

Refurbishing a Timepiece

Story and Photos: RANDY SANDERS

On April 14, 1911, *The Oregon Mist* newspaper reported on the installation of a “large and complicated piece of machinery” being installed in the Courthouse tower. The item was a hand-made, Seth-Thomas clock, crated and shipped from Walcott, Connecticut. The timepiece was considered state-of-the-art for its time.

Along with the timepiece came serious bragging rights and a sense of pride for folks in Columbia County back in the day. The newspaper article goes on to read: “...the next time people from out of town come here, the building will be much improved in looks...” adding, “...there is an attachment on the clock that will turn the lights on or off at any hour desired.”

It was a big deal for a small community like Columbia County to have such a precision clock working in the County seat for all to see, hear and use. It may be difficult for some people to understand today, but for a county in 1911 to be able to display a magnificent Seth-Thomas timepiece in their public plaza, meant the County was on the move.

Aesthetics was a portion of the positive aspects gained from employing a great timepiece in a public square. Columbia County’s clock tower gave the community a sense of authority and dependability by assuming the responsibility of keeping correct Standard Time. Workers in the



area -- as well as skippers and captains -- set their pockets pieces to it. Schoolteachers and shopkeepers all relied on Columbia County's dependable clock tower, as did judges, lawyers and the many folks traveling into the Courthouse for various reasons. The sheer conviction of employing such a magnificent timepiece -- with faces pointed in all four directions -- made a bold statement and reinforced an already held belief that Columbia County is a hard-working, dependable place to raise a family and to do business. This was a stellar public relations and economic development tool for its time.



Prior to the arrival of Columbia County's clock, The Portland Train Station punctuated its arrival in 1896 with a clock suspended inside a 150-foot tower -- where the iconic, "Go By Train" sign reads -- also a Seth-Thomas. This design is almost the identical design of Columbia County's clock, albeit much larger.

Three years later after the Columbia County clock was installed in the Courthouse tower, World War I thrust the globe into conflict. Just four months after the end of the war, Standard Minimum Wage -- as reported by the *Rainier Review*, dated March 7, 1918 -- paid a man between 45 cents and 55 cents an hour, or \$3.60 per eight-hour work day. Throughout all this history, Columbia County's clock was dutifully wound by hand each week, a simple task that again spelled out work ethic

and dependability.

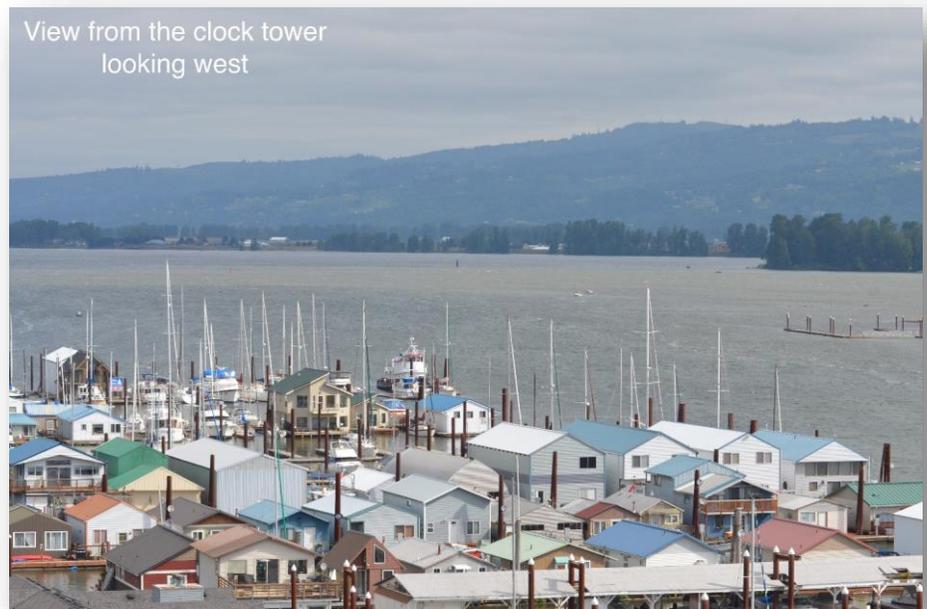
By 1939, World War II would again pull the earth into conflict and military support in Columbia County marched to the beat of the Courthouse clock tower. In the fifties, teenagers rumbled past the clock tower in their souped-up roadsters. The dependable old timepiece witnessed Viet Nam protests in the sixties, as well as a sit-in of marijuana-toking flower children protesting the County's reneged promise to allow a "rock" show at the County Fairgrounds. City legislators

misunderstood a “rock show” as being a display of minerals and gems, and not the 12-tractor trailer loads of amps and guitars that accompanied The Grateful Dead who showed up in the County to perform the “Bull Frog Festival” on their way to Woodstock.

