Antics of 52-Year-Old Courthouse Clock Mystify Veteran Custodian

BY JACK ELLIOTT

RECENT antics of the ancient courthouse clock are becoming a serious mystery to Sherman Dixon, for the last 36 years one of the building custodians and probably the oldest county employe in point of service. The massive timepiece, by far the largest in the city, several times this year has stopped during the night and then started up again—which simply isn't possible for it to do all by itself, Mr. Dixon says.

To anyone who isn't a bird, the clock is virtually inaccessible and there are only three sets of keys to the door which leads into the attic. All are held by the janitors and other county officials who are not suspected of complicity in the mischief. John Haines, stationary engineer, is similarly puzzled.

Why anyone would want to climb up several flights of stairs to reach the tower just to stop the clock is also a mystery—especially when one of the flights shoots up at an 80 degree angle, just about straight up. Another of the "flights" is a ladder sloped at a similarly precipitous angle. It leads from the open platform where the clock bell is located up into the clock tower.

Variety of Theories

The stopping of the clock has been blamed on the wind, the roosting of birds on the machinery or clock faces and now by Mr. Dixon on some miscreant who for sheer spite climbed up to the tower and bent an iron bar which connects the clockworks with the faces. That happened last winter. Recently the clock was from 10 to 15 minutes slow one morning, and apparently had been stopped at some time during the night and started up again.

"The clock won't start by itself once it stops," Mr. Dixon said. "It's just like an pendulum clock, if you put your hand on the pendulum and stop it, you have to give the pendlum a shove before it starts again."

He scouted the suggestion that maybe the wind had started the pendulum by pointing to the massive iron rod, about 25 feet long, which is suspended from the tower down into the building and serves as the pendulum. A tornado could hardly budge it.

Built in 1885

The old clock, constructed in 1885 by E. Howard & Co. of Boston, needs very little attention to keep it going despite its age. Its works as about as complex as possible and operate so that regardless of where the hands of the clock are the hour will strike at the proper time. Two separate sets of works are used for the striking apparatus and the faces of the clock, each set being powered by a gravity device. It ticks every two seconds, while the average watch ticks several times a second.

The force to run the works is created each week by Emery Hurley, familiar character of the city, who climbs up to the tower with Mr. Haines every Thursday morning, and winds up two weights, one for the clock and one for the striking device, which are suspended from cables and connect with the works.

The weights, each about 1,000 pounds, are pulled nearly to the tip of the tower and gradually during the week lower by gravity about 40 feet and again are pulled up. As they lower they move the clock works.

The weights, especially the one which runs the clock, were once a source of considerable danger for the people in offices below. Now strong railroad ties have been placed under them, so that if they do fall, they won't crash through to the basement.

Took Things Once

They fell to the first floor once, nearly killing an attorney who had been standing where they struck just a moment before in front of the auditor's office. It was during wartimes and the 1,600 pounds created such a thunder as they ripped through ceilings and floors that for a few minutes it was believed the Germans had started an air raid.

Mr. Dixon was standing in the tower with Mr. Haines when it let loose, and just a moment before had been standing next to the weights. When the steel cable snapped under the strain, the wires lashed about viciously but missed the two men. The 1,600 pounds tore through the ceiling of the second floor, struck the tile floor, ripped out a hole about six feet square and continued to the first floor, stopping in front of the door leading to the auditor's office, Mr. Dixon said.

"It would have gone through to the basement if it hadn't hit the wall on the second floor first and lost some of its speed," Mr. Dixon said.

The height of the tower deceives persons on the street below as to the size of the clock. Its faces are actually eight feet in diameter. The numbers are about a foot and a half high and the markings for minutes are about six inches high. The glass behind the hands is paneled and most of the panels are cracked.

Gears Operate Hands

The faces of the clock are about 25 feet higher than the works and operate by a gear system and drive shaft. The drive shaft extends upward from the works to a point equidistant from the four faces and level with their centers. A system of gears transmits the power to the hands of the clocks over four separate drive shafts. All four faces, theoretically at least, should give the same time.

The bell, likewise, is no midget. Measuring about five feet high and four feet in diameter at the base, it weighs several hundred pounds.

It was cast in 1885 from soft bell metal by the McShane Bell Foundry at Baltimore, Md. Despite its size, it resounds loud enough from the flick of a knife blade to be heard for several yards. The metal is extremely soft and can be pared as easily as lead. When the clock strikes, a giant hammer weighing about 50 pounds is automatically raised and falls against the side of the bell.

A huge wooden wheel is connected with the bell also and can be revolved to swing the bell for an alarm. On Armistice day from dawn till dusk, at least one or two persons were up in the belfry spinning the wheel and clanging the gong.

On clear days it is possible to see about six or seven miles in all directions from the tower, and on other days even the outskirts of the city are invisible.

From this vantage point a county official pointed out recently that Marion is in a sort of valley. A decided ridge of land is noticeable surrounding the city and this the official attributed Marion's record for escaping severe wind storms. From the tower it is seen that Fairground and North State streets, believed by some to be the highest point in the town, is as high if not higher than the standpipe. A pronounced slope downward from Main street to Center street to the west is easily discerned, although on the street it is hardly noticed.