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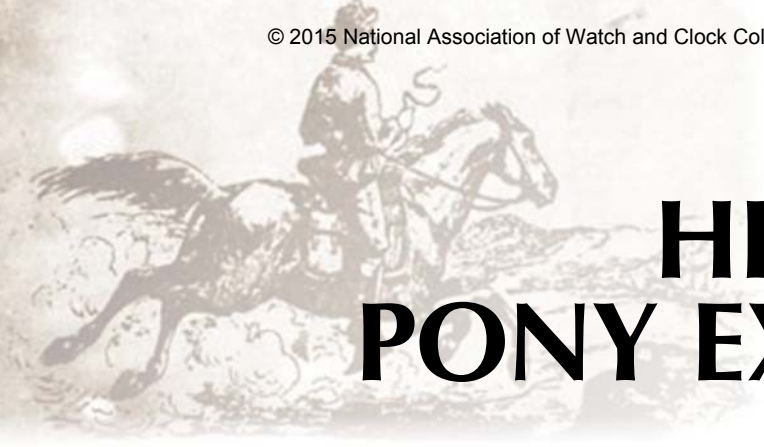

HISTORY OF THE PONY EXPRESS SYSTEM

by John Anderson (MA)

It's time to set the record straight on the Pony Express System in Yorktown Heights, NY. In early 1972 this company was developed by Edgar (Bo) Sullivan, an antiques dealer and auctioneer in Bedford Hills, NY, and myself, John Anderson, an antiques dealer from Dover Plains, NY.

Bo Sullivan had been a successful antiques dealer and auctioneer with his wife Patty Sullivan in a business called Forge Antiques and Forge Auctions. He had been doing this for a number of years when he teamed up with Bob Albert of Peekskill, NY, to buy his first lot of antique Japanese clocks from Ben Gravolet of New Orleans, LA. These old Japanese clocks had not been seen much on the antiques market in the United States; many dealers who bought them at auction early on thought they were American clocks because most had the labels or identification removed. Although it may seem intentionally deceiving to do this, at the time it seemed to make sense because Japanese products (new or old) did not connote quality. After they successfully marketed these clocks, the Sullivans pursued these clocks to the source. They contacted Kuni Endo, an antiques wholesaler in Tokyo, Japan, and followed up with a trip to Japan. This first buying trip was successful, and they purchased about 500 clocks. They were shipped by air in wooden crates with 20 clocks each at a cost of $18 each. This was the beginning of a successful venture to Japan; eventually, he went to Korea and elsewhere in search of these clocks. In 1972 they sold quickly at $32 in running condition and $28 in nonrunning condition, and so they imported more clocks, which sold quickly, mostly to other antiques dealers and through various auction houses.

In the early shipments from Japan Bo was surprised to find that about one in 20 clocks was 100 percent American made. He learned that the first mass-produced clocks the Japanese people could purchase at a reasonable price were from American companies, starting about 1880. Within 10-15 years the Japanese started their own clock companies. First they made cases and imported American parts and movements. By the turn of the century, a number of clock companies in Japan made the complete clock. Companies such as Seikosha Clock Co., Owari Clock Co., Osaka Clock Co., Meiji Clock Co., and numerous other smaller companies turned out thousands

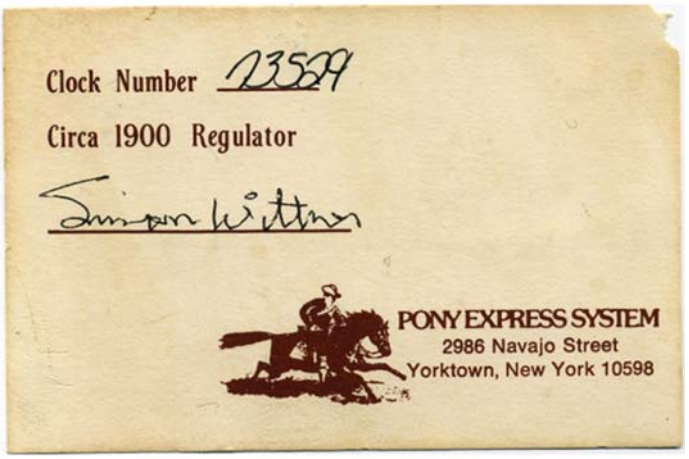

Figure 1. Clock identification card from the Pony Express System.

