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Quest for Information

Unique Charles Allison Timepieces

By Gregory Gerard Allison (NY)

I was a teenager when my father told me the full story of his dad's clocks. I already knew some of the basics. My grandfather, Charles (Charley) Allison, was a watch maker who created unique timepieces. One, a miniature 7" grandfather clock, complete with pendulum, was a gift for my parents' wedding in 1951. Unfortunately, he'd neglected to provide instructions—a left-hand wind for my left-handed father—and my dad wound it the wrong way on the first try. It had sat, broken, under a glass dome on our bookshelves, ever since.

Origins of a Quest

When I was a child, my dad would often tell stories after dinner in our Western New York farmhouse. One night, in 1981, the tale was about horology. My father was a grocery store owner by trade but my grandfather, who died 11 years before I was born, was a self-taught watch maker. He had a watch shop in East Rochester, NY, in the 1920s (before his divorce from my grandmother) and one in Sherman Oaks, CA, in the 1930s–50s (after the divorce). My dad told me about his father's craft, including a work bench in a north-facing bay window for best light, and Hollywood celebrities who frequented his shop and signed the guest book. Watch repair paid my grandfather's bills, but Charley loved to design and build his own timepieces. In a 47-year career, he created a total of 15 watches and clocks.

My father's hands became more animated as he described the collection, which he'd seen in person in 1945 on a layover coming home from World War II. He told me about the most special one: the Allison Mystery Clock. This particular wall clock had a deceptively simple design with 12 numbers placed on a 2' wooden square, and a peg at the center with detachable wooden hands. There were no other visible works.

My grandfather had demonstrated the clock's abilities during my father's visit. He took a yardstick and, reaching out, set the hands spinning. They rotated freely, ultimately coming to rest back at the correct time. The hands could not be confused. Even if spun very hard, they would return to the correct time, including the elapsed minute or two while spinning.

My father explained that my grandfather had thought of the design in a dream. He'd fielded many purchase offers—including one from a Texas oil man who, reportedly, wanted the clock so badly, he threw down a blank check and insisted that my grandfather fill out any amount. But Charley was not swayed—his creations were not for sale. He wanted them in a museum after his passing. My father didn't know what happened to the clocks. Charley died in 1955. His fourth companion/wife, Margie Smith, would have more details, but my father lost touch with her after the funeral.

My mind spun. My "genius" grandfather had made a timepiece with no apparent means of propulsion. He'd turned down a blank check for it (he could have been rich!). Movie stars were drawn to his work. In my journal entry that night, I vowed to locate my grandfather's clocks when I grew up.

Encountering the NAWCC

My father died in 2003 and I inherited two artifacts in the Allison clock legacy: Charley's shop guest book and the broken wedding clock. The first I put in my fire safe, and the second I placed on a bookshelf in my home, under the same glass dome from my childhood. When friends came over, I'd occasionally tell Charley's story—the left-handed wind, the Texas oil man, the missing collection. The clock continued its vigil as life's responsibilities kept my days busy; but, in the back of my mind, my boyhood vow nagged me.

In December 2016, the year I turned 50, I had a two-week holiday break from my day job (IT communications) and my spare-time job (writing/teaching). I decided it was time to begin my search. First, I gathered all the assets including the Allison Watchmakers' guest book, the copy of an undated, unsourced California newspaper article "Unique Clocks Are Created By Local Jeweler" that an uncle had mailed to me, and a photo of my grandfather's shop on Ventura Boulevard. I reread the article. The reporter had visited my grandfather's store and shared a detailed description of the collection, including the Mystery Clock. I turned to Google. Searching "Charles Allison" and "watchmaker" brought up nothing. I

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expanded my search to clock museums. One of the top hits introduced me to the NAWCC.

Right there, I started an email campaign to the NAWCC asking if they had heard of my grandfather. I also emailed museums in the San Fernando Valley to see if there were any Allison clocks in their collection. Finally I emailed my high school friend, who had relocated to Los Angeles, asking if he would let me crash at his place if I arranged a research visit. Without much preplanning, my quest had begun.

