Three synchronous electric clock companies started in California during the Great Depression. David Spector owned the short-lived Stanford Clock Co. of suburban San Francisco, which faced competition from the more established Hammond Co. of Chicago. In 1931 and 1932 Stanford produced an attractive series of alarm, kitchen, desk, and wall clocks in Bakelite and wooden cases (Figure 1), but after struggling for about 18 months the company went out of business.

Next to appear was James Remindo Clock Co., the 1933 brainchild of Henry James, a Monterey taxicab driver. James was tired of fares being late for their pickup time. After he tinkered unsuccessfully with Westclox alarm clocks, he dreamed up an electric clock for use in hotels and motels that customers could set so they would be on time for pickup (Figure 2). Several different wooden case and Bakelite models were made over the 30 years of the company’s operation. His successors continued production for another 24 years until 1987. After 54 years, electronic digital alarm clocks hastened the company’s demise.

The third company, Lawson Clocks, Ltd. of Los Angeles and later Pasadena, CA, and Alhambra, CA, offered a stunning variety of designs and high-quality clocks. Its 1938 catalog Lawson Time-Table Time boasted:

Figure 1. Stanford clock.

Figure 2. James Remindo clock.

Figure 3. Bronze logo of Lawson Clocks, Ltd. of Los Angeles.

Figure 4. Cover of Lawson 1938 catalog.

Figure 4A. Lawson Zenith clocks.
Intriguing in operation, striking in design, Lawson Time accents your home or office with the tempo of today. Lawson Limited Editions are your protection against the commonplace. They may be given with the utmost assurance of originality and appreciation.

The scores of different designs demonstrate that originality, and many collectors still appreciate them today (Figure 3).

The first plant, at 2329 W. Washington Boulevard in Los Angeles, began production after May 1933. The February 1934 Los Angeles telephone directory had the first listing for the company. An identification plate on Model No. 34—the earliest I have—refers to the company as Lawson Clocks Ltd., and this name was also listed in the 1936 Los Angeles City Directory.

Articles of Incorporation for Lawson Time, Inc., California Corporation, 160023, were filed with the California secretary of state on October 3, 1934. President Lindley Spencer Lawson was born in 1870 and died in 1954; he is in the 1910 and 1920 Census records as living in Pittsburgh, PA. He invented and began manufacturing gas water heaters and gas burners for cooking stoves. The Lawson Manufacturing Co., organized in 1901, successfully and profitably distributed its products nationwide through plumbers, Sears Roebuck, and other national distributors.

The 1938 Lawson Time catalog (Figure 4) listed executive offices and works at 2327-2931 W. Washington Boulevard, Los Angeles. One of the principals was H. W. Slaudt, and the national distributor for Lawson clocks was Koke, Slaudt & Co. Inc., with representatives in New York, Chicago, Pittsburgh, and Atlanta. The Pittsburgh representative was Lynn J. Lawson, son of the founder, which may reveal some connection with Pittsburgh’s Pennwood Clock Co., which also made rotating wheel clocks in wood cases at that time.

Crown City Plating Co. of Pasadena, CA, produced and finished the metal cases for the top-of-the-line Lawson clocks from as early as 1935 until production was interrupted in 1942 for World War II and probably longer. Harold E. Coombes operated Crown City Plating at 165 S. Fair Oaks Boulevard in Pasadena.

An email from Coombes’s grandson revealed that Crown City Plating came to own the clock company in early 1940 because of the large unpaid account balance Lawson owed him for finishing cases. Lawson Time, Inc. was listed at the same South Fair Oaks

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Figure 5. Lawson plate.

Figure 6. Copper impression.

Figure 7. White impression on black.

Figure 8. Waltham motor and works.
Boulevard address in the March 1940 Pasadena telephone directory. Clock production was moved from Los Angeles to a building across the alley from Crown City Plating. Lawson Clocks was there until the war interrupted clock production, and the clockworks building became the plating company’s anodizing department to produce aircraft parts and rivets. Another grandson of Coombes reported that when his uncle started kindergarten in 1935, he was unable to read a regular clock with hands, because all the clocks in his home were Lawsons with rotating wheel displays.

Coombes sold the business after the war. The Articles of Incorporation of Lawson Time, Inc., as amended on July 15, 1946, list the principals as John Beall, president, and Harry Eder, secretary. John Beall—pronounced Bell—was a chemical engineer who worked at Crown City Plating. He was a friend of Coombes and familiar with the operation. Figure 4A shows a table full of Lawson Zenith clocks being tested at the factory.