of fairly good-quality clocks. These companies marketed their clocks all over Asia and they can be found in Korea, Taiwan, China, and India. Different models were marketed in different countries. After talking to a number of collectors and dealers, it was assumed that they were not marketed in the United States for one of two probable reasons: the industrial manufacturing lobby was perhaps strong enough to keep them out of the country or the clock mechanisms infringed on too many American patents and many of the designs were almost identical to the American designs. Either way, they were never sold in the United States when they were new.

During this time, the Sullivans became friends with yours truly John and Marie Anderson. I worked part-time for two different auction houses. It turned out that Bo and Marie had gone to school together from elementary through high school. I spent a lot of time at Forge Antiques and soon learned how to clean and perform basic repairs and later advanced repairs on clock movements for the Sullivans. One day while unpacking a shipment of clocks, I mentioned to Bo that these clocks might be a good item for mass marketing or mail-order selling. There was no Internet at that time, and the only national publications were either the *Antique Trader* newspaper or *Antiques Magazine*. During a visit to fellow auctioneer in the area, Simon (Sy) Wittner of Yorktown Heights, NY, Bo proposed marketing these clocks on a wider scale. Sy loved the idea—he grew up in a family who had owned

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a Madison Avenue advertising agency. This set the wheels turning in Sy's head about the marketing possibilities.

The first of many meetings with Sy, Bo, and me was arranged to set up a company to market the clocks. We named the company, "Pony Express System." We set up headquarters in the lower level of the building in Yorktown Heights, NY, where Sy handled his antiques auctions. Sy handled advertising, marketing, and office responsibilities; Bo was in charge of purchasing clocks wherever available; and I took care of receiving, restoration, and shipping the clocks. The first lot of 1,200 clocks was purchased from Merritt's Antiques in Douglassville, PA. Merritt's subsequently became and remained the primary supplier for years of clock restoration tools and parts for Pony Express. The original clock restoration and shipping department consisted of me doing the movements and three people cleaning, polishing, and restoring the cases and everyone contributing to packing and shipping. This all was easier said than done, however.

The first ads were 3" x 5" in the New York area *Wall Street Journal*, and the clocks were priced at $79.95, delivered. We offered a 100 percent satisfaction, money back guarantee if not fully pleased! Don't forget that these clocks were marketed to the World War II generation and their parents. The language in the ads was geared to a more naive buying public eager to purchase an item from a fondly remembered period of history. We had just come out of the 1960s with much social unrest. Perhaps it was just the right product at the right time. It was successful from the first ads. It was decided, however, that all clocks that Pony Express sold would have a label and serial number affixed to the back of the clock, come with instructions on setting up and using the clock, and have a framable certificate of authenticity stating that the clock was a circa 1900 genuine antique.

Early on, it was decided to sell the long drop schoolhouse-style clock because these were the most numerous. Other styles (the short drop schoolhouse, English-style rolling pin clock, gallery, and box) were introduced later. The first six months were both a trial-and-error period and a time of rapid growth. Because of production disagreements, it was decided that the company would be owned solely by Sy and Shirley Wittner. Bo Sullivan was moving to the West Coast, but he still handled most of the clock supply to Pony Express, and I was retained as a paid employee to serve as production manager and supervisor. In the first weeks the company sold about 12-20 clocks a week, and more people were hired to expand production. The first employees trained with me to work on movements and I was developing an assembly line system with rolling racks to hold the clocks in the restoration process so that upon unpacking, the clocks were dismantled and numbered on both the case and mechanism, and matching rolling racks were correspondingly numbered to be easily identified and reassembled after the production process. Many packaging systems were tested because there was a high return rate from damage. The damage return rate was about 20 percent and this seemed unacceptable. Finally, we tried a new system of foam packaging that actually made a form-fitting cushion around the clock. It worked great and the return rate plummeted to about 8 percent.

