

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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### **A Pair of Mermaids**

The history of clocks and clock making has been a fascinating subject for over 250 years of clock making in this country and of interest to nearly 6,000 American clock and watch makers. As early as 1650 Tower clocks are mentioned in American annals and all during the 18<sup>th</sup> Century a clock in a home was considered a symbol of prosperity.

The latest clock to be received by the Monterey History and Art Association and now on display at the Stevenson House, is an old Dutch wall clock, the gift of Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Hill Gilbert. It had been given to Mrs. Gilbert by her mother, Mrs. Eugene Sage Abbott, who had commissioned a friend to purchase it in Holland. There are also two historical clocks in the Old Custom House and another tall clock in the Stevenson House which is very old.

When Dr. and Mrs. Gordon O'Neil of Seattle visited the Stevenson House a few days ago, they were delighted to see the old Dutch clock and with great enthusiasm told Mrs. William Kneass, the curator, the history of its mate now in their Seattle home. Very proudly the doctor told how he had met and become engaged to his Dutch wife in her native Holland, during World War II. He knew that he had been accepted as a future son-in-law when his mother-in-law-to-be presented to him as an engagement present, the old clock which she prized very highly.

Throughout the war, for fear the clock might be stolen or destroyed, it was boxed very carefully and buried in the garden. When Dr. and Mrs. O'Neil were married, the clock was again carefully packed and shipped to Seattle, put together and now keeps perfect time after 200 years of service.

Mrs. O'Neil, when asked why a pair of mermaids are painted on each side of the tin clock face, replied that the mermaid is a symbol of fairy land in Holland. They appear in a great many of the children's fairy tales, in picture books, and it is a legend that in the old days the mermaids lured the Spanish ships to the rocky shores to be wrecked and then the people [?] Holland could collect the treasures from the wreckage as it washed upon the beach.

In a book recently published "The Book on American Clocks," by Brooks Palmer the Macmillan Company, the author writes "Before the Revolution, the tall clock was the only clock made. The maker of the tall clock used only the simplest of tools, hammer, drill, file and sand for casting. After the Revolution, smaller types of clocks, as the Wag-on-the-wall were made. The Willards of Grafton, Mass., brought the banjo clock to its final perfection. Not until the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century was factory production of clocks begun in America."

There are three other interesting clocks on display in Monterey, another in the Stevenson House and two in the Old Custom House. "The Governor's Clock," a simple tall clock with a music box, which formerly was owned by Governor Alvarado; and a small mantel clock of delicate design, which is probably over 200 years old. It had been ordered in London by the Spanish government along with two others, for three principal missions in California. When the possessions of the missions were sold, the three clocks were sold for \$500 each in Monterey, James Watson, W.E.P. Hartnell, and James McKinlay were the buyers. The one clock was handed down from James Watson to his great grandson, Paul Pioda of Salinas, who has loaned it for an indefinite period for display at the Custom House.

The third clock is also a tall clock and is on loan to the History and Art Association for display at the Stevenson House by Mrs. Elizabeth Hamilton. On the face of the clock is written, "R. Whiting, Winchester." It was made prior to Mr. Whiting's death in 1835. It has a native cherry case and wooden movements.