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# OF TIME AND CLOCKS AND AN OLD MAN

## by H. R. Bratton (TX)

*Editor's Note: A shortened version of the following first appeared in the* Houston Chronicle *"Texas" magazine. See note at the end of the article which explains how NAWCC Chapter #139 made it possible for us to reprint it here for our members.*

Like most folks in our backwoods community, we had an old windup clock that kept fairly good time. Ours was an old Seth Thomas with a friendly face that looked out at us from the mantel over the fireplace. To keep it running, it had to be wound up tight every seven days. Dad usually wound it and oiled it—with the tip of a feather dipped in some 3-in-1—every Sunday night just before he went to bed. But, just like every other dad in the community, he would sometimes forget.

Not that a rundown clock was anything to get panicky about in those days. Back then, rural folks' lives were not geared to clocks like city folks' lives are today. Everybody usually got up with the sun, ate their noontime meal when it was straight overhead, and quit work when it was dropping out of sight behind Colie's Ridge. We'd sometimes go all day without even looking at a clock.

But then certain community affairs were scheduled by the clock. Like at school, books "took up" at 8 o'clock.

*Figure 1. Nearly every Thursday, I went to the old man's Piney Woods store for sliced, weighed, and packaged bologna and cheese. It was always delivered fresh that day, and made a delicious change-of-pace lunch.*

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And Sunday school started at 9 o'clock when we had preaching, at 10 o'clock when we didn't. So for that reason it was not an entirely unimportant matter that everyone's clock should run pretty close to the same time.

With about half of our clocks running too slow, and the other half running way ahead, we'd be running the risk of letting a fairly well-regulated community drift into chaos. So it was of some importance that everybody put out a little effort to get a stopped clock reset to somewhere near the right time.

I'm talking about the days before everybody had a telephone or a radio. When your clock ran down or stopped for some other reason, like getting out of level, it wasn't always easy to get it reset to the correct time. If you lived on a road that was traveled with some frequency, you could stop some passer-by to ask him the time. If he had one of those old railroad-style watches that was about to wear a hole in the bib pocket of his overalls, you could take the time he gave you as being close enough to keep you in the grace period at school or church.

And then if you lived in hearing distance of someone who rang a dinner bell every day at noon, you could run in and set your clock when you heard the first off-note clang of their old bell. Of course there was always the question of how close to the correct time the ropepuller's clock was running. And in the winter months, when there was no field work going on, noon bells weren't rung at all.

I remember a time or two when we tried to set our old Seth Thomas by the almanac. We looked up the time the sun was going to set on that day, and just as it went out of sight behind Colie's Ridge, Dad twisted the hands around until he had them set exactly on the dot, and then, with a gentle push of his finger, he set the old pendulum to swinging. On the average, it was probably as good a way as stopping some traveler, or listening for the first clang of a dinner bell.

Folks who lived on the main road would stop Dr. Hardy to ask him the time, if they heard him coming and could get up to the road quick enough. Doc was always in a hurry. Being a doctor, he felt obliged to carry a good watch for counting pulses, birth contractions, and the like. So he carried a chronologist-certified, dust-tight watch with at least 21 jewels in it. Every time he went to Conway, which was at least once a week, he would check it by the big Western Union clock that hung in the train depot.

Like us, most folks had clocks that would strike the time. I remember how that Seth Thomas of ours would strike out the hour and the half-hour all through the day and right on through the night when its striking would reverberate through an otherwise silent house. We got used to it, though. And that was how we sometimes found out that it had run down when even in our deepest slumbers we failed to hear its somnolent tones echoing through our bedrooms.

But in our waking hours, if we paid close enough attention, we could tell when the last coil in the striking spring of our old timekeeper was beginning to go limp. It would begin to strike a little slower and with a little less force each time it struck. And sometimes right in the middle of a "long hour," like eleven or twelve, it would grind to a halt and leave time suspended, as it were, until its spring was rewound. The genius who invented striking mechanisms may have built them to slow down like that as a time-to-rewind signal. But of course when we were all out somewhere working, we couldn't hear the warning signal of the strike's slowing down and getting weaker.

After I married and left home, I became used to dull, characterless clocks that didn't strike. When my wife and I went back on our first visit home, that old Seth Thomas kept us awake all night with its "man-the-barricades!" alarm every half-hour. I slipped out of bed one night after Dad had turned in, snuck back into the living room and stopped it. I confessed the next morning, when I heard Dad sadly telling Mom that the old clock was all worn out and was ready for the ash heap.