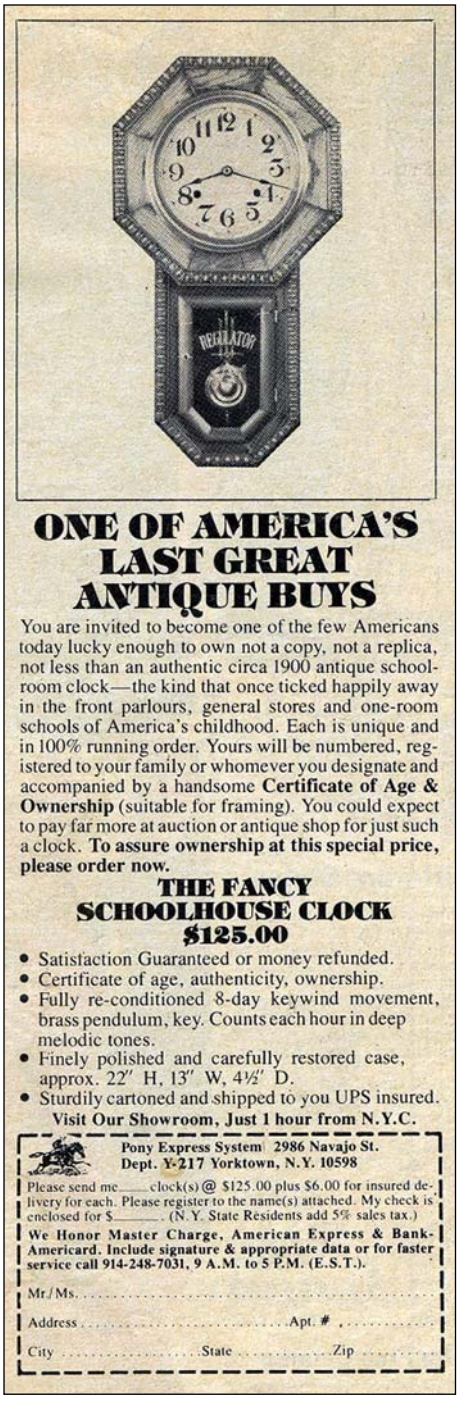

Figure 2. *Yankee Magazine* advertisement, February 1978.

Our advertising expanded to the ads most people remember with the headline "One of America's Last Great Antique Buys." We ran full-page ads in *Yankee Magazine* and raised our price to $89.95 and got great response. By the end of the first year, we were selling about 120 clocks a day and had about 30 people working on the assembly line. There were workstations for receiving and dismantling, dial replacement, brass polishing, movement cleaning and oiling, woodworking and case repair, case stripping and refinishing, movement repair and reassembly, and testing. We even had silkscreens made and produced our own exact copies of decorated replacement glasses in four different styles.

By the end of the second year, we were selling about 175 clocks a day and advertising in *Yankee, Sunset, Smithsonian,* and the *Wall Street Journal*. By then we had about 40 people working (not counting the office staff). I think that was about the peak.

You may be asking where we got so many clocks. Well,

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somewhere between the first and second year when we realized that we had a very successful business that was still growing fast, we came to the conclusion that we had to have a stable supply. That was when Bo went into full swing and contacted anyone he could find who could supply these clocks wholesale. He found another large supplier in Japan and others in Korea and Taiwan. Other importers in Illinois and Seattle advertised them in the *MART*. He contacted them and bought as much current and future stock as he could. We had a warehouse room next to the clock restoration room at Pony Express that measured about 50' x 40,' with 18' ceilings. About 1974 that room was two-thirds full of clocks waiting to be restored. I would guess there were about 35,000 clocks in it waiting to be restored. At this time Pony Express also had a display wall of about 100 clocks the public could purchase. The clocks that were shipped were like a giant

Three of America's Last Great Antique Buys!

