

MANSFIELD MEMORIES: The history behind the old town hall clock

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MANSFIELD - Mansfield's old town hall was a stately building. Opened in 1883, its belfry was adorned by a four-sided clock with arms that were a foot long. Each clock face was just under three feet in diameter and faced either north, south, east or west.

Getting inside the belfry was not an easy journey, but one that a caretaker had to make every week. First, he had to find his way to the attic above the large second-floor auditorium. The attic was "spooky," with a "maze of wooden timbers." It was lit by a single light bulb. From there it was "up two narrow but sturdy ladders whose rungs were smooth by years of use."



When the old town hall opened in 1883, its belfry was adorned by a four-sided clock with arms that were a foot long. Each clock face was just under three feet in diameter and faced either north, south, east or west.

The clock and chime mechanisms consisted of more than 900 parts. The clock was powered by a two-and-a-half foot square crate of rocks. Hanging by a cable just below the belfry, it worked with gravity to turn the gears and keep accurate time for just over a week. Custodians had to turn a massive crank two rotations to lift the rocks up 15 feet to keep time for another eight days. The pendulum was made of a 10-foot iron rod with a cast iron ball at the end estimated to weigh 80 pounds.

The chime mechanism rang dozens of times daily and required more effort from the custodian. It was originally powered by 600 pound weights in the cellar connected to a long cable that rang the bell at regular intervals. Eventually the open shaft that ran from the cellar to the belfry was deemed a fire hazard. The weights

were moved and the cable rerouted to an outside shed below. In 1968 custodian Roland Collins said it required 175 cranks every week to wind the chime mechanism.

Maintenance men left their mark over the years. Inscriptions inside the belfry included “Oiled 1887” and “Cleaned, September 12, 1900.” Other visitors left inscriptions like “Gladys B. Cliff, six years old, 1919, Christmas Greetings.” The clock worked well for the better part of 75 years.

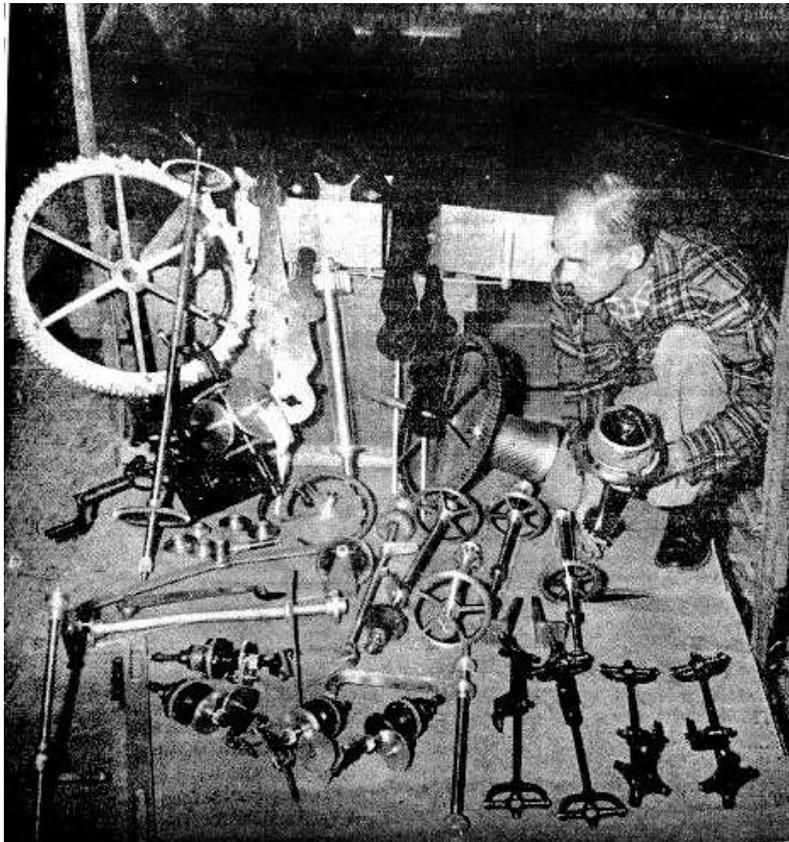
One day in 1956 the clock stopped. An anonymous donor paid Howard Clock Products \$600 to fix the problem. The Howard crew did not find bats in the belfry, but pigeons.