The company moved its offices to 317 E. Orange Grove Avenue, Pasadena, and the factory and service departments were located in nearby Sierra Madre. The Pasadena Lawson catalog continued to emphasize: “Lawson Time is modern time and adds that desired note of distinction and discrimination to office and home alike.” The company may have been struggling at that time because the catalog offered only five clock styles. Ownership again changed hands within a couple years because of financial difficulties.

On February 6, 1948, Henry W. Fenenbock, president, and Robert McManigal, assistant secretary,
of Lawson Time, Inc. to Wind up and Dissolve was filed with the California secretary of state on June 22, 1951, and with all obligations paid, the state declared the corporation dissolved on October 4, 1951. Thereafter, Lawson Clocks was run as a sole proprietorship until a few years before Fenenbock died in 1981. The company continued to be listed in the California Manufacturers Register from 1950 to 1981. This register reports there were 70 employees in 1950 and 11 employees in 1960.

Fenenbock was the leading American distributor of Parker Pens, and he used the Alhambra facility to develop and manufacture quality pen sets, some of which incorporated a Lawson clock. He used the excess space in the factory to make the clocks. Fenenbock tried unsuccessfully to persuade the major television manufacturers of the time to install Lawson clocks in TV sets. Discussions with Admiral, Columbia, Emerson, Motorola, Philco, RCA, Stromberg Carlson, Sylvania Westinghouse, and Zenith produced interest but no sales. One unresolved problem was how to adjust the clock within an enclosed television set. The Alhambra Lawson catalog stated, “The Lawson electric clock movement is a direct reading timing device that is especially adapted for use of industrial and instrument manufactures whose operations or products must be calibrated with extreme accuracy.” The wholesale price quoted in April 1953 for the movement alone was $4.37 each in quantities of 25,000.

Lawson works were installed in some Otis elevators, and that company continued to request the devices even after Lawson Co. discontinued operations.

Like Seth Thomas clocks, the date of Lawson clocks can be determined by the address on their labels. Lawson clocks marked with a Los Angeles address were produced between 1933 and 1940. Pasadena clocks date from 1940 to 1948, and Alhambra Lawsons were sold from 1948 to as late as 1981 (Figures 5–7).

Various motors powered Lawson clocks. For a brief time in 1934 and 1935 Waltham motors were used, most likely because of their dependability and Waltham’s good reputation (Figure 8). Early identification plates proudly stated, “Motored by Waltham.” Soon Telechron B and H rotors were occasionally used, and Hayden-Synchron motors powered many Lawson clocks as early as 1936. These motors were markedly modernized over the years. Figures 9 and
10 show two Lawson works: one with a bulky early Synchron and a later more modern enclosed version of the same motor.

Some of the motors ran on 50 cycle power, because the Los Angeles Department of Power and Light generated electricity at that cycle. In 1936 the 60 cycle power from the Hoover Dam created problems for Los Angeles electric customers. If one moved from a 50 cycle section of the city to a 60 cycle section of the city, the clocks advanced an hour in 50 minutes. Up to 125,000 electric clocks needed to be converted; a retail outlet, American Clock Co., switched out 50 cycle rotors for 60 cycle rotors for $1 per clock. Lawson Co. also offered 220 volt clocks.

Various identification plates, impressions, and labels were used over the years of production (Figures 11 and 12). A small metal plate riveted or screwed onto the bottom or back of the case identified the early clocks produced by Lawson Clocks Ltd. in Los Angeles. These clocks were called Lawson Limited Editions. After incorporation in 1936 the second name of the company, Lawson Time inc., was embossed directly into some of the wood and metal cases. Later clocks, made in Los Angeles and Pasadena, added a patent number to the information on the case. The patent was that of F. A. Greenawalt, which was used in similar Pennwood clocks. The applied metal plate also was on most clocks with Pasadena and Alhambra addresses during their respective time periods. Up to the time Lawson began acknowledging the patent, the case styles were identified only by a model number. Thereafter, all Lawson clocks were referred to as Model P40 for the works and with a style number for the case. Many cases were also named, but the names were inconsistent. Identification plates from this time identify the company’s third name as “Lawson ELECTRIC CLOCK.” Beginning with the Alhambra catalog the slogan of the company was “Time at a Glance.” Fenenbock had a flair for promotion and was always looking for ways to increase sales. Fenenbock’s son told me he remembers the office secretary answering the telephone with a melodic, “3:56 Lawson Time.”