Genuine Circa 1900 Antiques.
When they're gone, they're gone forever.

The Round-Top Schoolhouse Clock
$110.00

The Fancy Schoolhouse Clock
$125.00

The Classic Double Scroll Clock
$115.00

We urge you to take heed. These are truly the last of the Great Old Clocks. At our low price, you may never see these values again. Authentic circa 1900 antique schoolroom clocks, like the kind that once ticked happily away in the front parlours, general stores and one-room schools of America's childhood. Lovingly restored and in 100% running order. Each is unique—gathered from sources all over the world. Yours will be numbered, registered to your family or whomever you designate and accompanied by a handsome Certificate of Age and Ownership (suitable for framing). Order now, to avoid disappointment. When these clocks are gone, they're gone forever.

- Clocks, we believe, will appreciate many times in value in the years to come.
- Certificate of age, authenticity and ownership.
- Fully re-conditioned 8-day keywind movement, brass pendulum, key. Counts each hour in deep, melodic tones.
- Finely polished and carefully restored hardwood case, approx. 22" H, 13" W, 4½" D.
- Sturdily cartoned and shipped to you UPS insured.

FOR FASTER SERVICE ON CREDIT CARD ORDERS CALL (914) 248-7031 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. (E.S.T.)

Visit our Showroom, just 1 hour from N.Y.C.

Pony Express System
2986 Navajo St., Dept. Y-721
Yorktown, N.Y. 10598

Gentlemen: Please send me the following clock(s) (state qty.):
___ Round-Top Schoolhouse Clock *(Style 14)* @$110.00
___ The Fancy Schoohouse Clock *(Style 12)* @ $125.00
___ Classic Double Scroll Regulator *(Style 15)* @ $115.00
(Add $6.00 for each insured delivery.)
For multiple orders use separate sheet of paper.

My check is enclosed for $_____(N.Y. State residents add 5% tax.)
I prefer to charge my (check one)
☐ American Express ☐ Bank Americard
☐ Master Charge

Account No._____ Expiration Date_____
Signature_____
Mr./Ms._____
Address_____
City_____ State_____ Zip_____

Satisfaction guaranteed or money refunded.

YANKEE • *July '78* 19

Figure 3, right. *Yankee Magazine* advertisement, July 1978.

Figure 4, below. As for Sy Wittner, this article was apparently the only place he stated that they were American clocks. It may be that he intimated to the writer of the article that they were American and did not exactly say so. In no advertising or otherwise, did I ever see this stated. It had to be a personal interview with Mr. Wittner. That being said, I don't wish to speak illl wll of the dead as they can't defend themselves, but Sy had a darker side to him. He was a great businessman, but many employees quit during these years due to his temper, myself included! I quit three times and was rehired again each time for more money because the employees did not like to work for him and preferred my management. So it doesn't surprise me that he may have said something like this in an interview. AP article, 1979.

Old Clocks Set Hearts Tick-Tocking

AP Photo

Sy Wittner And His Wife, Shirley
. . . surrounded by their antique clocks

Associated Press

YORKTOWN, N.Y. — There is no time like the old time, Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes said a long time ago.

Sy Wittner is here to tell you Holmes was right, especially if the time is kept on an old clock.

Americans by the droves are eager to have those old pendulum clocks that once hung in schoolhouses and post offices across the land, telling the hours of a nondigital day.

"We never dreamed they would have this appeal," Wittner said. "It's all we can do to keep up with the demand."

Wittner and his wife, Shirley, operate a mail-order antique business. They call it Pony Express System, and those old clocks are their main stock in trade.

The clocks hang from every available wall of the Wittner plant, ticking and tocking and chiming and wagging their pendulums.