I am sure that much-loved old clock would still be in the Bratton family as an heirloom if not a still-reliable timepiece had it not gone up in flames with about everything else when the old home burned down. That clock had survived a tornado and a flood, but when nobody thought to snatch it from the mantel and carry it to safety, the faithful old ticker and striker went down in flames.

But, as troublesome as it was back in "them days" to keep your clock running and striking at somewhere near the right time, can you imagine how stressful it must have been having to keep one eye on an hourglass so it could be turned just as that last grain of sand trickled through? And then have to note the number of times it had been turned so you'd have some idea of the hour of the day?

What if you forgot? You wouldn't know how much sand would have run through while your poor, over-stressed mind had been relaxing with a little wool-gathering. I guess you could have taken it over to a neighbor's house and asked him to turn it for you the next time he turned his. But how could you know how much wool-gathering he might have been doing?

As long as someone kept an eye on it, I could see that an hourglass was more accurate than a sundial. But I could see one advantage the sundial had over the hourglass. When the sun was shining, you could get a fair estimation of the hour just by glancing at the line of the shadow on the dial. But during cloudy periods, when the sun couldn't cast a shadow for days, what would you do? Beyond being barely able to tell when it was night and when it was day, you could not have told what time it really was with more accuracy than plus or minus two or three hours! You could miss a medicine-taking time by so wide a margin it might be fatal!

But I know one thing that would have provided a household with a reference base from which every morning could have been started with as much accuracy as the government tone we were able to hear at high noon in later years on our radios. That of course would have been Jock, our old red rooster, who would have crowed at the

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*Figure 2. One could almost imagine how the old country store looked during its hey-days with shelves, tables and walls all neatly arranged with a wide array of goods ranging from washtubs to hats and horse collars.*

tick of dawn if the clouds obscuring the sun had been a mile thick! You could not have slipped the first glimmer of daylight past ol' Jock if he'd been locked inside a black box for a month!

I sometimes wondered what ol' Jock would have done if we had up and moved to Alaska, where, in the summertime, the sun shines all day every day, with no night and no dawn. Dad said the old ruler-of-the-roost would soon go crazy. But I don't know. I think ol' Jock would have somehow figured it out. . . .

Anyway, nowadays, accurate-to-the-split-second timing devices are all around us, with hardly any of them ever needing to be wound or oiled or reset. They even have a kind that prints the time and date on your tab at the grocery store, and in just about any other place you do business. There is even a calendar and clock on this computer I am writing on that tells me the date and time every time I switch it on.

I sometimes feel a little resentful at all of these nagging reminders that time is silently and relentlessly moving on and carrying us all along with it whether any of us want it to or not. Why can't we all dig in our heels sometime, and shout, "Whoa! These are good times in our lives. Why should we be rushed through them? Stop the clocks. Heaven can wait. Let us tarry a while longer over the delights of Earth so each of us can be better prepared to appreciate the raptures of our Valhallas."

And that brings me to the old man I got to know a few years back up in East Texas. Remembering him was what got me started writing this treatise on old clocks in the first place. The old settler was still doggedly running his old-time, crossroads store deep in a rural area of the Piney Woods even after its day had come and gone and the big chain stores in the not-so-distant towns had already gobbled up all of the business for miles around. He may have been one of the first to dig in his heels and say "Whoa" to being rushed through all of our good times, but he had an entirely different notion about stopping clocks.

From the office where I worked, which was just inside the main entrance to a big munitions plant, I'd go over

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to his store nearly every Thursday to buy bologna and cheese for lunch. They were always delivered fresh that day and made a delicious change-of-pace lunch.

The first time I was in the old store, while my bologna and cheese were being sliced, weighed and packaged for me by the lone clerk behind the counter, I looked around the once-grand emporium. Everything in it, all of which had once been new and neatly arranged on tables and shelves, had just about turned into disarranged piles of junk: rusty washtubs, shovels, frazzled brooms, turning plows, horse collars, bedsprings, stovepipes, racks of skimmer hats, piles of old shoes, half-dressed, armless mannequins leaning at awkward angles.

I was struck by the sight of at least two dozen old-style pendulum clocks looking down like sentinels from a second-floor gallery. It was obvious that none of them was being reduced to junk by time and neglect. They literally gleamed with care. There was no dust on their faces, their cases glowed from what must have been regular rubbings with lemon oil, and every brightly polished pendulum was sedately swinging back and forth. All of the old-time clocks, each one ticking to its own cadence amid the piles of rubble, jumbled my senses and left me with the weird feeling that I had just wandered onto the set of an Alfred Hitchcock movie.