The subsequent two years were filled with watch research. I joined the NAWCC and submitted a formal research request. I visited the Los Angeles Public Library and churned through their microfilm records. I stood on the corner of Ventura and Sepulveda, drinking in the atmosphere of where Allison Watchmakers had once stood, 70 years earlier.

Despite my efforts no quick answers to the missing clocks surfaced, only clues. There is a 1937 advertisement in the *Van Nuys News* touting my grandfather's 29 years of experience.¹ I calculated that he'd started his craft at 16. A 1940 U.S. Census record listed my grandfather's residence as "rear of store."² The next row indicated his third wife's name was Grace. A 1945 guest book signature from actress Mary Astor of *The Maltese Falcon* fame proclaimed, "This is something new and different!" Did she mean the Mystery Clock?

Being a writer, I took meticulous notes and captured my efforts in prose as I connected with a grandfather I never knew. I longed to locate the missing clocks. As I met horology enthusiasts and showed them the broken clock, my interest in the "bird-in-hand" grew. My quest eventually diverged into two paths: (1) to learn everything I could about my grandfather's world and locate the Allison collection, and (2) repair the broken Allison clock I owned.

Repair

In summer 2019, Path 2 took a leap forward. I'd shown the clock to members of my local NAWCC Chapter 13 and they'd been very helpful. Ed Olesky, Laurie Kimble, and Frank Ziefel each evaluated my clock, noted its unique repair needs, and eventually led me to contact Mahlon Shetler, an Amish watch maker near Hornell, NY. After some correspondence, I headed south from Rochester with the clock and renewed hope in tow.

Mahlon's workshop was located on the side of a hill against a backdrop of wheat fields and a thick forest of trees. A barn-like structure with white metal siding masked the three floors of watch-making within. Mahlon and I began to take the clock apart, and he shared some observations:

- The casing appears to be aluminum
- The movement has a balance wheel, a regular lever escapement, and train; however, it also has a pendulum (Figure 1)

