

No. 29 Parlor and Gallery Clock Self Winding Clock Co., New York



At the turn of the 20th century, a developing transportation industry combined with the Industrial Revolution meant that people needed a way to know the exact time across the miles in order to accurately coordinate their activities. In response to this, the Naval Observatory Laboratories in Washington, DC joined forces with Western Union to provide an innovative system for precise time synchronization of clocks all over the US. The Self Winding Clock Company, established through the inventive mind of Henry

Chester Pond, produced the finest clocks housed in very robust, high quality, usually solid wood cases that ran on a pair of the new No. 6 Dry Cells which had gone into production in 1896. This was done by taking a high-quality Seth Thomas style mechanical movement equipped with a special rotary or vibrating armature motor, using the batteries to wind it every hour. This eliminated the need to wind these clocks on a regular basis.

The most common movement style was the Style F. It proved to be the most reliable as well. This is the most frequent movement found in this clock. This movement style, with very few changes and modifications, was used from the early 1900's until the company closed its doors and ceased operations in the early 1960's.

Synchronization involved sending out a signal to clocks all around the country simultaneously, at exactly noon every day. The Western Union Telegraph system had already established a network of wires interconnecting businesses, railroads, etc. for communication purposes. These same wires were adapted to synchronize clocks at these locations. Within a few minutes of the hour, telegraph activity was ceased and a series of synchronization signals were sent out. Inside the Self Winding Clock Co. models such as the Model 29 a mechanism connected to an electromagnetic coil would react to this Western Union signal by resetting the hands to exactly the hour. This method survived to provide the nation with synchronized, precise time up through the early 60's.



Keeping Time Accurate. The timekeeping accuracy was set by the Naval Observatory Laboratories in Washington, DC (still in existence today!). It is estimated that using star alignment and transferring the measurements to a very accurate “astronomical” clock on site, that they could achieve accuracies in the range of 20 milliseconds per day, more than adequate for the original requirements of the time. This time was relayed to the Western Union

Telegraph lines and ultimately to the clocks. Often, the WU signals were connected to a very precise, long case Master Clock (probably containing a mercury filled temperature compensated pendulum) on site, and then from there relayed to smaller “Slave” clocks. The No. 29 was most likely one of these “Slave” clocks, but this is difficult to determine since some are found with equipment installed so they can operate as “masters.” But most were used as self-running synchronized slaves.



The master clocks (shown to the left) were often located in a service room or basement of the building, sometimes in prominent places within the building, and were carefully maintained to assure that the timekeeping on site was optimum and always accurate. These were the most expensive and fine clocks that Self Winding Clock Co. built. They are very sought after today. The example shown at the left is a No. 9 with a Mercury-filled pendulum. The cases were ornate, solid oak, birch, maple or other fine wood. They were equipped with relays and special switches attached to the movement that triggered the signal sent to the slave clocks.

This clock, once restored by Ken’s Clock Clinic of Austin, TX, will be a wonderful example of the No. 29 style, 120 beat Gallery and Parlor Clock built in the 1920-1930 timeframe. The movement will be restored as new. The finish can often be conservatively restored. If the finish has failed, restoration can be offered which consists of hand application of 9 coats of clear orange dewaxed shellac, hand lapped in between coats. The final finish is rubbed out and waxed with brown carnauba wax. The No. 29 will be equipped with a special device which looks like a pair of No. 6 cells; one of which provides power, and the other replicates the original Western Union signal. This is our very popular Model 1900GS Kit. As a result, the clock stays on time, to within 2 seconds per month. In every other way this clock can be restored to original condition with original Self Winding Clock Co. parts.

Epilogue. In fact, the actual closing of the doors at Self Winding Clock Co. in the 1960’s was the result of a lawsuit against Western Union over breach of contract. The Western Union Company was responsible for both the synchronization services and the maintenance of the clocks (mechanical, changing batteries, etc) over the decades. The quality of their service had deteriorated greatly towards the end of the era, and we do indeed see that in many of the remaining clock movements today. Interestingly, WU bought SWCC as a settlement of the lawsuit. Thereafter, all clocks in service were ordered collected and destroyed. Only a fraction of the clocks originally put into service remain today.