“And plenty of them!”

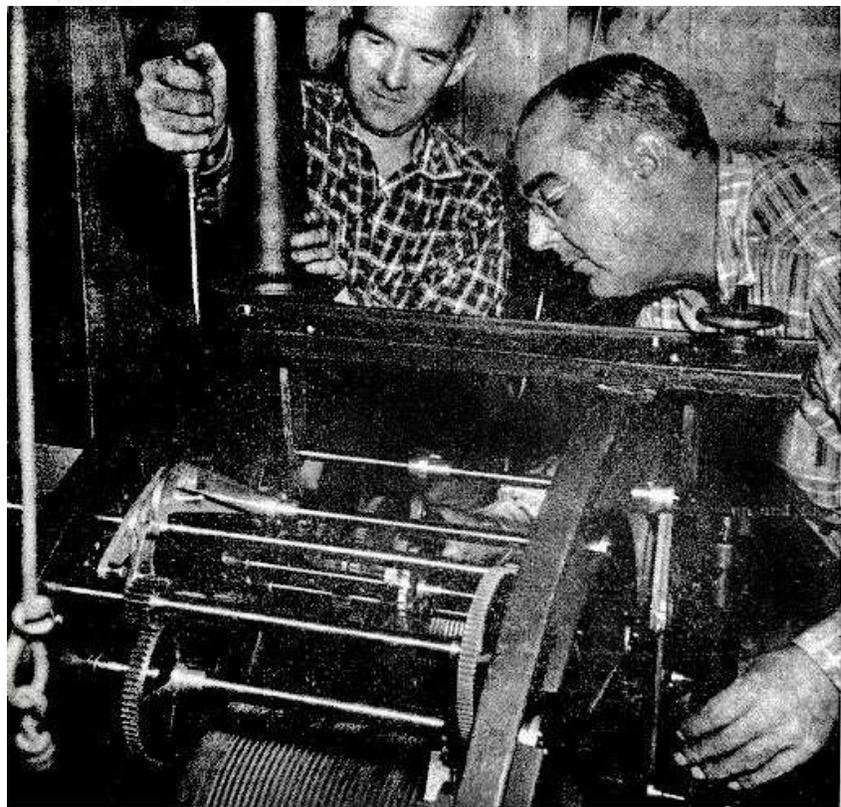
It seemed it was not so much the pigeons that stopped the clock: it was what they left behind.

“We found droppings all over the gears up in the belfry. They had gotten so thick that they just couldn’t turn anymore,” said Ed Archambeault of Howard Clock.

Within a week Howard had the gears pristine and



Jack Starr of Howard Clock with clock parts as he cleaned and restored the old town hall clock in October 1957.



Jack Starr and Ed Archambeault of Howard Clock inspecting mechanisms in the old town hall clock in October 1957.

the clock was running again. By the time Roland Collins took over as custodian in 1964 pigeons had stopped the clock again. Rollie cleaned up the mess, oiled the works and got the clock running within a week. This time he added chicken wire to keep out the birds. He took great pride in keeping the clock running.



One face from the original old town hall clock now adorns the top of Mansfield's commuter rail station.

But nothing could stop the calamity that beset the building on December 20, 1970, when it was destroyed by fire. The belfry crashed into the ruins below bringing the stately old clock with it.

So what happened to the four clock faces that hovered over Mansfield for nearly a century? One was fully restored and installed at the new town hall at 50 West Street. It was moved in 2004 to the new train station where it remains to this day. Two of the faces were sold to raise money for the restoration of the first clock face. They remain in private hands. The fourth clock face was damaged beyond repair and could not be salvaged.