

# A Wooden Noisemaker

By Inga Milbauer



Wooden Cog Ratchet  
*BHSM Collection*

The Boylston Historical Society and Museum has the wooden cog ratchet (or cog rattle), pictured above, in its collection. It measures 10.75" x 7.75" and was donated in 1973 by Alice H. Segersten. According to the provenance, it was used to call worshippers to services. Alice Maud Hazard was born on 22 March 1893 in Boylston, Massachusetts, the daughter of George Hazard and Alice J. Flagg. She married Joseph E. Segersten in August 1925 in New York City, New York. Alice Hazard Segersten died in 1978 and is buried in Mountain View Cemetery in Shrewsbury, Massachusetts.

This type of noisemaker is a more complex form of a scraper, a percussion instrument which serrated surface is rasped by a stick to produce sound. With the cog ratchet, the cog wheel is set in a frame to which a flexible tongue is attached. When the wheel revolves on its axle, the tongue scrapes the cogs producing a loud sound.<sup>1</sup> By holding the handle and spinning the rattle around, it makes a loud clicking sound.



Alice Maud Hazard  
*BHSM Photograph Collection*

The origin of wooden noisemakers can be traced back to ancient civilizations. Made of bone, gourd, shell, horn or wood, they were used in rituals and as musical instruments.



Handle & Cog View  
*BHSM Collection*

Several cultures adopted the cog ratchet. Medieval Christians used cog ratchets during the silent days of Paschal Triduum (the three days beginning the evening of the Thursday before Easter and ending on Easter Sunday evening) instead of ringing church bells. Named crotalus, which means rattle in Greek, handheld crotalus would replace the altar bells. Larger, stationary crotali were designed to be used in place of tower bells. A bell tower rattle was several feet wide, stationary and operated by a crank.<sup>2</sup> In Jewish communities, the cog ratchet, called grogger (rattle in Yiddish) or rashanim (Hebrew), is still used during the Jewish Holiday Purim. Purim celebrates the survival of the Jews of Persia: “Under the rule of King Ahashverosh, Haman, the king's adviser, plots to exterminate all of the Jews of Persia. His plan is foiled by Queen Esther and her cousin Mordechai, who ultimately save the Jews of Persia from destruction.”<sup>3</sup> During the

reading of the Book of Esther, the grogger is used to drown out Haman’s name.

In Colonial America, cog ratchets were used in a secular way. The citizens of Boston established a group of watchmen in 1631 to patrol the streets at night to protect the public from criminals, wild animals and fires. The watchmen used rattles to sound the alarm. The director-general of New Netherland, Peter Stuyvesant, formed a group of eight men and a supervisor to patrol New Amsterdam (later renamed New York City) in 1651. The group was called the *Rattle Watch* as they used large rattles to sound the alarm when patrolling the streets between 9 p.m. and dawn.<sup>4</sup> The usage of cog ratchets as an alarm continued in later time. They were used, for example, to summon firefighters or local militia, and on naval ships to sound the alarm during the American Civil War. Police and fire departments used them until the late 1800s. A patent from 1865 by J. McCord shows a “Policeman’s Rattle” with a collapsible handle to make it easier to carry it in a pocket.<sup>5</sup> During both World Wars, British and American forces used rattles to warn soldiers of gas attacks. In Britain, air raid wardens in towns and cities would use cog rattles to warn of gas attacks during the Blitz in the Second World War.

Returning to the original use as a percussion instrument, several classical music composers used cog ratchets in their compositions. Examples include *Till Eulenspiegel* (1895) by Richard Strauss and *The Rite of Spring* (1913) by Igor Stravinsky.<sup>6</sup> Widely used in the United Kingdom at rugby and soccer matches by supporters to encourage their teams, they became known as “football rattles” until they were banned in the 1970s. Throughout history, these noisemakers have been used as percussion instruments, festive noisemakers, and by children as toys.

## Acknowledgements:

<sup>1</sup> [britannica.com/art/scraper-musical-instrument#ref226991](https://www.britannica.com/art/scraper-musical-instrument#ref226991)

<sup>2</sup> [forward.com/culture/335491/the-strange-and-violent-history-of-the-ordinary-grogger/](https://www.forward.com/culture/335491/the-strange-and-violent-history-of-the-ordinary-grogger/)

<sup>3</sup> [reformjudaism.org/jewish-holidays/purim](https://reformjudaism.org/jewish-holidays/purim)

<sup>4</sup> [medium.com/discourse/the-rattle-watch-aa7ecfd590ab](https://medium.com/discourse/the-rattle-watch-aa7ecfd590ab)

<sup>5</sup> [medium.com/@objectivehistories/the-brief-history-of-ratchets-c8d92366c217](https://medium.com/@objectivehistories/the-brief-history-of-ratchets-c8d92366c217)

<sup>6</sup> [britannica.com/art/scraper-musical-instrument#ref226991](https://www.britannica.com/art/scraper-musical-instrument#ref226991)

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Photography by Inga Milbauer

Editor, Nancy A. Filgate, Director, Boylston Historical Society & Museum, Inc., Boylston, Massachusetts