

Above the entrance to the Redstone Inn, up inside a looming square spire, within what feels to me like a miniature captain's wheelhouse resides a bastion to a time gone by. It is a Seth Thomas tower clock built in Thomaston, Connecticut in 1901 and installed in 1902. When I first came to Colorado in 1979, part of my duties as maintenance man/ chief horse wrangler was to care for this beauty. It wasn't running at the time and had not been running in recent memory. With the help of my father, we were able to coax it to life and get it to run...well, like a clock. What follows is a story of my musings about returning to this now volunteer labor of love, a task I share with my best friend, Mary.

This is intended to be a human-interest story. The main character of this story though is not human at all. At least not entirely. This is a story about a clock. But first, please indulge me as we take a couple dozen big steps backwards in time. Millennial sized steps.

Archaeological evidence suggests that primitive man and woman left evidence of their tracking the passage of time. The phases of the moon and the rising and setting of the sun and stars throughout the year have always been the measure of time. From early cave paintings, to scratches, nicks and gouges in bone and to stone monuments, humans have demonstrated a need and value for the tracking and recording of time.

Now come forward with me in time to a more recent past. A past experienced by our grandparents and great grandparents. The era is set within the second period of industrialization that followed the Industrial Revolution. The setting is Redstone, Colorado. The date is very early 1900s. The situation is set in a coal mining town- a Company town. In this town are children, teachers, shop keepers, maintenance workers, water managers, early electricians, chimney sweeps, housewives and, of course, coal miners and cokers who are all part of the Company in one way or another. These folks were generally poor and came to Redstone in search of a better life. With the creation of John C. Osgood's little village of "enlightened industrial paternalism" (one of the first towns in the US to have electric lights) it offered a chance for a better life and also steady gainful employment. With little or no personal wealth, many of the workers lacked fancy personal accoutrements, one of which would be a pocket watch. Village life ran as villages do, governed mostly by the rising and setting of the sun, but company life marched to a different beat which ran on a 24-hour schedule. For them the day was divided into day, swing and night shifts- each with their own divisions of work duties, midshift meal and a break if you were lucky and the straw boss wasn't watching too closely. Miners were going on and off shift, children were going and coming from school, wives were washing and shopping, horses were harnessed and shod, and shops were opening and closing as needed for the miners. The only practical way to schedule and synchronize all of village life was with one clock. A big clock. With a big bell. And that bell rang the appropriate time, day and night. And someone had to take care of that most important centerpiece of village life, the all-important organizer of wake and work, work and eat, work and sleep. The Big Clock.

"A community with an unreliable town clock must be regarded with suspicion. The town clock is the most emphatic public word for a city. It should be honest in its tale; the information it gives should be beyond suspicion of any doubt. If it lies, the morals of the city must suffer; for it is the conspicuous example of lying or truth, to the public body..."

Source: The Jeweler's Keystone, September 1905.

Forty cycles of Earth revolving around the Sun later, I find myself the beneficiary of fortunate happenstance. I am again at the helm of this mighty timepiece and along with Mary, we share this labor of love as cockeyed clock masters. After gaining access to “the clock tower room” (the only rentable room in the Inn that does not have its own bathroom, rather it shares a communal bath/shower just down the hall) I climb the ladder and open the locked hatch and we climb up into the spire. After making our apologies to George (an affectionate name given to the spirit said to roam the halls of the Inn after dark) for our disturbance and to avoid bad karma, we set about our chosen duties. We inspect the tower for debris blown in by seasonal winds and feathers left behind by seasonal aviary tourists.

The clock room seems diminutive within the tower, no real hint as to what is inside other than the massive bell on top and the drive shafts poking out to the four clock faces. A first impression when entering the room is that inside is a monstrous, distorted, steampunk version of your grandmother’s old foot powered sewing machine only with more bells and whistles. Fear not, potential future clock winders, this machine is no more complicated or menacing than your favorite old grandfather in a comfy cardigan and slippers. In fact, that is what it is- a super-sized grandfather clock on steroids. It has a pendulum the size of a watermelon. It’s power weight is the equivalent of two bags of concrete that you wind up with a big crank periodically to keep the old boy ticking. Like many grandfather clocks, this tower clock was built to be an 8-day wind. This is so that if you usually wind the clock every Sunday it allows for an extra day in case you forgot or fell asleep while watching a movie you’ve already seen before. The number of days the clock can run is limited only by the length of travel the weights move from top to bottom. The weight for our tower clock travels nearly two stories on a single winding! This length allows our clock to run for 11 days (as we found out by accident)! Now, about that bell:

“The big clock in the Redstone Inn tower regularly tolls out the hours now, it’s rich tones reverberating up and down the valley.”

Source: Camp and Plant, Nov. 15, 1902,

It didn’t take long these days to discover that having a big bell in the roof of a hotel that “tolls out the hours...rich tones reverberating up and down the valley” goes over about as well as a robo call on your cell phone to let you know “your social security number has been suspended due to fraudulent activity” right at midnight...and at one... and at two... and at three...and at...well, I think you get the gist. Much to our astonishment, the mechanism that rings the bell every hour on the hour has mysteriously and inexplicably been disconnected. Thanks George!

The world has changed a bit in over 100 years and our village is now global, encompassing the entire planet. And just as the small village did back then, this modern global society revolves around a central, coordinated timekeeping system that nearly 7 1/2 billion people casually carry in their back pocket or wear on their wrist. So why do we make this weekly pilgrimage to climb several flights of stairs, up two ladders and two hatchways, to bestow a gift of life to an inanimate pile of cast iron and brass gears for a world that seldom looks to the sky as the source to regulate their lives? Because the clock had purpose. And it still has purpose. As much as Stonehenge and a Roman sundial still have purpose. If the sun rises over the Heel Stone or passes over a sundial and no one is there to notice, do they still mark time? The answer is yes, and it is yes for the Redstone clock if we or someone else continues with this labor of love. And if you are ever passing by and care to look up and take the time to notice the time, this clock will again have served its purpose.