

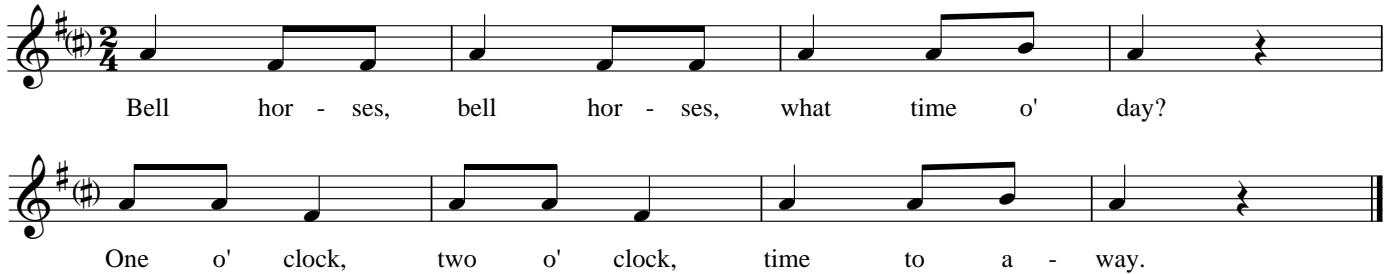
Bell Horses

Source (text):

Iona and Peter Opie, eds.

The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes

Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1951



Game Directions

Children sit in a circle. One child is chosen to be the bell horse and given jingle bells. A second child is chosen to be the driver and given a scarf to act as reins around the horse's waist. The children trot around inside the circle as everyone sings. At the end of the song, the horse and driver each choose another child to be the next horse and driver.

Background Information

A rhyme common in the nineteenth century for starting children's races. Variants include the following:

Coach horses, coach horses, what time o' day?
One o'clock, two o'clock, three and away.

Bell horses, bell horses, all in a row,
How many fine bells, I want to know?

And for blowing the seedheads off dandelions:

Field horses, field horses, what time of day?
One o'clock (puff), two o'clock (puff), three (a tremendous puff) and away.

Exactly what bell horses are in this context is undetermined. Bells used to be hung on the leading pack-horse, called the "bell horse," and on festive occasions, particularly May Day, the wagoners' horses were, and still are, decked with bells. Denham tells how bells were used on coach horses up to the beginning of the nineteenth century. A New Zealand correspondent, stating that the rhyme was used for race-starting in his childhood, explained "bell horses" as meaning race horses, the term deriving from Stuart times when, instead of having cups as trophies, races were sometimes run for silver bells.