Later clocks were identified with a yellow paper label glued to the bottom of their cases (Figure 13). These labels added the Underwriter’s Laboratory logo but omitted the patent number, which may have expired by that time.

From the beginning, Lawson sales literature offered the option of engraving the cases as presentation pieces to honor or recognize the recipient. In 1937 the Pasadena Tournament of Roses Pageant chose Lawson clocks for its awards, and the Grand Sweepstakes Award was the Lawson lamp Model 812. A unique model was awarded the next year to the city of Sierra Madre, CA, for its winning 1938 Rose Bowl Parade float. A different clock was awarded to Walt Disney for the first movie studio-sponsored float in Rose Parade history (Figures 14 and 15).

The 1938 catalog boasts, “Lawson Time designs by Ferher and Adomatis.” Paul Fehér (rhymes with Bayer) (1898–1990) was in large part responsible for some of the greatest Rose Iron Works art deco

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12:43

12:35

12:35

Figure 18. Early numerals.

Figure 19. Later numerals.

Figure 20. Latest numeral font.

Figure 21. Model 12.

COURTESY OF DECOPIX.COM.

Figure 22. Model 34.

AUTHOR’S COLLECTION.

Figure 23. Model 22.

COURTESY OF DECOPIX.COM.
creations of the late 1920s and early 1930s. Another designer often associated with Lawson clocks is KEM Weber. Karl Emanuel Martin, a preeminent “moderne” German designer, came to America in 1914 to assist in the construction of the German Pavilion for the 1915 Panama-Pacific International Exposition in San Francisco. When World War I erupted, he was stranded in California and decided to stay there. Some time thereafter he took the surname of Weber. KEM are his initials, but he used them as his name.

One Lawson often ascribed to Weber is the Zephyr No. 304, although the clock had already appeared in the 1938 catalog without crediting him for the design (Figure 16). For several years Weber lived in Santa Barbara, and a friend of his reported that he had a Zephyr of which he was very fond. Because Fehér’s name is mentioned and Weber’s is not, it seems likely that ascribing Lawson clock designs to Weber is either a mistake or a marketing fiction. Recently, a book written by Christopher Long, Kem Weber, Designer and Architect, states that Weber never designed any clocks produced by Lawson.

Perhaps this latest research will settle the matter. As stated, only model numbers identified the early Los Angeles clocks. The lowest I have seen is Model 12 and the highest is Model 937. Model numbers of clocks in the 1938 catalog range from 97 to 410 and do not appear to relate to any order of production.

The most costly Lawson clock in 1938 was priced at $62.50, a reasonable sum for a classy clock. However, in today’s dollars that would amount to more than $1,000. Who could afford such a luxury, and why would Lindley Lawson leave his business in the East and venture West to California? Randy Juster, a friend and collaborator in the study of the Lawson story, suggests that he was attracted by the golden glow reflected off California’s 1930s land developers, movie moguls, oil magnates, and gangland characters. The profitable Lawson Manufacturing Co. had already invested in land in California, so Lawson knew the potential of the West. We do know that Lawson clocks were advertised by Beverly Hills merchants. A 1937 LA Times ad says, “Accent your home with the tempo of Lawson Time” (Figure 17). A late Pasadena catalog boasts, “Lawson Time presents a few of the custom models now available at fine stores throughout the nation.” Clearly, they were aiming at an upscale customer.

The rotating number wheels were formed of an early plastic material. Some sources refer to it as
Ivorine, although it does not have the simulated organic stripes typical of other Ivorine items of the time. The works are essentially an odometer, except that the hour wheels have 12 faces; the ten-minute wheels have only six, and the minute wheels have ten. Some of the clocks are adapted to the 24-hour cycle with the a.m. hours 1 to 12 black on white, and the p.m. numbers white on black. The numerals on the Lawson clocks I have observed are black without exception, including the seconds wheel. This contrasts with Pennwood clocks, which sometimes sported red, green, blue, and orange numerals in addition to black and red seconds wheels. Early Lawson numerals were rounded and of different widths within each numeral. Later numerals were more squared off and more consistent in width. The latest numerals presented a slightly less bold font (Figures 18–20).