Back in the office, the out-of-sync ticks of those old clocks, along with the "frozen-frame" scene in the old store, kept flicking in and out of my mind.

The next week, when I was in the old store for another country-boy lunch, all 27 of the old clocks let go at the same time and started striking the hour of 12. It was as if you were in some music class where 27 kids were trying to hammer out a tune on musical bells. There was not all that much harmony, but there was plenty of fortissimo up and down the scale, and most of them finished at the same time. Once, amid the clangorous notes, I thought I heard a familiar bar from an old-time tune. (Hitchcock would have probably had them playing two or three recognizable bars from the theme of his movie.)

While the clocks were striking, I looked around for the old man. He was standing outside his office door with a delighted look on his face like some old grandfather who was being honored by a grand performance by all of his grandchildren. I think he was especially pleased when they all struck the twelfth note at pretty much the same time. Probably as close, with all of his constant tinkering, as he could ever hope to get them.

The old storekeeper had several Seth Thomases sitting around. I asked him one day if I might buy one. "Don't want to sell 'em," came his gruff reply, as he turned away and walked to the back of the store. Then why was he keeping them, I wondered? I finally concluded that, instead of him ever hoping to stop time in its tracks, he might have established some feeling of unity with those old clocks, and in return for him keeping them ticking, he thought they might someday turn time back on itself and let him live the good times in his life all over again.

This was back in the '60s, and even though he was approaching 80, he looked robust and healthy, and I could see no reason why he should be expecting an early end. But then he could've had a serious sick spell some time back that had started him to worrying. But there were no obvious ill effects from any sickness he might have had. He still stood tall with no droop to his shoulders, there was still plenty of spring in his stride, and his eyes, unaided by glasses, were as clear and sharp as a bluedarter hawk's.

It was said that he had come to East Texas as a young man, hardly more than a boy, back near the turn of the century to trap fur-bearing animals around our lakes and streams. It wasn't long before he was buying furs from the Indians. He had prospered and had soon built a small store. He had prospered even more during World War I and had built a much bigger store, which was the one that still stood at the crossroads crammed with its aging stock of merchandise.

He had had his ups and downs since the first war—way down in the '30s, up again big during World War II. But it had all been downhill for him with the paving of the roads soon after the second war, when most folks became car owners and started doing their shopping at the big stores in town.

But even though he couldn't have been making more than just enough out of the store to pay his one clerk, he had hung on to it and kept it open every day from 8 to 5. He had an office with a favorite clock on each wall back in one corner where he collected payments on the loans he still made at a good rate of interest. But I got the feeling that he was hedging his hope about the clocks turning back time: By thinking of the old store, his clocks and himself as having become a single entity, the cruel reaper that stalks us all might keep on passing him by.

I never found out if he had always had his strong rapport with clocks, or whether he had developed a passion for them in his later life when he became more aware of the fleeting years. I guessed that his feeling of unity with the old timekeepers might have started soon after his wife died in 1958. Anyway, there was something about them that seemed to stir within him a feeling of union and kinship. Something I am sure no lifeless sundial or hourglass could have ever done.

One day in the summer of '63 they found him dead in his office. He had apparently gone quietly with no struggle. The grim reaper had, without as much as a "by your leave," violated the little sanctuary he had set up for himself.

On the next Thursday after he'd been laid to rest, I went over to see if there might have been one more delivery of the bologna and cheese that I loved so much. There had been. While I waited for them to be wrapped, I looked around the old store. Every clock had stopped.

