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A Dying Art, An Ethnography on Clock Repair
Synopsis:

For my final project I chose to investigate the world of clock repair and chose to observe Tim Doyle, a local clock repair man. Being in the business for almost twenty years, Tim has been through it all. He started his business in his home and later moved to Glasgow, where he opened a store on the square. He offers many services and products for sale. The purpose of this ethnography is to reveal the meaning and importance behind clock repair. Tim believes that clock repair is a dying art and should be passed down before it’s time runs out and it becomes a trade lost in time.
A Dying Art: An Ethnography on Clock Repair

Only the sound of pendulums swinging back and forth fill the room with the occasional coo coo! coo coo! as I sit and watch an artist at work. When I look around I see many clocks hanging on the walls, ranging from cuckoo to mantle, wall to grandfather, and even some small alarm clocks. There are also many clocks on the floor covered with post-it notes and invoices. The front window is decorated for Christmas with the hustle and bustle of Glasgow’s square just outside.

Tim Doyle, a Cave City native, sits at his work bench oiling a clock, with a device filled with oil and a small needle at the end which drips the oil onto the gears of the clock movement. Tim was raised in Cave City and later moved to Glasgow after being married. Like many others he worked a steady nine-to-five job for many years until another opportunity came along by accident.
Tim sits at his work bench, fixing a loose screw on a clock movement.

In 1991 Tim was a sales representative for the Goodman Candy Company and while on route one day in Glendale, Kentucky, he came upon a business card hanging on a bulletin board, for a clock repairman by the name of Sam Daughtery. Sam lived in Elizabethtown, Kentucky and had been repairing clocks for well over fifty years. Tim had a few clocks of his own that needed to be fixed, so he gave Sam a call. He wanted Tim to come by
his house that day. So after talking to him, Tim decided he had a few extra hours that day so he visited Sam’s house in Elizabethtown. His shop was located in the basement of his home, where he lived with his wife Pauline. That day Sam asked Tim if clock repair seemed interesting to him, but the thought of working with tiny gears and wheels intimidated him. As the day came to a close Sam made an offer for Tim to come back the next day and he would show him a few tricks of the trade in hopes that Tim would become interested in it.

Sam and Pauline had two sons, one that lived in the E-town area and the other in Louisiana. Neither of them showed interest in clock repair at all and Sam hoped that Tim would be interested in it so he could pass this art down to him. If a trade isn’t passed down, or learned by another person then it becomes lost in time, pun intended. After checking with his wife, Donetta, he made plans to visit Sam again the next day.

The following day, a Saturday, Tim travelled back to E-town, and spent the day watching Sam in his workshop. They spent the day together talking about Sam’s experience with clock repair and he began to teach Tim a few of the basics. At the end of the day Sam asked Tim again if he’d be interesting in learning more about clock repair and after training with him all day, he thought about it and told Sam he’d really like to. So, for the next year to a year and a half, Tim would spend his days off and his weekends in E-town with Sam, learning more about clocks and their mechanics, as well as how to repair them. During their training, they mainly covered the basics.

Unfortunately Sam passed away five years ago and it upset Tim because he had lost a great friend and mentor. He would refer to Sam anytime he needed help and after he passed
away, Tim had to continue learning on his own. “It’s basically trial and error,” he noted during our interview, “you learn something new almost every day.”

Tim began tinkering with old clock movements in his own home, trying to learn more on his own. One day he took a kitchen clock movement completely apart and attempted at putting it back together. When it began ticking he ran inside to show his wife and he said, “it’s running!” and in response she said, “well?” but he came back saying “you don’t understand, I just took this completely apart and put it back together and it’s actually working!”

Since his training with Sam, Tim has started his own business, where he sells and repairs new and antique clocks. It started in his home, in a small building outside which he later expanded. After being laid off from his job he decided that he would move to Glasgow and open a shop there. He found a great spot that was open on the west side of the square and so Tick-Tock Clock Shop was born. He no longer makes repairs out of his home, but will occasionally have people drop them off there.

At his shop he sells new, antique, cuckoo, mantle, wall, grandfather, grandmother, kitchen and even small desk clocks. Even though Tim offers many products for sale, most of his business revolves around repairs. Many people bring their clocks to his shop, but he also makes house calls, especially when it comes to grandfather clocks. The movements are very large so he brings them back to his shop where he has a device to hang them while repairing them. His shop is filled with clocks, some for sale and some sitting in the floor with post-its on them, which means they’ve been repaired, just waiting for their owner to pick them up.
Above are the Grandfather clocks Tim has for sale in his store. He also has a couple of Grandmother clocks, which are a little smaller than a Grandfather clock.

