

Time and Time Again

By Anita Heistand – press release which appeared in the Kansas City Star, Sunday, June 9, 1991

Cherokee County past and present citizens have worked together to offer sight and sound of a giant, unusual antique clock. Though citizens bought the clock in 1919 as a courthouse tower clock memorial to the sacrifices of World War I soldiers, people of today have renovated and rededicated it, setting it in a new forty-foot tower with four-by-eight-foot windows on three sides so that passers-by can view the works.

The Women's Civic Committee led in raising funds by private donation to be added to the \$1,000 given by the county for purchase of a clock and bronze memorial tablet. The clock cost \$20,000 and was the best of its kind, having four dials, one for each side of the courthouse tower, and an 800 pound bronze bell to strike on the hour and half hour. Extra money bought an angelus chime system to ring at 7 am, at noon, and at 6 pm. The dials were electrically lighted so they could be read at night. The clock, put into service Friday, the 13th of February, 1920, was probably the last of the five foot tall pedestal mounted clockworks made by the Seth Thomas Clock Company.

Shortly after the clock was installed, heavy storm winds vibrated the tower so ferociously that the works were thrown out of adjustment, stopping the clock. The works were adjusted and restarted. A month later, a similar storm vibration caused the chime motor to burn out, and it was not replaced. The mellow big bell tones each hour, though, were an appropriate reminder of time which had been extended to the citizens through the sacrifice of battle. The memorial later extended to county men involved in all the wars since that time.

Starr Smith established a jewelry store and clock and watch repair in Columbus in 1938, and was entrusted with care of the tower clock.

After moving to Colorado in 1950, then returning to Columbus in 1956, Smith found that the old courthouse had been razed and a new courthouse without a tower had been constructed. The four clock faces from the old clock had been placed in the four sides of the new courthouse, and were to have been run by a new electric motor. The old clockworks had been discarded. The works soon failed, and the original mechanism could not be found. The clock faces were stilled, and Smith began a search for the original works which was not rewarded until 1983.

Then a retired county employee helped Smith find the mechanism, which had been stored at the county barn and had dwindled to a heap of rusting pieces on the gravel floor. Smith bought the works for a small amount and began the job of gathering up the parts, combing the gravel for the smaller pieces and wheels. He traced the clock's history to the company at Thomaston, Conn., which was no longer in business, and found that replacement parts were unavailable.

After two years of rising before dawn and working until supper to clean, restore and reassemble the original parts and add a few handmade replacements, refurbishing the old clockworks with new paint and shining the old brass, Smith could proudly watch the original eighty pound mahogany pendulum swinging its exact pace of once per second.

An electric motor lifts the weights, winding the clock every twelve hours, as one probably did in 1920. Once the weights are lifted, the clock will run without electricity up to twelve hours. The weight which drives the clock weights 75 pounds. The matching weights on the left and right sides of the works which control the striker and angelus chimes each weights two hundred pounds.

A small clock face at the top of the works shows the time, which is echoed on the large clock faces. While Smith was repairing the clock, he mounted a small battery operated clock nearby and used it to check the clockworks pace.

The chains, weights and brass gears work so smoothly it is almost soundless, even when a fan controlled governor whirls each hour.

When the clock was fully restored, Smith tried to interest former area officials in reclaiming the clock, but they thought it too expensive. He was ready to sell the mechanism, but didn't want to see it leave Columbus.

In 1987, Mr. and Mrs. Harold Youngman heard of the possibility, and wished to build a tower for the clock in memory of his parents. Interested citizens approached Smith about donating the clock to the city of Columbus. The Smiths were agreeable and the project, which soon involved volunteer workers, was underway.

County Commissioners voted to donate an area on the northwest corner of the courthouse square for the building, and the tower was erected. Three of the original clock faces made of marble with cedar hands and numbers were removed from courthouse walls, and placed in the three windowed walls of the tower. One clock face remains above the north side entrance to the courthouse. An element of the original clock which was never recovered was the striker, an arm with a huge sledgehammer type attachment which struck the bell. Searchers found a striker at Nevada, Mo., exactly like the original, and it was purchased to be installed in the tower.

A 1,200 pound bell which predates the clock, being salvaged from a former Columbus school which was dismantled about 1916, rings out each hour and half-hour.

Starr Smith passed away April 8, 1988. The clock was rededicated and the tower dedicated July 3, 1988.