

## Symposium Sponsored by Clock and Watch Collectors Honors Willis Michael

by Jeanne Schinto

"This is a type of gentleman and a way of life that is gone from the American stage," W. Michael Nailor of Northumberland, Pennsylvania, told a 60-member audience of clock and watch collectors at the National Heritage Museum in Lexington, Massachusetts, on September 30, 2006. He was speaking of his uncle for whom he was named, Willis R. Michael (1894-1969). The group had assembled for a one-day symposium devoted to Michael, one of the best-known collectors of timekeepers from an earlier generation.

Michael, who lived in York, Pennsylvania, began to get interested in horology in 1937, when he bought at auction an 18th-century tall-case clock made in his home state by George Hoff (1733-1816) of Lancaster. Just a dozen years later he had amassed 400 clocks and 225 watches. By 1949, he had been elected president of the then-fledgling National Association of Watch & Clock Collectors (NAWCC), which he helped to found. The collector had also by then built a new home in York to accommodate his private museum and workshop in a vast underground space that included a walk-in vault for the watches and a clock display area so large that nephew Nailor remembers as a youngster riding his bike around inside it.

Michael invited the public, particularly school groups, to see the collection that spanned the history of timekeeping from the 16th century to the early 20th century. "But he always had handcuffs available," Nailor recounted. "He would hold them up as they came in and ask, 'Are there any children who feel that they cannot keep their hands to themselves?' I never saw him handcuff anybody, but I always thought the threat was real."

Besides horology, Michael's other passion was Freemasonry. By the time of his death, he had achieved the rank of 33rd degree Mason, Grand Sovereign of the Grand Imperial Council, Empire of the East. This probably explains why his widow, Ruth B. Michael, donated a significant portion of his horological collection to the National Heritage Museum, built in 1975 by the Scottish Rite Masons of the Northern Jurisdiction of the United States. (Details of the Michael gift are confidential.)

The symposium, hosted by the museum, was sponsored by the NAWCC's New England chapter in part to honor Michael but also to remind its members and others that objects seen in exhibitions are just a tiny portion of most museums' holdings. Small portions of the Michael collection were exhibited at the National Heritage Museum in 1977 and 1982. Another exhibition is planned for the near future. Otherwise, the vast majority of the 148 clocks and 52 watches are in storage, albeit available to interested researchers and scholars by appointment.

Robert Frishman, organizer of the symposium and past president of the New England chapter (as well as, in the interest of full disclosure, this reporter's husband), pointed out in his opening remarks that horological collections in particular are frequently stored away, out of sight, out of mind, "not viewed as often as they could be or perhaps not as often as the donor might have liked or wished." Fine art and folk art, rather than works of industrial art, continue to be in the ascendancy. But here was an opportunity to bring some of these rarely seen objects out of the museum's basement. It was also a time to learn about the man who had collected them.

Surprised and touched by the effort it had taken to track him down, Nailor said, "My uncle was a very interesting man to me, and now I find a roomful of people who want to hear me talk about him." He went on to describe Michael as "a mythic character" in his life. More than a rich uncle who had no children of his own, this "gentleman factory owner" of a tool-and-die corporation was the "wizard in the workshop," "larger than life," "self-made," "hard-working," "never idle for a moment."

"People who have large fortunes today don't seem nearly as interested in collecting things, at least not in the way he did," said Nailor, a 54-year-old public high school librarian. "They spend their fortunes in other ways. This is nostalgia really for what once was."

The day's program also featured talks by three experts in clock-making fields represented by the collection. Each expert chose pieces that the museum staff brought upstairs for viewing in the assembly room.

Jonathan Snellenburg of New York City chose a half dozen of the best and earliest Continental clocks, including a couple that he recognized from the pages of the old auction catalogs that he enjoys collecting. The most exciting of these, which he called the "centerpiece" of Michael's Continental collection, was featured as the cover lot for a sale at Manhattan's Parke-Bernet Galleries in October 1948. Part of the estate of tobacco magnate Henry Strause, it was a 17th-century French table clock with a bouille-decorated case, and its complicated movement had been signed by Henri Martinot (1646-1725).

"Martinot is a name we don't run across very often," Snellenburg said, "but the family was once one of the most prominent clock-making families in Europe, particularly in France." By his count there were 34 Martinot clockmakers in seven generations working in Paris, and this particular Martinot succeeded his father as keeper of all the royal clocks for Louis XIV.

Snellenburg said he recognized the same clock from a three-page write-up in his first edition of F.J. Britten's *Old Clocks and Watches and Their Makers* (1899), in which Britten asserts that the clock was actually once owned by Louis XIV. The Sun King (1638-1715) did own ten Martinot clocks, said Snellenburg, but whether the group included this one isn't known for certain.

It's also not known whether Michael was the high bidder at the Parke-Bernet auction or bought the clock from someone else (the hammer price was \$575). This was a time when a tall-case clock by English maker Joseph Knibb (1640-1711) or one by his contemporary Daniel Quare (1649-1724) sold at the same sale for \$350, Snellenburg said, and one by the man who is often suggested to have been the greatest clockmaker of all, English or otherwise, Thomas Tompion (1639-1713), cost \$1725.

