, Olins and Lascelleses: captains of industry in mining, forestry and oil. But what happens when we ask the question one more time: where did *their* startup capital come from? The startup capital for the startup capital for the startup capital? Just how exactly does a family get rich in the British Empire at the turn of the 19th century?

There are a number of answers to that question, but all of them would be unfair, even slanderous to state. Libellous, technically, if you printed them in the pages of Ptarmigan magazine.

But whatever the answers, what do they matter? The Middle Passage and the Plunder of India weren't Richard Boegaard's fault, and neither were the expropriations of St. John's Ward from the poor or the Grand River tract from the Haudenosaunee. And it wasn't Richard Boegaard's fault when rents had to go up and tenants didn't like it, or when wetlands had to turn into driveways and the endangered birds didn't like it, or when old buildings had to be redeveloped and the people living there protested, 'this is our home.'

None of these things were his fault. *Of course they weren't.*

But he did become tremendously rich off of them.

When Richard Boegaard was 48 years old he bought a piece of land in Fenstoke-St. Peter's, where it turned out that the old Anglican church of St. Agathus still stood. The very church where he'd spent so many hours drawing angels as a child.

Or, and maybe this is another way of looking at the evidence, he bought that piece of land *because* St. Agathus was standing on it.

I have a picture that I came across while researching this story. It was in an old parish directory which Rebecca Gates gave to me. An overexposed photograph of a young Boegaard, standing out in front of that church. He's wearing an overstarched white shirt; a pair of grey flannel pants and a blue blazer. I grew up wearing the same clothes each Sunday. I know just how they scratch your skin, just how the blazer always carries that faint smell of mothballs.

Behind him towers the great Victorian darkness of that church. And, just glimpsed in the tower at the far right upper corner, the dark suggestion of a bell.

The Beginning

Rebecca Gates remembers an incident from her childhood. It involves that parish bell.

“There was an old man at the church: George Garcy, he was a widower, and had been a part-time custodian at the church when he was younger. But that was before I was born: he was well into his eighties by the time I remember him.”

Not many people in Fenstoke St. Peter remember George Garcy anymore. Those who do, recall a small, milky-eyed man who sat in the same chair of the parish hall for hours in the early morning before church services began, and hours into the afternoon, after they'd ended.

“We always had to ask him to go, when it was time to lock up.” James Frobisher, another former part-time custodian at St. Agathus, was twenty years old when Mr. Garcy died. “He'd always say, ‘Can't you just leave me to close up behind you?’ We'd have to tell him, ‘Sorry, George: you don't work here anymore. You've got to go home.’”

The only newspaper record of George Garcy I can find might offer a clue as to why he didn't like to go home. It's a clipping from the Fenstoke Messenger-Gazette: April 13th, 1932. ‘TRAGIC DEATH’, the paper announces. ‘Mary Garcy, 22, of Stone Row, Fenstoke, was found drowned this morning in the quarry pond behind Claggan Line. Mrs. Garcy appears to have received a head injury before her death. Police say they cannot rule out foul play at this point in the investigation. Mrs. Garcy's husband George, 41, has been brought in for questioning, and police are asking for information about the whereabouts of an unnamed vagrant, described as ‘dark-haired & of sallow skin’ who was seen in the area the night before Mrs. Garcy's discovery.’

George Garcy was quickly released. The ‘unnamed vagrant’, an indigenous man from Six Nations named John General, had been apprehended in the next village over. Court documents identify General as having been born in the township of Caledonia, which now, almost a century later, remains central to disputes between the Six Nations of the Haudenosaunee, and developers like Richard Boegaard. Developers say the town, like most of the Grand River Watershed, was ceded to the government in the 1800s. Six Nations says the land was only ever leased, and that they're owed about two centuries of back-rent. Over the decades, this land dispute has frequently become violent. And if you wanted to, you could think of John General as one of the victims of that violence. Despite his unwavering protestations of innocence, he was convicted of Mary Garcy's murder, and later hanged at the Don Jail.

Despite the fact that George Garcy no longer worked for St. Agathus, it seems he still owned a set of the Church's keys. On the day of his death he took a group of boys up the belltower, so they could look out on the town below. On the way back down, it seems, one of those boys rang the bell. What child wouldn't have been tempted to? But in the enclosed space of a belfry, the ringing of a 49 hundredweight bell is incredibly loud. The noise seems to have startled Mr. Garcy at the top of the steps, and at his age, the fall could not have been anything but fatal.

He was dead well before the reverberations faded away.

Interestingly, none of the boys ever claimed to have known which of the others, if any, had been responsible for pulling on the rope.

Also interestingly, one of the boys in that tower on that fateful Sunday afternoon was Richard Boegaard, Jr.

The Belfry

On the *Belfry's* opening night, everything was perfect.

“Food was flying out of the kitchen, the drinks were fucking killer, and everyone was there: the mayor, people I can’t even fucking tell you about without breaking an NDA, *everyone*.” Asher Farb still gets a faraway look when he talks about the Belfry. “It was like, this is it. We finally fucking made it. *54-40?* Forgotten: gone. We were all the way back, and the future was fucking limitless.”

He recalls seeing Boegaard only once before his death that evening, near the beginning of the night.

“I made sure to track him down, you know, it was a lot of his own money in the place, so you have to, like, pay respects.”