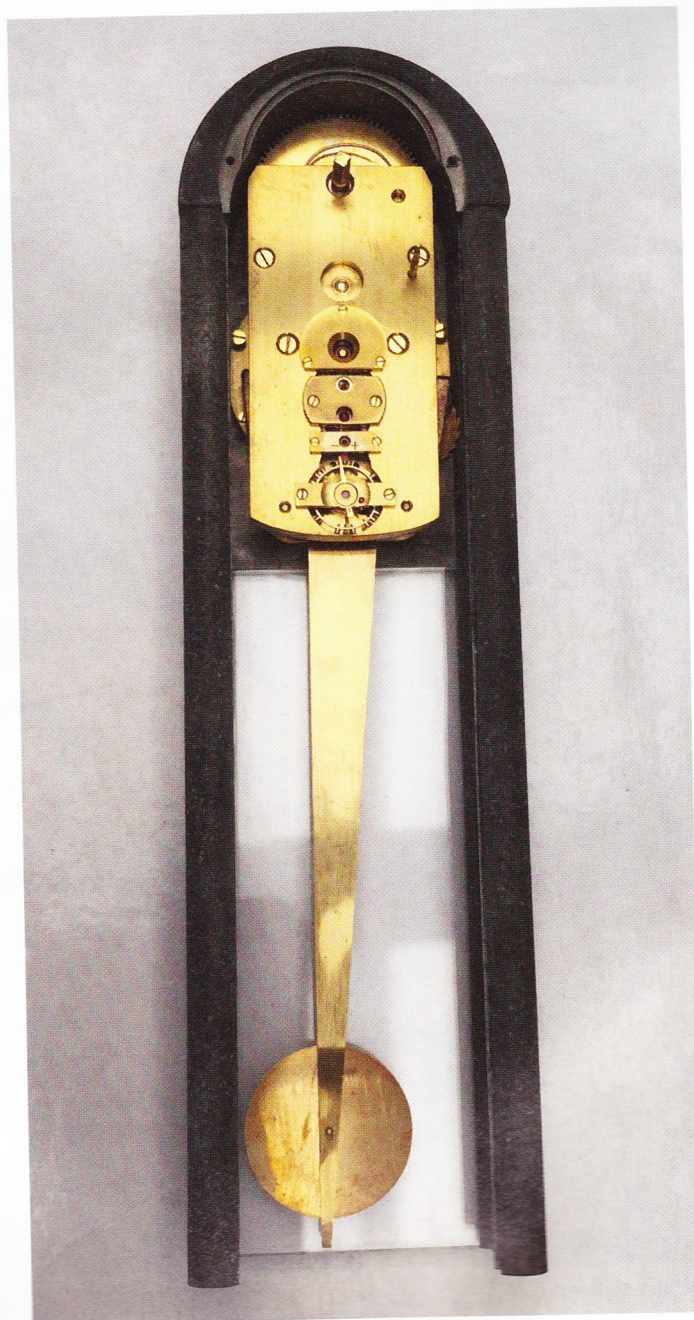


Figure 1. Rear view with backing removed.

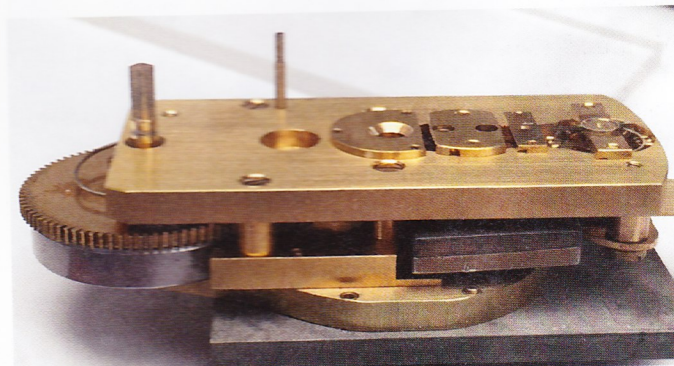


Figure 2. A side view of the Waltham barrel.

- The movement uses a Waltham barrel (Figure 2)
- Many of the interior parts are homemade
- My grandfather had blued his own screws
- The mini-chimes inside the casing are decorative, but the pendulum is designed to swing
- Hence, we have a timepiece with both a balance wheel and a pendulum

This functionality captured Mahlon's attention. He said that the fourth wheel appeared to drive the pendulum, but that the design was like nothing he had ever seen (see the sidebar "Inside the Allison Clock"). According to Mahlon, "The movement (Figure 3) is extremely well thought out and shows extremely good craftsmanship." He could have created a replacement gear for the broken ratchet wheel, but instead he encouraged me to seek laser welding to preserve the original parts as much as possible (Figure 4). He would be able to finish the repair once the weld was complete.

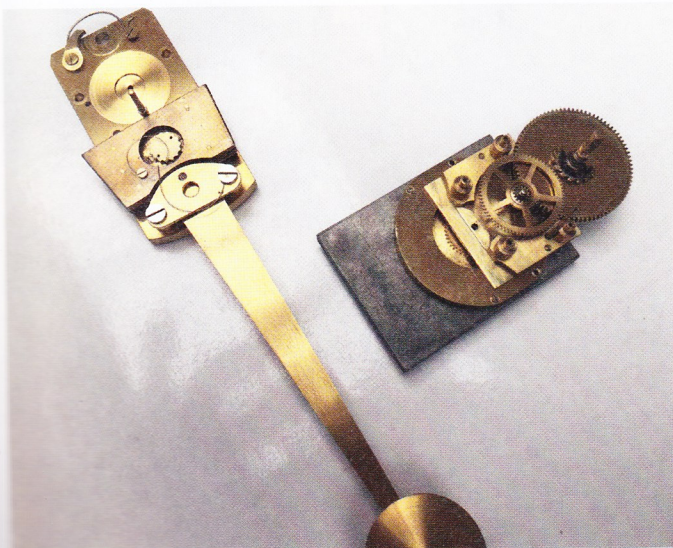


Figure 3. Pendulum.



Figure 4. The repair on the broken ratchet wheel.

Back in Rochester, I located Precision Laser Technology online. I explained that my greatest concern was that there was only one original gear, so there was no room for error. Precision accepted the job and completed a laser weld for \$100 in just two days. Their representative explained that it required some additional welding due to micro-cracking around the base. With the repaired click wheel in hand, I returned to Mahlon's workshop, where he quickly allayed my fears about the damage having been too severe. The weld was excellent and should work properly. As Mahlon patiently talked me through the rest of the repair, I felt the years between Charley and myself blur as we traced my grandfather's work through this timepiece.