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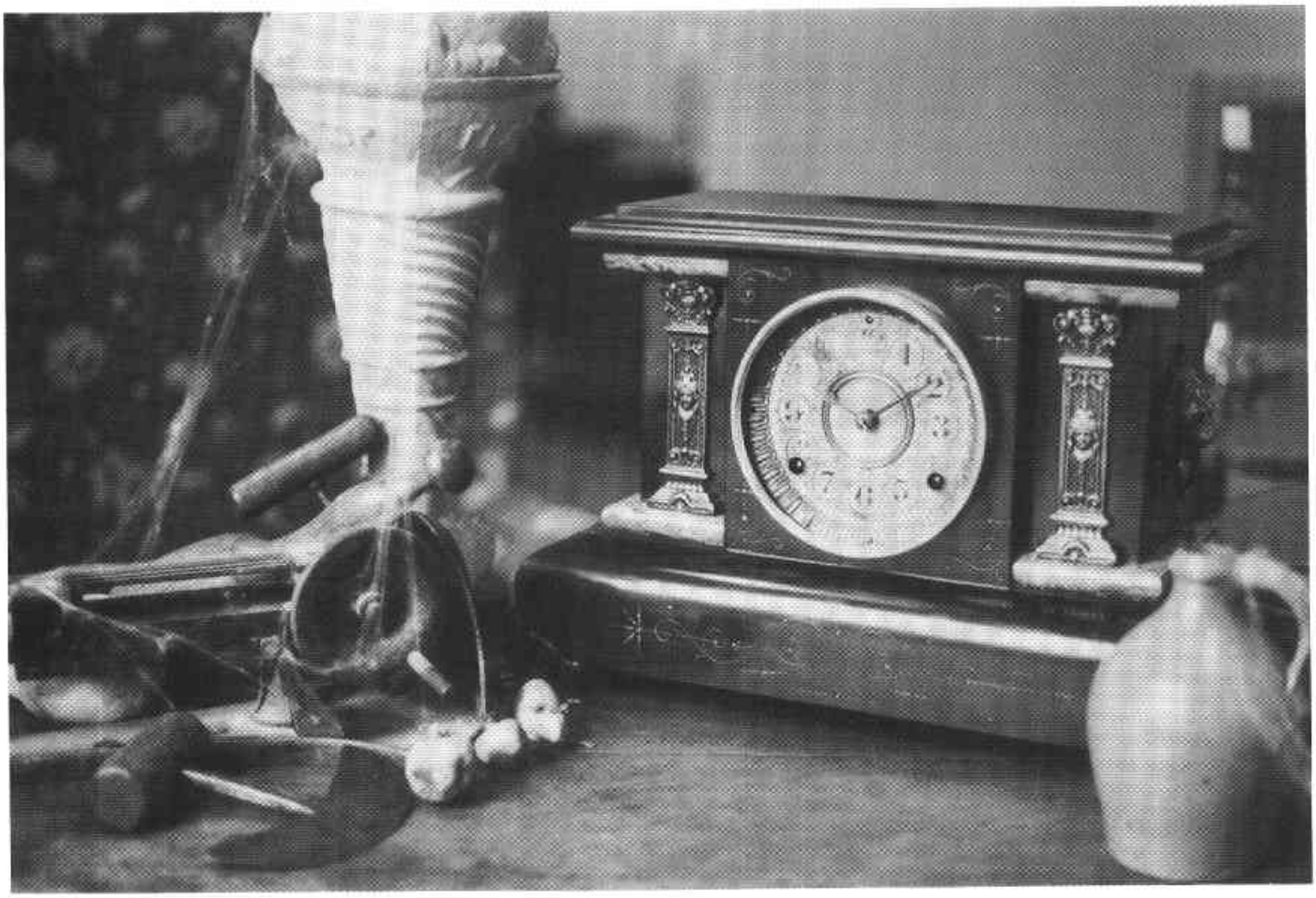

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*Figure 3. The goods of this once grand emporium had just about turned into dusty junk. The only exception were some two dozen, brightly polished old clocks, each one ticking to its own cadence amid the piles of rubble.*

Every pendulum was still. And except for the rustle of the paper my lunch was being wrapped in, it was as silent as a tomb in the old trading center where the old man had lived and died with his beloved clocks. I hoped they had eased his passing.

I didn't ask if one of the old Seth Thomases might now be for sale. I was afraid that the old man's ghost might start appearing too often in the middle of the night with a dust cloth and a winding key.

I left my job soon after the old man died, and I never did find out what happened to his clocks. For all I know, they could still be sitting right where they were, waiting for the old man's gentle hand to dust and wind them.

I have never heard of anybody collecting them. And there may not be a speck of character, or anything at all to spark a feeling of kinship in an electric clock that sits smugly on a table keeping perfect time with nary a tick or ding. But I guess I'll have to admit they serve us better in these demanding times than hourglasses or sundials—even old tickers and strikers—certainly better than almanacs or roosters.

## About the Author

H. R. Bratton is a free-lance writer living in Point Blank, Texas, on Lake Livingston about eighty miles north of Houston. Mr. Bratton, a retired Industrial Engineer, has had several of his short stories published in the *Houston Chronicle's* "Texas" magazine. Two of his stories are included with a collection of "Texas" magazine articles published in book format during the fall of 1993.

## San Jacinto Chapter #139 Project

Several members of Chapter #139 noted a shorter version of H. R. Bratton's article in the May 17, 1992 issue of the *Houston Chronicle's* "Texas" magazine. Chapter members contacted Mr. Bratton and made all the necessary arrangements to secure his permission to publish this original, longer version of the article in our BULLETIN. After his permission had been obtained, San Jacinto Chapter #139 members provided the illustrations that appear with this article.