Lawson produced clocks with wood-, metal-, mirror-, plastic-, onyx-, and leather-covered cases. At least two different metal-cased clocks were incorporated into lamps, and some included a cigarette box or a pen and pencil set. Models 12 and 34 differ primarily in the added base and beveled corners of the latter (Figures 21 and 22), which shows the practice of making small changes on a basic design that would continue throughout the life of the company.

Model 30 was gussied up with rococo touches, but because I have seen only one of these in more than

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Figure 27. Model 101.

Figure 27A. Model 104.

Figure 28. Model 205.

Figure 28A. Model 201.

Figure 29. Model 215.

Figure 30. Model 217.

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20 years of searching, it may have been unpopular or unsuitable for the difficult years of the Depression. Model 22, which resembles a treasure chest, attracted much attention on eBay in 2012 and sold for $766 (Figures 23 and 24). I have seen only two examples of this model.

The case of Model 36 reflected the art deco skyscraper period and resembles Pennwood Model 305 and some smaller Telechron designs (Figures 25 and 26).

Model 101 is one of the earliest of Lawson’s recognizable rectangular cubes (Figure 27). Model 104 is an early attempt to add brass fins (Figure 27A). The Barrister Model 205 had silver or brass horizontal metal stripes to distinguish it (Figure 28). It cost $14.75, which was $2.25 more than the Southerner5 Model 201 without metal adornment in the same catalog (Figure 28A).

Model 217 had simple front fins beside the numerals, and the Sportsman Model 215 sported one-piece wraparound fins on the front and ends (Figures 29 and 30).

**Plastic Cases**

Pennwood Co. made many different plastic cases, but Lawson designed and sold only one, the more economical Empress Model 221, priced at $12.50 in 1937. A 1954 Alhambra advertising piece renamed the clock and offered it as the Americana, priced at $14.95, and stated, “It’s the identical famous Lawson movement—masterpiece of technical and mechanical perfection—for 32 years choice of those who could afford only the very best! Until now, Lawson was top-priced because superbly hand-crafted cases added prohibitive cost.” The case was produced in “seven glorious colors with contrasting ornamentation: Golden Ivory—Jungle Mahogany—Gleaming Walnut—Canary Yellow—Pacific Blue—Jade Green—Mellow Burgundy.” This clock seldom shows up at auctions and is a desirable model to collect (Figures 35–37).

**Leather Cases**

Model 222s were covered with leather as a design element (Figure 38). The burgundy and green versions sported a gold-embossed design around the numeral lens, and the green case also carried the gold-embossed Investors Diversified Services logo, the year 1955, and the name of a recipient, with the designation “Member, Presidents Club.” It appears that all the green clocks were awards to successful salesmen. Leather cases with five other different-colored and contrasting combinations were offered in the Alhambra catalog pages (Figures 39–40).

**Luxury Cases**

The Arlington Model 97 first appeared in the 1938 Los Angeles catalog, priced at $62.50, the most costly clock offered at the time and clearly a luxury item. If one adjusts for inflation, it would be $1,011.50 today. It had an onyx base, end caps, and Lucite blocks and was offered in a gold, silver, or bronze metal case. It still makes a striking presence. Later, Model 480 removed the end caps and added fins, continuing the practice of changing appearance slightly to broaden appeal and attract additional buyers. The postwar Alhambra catalog lists the Arlington clock as Model 937 (Figures 41 and 42).

An early metal case, Model 304, called the Mayfair as early as 1937 but renamed the Zephyr in the 1938 catalog, was a winner from the start (Figure 43). It is arguably the most successful design Lawson
Figure 35. Brown case. COURTESY OF DECOPIX.COM.

Figure 36. Green Americana. COURTESY OF DECOPIX.COM.

Figure 37. Yellow Americana. COURTESY OF DECOPIX.COM.

Figure 38. Red Model 222. COURTESY OF DECOPIX.COM.

Figure 39. Green Model 222.

Figure 40. Tan Model 222.

Figure 41. Model 97. COURTESY OF DECOPIX.COM.

Figure 42. Model 480 (on red background). COURTESY OF DECOPIX.COM.

Figure 43. Silver zephyr, Model 304. COURTESY OF DECOPIX.COM.
ever produced. It was offered in gold, gunmetal, bronze, and silver cases with contrasting metal appointments and was produced throughout the life of the company at all three locations. The same success did not come to Model 303 (Figure 44), the Admiral, or Model 308 (Figure 45), the Annapolis, despite the company advertising them in a jeweler’s trade magazine.