Mahlon was pleased that the action sprang to life after just a few clicks. "Your grandfather must have used quality oil for the 1950s. Otherwise there would be residue. But this clock just wants to run, even after 70 years."



Figure 5. The clock face.

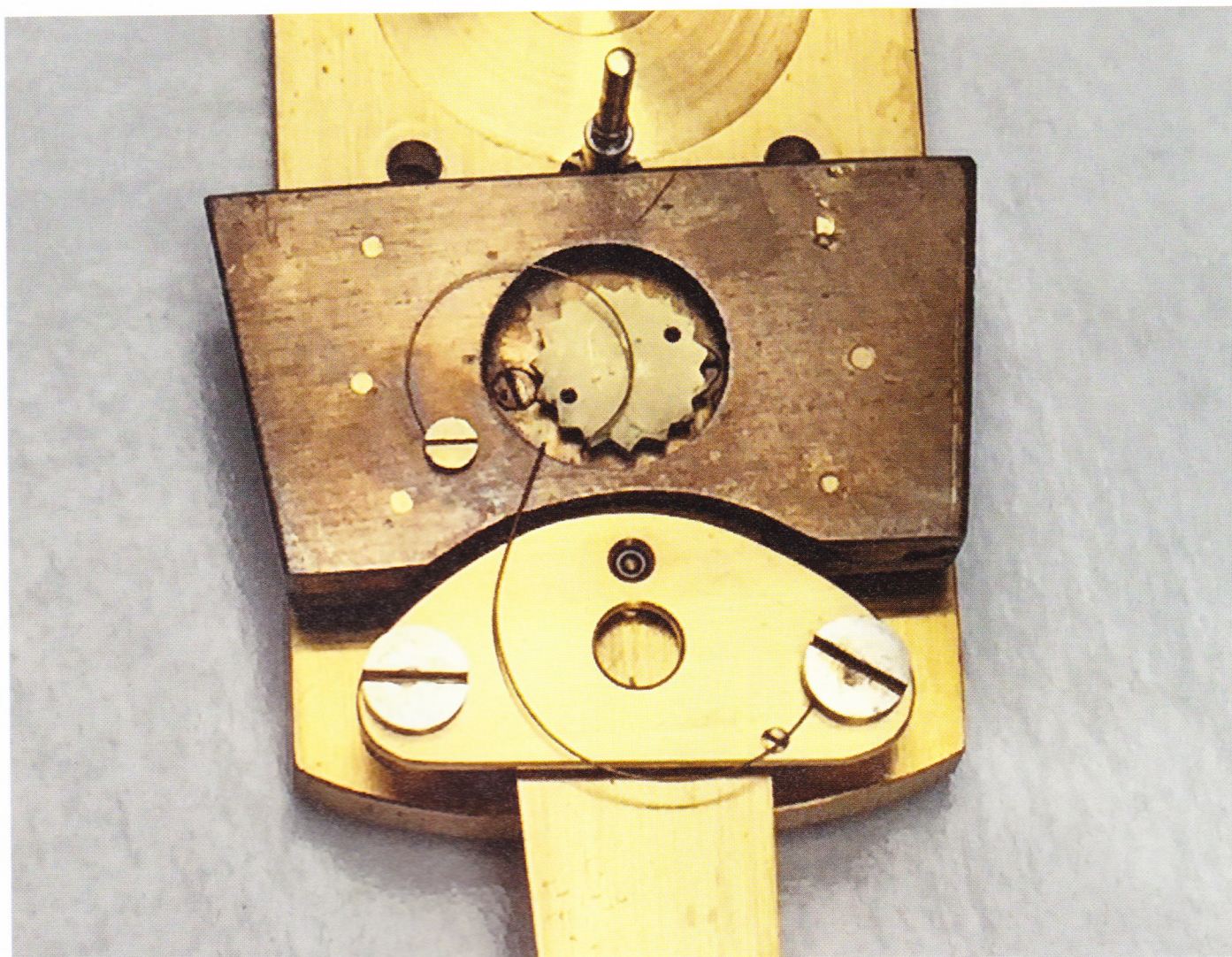


Figure 6. The pendulum mechanism up close and personal.

