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AS TIME GOES BY:

THE STORY OF GILROY'S OLD CITY HALL CLOCK

by

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INTRODUCTION

The place is the center of town -- at the crossroads where the old Butterfield mailcoaches from the Central Valley first came upon El Camino Real, the King's Highway. Now patrons of modern clothing stores and restaurants bustle by the hardy stone edifice which once housed their local government. Atop the stately building sits a large bell, and just below it, four huge clock faces, facing each of the four points on the compass. As the mammoth minute hands point directly skyward, a hammerhead hits the bell. A series of strong, resonant chimes fills the air. Pigeons flurry and fly from their roosts in the tower. The people below look up and check their watches. Some ignore the sound, while others ponder--who looks after that old clock? Who winds it? Who sets its chimes? Some deformed hunchback living amongst the pigeons?

Nope. I do.

* * * *

This is the story of the clock located above Gilroy's Old City Hall building. Its hands have kept Gilroy running on time (off and on) from its installation in 1914 to the present day. As its 75th birthday approaches, the moment is right to reflect back on the history of the clock, and the faithfulness of its first caretakers, whose solemn duty I have inherited.

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THE FACE OF TIME

The clock which Gilroyans have come to love actually fills three stories, accessible only by rickety stairs and ladders, above the Old City Hall building.

Thirty-five feet above street level is the clock machinery, installed in a small room. Forty-two feet up are the four clock faces themselves, with vivid Roman numerals displaying the hours. Fifty feet up is the bell in its tower, and above that a flagpole rises to a height some 75 feet in the air.

The bell in the clocktower has two purposes. One is to sound the hourly (and half-hourly) chime when the hammerhead striker hits the bell's exterior. But the bell can also be rung manually from the building's entryway. Long ropes can be hung from the clock room down to the main doors for this purpose. This warning bell system was used in the days of the City's first volunteer fire department.

The clock mechanism has a nameplate on its cast iron base, inscribed "Seth Thomas Clock Co., Thomaston, Conn., USA, Dec. 31, 1913, No. 1859." The Thomas Clock Company was one of the two big companies in that time period which competed in the market (the other being the Howard Company of Boston).

Worth about \$1000 in 1913, the historic clock is certainly worth at least \$10,000 in 1987.

HISTORY

Gilroy's historic City Hall was built at the corner of Sixth and Monterey Streets in 1905-06. Designed by Samuel Newsom, and engineered by Wolf and McKenzie of San Jose, the structure was meant to bring Gilroy into the twentieth century. The design called for a large clock to be installed to complete its landmark exterior.

But money for the clock was not immediately available. Soon after completion of the City Hall, a fund drive was started to finance the purchase of a four dial clock for the "New City Hall" which was expected to cost about \$700. Among early contributors were cattle baron Henry Miller (\$100), Mayor George Dunlap (\$50), and L.A. Whitehurst (\$50). Time passed, however, as sufficient funds were not raised. A 1910 photograph of the building shows wood cutouts in the holes where the clock faces should have been.

In late 1913, the Council retained H.J. Musgrave of San Francisco, to install the clock in the tower. Musgrave agreed "to keep all rain and moisture from entering said tower through any opening made by him."

The clock was unveiled in February, 1914. On February 7, 1914, the town newspaper, the Gilroy Advocate, announced:

"The handsome town clock installed this week in the tower of the city hall has excited the admiration of our citizens. The name of the donor was to be kept a profound secret, but it has become generally known that Mrs. Caroline A. Hoxett is the town's fairy god-mother.... Nothing could be more useful to the city for years to come, than this handsome clock, which will mark the passing of the hours....

Mrs. Hoxett, the grandmother of current Gilroy mayor Roberta Hughan, made a formal presentation of the clock to the City on March 2, 1914. The Council's resolution praised her, and proclaimed that the clock's hands "will ever point the hour, and its bell, at stated intervals, [will] proclaim the flight of time."

The bell was installed a short time after the clock. Soon, Gilroyans could recognize the difference in sound between the hourly strike, and the manual ring of the bell for special events.

Usually, the manual ring of the bell meant tragedy: a fire was spotted, and the bell was calling for volunteers to battle the blaze. But at least once the bell symbolized good news. On November 11, 1918, as soon as the news of the Armistice ending World War I reached Gilroy, seven-year-old Lawrence Cullen, uncle of current Gilroy Mayor Roberta Howson Hughan, was held aloft on his father's shoulders to pull the bell rope.

Through the years, City employees and volunteers kept the clock wound and maintained. Access to the tower was through the judge's office upstairs. Nancy McCarthy, a newspaper reporter, recalls how the judge kept huge stacks of papers and books in his chambers, making access even more difficult. The bell has been shut off several times over the years. Twice it was silenced due to complaints from local residents and guests

at the Milias Hotel across the street that it was keeping them awake at night. Henry Webber, current manager of the now-converted Milias Apartments, says residents there have a "love-hate relationship" with the bell.

As the City offices outgrew their quarters, new facilities were built several blocks to the west. Gradual abandonment of the building had also led to spotty maintenance of the clock. The clock stopped during an earthquake in 1959. For quite a while, the clock stayed at the hour the shock waves had hit the city. Meanwhile, the building was threatened with demolition. However, thoughts of the clocktower crashing to the ground were too much for many public-minded citizens to bear, and the Gilroy Historical Society was born. In the late 1960s, Historical Society volunteers installed new features in the clocktower, including replacing the pendulum with an electric motor.

The building was saved from destruction, and became a focal point of the City's Bicentennial Project in 1976. The structure, however, had become uninhabitable because of seismic safety regulations. The City leased the building in 1980 to Hoffman and Associates of Watsonville, for the purpose of opening a restaurant.