The clock held steady throughout the disco-seventies, new wave-eighties, nineties and right up till today. In the years that have passed, the solution of milk-lime juice paint covering the glass faces has long faded, the gears corroded with bird dung and grease, the wooden hands have peeled, cracked and split. After several screws loosened themselves due to the extreme change in temperature and moisture inside the tower, the clock stopped working. Throughout this period, America involved itself in the longest wars of the county’s history, endured economic disaster and political division. The clock no longer kept time and the bell -- that once-echoed down the plaza and past ships docked on the river -- fell silent. This came to be a stark metaphor for America’s difficult times.

In the clock’s 103-years, maintenance issues hadn’t ever been properly addressed. But now that people realized there must be action taken, the County, unfortunately, did not have the funds to support the project.

Rick Katterman took on the tall task of refurbishing the clock little by little while working as a maintenance employee with the County. Painting and polishing here, researching parts and history there. Columbia County Facilities Manager Todd “T.C.” Cunningham -- who has just recently been hired -- speaks highly of Rick’s efforts.





Steve Topaz shows off his artificial heart and machine.

“From the work I saw when I first arrived here, he did a fine job and was paying a great deal of attention to detail. It’s just too bad he didn’t get to realize the end result of his work of history come alive again before his passing.”

Rick passed away about a year ago, but provided the spark that ignited this great project. Volunteers such as Steve Topaz came forward, along with other folks like Jeff Smith, David Somann and volunteer coordinator Mary

Heberling. The project was initiated by

Saint Helens Economic Development Corporation (SHEDCO) and “Rock the Clock,” became the group who is raising the funds for the project.

Steve Topaz is a 76-year-old mechanical engineer from the East Coast, now living in St. Helens. A Purdue University graduate, he has an impressive resume and contributed to the designs of artificial hearts, fetal heart monitors, heart monitor machines and intraventricular medical pumps -- a pump that sustains the function of a human heart that is in failure.



With a thick accent sounding somewhere between Brooklyn, Philadelphia and Boston, Steve jokes with me.

“Most people don’t want any products that I have designed,” he laughs. “If you’re in good health, you don’t want anything to do with my products.”

Topaz talks passionately about high-speed centrifuges and the refurbishment of the clock, of course. Beside an engineer’s challenge for a good project, Steve Topaz has another reason for seeing this one through.

“There have been so many people talking about the bell ringing again; the crew, citizens and various volunteers. Their efforts have been so cool to watch.”

TODD “TC” CUNNINGHAM

“Rick and I were friends, good friends.”

Most of the project has been completed, although one clock face remains. There was more than technical skill involved with restoring the great timepiece as Topaz explains.

“The clock face is two pieces of glass laid together; one very thin piece on top of another. That milk-lime juice solution had to be painstakingly removed with vinegar. It was the only stuff that removed the paint and still it was horrible getting that stuff off there!”

For the glass faces that were unable to be saved, volunteers hired a local glass company as well as an architect and sheet metal fabricator.

“There was originally steel tubes installed on-site once the clock arrived. Somewhere along the way, someone had the bright idea of hanging Christmas lights on the

clock and bent the tubes,” Topaz continues. “Also all the original hands of the clock were wood and so we replaced those with metal hands.”

The original wooden hands will be entered into the County museum.

Aside from the final face of the clock that needs to be replaced, the clock is up and works well. Facilities Manager, Todd “T.C.” Cunningham is delighted the project is shaping up.

“There have been so many people talking about the bell ringing again; the crew, citizens and various volunteers. Their efforts have been so cool to watch.”

If you’d like to be part of this memorable moment in Columbia County’s history by volunteering or contributing to the cause, you may contact: <http://www.shedco.org>

Facebook: <http://www.facebook.com/st.helens.SHEDCO>

Phone: 503.366.8232

Email: mainstreet@ci.st-helens.or.us

Watch for the video short documentary of this story by “liking”
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