He found Boegaard drinking a Steam Whistle at the edge of the water feature, alone in the noise of laughter and clinking cocktail glasses.

“He was just looking at the bell,” says Farb.

Right now, if you have the connections, you can still get into the empty restaurant and see that bell hanging there. Heavy, silent in the slanting afternoon sun, the movement of the AC across its open mouth giving the faint impression of a sound of whetted steel. The space is all in legal limbo now: the branding, the assets. And so for now, the bell just waits.

Asher remembers Richard asking where he’d gotten the bell from. “I told him, ‘I dunno. Have to ask Larry.’” That’s Larry Easterman, of Blackout Design. “He said something about finding it buried at a scrap yard somewhere. Pretty good, huh? He always finds good pieces, I don’t know how.” At this, Farb says Richard got ‘a funny sort of look on his face’. “He said, ‘Maybe the good pieces find *him*, Asher’. I thought that was a decent joke at the time.”

Opening night puts a lot of demands on a restaurateur’s attention. Someone from the kitchen showed up at Farb’s elbow: Matty Spence needed him for a moment. Asher was already making his excuses when Richard grabbed hold of his arm.

“I was surprised. He never did that: never like, broke your personal space like that. And he was stronger than he looked: it actually hurt a little bit. He asked me: ‘Hey Asher, do you think I could ring that bell? I always wanted to.’ Well, I had always wanted to let people ring the bell, but Larry talked me out of it. ‘Do you have any idea how loud a 49 hundredweight bell can be in an enclosed space?’ he told me. So I said to Richard, ‘Sorry man, Larry saw you coming. They took out the ringer in there.’”

‘Clapper’, is the word Asher actually means to use. (At least according to Daniel Fairstowe’s monumental textbook, *Campanology*.) The bronze clapper is what makes the bell actually ring, and according to Asher, the one at Belfry had been removed.

Which makes what happened next interesting, to say the least.

After Asher returned to the kitchen, Richard Boegaard did something nobody would have expected. He had always been a quiet, backroom kind of guy. No showman, not by any stretch of the imagination.

But that night, in front of the great & the good of John Tory’s Toronto, he climbed over the polished brass railing and clambered down into the water feature, ruining his handmade loafers.

Several people laughed: a few young women cheered and raised drinks. Someone shouted, ‘Go get ‘em, Richard.’

But everyone who was there that night says Boegaard just stood in the water, staring up at the bell, at the darkness beneath it. A friend of mine who was waiting tables that night says he reached up and ran his fingers along the letters stamped into the curve of the bell.

“It was a weird moment,” she tells me. “The whole room just went quiet. Like we all knew something was going to happen.” I won’t share my friend’s name, by the way. She’s left ‘Belfry’ off her resume. “Then he just turns to us and says, ‘You want to hear me ring this bell?’”

Most people remained silent, it seems. A few drunk television producers cheered him on, but their voices fell flat in the odd silence that had descended. Back in the noisy kitchen, Asher Farb was too busy arguing with his celebrity chef to notice what was happening outside.

Richard Boegaard reached up. He grasped hold of the rope which was hanging down from inside the bell. Felt the weight of the bronze clapper attached to it, and swung.

[beat]

It’s tough to get a sense of what the noise was like. Most people who were there say things like ‘I can’t describe it’, or ‘it was unlike anything I’ve ever heard.’ But the physical evidence speaks clearly. Fifty three people from that room ended up in the hospital that night. At least twenty

suffered ruptured eardrums. My friend who was waiting tables has suffered from tinnitus ever since. Even in the kitchen, Asher Farb says the sound was unbelievable.

“Matt and I threw ourselves on the floor. We thought a bomb had gone off.”

If you stand inside the empty restaurant today, that’s almost what it looks like happened. Half the windows were shattered and thrown into the sky by that terrible sound, their shards slicing down on the heads of pedestrians far below. Today the abandoned space stands dim from the plywood sheets which cover up those floor-to-ceiling vistas: those wide views of the unceded Toronto Islands.

Several eyewitnesses claim they saw steam rising from the water’s surface as the bell’s sound died away. I spoke to Margaret Sawai, a professor of applied physics at TMU, and she assures me the described phenomenon is impossible.

Yet nonetheless, still standing and wreathed *in* that steam: Richard Boegaard, Jr. Developer, friend to the great & good, wearing a bitter smile on his face. As silence swept back into the room like a wave, he fell backward into the smoking water and never moved again.

The cause of death was Cardiac Arrest. A perfectly normal death for a man his age to die.

Bronze.

As I stand in the empty shell of the restaurant, in the dusty sun of the side windows, I can understand why Richard Boegaard would want to ring that bell. It seems to call in the silence. But when I reach up to touch cold bronze, there’s no clapper waiting for me in the darkness. The bell hangs mute and silent.

Why it spoke for him that night, I can’t claim to know. But it seems he went to that bell gladly, so maybe *he* knew.

It’s Thurcytel, of course, that hangs in the empty restaurant. That ancient bell: recast, remoulded and rebroken and shipped across the sea and demolished in its tower and buried alive under scrap and dredged to life again for the edification of the Belfry’s patrons.

An old friend; old foe, perhaps.

A bell he’d sat beneath so many hours as a child, drawing angels in the parish windows.