With the help of grant funds, the building was refurbished at a cost of \$1.5 million. The electric motor was removed and the original pendulum workings were restored as a part of the historic restoration. Moulding was made for two of the clock faces.

Economic conditions caused a delay of the restaurant's opening, and its existence was short-lived. Meals were served only from Christmas 1983 to mid-1985. Damage was done to the clockworks by vandals who had broken into the belfry one New Year's Eve.

Delicate parts were broken, and the handmade parts would eventually be required to replace them. When the restaurant closed its doors, the leasees stopped all care for the clock, and it became inaccessible. Soonafter, pigeon droppings began to seep into the clockworks.

In mid-1986, the leasees defaulted on their SBA loan for the restaurant. The City of Gilroy was successful in reacquiring the lease from the SBA, along with the restaurant furnishings, in August, 1986.

Following reacquisition of the building by the City, damage to the clock was repaired, and the clock and chimes were brought back into operation.

MAINTENANCE AND REPAIR

The original clock was designed to be operated by a pendulum. Maintenance and lubrication are required to be done on all moving parts on a regular basis. The tricks of oiling just the right joints have been passed down from caretaker to caretaker over the years.

Accessibility to the belfry is difficult; there are 46 stairs to climb. The last thirteen are narrow, and the passageway is somewhat treacherous. Ladders to the clock faces and the belltower are even more dangerous.

All of the caretakers have found that the winding is fairly awkward, because there is little room in the clockroom, and the

weighted cables, which are wound with a crank like that used for an old automobile, are quite long. The weights hang from a pulley system high in the belltower, and are a potential danger during an earthquake. The cable for the bell striker must be wound every three or four days, the cable for the clock every six days.

At daylight saving time in April, and again when it ends in October, the hands must be adjusted one hour. This can be difficult, because the chime mechanism must be carefully held while the clock is moved forward. The time is set with a brass key which moves the hands on all four clock faces simultaneously. It is also possible to adjust the speed of the clock or the beat of the pendulum with the various brass knobs above the pendulum, or by adding lead shot or copper-clad BBs to a tray on the ball of the pendulum.

Temperature variations, moisture, and seismic tremors effect the operation of the clock.

BIRDS OF A FEATHER

Closely associated with the clock have been many generations of pigeons and their roosts. City Council minutes as far back as 1913 address the pigeon problem. The clocktower roof and the front steps of the building have long since been "whitened" by their droppings. Cleaning the steps was once one of the chores of the police officers in the building. Sometimes prisoners in the jail located in the rear of the building were given this chore. (The judge would then normally lighten their sentence!).

Dozens of suggestions from concerned citizens have been tried over the years. Mice, scarecrows, stuffed owls and snakes, and other scare tactics have been employed. When the City reacquired the building in 1986, workers scraped over a foot of droppings out of the clocktower before installing chicken wire to keep the birds out. Traps have now been placed on the roof to catch the birds which still roost on the cupola.

Tradition seems to show, however, that the pigeon problem may still be addressed by the Gilroy City Council in the year 2013!

THE PEOPLE

The Lawton family, proprietors of Lawton's Gem Store, have had a long association with the clock. George Lawton, Sr. worked on the clock in the 1930s. His son Philip took over the cleaning of the clock from his father. Today his son, George, Jr., is still a local businessman.

The Bolfig/Gilmore family has also had a long love affair with the building and its clock. Carl "Pop" Bolfig was credited with saving the building from destruction in the 60s. His sons-in-law and grandsons spent many hours working on the clock. His grandsons Chuck Gilmore, Jr. and Jim Musollino were photographed in by the Dispatch in 1966 stripping and refinishing the clock faces and numerals. Charles Gilmore (Sr.) installed the electric motor soon afterwards. Chuck, Jr., currently sits on the City's Old City Hall Committee.

Gene Corriden is a clock-lover and repair expert who lives in Soquel, California. He was retained by Hoffman and Associates in 1980 to restore the clock mechanism to its original condition. After the vandalism in 1985, he collaborated with ironworkers to remake parts by hand, based on drawings of similar parts from other large clocks in California. His experience includes work on the clock in old IOOF building in Santa Cruz, as well as large clocks in Oakland, Reedley, and Westwood. He continues to do maintenance on the Gilroy clock for the City of Gilroy.

Ralph Blackburn, the owner of Gilroy Hardware from 1975 to 1986, voluntarily wound the clock for several years. His interest was aroused when Corriden came into his store to buy parts in 1980. He attended the clock twice a week until relieved of the responsibility by the Hoffmans. He moved to Oregon following his retirement from the hardware business.

Chuck Myer assumed the role of restorer and caretaker of the clock when the City reacquired access to the building in August 1986. He is a city planner for the City, and serves as staff to the Old City Hall Committee appointed by Mayor Hughan.

THE FUTURE

In July, 1987, the State Legislature is expected to authorize a \$29,000 grant by the Office of Historic Preservation to the City of Gilroy for exterior maintenance of the structure, including the clock.

The clock's future is integrally linked with that of the building, and the building's future looks much brighter today than it has in several years. Now back under complete control of the City of Gilroy, the restaurant facility will be reopened sometime in 1987. A high-quality Mexican restaurant, "Eduardo's Cantina," has been proposed by millionaire developer/restaurateur Ed Lazzarini, whose Golden Oak restaurant in Morgan Hill was the result of a loving restoration of a historic winery structure.

Any future lease of the building by the City of Gilroy will include care and maintenance of its historic clock.

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