The clock face was next (Figure 5). "I believe he made the hands. They are very heavy duty, not like other hands," Mahlon said as he squinted through his loupe goggles. "I believe he bought the dial and put his name on it." (RAN Editor's Note: The dial may be a car clock dial?)

He continued to assemble the parts, pointing out the fourth wheel and the pendulum motion. A gear with a couple of small wires running to two screws made no sense to me (Figure 6), but Mahlon was clearly excited as he stood the clock up straight, still with the works exposed. "That is so crazy," he said as the pendulum moved back and forth. "After 30 years, not a whole lot intrigues me. It's a shame we're going to have to cover that beautiful movement."

The clock, shown cased in Figure 7, continued to tick as Mahlon focused on creating a winding key to replace the original, which has been lost. He assured me that he could make one from brass. We decided on an A-shaped

design that would complement the clock. As we wrapped up for the day, the clock was keeping perfect time.

Conclusions and Questions

Reinvigorated by this part of the journey, I am encouraged that I will be able to not only realize my childhood dream but also create a connection across the years among grandfather, father, and son. However, I still seek information about my grandfather and the time in which he lived. If a reader of this article could help with this search, specifically but not limited to the history below, I would greatly appreciate it. Correspondence can be sent to Greg Gerard Allison at greallroc@gmail.com. The RAN editor (edwinfasanella@gmail.com) would also be interested in any comments from the readers.

- My grandfather died on February 26, 1955. At that time, he lived with a woman (companion? wife?) named Margie Smith. Their home was located in

