Marking Time

BY **LAURIE LAMOUNTAIN**

I have four watches that quietly keep each other company in a dresser drawer; a Tissot, Swiss Army, Relic and Citizen. The Tissot is stuck on the 3rd of some month and the Swiss Army on the 26th. The other two don't mind what day of the month it is; nor do they bother counting down the seconds. I also have a Movado Museum watch that once belonged to my brother. They all need batteries to operate but none of them is digital.

I am old enough to remember when clocks and watches required daily winding and one could, occasionally, dial the operator to ask the time. It all seems so quaintly distant now, in this time when our sense of it has been so strangely impacted. These days, it's not uncommon for me to question what day it is, let alone what *time* of day it is.

And yet, one of the more grounding sounds for me right now is the ticking of the clock on my bedside table. It reassures me that as strange as this slice of time we're living in is, time does not measure it any differently than it ever has. It just keeps marking it in its continuous, incremental way—like the beating of a heart.

There is a town I visited once that is known as the watch capital of France. Besançon is not far from the Swiss border, where it ironically rose to its rank after the French Revolution so that France would no longer have to rely on imports from Switzerland. According to a *New York Times* article, the clock and watch industry in Besançon reached its pinnacle in the early 1900s, when it employed 20,000 workers. As of 2018, when the article was written, the industry had dwindled to around 1,500. The decline was the result of "La Crise du Quartz, the sharp downturn in mechanical timepiece production and sales that followed the rise of quartz watches in the 1970s." Thankfully, the article goes on to say, *horlogerie*, the heritage of clock and watch making, is experiencing a renaissance in Besançon.

Heritage is a powerful thing. It has a way of asserting itself on an almost cellular level. It makes me wonder if Mark Beever, owner of Hickory Dickory Doc Clock Shop in Cornish, Maine, might have *horlogerie* in his blood. He recalls his grandfather and mother keeping many clocks in their homes. His curiosity about mechanical things and later appreciation of antiques forged an early interest in horology. Then, while seeking help with a problem clock in 1999, Mark was introduced to the National Association of Watch and Clock Collectors (NAWCC) through the state chapter. He began taking classes and attending workshops to learn

proper repair techniques. After a successful thirty-five-year career as a veterinarian, he opened his repair shop and now spends his days fixing clocks and watches instead.

Oddly enough, Mark has known several veterinarians with an avocational interest in clocks. The professor he had for equine surgery at Purdue University College of Veterinary Medicine had a clock repair hobby and used to repair campus clocks. Mark attributes the connection to the satisfaction derived from working with ones hands; fixing things.

With a goal of preserving antique timepieces and restoring them to working condition, Mark carefully follows the Standards and Practices for Clockmakers established by the American Watchmakers and Clockmakers Institute. While it sounds like it is older than, well, time, the AWCI just celebrated its 60th anniversary this year. When it organized as the American Watchmakers Institute (AWI) in 1960, it was effectively a merger of the United Horological Association of America and the Horological Institute of American. Similarly, the NAWCC was first organized in the 1940s by members of the Horological Society of New York and the Philadelphia Watchmakers' Guild. Both organizations continue to set national standards for the horology profession, while NAWCC has achieved worldwide membership status and operates the only specialized horological library in the world. Mark has served as secretary for Maine's Chapter 89 of the NAWCC for the past several years.

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The showroom at Hickory Dickory Doc Clock Shop is marked by the unsynchronized ticking and hourly chiming of tall clocks, shelf clocks, novelty clocks, and wall clocks. Because he doesn't have a preferred era, the styles vary from Early American Banjo clocks to very ornate Victorian to mid-century. Banjo clocks, so called because

of their shape, are Mark's favorite. They were the first major American design from the early 1800s. There are also ship's bells that divide the day into six four-hour periods known as watches; an antique time card punch; anniversary clocks that theoretically need only be wound once a year; moon dial clocks that display the phases of the moon, pendulum clocks; and even a couple of cuckoo clocks. With the exception of the newer novelty clocks and wrist watches, all of them are mechanical.

Mark likens mechanical clocks to an old car. Despite that worn out or broken parts may need to be repaired or replaced over time, they don't have the complicated electronic circuitry of a quartz clock. By the same token, while it's easy enough to find parts to repair newer clocks, he has found it increasingly harder to get parts for older mechanical clocks. When he's unable to source them or pilfer them from a similar clock, he has resorted to making his own levers, pinions, wheels, etc. on a jeweler's lathe.