Gordon Converse of Malvern, Pennsylvania, chose five Pennsylvania tall-case clocks by makers whose lives spanned more than a century from John Fisher Sr. (d. 1808) to Jacob Custer (1805-1871). Fisher, known as a portrait painter as well as clockmaker, came to York from Germany with his parents in 1749, and his clocks show the influence of his mother country, said Converse, who pointed out that the movement had lantern pinions as opposed to cut pinions and the bonnet of the flat-topped walnut case had thick columns.

Next in chronology came an example by David Rittenhouse of Norristown (1732-1796). "It has been restored a lot," said Converse, "and I wonder if it does have its original case." Still, as the dealer noted, it was a signed clock by one of America's greatest clockmakers, who also excelled in several other professions, including astronomy, mathematics, and surveying.

Converse's third and fourth examples were from the Federal period, one by Hoff, the other by Daniel Rose (1749-1827), who worked in Reading and began to make clocks in the late 1770's, after having served as a lieutenant in the Revolutionary War. The case for Rose's movement was Chippendale style cherry with a scroll-topped bonnet and customized inlay and quarter columns; the paint-decorated dial was an unusual dark green. The Hoff, with a nest of bells, was in a walnut case, but whether it was the original 1937 purchase made by Michael or a later one, again, no one could verify.

The last and latest tall-case clock in the roundup was signed "J.D. Custer." Like David Rittenhouse, Custer worked in Norristown. But he possessed a mechanical ability that could not be compared to the master's, being in Converse's phrase, "a little Rube Goldberg-ish in nature." Having worked on several clocks by Custer, the dealer described the clockmaker's movements as "the clap-trappiest things I've ever seen."

Custer's strength lay, perhaps, in his innovative ideas. Known as the inventor of a clockwork mechanism that rotated lighthouse beacons, Custer also made novelties, such as a clockwork parasol that opened and closed, meant for advertising a parasol maker in Philadelphia. What else was commendable about Custer's clocks, including the one in the Michael collection, was their affordability. Relatively short (approximately 7' tall) and made with mahogany veneers, they cost new about \$60.

After affordable tall-case clocks came even cheaper shelf clocks, of course, selling for as little as \$2 by the late 19th century. The final speaker, Thomas Grimshaw of Cheshire, Connecticut, past president of the American Clock & Watch Museum, Bristol, Connecticut, gave an overview of these mass-produced timekeepers. He used as illustrations some of the rarer ones from the Michael collection, including a Birge & Fuller eight-day spring steeples-on-steeples clock made in Bristol and an eight-day pillar-and-scroll clock made by Asa Munger of Auburn, New York.

"I think I have found in Willis Michael a collector soul mate," said Grimshaw. "What was the method behind the madness that put a Rittenhouse in the same collection as an oak kitchen clock? He really collected the history of the clock."

A few of Michael's clocks, it should be mentioned, were out of the storeroom and on long-term display in the museum. They include what's probably the most valuable clock from the Michael bequest, a Simon Willard lighthouse clock. During Sotheby's Americana sales in New York City in January 2006, one sold to Leigh Keno for \$744,000, an auction record for what Willard called his "patent alarm timepiece," but which is known to collectors by its nickname, derived from its resemblance to a miniature lighthouse.

Symposium participants included dealers Charles Breluel of Glenmont, New York, and Stephen Sanborn of Newbury, New Hampshire; John Stephens, director of the Willard House and Clock Museum, Grafton, Massachusetts; NAWCC board of directors member Thomas McIntyre of Harvard, Massachusetts; New England chapter officers Burt Kassap of Newtonville, Massachusetts, and Wayne Paskerian of Winchester, Massachusetts; along with several museum staffers, including Maureen K. Harper, collections manager, and Hilary Anderson, director of collections and exhibitions, who spoke to the group about the museum's central focus, which is Masonic and fraternal material, followed by American material culture.

As Michael's nephew Nailor pointed out, the collector's two main interests, horology and Freemasonry, reached their apogee in the pocket watches he owned that were made by the Dudley Watch Company of Lancaster, Pennsylvania. The Dudley firm's founder, William Wallace Dudley (1851-1938), was a watchmaker and a Mason who belonged to the York and Scottish Rites, the Nobles of the Mystic Shrine, and the Tall Cedars of Lebanon. For many years, Dudley worked on a design for a Masonic symbol—a slipper, plumb, trowel, level, square, compasses, the letter G, and a Bible. Those parts were machined by his friend and fellow Mason, Willis Michael.

Richard E. Gilbert, Tom Engle, and Cooksey Shugart, in the *Complete Price Guide to Watches* (2006), list the Dudley Watch Company as having been in existence only from 1920 to 1925 and producing only about 1400 watches. Of those, only a small number were the Masonic model, making them extremely rare, valuable, and very collectible. The Michael bequest to the National Heritage Museum included five.

On June 22 and 23, 1993, two years after Michael's widow died, the contents of Michael's collection—752 lots of clocks, watches, scientific instruments, musical boxes, and automata—was auctioned by York Town Auction Inc., York, Pennsylvania. Some members of the symposium audience had bought items at that sale. Plenty of others must be in circulation in the marketplace.

For more information about the NAWCC, see its Web site ([www.nawcc.org](http://www.nawcc.org)). For more information about the National Heritage Museum, contact the staff at (781) 861-6559, or via its Web site ([www.nationalheritagemuseum.org](http://www.nationalheritagemuseum.org)).