

The "Mission Bells" Letter and Sheet-Music Annotation

1911 letter by "Marie Louka" (published 1912):

Lakewood, N. J.
Dec. 15, 1911.

Whitney Warner Company
131 West Forty-first Street, New York.

Gentlemen—I am sending you with this the last of the five teaching pieces that I promised to write this year. I have named it "Mission Bells."

The theme, and in fact the whole composition, came to me as an inspiration while traveling through California for my health two years ago. I traveled most of the time in stage coaches, of which there are still many left between San Diego and San Francisco. I saw the ruins of many of the old missions, which one hundred years ago were a refuge and a home for the worn traveler, who could stay as long as he wished and pay what he could afford and when he went away took the blessings of the Monks, those men of God who sacrificed their lives for mankind in a country which was inhabited mostly by lawless Spaniards and Mexicans. While almost all of these buildings are in a ruined state now, I was very much impressed with the bells, which in four or five missions still remained. These bells were formerly rung at night to guide lost travelers.

One day while making a trip on horseback to the foot of a range of mountains with my companion and a guide we lost our way. It was late in the afternoon when we discovered this fact. While wondering what to do, we heard the chiming of sweet bells—three in number, we judged from the sound—and following this, to us most welcome sound, we came upon an Ursuline convent, situated in a most beautiful natural park in the foothills of a long range of mountains. As we came close we could hear the soft tones of an organ and the singing of the nuns. It was vesper time, and I was so deeply impressed with the beautiful scene that I forgot the predicament we were in. We reined up our horses and stopped until the chanting was over, and the whole scene made such an impression upon me that I resolved to embody it, just as it then impressed me, in a musical composition.

This I have since done, and I am submitting the manuscript to you under these conditions, that it be named "Mission Bells," and that a short description of this event in my life be inscribed upon every copy. Kindly send contracts and any other communications to my home in Philadelphia.

Yours sincerely, MARIE LOUKA.

Sheet Music Annotation:

"Mission Bells" was suggested to the composer several years ago while travelling through California and hearing the chiming of sweet bells from an Ursuline [sic] convent situated in the foot hills of the mountains. The bells, calling the nuns to prayer, the picturesque scene, and then the chanting of the nuns with the organ accompanying, made a profound impression, and "Mission Bells" pictures the author's remembrance of that memorable evening.

Was the Letter's Story Authentic?

The now controversial December 15, 1911 letter claiming that an experience while travelling in California was the inspiration for "Mission Bells" contains some potentially verifiable statements, namely:

1. It occurred in California two years prior to 1911, i.e. **in 1909**;
2. At the time, **stagecoaches were still running** in California;
3. He was taking "a trip on horseback to the **foot of a range of mountains**;"
4. **Bells** (estimated to be three in number) led them to an **Ursuline convent**; and
5. It was "situated in a most beautiful **natural park in the foothills of a long range of mountains**."

Was Johann C. Schmid in California in 1909?

His telling was that earlier in his life he had traveled rather extensively nationwide, including to California (where he claimed to have met Lillian Russell). He earned his way by playing piano wherever he could. We, his grandchildren, had thought those travels were before his first marriage in 1902, but explicit timing was never clear to us. By 1906 he had started a family, in 1908 his 10-month-old son had died, and in 1910 his second daughter was born. Moreover, during 1909 he published at least 11 works. Accordingly, 1909 is probably not when he was on the road. Maybe it was an incident from an earlier time but penned "two years ago" to add currency. If the travels had been in say 1890 when he was 20 years old and he had written so, then "Marie Louka" would have been 41 in 1911, maybe too old for the desired image. He could have sidestepped the issue by just not mentioning a time at the sacrifice of only a little credibility but didn't. Or was it someone else's story, or a complete fabrication? It's highly likely that some license was taken, at least regarding the year. *Yes, he had been traveling in California but probably before 1909.*

Were stagecoaches still running at the time?

"The last American chapter in the use of the stage coaches took place between 1890 and about 1915. In the end, it was the motor bus, not the train, that caused the final disuse of these horse-drawn vehicles. After the main railroad lines were established, it was frequently not practical to go to a place of higher elevation by rail lines if the distance was short. By 1918 stage coaches were only operating in a few mountain resorts or western National Parks as part of the "old west" romance for tourists." Source: [here](#).

Yes, stagecoaches were still running.

Was there, at the time, an Ursuline "convent" in California in the foothills of a long range of mountains?

In the 1880s, Ursuline nuns started a school for girls in Santa Rosa in the foothills of the Mayacamas Mountains, a long range (in and around Sonoma County) that includes Cobb Mountain, Hood Mountain, and Mount Saint Helena. The school was located in one of the valleys of Sonoma County where it was flanked by long finger-like mountain ranges with wooded state parks as well as now an Audubon Sanctuary. The area has all the attributes of a "natural park," as it was described. A terrain map showing the original location of the Academy and a picture of its original building (ca.1885) are appended below. *Yes, in the foothills of a long mountain range was a women's Ursuline Academy that could have been quite reasonably mistaken for a convent.*

As J.C. Schmid liked his wine, it makes sense that he would visit the Sonoma valley region where wineries thrived then as now. The letter does not suggest that the academy building was entered, or even that they dismounted, so mistaking the academy for a convent is plausible. The original building no longer exists so I was unable to verify the presence of bells (or their number) but the photograph of the original building shows that it definitely had a bell tower. In 1900, the affiliated church (St. Rose) moved to its current location adjacent to the original academy so, depending on the timing, the bells and/or organ tones could have emanated from it. So, *yes there probably were bells*. In the 1950s the building was torn down and the school moved further north. The church appears to have now engulfed the site of the original academy. A brief history of the school (it closed in 2010) can be found [here](#).

Summary and Conclusion:

The stated year of the incident seems convincingly improbable. However, the letter's descriptions of the terrain and the "convent" are consistent with the original Ursuline Academy's Santa Rosa, CA locus at the time. I cannot rule out the possibility that the letter was a completely fabricated publicity stunt, but there's enough evidence to suggest that such an assertion is unwarranted. I'm sure my grandfather was capable of subterfuge, the name of the game in the Tin-Pan-Alley culture. From what *is* known, the letter's story is plausible but uncertainties leave its authenticity indeterminate.

Lew Thomas
November, 2015



**The Original Ursuline Academy
at 10th and B Streets
Santa Rosa, California
(photo courtesy Ursuline High School)**