Tim makes most of his repairs out of his shop in Glasgow, but he also makes house calls and geographically speaking he has a very wide range of clientele. Thursdays are usually his travelling days and he makes his rounds to various cities. The majority of his repairs outside of Glasgow are in the Bowling Green area, about thirty miles away. Tim also drives to Elizabethtown, Tompkinsville, Leitchfield, Morgantown, and Franklin as well as other towns when necessary. When travelling, Tim usually charges fifty two cents a mile as well as the bill for the repairs and any parts he may need to order.
Tim talks to a customer in their home while on a house call. He was repairing the customer’s grandfather clock and needs to order parts for him.

When ordering parts, he often buys keys, hands, faces, gears, wheels and other small parts. Sometimes ordering larger parts like pendulums or entire movements is needed when a part can’t be fixed and need to be completely replaced. On the other hand, some repairs are simple, such as simply replaced a AA battery in a Quartz clock.

Around the holidays, Tim has a one day Open House where he serves refreshments and allows people to come in and out and see what he has to offer. Many of his bigger sales are made around Christmas time, and he offers lay-away for those who are purchasing more expensive clocks, like grandfather clocks. He also has a raffle where he gives away a free clock to one lucky winner.
On any given day during the rest of the year, Tim can be found behind his work bench repairing clocks. He offers many services and repairs, including oiling, cleaning, winding, putting in new bushings, ordering new parts, such as hands or faces and even just changing batteries. He noted that the most tedious part is putting in bushings, which are spiral shaped pieces that have to be drilled and then pressed into the clock and can open spring back open, making the job even harder.

To keep track of his repairs and his customers Tim uses a computer software program that allows him to go back and check invoices, as well as add to them when necessary. He has a very wide range of clientele, but most of his customers are elderly men and women. When talking with Tim, he told me that the reason behind this is that they often appreciate the value of clocks more. Many of them will bring in a clock that is an old family heirloom and they want it fixed because it has so much sentimental value to them. However some of his patrons are younger people who often bring in clocks that are either electric, battery powered or simple clocks, because they don’t appreciate the older, more nostalgic clocks.

Tim has repaired many clocks in the past twenty years and has come across various problems and has seen some very interesting clocks in his time. Many of the more fascinating clocks are the antique ones that he repairs, some dating back to the 18th century. He even repaired a clock once that is only one of two in the whole world and the other one is in the White House. Tim noted during our interview that he has found some interesting things in clocks before, such as rat’s nests.
There are hundreds of styles of clocks, but Tim’s favorite is the cuckoo clock. He had the opportunity to visit Germany almost four years ago when his son and his family lived in Germany. His son, Josh was stationed on base in Wiesbaden, Germany. While there they visited the Black Forest, where the cuckoo clock originated. To this day they still make cuckoo clocks there. Tim’s wife said he was like a “kid in a candy store.” They also visited the House of 1,000 Clocks, located in Trisberg, Germany, which has one of the world’s largest cuckoo clocks.

Another clock enthusiast in this area is Rosalie McCuiston. She is 87 years old and lives here in Glasgow. She also does a little clock repair herself, and mainly works on cuckoo clocks. She owns close to one hundred clocks and her house is constantly ticking. Her favorite clock is the French clock, because of its old style beauty and its chime. She own several French style clocks. While talking with Mrs. McCuiston she told me that she was in the process of fixing a cuckoo clock, because there was something wrong with the pendulum. Below I have included a couple of pictures from her house, including a French style clock, her wall of cuckoo clocks, and he standing by the table where she repairs her clocks in her kitchen.
Shown above is Mrs. McCuiston’s wall of cuckoo clocks. The large cuckoo clock on the far left was purchased from Tim Doyle at Tick Tock Clock Shop.
Mrs. McCuiston’s French style clocks, which are her favorite because of their beautiful aesthetics.

Mrs. McCuiston stands next to her kitchen table, where she makes most of her clock repairs.

Mrs. McCuiston and Tim both agree that clock repair is a dying art. Tim has a man that comes to help him sometimes, but he wants to have an apprentice, so he can train them, like Sam trained him in this trade. Although Mrs. McCuiston makes repairs only for herself and sometimes family, she feels that clock repair is very important and should be passed down so the art doesn’t die out.
Tim loves his job and what he does. It has been a hobby of his for almost twenty years but recently it has become his passion. He spends a great deal of time working on clock so that his customers will be happy and have their clocks in working order. Tim feels like clock repair is very important and should be kept alive and ticking.