Downstairs, crews work day and night restoring the clocks, packing them, sending them on their way.

For the Wittner's, time wasn't always money.

A few years ago, they ran a small-scale antiques business. Then, like a prospector stumbling upon the mother lode, Wittner discovered a huge cache of old clocks.

"I will not reveal the supplier," he said, "but I am able to certify the authenticity of every one of the clocks. They were made in New England, most of them in Connecticut, generally between 1890 and 1910. Hundreds of thousands were produced at that time."

To restore them, Wittner removes the clock's machinery, etches it with a code number, numbers the cabinet, then reunites the two after they have been refurbished separately.

"The system seems to function," Wittner said.

Like, one is tempted to say, clockwork.

Entertainment Arts Culture

The Observer's feature editor, Jim Nolan, Wants To Hear About It

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grab bag. One clock might be average, one not so good, and the next might look like it belonged in a museum. Whenever we got a complaint about a clock sold by mail order, we had them ship it back and either refunded their money or handpicked a super nice clock to replace it. We tried to please almost everyone.

Business went fairly smoothly for the next few years, and clocks were selling in the $139-$150 price range. Toward the late 1970s we received complaints from the NAWCC for misrepresenting the clocks and from the New York Attorney General's Office. We were forced to put a label with the country of origin on the clocks. In addition, by 1978-1979 the quality and quantity of clocks available to us were getting bad. Many of the clocks coming from Korea had aluminum and steel movements that could not be restored to run, and we had to substitute reproduction movements. The first repro movements were not very good and ran poorly. The wholesale price was now getting up near $45 and the handwriting was on the wall. In late 1978 the decision was made to end the business on June 1, 1979. After the business was closed, employees were let go, and an auction of all remaining stock and parts was organized. There were still hundreds of clocks, movements, and parts left over. For the next three years you could find them for sale by many different dealers at large flea markets.

During the seven to eight years Pony Express was in business, we estimate that we handled about 150,000 clocks. Some 135,000 clocks were sold by mail order. Perhaps 5,000 were sold off the wall at our business location, and the rest either were nonrepairable mechanically or had cases that were too rough for restoration. We sold basically three types of clocks by mail order: the long drop schoolhouse (both round and octagon top), the short drop schoolhouse, and the English-style double rolling pin wall clock. We also sold 11" round gallery clocks and a number of conversions to backward running "barbershop" clocks and some figure 8 wall clocks and simple calendar clocks. The Japanese clock companies also made other styles, but in less quantity. A good number of 100 percent American schoolhouse clocks (both long and short drop) and figure 8 wall clocks also were imported along with the Japanese clocks. These were not handled by mail order but were sold to antiques dealers and through clock auctions around New England. I do regret that I was not into photography at the time because with the amount of clocks we handled, a good, definitive book could have been created on antique Japanese factory production clocks.

About the Author

John Anderson now resides on Cape Cod where he opened a clock shop in 1979 (www.villagepeddlar.com). Bo Sullivan now lives in and still deals in antiques and clocks in Southeast Massachusetts. Simon Wittner died in the early 1980s in Florida and is survived by his wife Shirley in New York. Anderson has not kept track of all the other workers and employees of Pony Express but imagines they look back at their contributions as quite an experience.

If you have any questions, please contact him: John Anderson, P.O. Box 979, Dennis, MA 02638, 508-385-7300, jander1235@aol.com.

Collecting

There was our neighbor
Mrs. Moore and after she died
They found can upon can
Of coffee in her basement
Odd but it wasn't until later
That a friend who had little
Child in childhood
And a cellar mostly wine
Got me to think
Of Mrs. Moore again
And my mother an orphan
Traipsing through Haverhill
Rummage sales for clocks
That sounded like hearts on our walls

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Ray Comeau was a long-serving dean in Harvard University's Division of Continuing Education, where he currently teaches courses on French literature and management. He attends chapter meetings in his native Massachusetts to learn about clocks and watches, of course, but also to meet interesting members.