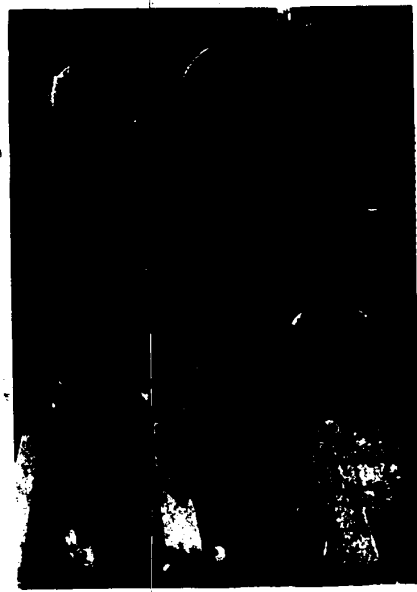


Standing among his rare collection of clocks is William Ashdown, who has made it a lifetime hobby to see what makes things tick.



Pocket watches have always been popular. Ashdown has managed to collect a great variety.

Youthful fascination

Farmington man finds intrigue in time pieces

By CORINNE ABATT

William T. Ashdown, owner of Ashdown Clock Service in downtown Farmington, admits he has been "chasing wild horses" most of his six decades of life.

Master of many trades—clock and watch repairman, refiner and assayer, antique collector, salesman and historian—he asks himself half-humorously why he spends time indoors when he is really a sheep farmer at heart.

"I love the land and I don't know how I got side-tracked."

There is some satisfaction for him in visiting the family's central farm in Charlotte. The Ashdowns have owned it since 1850.

But, the fascination for clocks struck him early.

"When I was five or six years old I used to walk up and down the alleys

near our home in Detroit and bring home clocks to take apart that I had found in the discards."

The interest hasn't diminished—especially in old and valuable clocks.

"MY FAMILY HAS BEEN watch-makers, clockmakers and instrument makers since the Holy Wars in England in Cromwell's time. Maybe that's why I like the clocks from the Cromwell era so well."

He has four of them. Two, circa 1680, are Lantern or Cromwellian clocks. Handmade in Bristol, England, they have a square base with a dome top.

One has original side panels, those for the other are lost. He notes that while the works are simple, the workmanship is exacting and beautiful.

Ashdown is one of two remaining charter members of the Michigan area National Association of Watch

and Clock Collectors. His son, Neil, 13, is also a member.

As an assayer and refiner, Ashdown buys gold, silver and platinum pieces. If they are not salable he melts them into pure blocks or sheets to sell.

"Right now the price of gold is dropping. Since the first of September when it was \$153.00 an ounce, it dropped to \$147.00 this week."

He says many predictions place the price at \$130 before the slide ends.

Silver hit an all-time high recently, \$5.22 an ounce. It has dropped steadily ever since and now sells at \$4.55.

"I'M CRAZY ABOUT gold," he says. "I've been buying it since 1951. I'm one of the few old fashioned smelters in the area with my own furnace and my own rolling mill."

The scrap gold he buys is from 12 carats (which is half gold, half other metal) to 24 carats, which is pure

gold. The pure is marked 999 fine plus. He melts the scrap gold and silver. When it is pure, he rolls it into sheets and sells it to jewelers.

"I'm a gold bug myself. I figure the two most precious things in the world are gold and love."

Good pocket watches, of course, aren't melted down. Many of his are English. One with a screw back is a Deuber-Hampton made in Ohio, another is an early New York Standard.

And his wild horses are another story. These are the dreams, the chances after treasure, the million-to-one chance to strike it rich.

He sells metal detectors—machines which beep when held close to the ground if there is metal under them.

He once found a 1800 Canadian half penny next to his house with a detector. He also has found bullets in

the Masonic Temple yard. There have been other finds, he says, "close to home."

True to the treasure hunter's unwritten code, Ashdown won't give exact locations.

Fortunately, he says, his wife, Joyce, likes chasing wild horses too. She's willing to take off in the car or across the fields when a mutual spirit moves them.

Rather sadly he says, "People in this area don't dream and so they don't buy the detectors much. You've got to be a dreamer to expect to find something when you go out. It's kind of like being an alcoholic—once you start chasing wild horses, you never get over it."

Ashdown attended Allen Park Jun-

ior College, until love took precedence over education. He was for a time an apprentice watch and clockmaker and over the years has continued to expand both his knowledge and interest.

To keep himself happy when the wild horses aren't running and the clocks are all ticking, Ashdown buys sales to which the keys or combinations have been lost. It took eight months of careful calculations before he worked out the plan to open the small green floor safe in the family living room. But the plan worked and he's proud.

In addition to son Neil, the couple have two daughters, Beth, 16 and Becky, 15. They have lived in this area for 18 years.



Fixing the relic time pieces is all part of the fun in collecting, as demonstrated by Ashdown, who finds the pastime relaxing.

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