

Heights Tower Clock Repair Review As Told By Fellow Chapter Member

I know many folks in our chapter have ongoing projects; perhaps something they started a while ago, thinking it wouldn't take long, and then one thing led to another... and well, time passes. But probably no one has a project as long lasting as the one that the Grenader family has taken on. I'm writing, of course, of the old textile mill on 22nd street in Houston Heights, its long term renovation and the restoration of its tower clock by NAWCC Chapter 139.

From the time the building was completed (1900) to when Jonathan Grenader's father acquired it (1966) to today, the building and its clock have gone through various changes and stages of disuse and disrepair. No more. Last year a renovation of the building's unused upper floor commenced and for the last couple of weeks a crack team of chapter members (including but not limited to: Wayne Denham, Marcus Bush, Mike Helfrich, Ben Fulbright, Tim Bailey, Del Rolison, Tim Glanzman, and Drew Lundgren) have disassembled, cleaned, restored, painted, assembled, oiled & tuned the 200 pound Seth Thomas #15 time & strike tower clock housed there.

Perhaps another parallel to your projects (or at least mine): everything seems to go swimmingly, until what should be the final assembly. And then it doesn't. In beat, the movement ran with a strong beat and minimal weight. The strike was synchronized—at rest the hammer wasn't resting on a tooth. The four time trains and linkages for each clock face were oiled and hung and turned easily. And then the first of two problems was encountered: the bushing for the arbor that linked the motion works to the power wasn't quite square. That problem was quickly diagnosed, although not so quickly fixed.

The second and bigger problem was that the spring on the strike side hammer (acting as a counter weight) could no longer do its job. Varying attempts at shortening the spring, adding weight to the opposite side of the hammer lever and changing the synchronization mesh (so that there would be more momentum when the tooth engaged the hammer) each individually failed. But a combination of these (and a similar change on the bell clapper lever for less force) did the trick!

In the shop, when you encounter problems you take it apart, check it, put it back together, and...repeat. Now do this with wheels the size of your palms, heavy drums, weights that come in 25 pound increments, a bell clapper that needed repeated resetting, a hammer spring that had seen better days, tight working spaces and more heat and humidity than is comfortable—even for Houston—and you get a sense of the challenge the team faced.

Special thanks go to Tim Bailey who climbed the ladder to the bell tower to reset the bell clapper at least 10 times. And also to Wayne Denham who patiently added and removed the strike side weights during the disassembly/reassembly iterations.

All agree the effort was worth it. The bell sounds lovely, the cleaned movement is a thing of beauty and a joy to behold. Come to the Christmas party and you'll get a chance to do just that.