

Sign of the Times at the West Coast Clock & Watch Museum (WCCWM)

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See YouTube video of
recently donated
Jeweler's Clock Sign.

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Recently an antique “Dummy Clock” jeweler’s sign was donated to WCCWM. According to Alexis McCrossen's book *Marking Modern Times - A History of Cocks, Watches, and Other Timekeepers in American Life*, dummy clocks or clock signs like the one that was just donated to WCCWM were designed during the public clock era in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Jewelers who either could not afford or were not allowed to display street or post clocks in front of their establishments would purchase dummy clocks for advertisements.

For centuries jewelers, watchmakers, and clock makers developed and regulated the trade of making and repairing mechanical timepieces. Prior to the implementation of standardized time zones, they also provided their communities with the important civic duty of providing “local time.” Jewelers and clock makers used astronomical instruments and charts to perform this duty. In addition to maintaining local time and servicing and repairing timepieces, jewelers sold fine goods such as china, linens, silver, crystal and modern appliances. An often forgotten fact is that jewelers also provided vision exams, eye glasses and other optical goods to the public. There would frequently be a pair of eyeglass frames incorporated into the dummy clock sign.

My husband Dan’s great grandfather, W. C. Fisher migrated to Lorain, Ohio from England and opened a jewelry store. Following are some of Dan’s mom’s (Margi Francis) memories of her grandfather’s store:

“For years it was the only jewelry store in town. Not only did he sell jewelry and watches, but he sold china, silverware, and chandeliers – the kind of things that were very elegant.



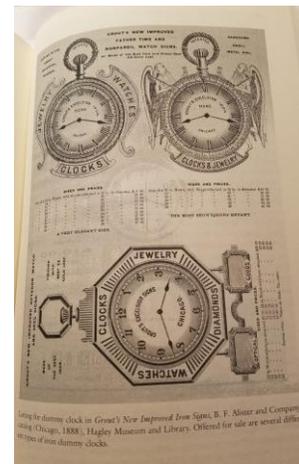
“The street out front was paved with bricks. They still had some horse drawn wagons when I was little. The hooves would make a hollow clapping sound. While the city

removed snow from the streets, the shopkeepers were responsible for the sidewalks in front of their stores. I remember Grandpa going out front and setting the clock. It was one of those dull green metal clocks on a post and it faced two ways. I remember him doing it every week. It was always his job.

“Inside the store, it was cases on the sides and nice chandeliers. The things he sold were what he decorated the store with. And on the back wall was one of those eye charts.

“When I was in 2nd or 3rd grade they sent home a note to Mother and Dad saying that I needed glasses. Dad told Grandpa that and Grandpa got really upset. HIS granddaughter didn't have anything wrong with her! And he hauled me down to the store - this was after hours - and got out something he put over your eye and the chart was hanging there. And I'm sure he must have helped me because when [the exam was finished] he said, “See? I told you she didn't need them.” That was when I learned I was perfect. Trouble is, I was disillusioned later!”

While Great Grandpa Fisher's store had a post clock out front, as mentioned earlier, many jewelers either could not afford or were not allowed to have one. So they purchased dummy clock signs. Apparently most dummy clocks all have the hands showing the time as approximately 20 minutes after 8. On page 165 of McCrossen's book⁽¹⁾ is an illustration (pictured here) from a *B. F. Alister and Company catalog* (Chicago, 1888) that shows several of *Gout's New Improved Iron Signs*. One of the examples is similar to our newly acquired dummy clock and even has a set of spectacles with the words optical goods engraved in the frames. All read approximately 8:20.



There were a stories about these painted wooden and/or iron clock signs that occasionally cropped up in newspapers around the nation for several decades. It was about why all of the signs read approximately 8:20. They said that the reason was because it was the exact time when President Lincoln was shot in Ford's theater (which is not true). After that, the story has gained several twists including it was the time of Queen Victoria's birth, it was the time of George Washington's birth, and it was the time that the Declaration of Independence was completed. The last about the Declaration of Independence caused a great deal of consternation.

Of course, all of the stories were false.

The actual reason was far more mundane. Arranging the hands in the 8:20 position made the best spacing for advertising.

Come visit the museum and see the Jeweler's Sign.

1. Mc Crossen, A., p. 165, *Marketing Modern Times, A History of Clocks, Watches and Other Timekeepers in American Life*, 2016, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, Ill