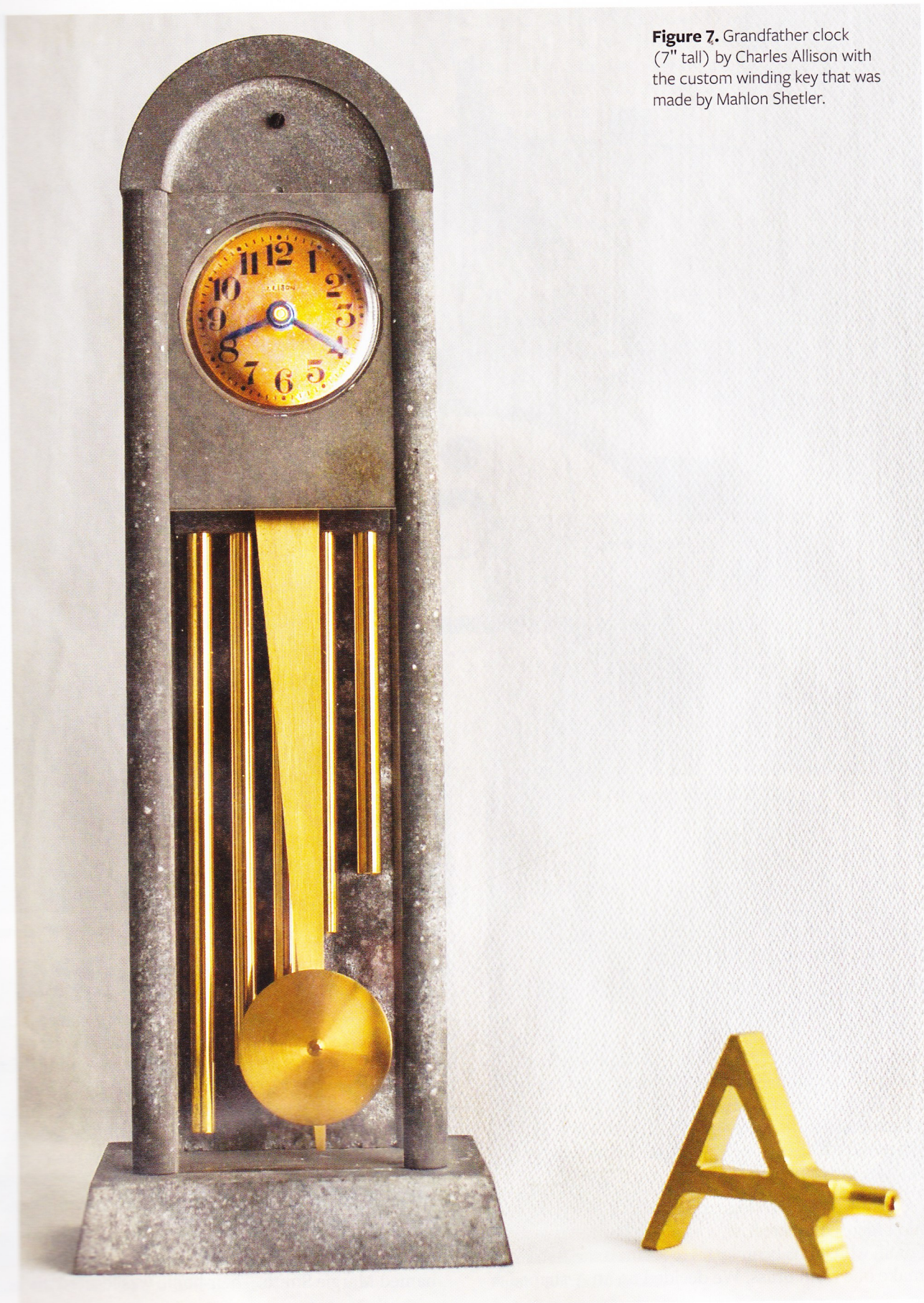


Figure 7. Grandfather clock (7" tall) by Charles Allison with the custom winding key that was made by Mahlon Shetler.

Woodland Hills, CA. Margie had a son from a previous marriage named Jimmy.

- Word has come down through my uncle's family that the clocks may not have gone to a museum; they may have ended up with Jimmy. Whether Jimmy or his potential offspring are still alive—and whether my grandfather's collection is in a museum, on a living room wall, or stored in an attic—remains a mystery that I am committed to solve.

Acknowledgments

The author thanks all those who have helped him on this journey so far, including NAWCC Chapter 13, the Los Angeles Public Library, Mahlon Shetler, and Precision Technology.

References

1. Ad. *Van Nuys News*. April 15, 1937. pg. 4. <https://www.newspapers.com/newspage/32633950>.
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About the Authors

Gregory Gerard Allison is a communications manager in Rochester, NY, and author of various books. His work in progress captures his head-first dive, at age 50, into the horological world, as he searches for his grandfather's missing clock collection. For more information visit www.gregorygerard.net.

Mahlon Shetler is an Amish watch maker located in Western New York. He is a self-taught artisan who specializes in repairing unique timepieces and teaching the craft to the next generation of watch makers.

Inside the Allison Clock

By Mahlon Shetler (NY)

When I first looked at the Allison miniature grandfather clock, I was reasonably sure the chime tubes were faux, but I was not so sure about the pendulum. I had seen numerous miniature clocks showing a pendulum but, so far as I can recall, they were all inanimate. Admittedly, I thought that would be the case here, until the back was removed and I was able to see the counter weight behind the main plate.

The balance wheel was the obvious timekeeper. My question was how did the train kick the pendulum to keep it going? That answer was revealed upon further disassembly showing the spring wires and the 15-point star wheel inside the pendulum counter-weight.

It was immediately apparent that the mainspring barrel and second wheel were from a Waltham car clock, but the winding arbor appeared to have been made in-house, with the ratchet wheel being integral to the arbor. It is quite possible that the escapement may have been sourced from Switzerland or even borrowed from an existing watch.

However, I believe all plates to have been designed and machined in-house, and quite possibly parts of the train, the blued screws, the case, the hands, and so on. After the broken gear was repaired and the clock was reassembled and given a slight amount of power, the pendulum started swinging slowly, even while held in a horizontal position, resembling that of a full-size grandfather clock.

Miniature clocks have always caught most collectors' attention, especially if they were hand-built and one-of-a-kind. Miniature clocks seem to fit into both watch and clock collecting categories. I have seen one other miniature grandfather clock, possibly made in the 1860s, possibly by a Waltham Watch Co. employee, utilizing parts of a 57 model watch. It was also very tastefully done, with an enamel dial in a narrow waist tall case (as they were referred to back then), but without a pendulum. As was usual, it did not have glass in the waist door, so the absence of a pendulum was not obvious.