All but one of the clocks in his showroom have parts made of brass and steel. The exception is a tall clock made in Winchester, Connecticut, in the 1830s that has works made entirely of wood. He explains that in the early years of American clockmaking, brass and other metals were only available through the European market and were therefore very expensive, so clockmakers in New England began crafting wooden works. Clock plates were made of quarter sawn oak, wheels were cut from cherry, and arbors (axles) from mountain laurel. The 1820s-30s marked a transitional phase when sheet brass became more available and American clockmakers shifted over to brass and mass production techniques that allowed them

to make large numbers of affordable shelf clocks. Bristol, Waterbury, New Haven and Plymouth Hollow were the center of the clock making industry in the 1800s, although there were many talented clockmakers in the Boston area, Rhode Island, New York, and Pennsylvania well before that.

Mark points out that in the beginning clocks were a utilitarian device to help farmers with planting and keeping appointments in town, but over time competition led to more ornate and elaborate designs as different companies tried to distinguish themselves in a wider market. Brass finials, reverse painting, inlay and marble cases were just a few of the artful embellishments.

One other notable exception to the mechanical clocks in the showroom is a master clock that Mark rebuilt with his son. It has a super-accurate mercury pendulum and runs on DC battery power to send wire impulses to a number of slave clocks as part of a synchronized network. However unfortunately named, they were common in factories, offices, and schools in the 1900s.

"A lot of clocks have been modified and parts combined from others. Clocks that are completely original are worth a lot more than a clock movement being put into a different case just to try to assemble something. It takes a little evaluation to figure out the degree of originality," says Mark. "A lot of times there will be a label that the maker pasted into the back and that can add a lot of value."

He opens a clock to display a label documenting it as a Seth Thomas from Plymouth Hollow, Connecticut, and adds that Seth Thomas was so instrumental to the growth of Plymouth Hollow that it was renamed Thomaston in 1875.

Beyond the showroom lies Mark's workshop, complete with two watchmaker's benches, jeweler's lathe, test stand for tall clocks, and all the accouterments of watchmaking and repair. What began as a hobby twenty years ago is, in Mark's words, getting pretty serious. He finds he really enjoys the mechanics of it, as well as the satisfaction of restoring a family heirloom, and is starting to get more calls through word of mouth. According to his wife, Sharon, "he is really quiet and reserved—and he can just fix *anything*."

There's a saying that even a broken clock is right twice a day, but there's another that says that clocks in disagreement are worse than no clock at all. Precision is an essential aspect of horology. A timepiece that doesn't keep proper time is unreliable. The earliest recorded weight-driven mechanical clock was installed in the priory of a Roman Catholic Church in England in 1283. It indicated the time by striking a bell, hence the Latin word for bell, *clocca*, was adopted. It was by no means a precision timepiece.

When Christiaan Huygens devised the first pendulum clock a few centuries later in 1656, it was 100 times as accurate as its predecessor, reducing a typical gain or loss of 15 minutes a day to about a minute a week. In 1675, Huygens devised the next major improvement, the spiral balance spring. Quartz crystals have since greatly improved the accuracy of our timekeeping instruments; nearly all computers contain a quartz crystal clock to regulate their operation. Atomic clocks are even more precise and they will surely be replaced by something even more precise in the future. Interesting to think, though, that no matter how precise our ability to measure time, the fact remains that it is the one thing of which we will never have enough. ☼

To arrange a time to meet with Mark to discuss your timepiece, call 207.625.7403 or visit hickorydickorydocclocks.com.

Mark is caretaker of the 120-year-old Cornish Town Clock, which resides at the old Odd Fellows Hall in the village. After restoring the function of the unique mechanism that strikes the large bell, some neighbors were disturbed, so he invented a night shut-off device. If all is working properly, the Town Clock strikes the hours from 10 a.m. to 9 p.m. He serves on the Tower Clock Committee for Chapter 89, which maintains pictures and historical data on all of the old mechanical and public tower clocks in Maine, and more recently has been a part of the restoration team for the historic 1925 Hay & Peabody's Seth Thomas clock located on Congress Street in Portland at The Francis hotel. It is one of only a few four-dial street clocks produced by Seth Thomas Clock Company, and will be keeping time with its original pendulum and an electric motor to re-wind the weight.