

In Memoriam

Seth Glanville Atwood — 1917-2010

There are horological collectors, and there are horological collectors who have a special impact on our avocation, and then there is Seth Atwood, the Illinois businessman, who founded and operated the greatest horological museum that ever existed in the Western Hemisphere, the Time Museum in Rockford, IL.

Seth Atwood was born in 1917 into a family of locally prominent businessmen in Rockford, IL, and attended Stanford University (BA, 1938) and Harvard Business School (MBA, 1940), before serving in the U.S. Navy. After the war he joined the family company (automotive components), and managed various ventures in industry, banking and real estate. He was a prominent member in his community and heavily involved in civic and philanthropic endeavors, but for this publication this obituary will focus on his horological achievements.

Based on an early interest in the history of timekeeping since his student days, he eventually started collecting clocks and watches. By the 1960s he had become a serious student of horological history, which led to the 1971 founding of the Time Museum, operating out of the Clock Tower Resort and Conference Center in Rockford IL, another family venture. Seth aspired to have his collection—which became “his” museum—represent all the fundamental turning points in the history of timekeeping. A major step forward came in 1977, when William Andrewes, at that time a British clockmaker on the Staff of the Royal Observatory in Greenwich, agreed to become the first full-time curator of the Museum. During the next ten years the Museum “exploded” both in size and stature. Around 1982, a whole additional wing was added to the Clock Tower Resort, allowing for not only more gallery space for what came to be a 3,000-plus item horological museum but also a library and conservation department. Seth was always interested in showing—besides everyday, popular timekeepers of every era—the most important pieces of horological history. That mindset led to the acquisition of pivotal artifacts, such as one of Harrison’s wooden movement tallcase clocks, the “Mudge Green” chronometer, the Henry Graves super-complication watch by Patek Philippe, one of the earliest existing pendulum clocks (by Salomon Coster, ca. 1657), Berthoud’s Montre Marine No. 6, a Breguet Sympathique, and others of similar historical significance.

Seth eagerly sought the advice and counsel of the most noted horological experts from around the world. Legend has it that at one time he had them draw up a list of the 50 most important horologists in the history of mankind, with the goal of acquiring an example from all 50. As the list included ancient makers like Su Song from China, Italy’s de Dondi, and Richard of Wallingford of medieval England, with no known surviving works,



there was a need to commission major modern reconstructions of the significant milestones. The same approach was taken to secure a replica of Harrison’s H1, as the Royal Observatory in Greenwich was not going to sell part of its national heritage. Reportedly, at the end the only missing item on the wish list was a clock by Jost Bürgi. But the Time Museum also commissioned or acquired several important modern masterpieces, such as Anthony Randal’s multi-axis tourbillon clock and Rasmus Sorens’ astronomical clock.

What Seth Atwood created was the most comprehensive and amazing collection of timekeepers ever assembled under one roof. But even more unique than acquiring all these pieces, was his decision to attempt to publish a comprehensive and scholarly catalog of this collection. In the mid-1980s he started summoning the foremost experts in various horological specialties to Rockford, and commissioned them each to write a catalog raisonné on a small section of the collection. Each of these books was to run for several hundred pages, with countless illustrations, and not only describe the pieces in the Time Museum representing that segment of horology, but be the definitive text on that chapter of horological history. To me, that publishing venture represents the best of Seth Atwood. He was not primarily interested in owning some of the greatest timepieces ever made. His mission was to share and disseminate horological knowledge. Unfortunately, only four of the many planned volumes were ever published (*Water/Fire/Sandclocks*, *Astrolabes*, *Chronometers*, and *American Pocket Watches*). In the end, even Seth Atwood’s great dedication and resources were no match for the market forces in horological publishing, where only books on the popular and flashy sectors are viable, and thorough scholarship does not sell.

By 1999, the Clock Tower Resort was sold, and the Time Museum needed a new home. None of Seth’s children were interested in continuing the venture for the long haul. At first it looked like the City of Chicago Museum of Science and Industry would provide a home for the world’s greatest ever collection of timekeepers, and the Atwood family offered generous conditions to preserve most of the collection together. However a confluence of problems outside of their control prevented that from happening. The resulting auctions in New York, in 1999 and 2004, were a unique chance during the preview to get close to some of the most interesting clocks and watches ever made. Several of the most important pieces eventually found their way into other public displays.

The world of horological collectors and timekeeping aficionados owes Seth Atwood a deep gratitude. He was a horologist who thrived on sharing both his artifacts, his knowledge, and his enthusiasm freely and generously with others. Seth, you will be missed and remembered in the world of horology. —*Fortunat Mueller-Maerki* (NJ)