

Chiming Clocks

Within a year after my marriage, and still without a proverbial pot to piss in, I was collecting chiming clocks. A fondness for chiming clocks might well be due to a recessive gene that some inherit and some do not.

I have racked the memories of my childhood and find only one chiming clock that I remember, the one my grandmother had placed in the alcove above her china closet in the formal dining room at the home ranch, west of Williams. If I remember correctly, it chimed the hours and the half-hours, but not the quarters.

This clock played an important role in the spiritual regimen of my grandmother's day, because by the last stroke of 8 p.m., everyone in the house was expected to be on their knees in the dining room, ready to recite the Holy Rosary with her. Truthfully, it was my grandmother who actually said the rosary aloud in a crisp and articulate voice, while the others assembled mumbled their parts of the Hail Mary and the Our Father, with their arms resting on the dining room chair seats and heads bowed so low their mouths could have kissed the cushions. In the background of my grandmother's firm prayer recitation, the rhythmic ticking of the chiming clock could be heard, and by the time – oh, would it never come? – the chime struck the half-hour, the evening prayer was over and all assembled were free to leave.

I have no other family recollections of a chiming clock. My teen-age and early adult years were governed by the ringing of a monastery bell, which called us to prayer, announced the great silence for the evening, and woke us before dawn in the morning. Perhaps the sounds of these monastic bells became so etched into my psyche that only the rhythmic sound of the swinging pendulum and the chimes of a clock can satisfy me. I don't know this to be the case; I lean toward the recessive gene theory.

My first married chiming clock cost us 50 1968 dollars. Working at that time in the farmworker movement and living in a state of involuntary poverty, I have no idea where we found the money to make such a large purchase, but we did. This clock was a restored mantel clock, which we found in an antique store in Porterville, some 30 miles or so from Delano, where we lived.

The wood surround of the clock, approximately 24 inches high and 18 inches wide, was carved into plants with large tulip-like flowers sprouting from the ends of their stalks. It chimed the hours and the half-hours with a nonsense flat sound. Our Porterville clock was not as comforting as I remember my grandmother's clock, which gave forth sweet, soothing, and melodious tones. But our first chiming clock was more imposing and made its own special statement. For more than 26 years, it proved to be a veritable workhorse of a clock. Today, it sits on our family room fireplace mantel and keeps perfect time as it bangs out the hours and the half-hours. It must be more than 50 years old by now.

Our second chiming clock, a squat-looking mantel clock made of iron, with its plain recessed face flanked on either side by marble columns, belonged to Bonnie's grandmother. It had been a turn-of-the-century wedding present. The clock, made by Ansonia, originally came from Massachusetts, or maybe it was New York. The sound of its chime was softer and more melodious than the Porterville clock, and it also chimed the hours and half-hours. The Ansonia clock served us well for more than 15 years, but despite the best efforts of several clocksmiths, it couldn't keep the pace and now sits relegated to the closet, waiting for a new owner to resurrect it to its former glory.

It was these two clocks in our Delano home that gave my father fits. He was a light sleeper and an early riser, and during his occasional visits he became annoyed with our clocks throughout the overnight hours because they did not chime in unison. In fact, they might be out of sync with each other by as much as five minutes. On the first morning after his arrival, he would take great pains to reset the clocks so that during his visit they chimed in unison. Chiming clocks not in complete harmony with each other violated his mechanical sense of law and order.

Our next chiming clock was a grandfather clock, a mail order item through the American Express catalogue, for 800 1978 dollars. It is a 7-foot-tall replica of an early American grandfather clock. It is quite handsome and a good-looking piece of furniture in its own right.

Having ordered the clock on sheer impulse, I had no idea what to expect, and when it arrived unassembled in a very large box, I went into a state of high panic. My innate ability to read and follow assembly directions is so poor, it

cannot even be measured. By some miracle or dumb luck, I succeeded in putting it together, and after the first swing of the pendulum, that grandfather clock owned the house. A 40-inch swinging pendulum, three sets of chimes from which to choose, and every quarter-hour marked by deep and resonating tones, which filled our large two-story house. Mail order or not, replica or not, that clock keeps perfect time and commands the respect of all who see and hear it.

Our kitchen wall clock is known as a school clock. A vertical, rectangular-looking clock with a glass front and a large but plain face, it marks the hours and the half-hours with a clear, pleasant-sounding chime. For many years we had to make allowances for this clock because, despite all repair efforts, it ran up to 20 minutes fast. Much of our time was spent setting the clock backward to the current time, knowing full well that within a day or two it would race ahead.

At some point in our marriage, we acquired an anniversary clock. So named, of course, because the clock needs to be wound only once a year. Its pendulum, a stem with three balls attached, equidistant from one another, can be seen through the glass from all directions. The pendulum turns first in one direction, pauses, and then turns back in the opposite direction. Six inches high, it sits on the bric-a-brac shelf and never makes a sound. Perhaps its chime and its charm are simply visual. I have yet to find an anniversary clock that keeps any semblance of the correct time, and ours is no exception. Decorative and pretty to look at probably sums up its value.

In 1979, my wife gave me a clock as a gift for a special occasion. It stands about 16 inches tall, has a square look about it, glass windows on both sides, and an inside mirror attached to the back wall to show off its mechanical workings. With three sets of chimes from which to choose, it delivers each quarter-hour with a progressively longer fanfare, and the melody finally comes to fruition when it chimes the full hour. The tick of the clock is soft and pleasant, the sound of the chimes rich and melodious, and it keeps perfect time.

Our home is large enough to provide each clock its own space, and when I wake up in the middle of the night, as my father did before me, I hear the clocks, each with its unique chime, strike the hours. And even though it might

take as long as 15 minutes before each clock has announced its hour, for some reason this lack of synchronism does not offend my mechanical sense of law and order. That is one recessive gene I did not inherit.

Afterword

Now, many years later, I am left with only one chiming clock, the grandfather clock. Actually, it is only on loan from my youngest, since she has no home of her own large enough to accommodate its size.

I gave each of the children one of the clocks, their pick. Here was part of my thinking. My children were raised living with these clocks; it might be comforting to them if one of the chiming clocks followed them to their own home. Then, too, there are grandchildren to be concerned about. What might happen to them if they were not raised with a chiming clock? Fearing the worst, I did my part. Finally, when I go to their houses for a visit, I have the opportunity to revisit an old friend, something like discovering a favorite toy at grandmother's house that you had discarded years ago.

Thus far, only one clock has become a casualty. One of my sons-in-law, I am told, cannot go to sleep with the eternal tick-tock and the twice-an-hour chime. What can I say? I make no apologies, I tried to do the right thing. It is still my hope that the chiming clock sitting silently on their mantel will work its magic somehow. I can't help myself; recessive genes cannot be stamped out.