Other models offered in 1938 included Model 300, the New Yorker; Model 350, the Manhattan; Model 400, the Springfield; and the Highboy, Model 410 (Figures 46–49).

The basic Lawson cube was produced in several different metal applications. Model 200 had clean modern lines (Figure 50), Model 202 (Figure 51) was basically the same with a fender or bumper added on the front, and Model 206 (Figure 52) displayed manic machine age exuberance.

On other models the square edges began to round out. Model 216 was available in either bronze or brushed steel and had a grill reminiscent of wooden models (Figure 53). With Model 312 the same basic shape rotated 90° to the front (Figure 54). Model 306 followed the progression first demonstrated on wooden cases with all edges rounded and minigrills added (Figure 55).

Not all of the cases produced were a basic box. An early octagonal Model 95 (Figure 56) and two different trapezoidal models (Figures 57 and 58) exist. These cases failed to grab the public’s eye or purse and rarely appear in public offerings. Like many other Lawsons, these cases featured contrasting colored metals as a design element.

The company also experimented with rounded models other than the successful and popular quarter-rounded Zephyr. Model 93 (Figure 59) was totally round and Model 67 (Figure 60) has half-round ends and a wooden base.

Lawson found other ways of rounding out its models. Model 77 was incorporated into a pen set that repeated the half-moon shape in the base and the face (Figure 61). Model 105 was a simplified variety of the same case in walnut, without a base or penholders (Figure 62).

Model 69 (Figure 63) came in steel and chrome, and Model 208...
Cases in Figures 65 and 66 with fins at the bottom were both marked Model 313, although one is rounded and the other is squared. A seller or the factory worker may have misidentified the case. Some of the identification plates were stamped individually with handheld number punches; we have all heard anecdotes of cars coming off the assembly line on a Friday afternoon with interesting anomalies. At any rate, the models show the designers moving the round around and fiddling with fins.

**Model 400 Series**

The visual effect of design additions to the cases in the Series 400 is to make the clocks appear wider. Figures 67 and 68 show clocks that seem to be floating, whereas Figures 69 and 70 visually anchor the clocks to the surface.

Models 812 and 818 were adapted to include table lamps (Figures 71 and 72). Model 812 appears as early as 1937 in an advertising piece. This clock was presented as the Grand Sweepstakes award at the 1937 Pasadena Rose Parade. Other clockmakers were also venturing into adding lamps to clocks at the time.

**Dual Identities**

Lawson Model 472, the Coronet (Figure 73), and General Electric Model 8B22 (Figure 74) are the same. The 8B22 also has Lawson plastic time wheels rather than the more narrow die-cut aluminum wheels of almost all earlier, prewar Telechron and General Electric clocks of the Cyclometer series. Both clocks also sit on bun feet, reflecting the Lawson influence, instead of flat with no feet, as did all prewar Telechron clocks.

The same striking similarities exist between Lawson style 470 (Figure 75) and Telechron 8B23 (Figure 76). The only difference between the two clocks is that access to the works is through the back of the Telechron and through the bottom of the Lawson. Lawson Time office correspondence, dated April 20, 1953, refers to “the clocks Lawson manufactured for G. E.” There seems to have been a cross-fertilization of ideas and a comfortable, even competitive, relationship among the major producers of the rotating wheel clocks: Lawson, Pennwood, and General Electric. I have encountered some mistaken attribution or intentional deception relating to Lawson products. Metal-cased clocks echoing the Lawson style but with no identification are often advertised as Lawsons. Some bear the “Silver Crest Genuine Bronze” impression of the Smith Metal Works Co. of Buffalo, NY (Figure 77). These often have the Pennwood Numechron name and address cast into the metal frame holding the motor and rotating wheels. These are not Lawson clocks. After 1940 Lawson either bought frames from Pennwood or made them under the Greenawalt patent.

Fenenbock’s son remembers the metal frames being produced on-site in the Alhambra factory. A friend recently gave me a piece of brass that had been added to the bottom of a torsion pendulum. The metal was part of a case that bore the imprint of Lawson Time inc, dating it to the late 1930s. It was applied either to add weight to the pendulum or to insinuate that the clock was a Lawson. If it were the latter, the intact Lawson clock would have been much more valuable than the torsion clock.

In 2009 a handsome clock described as a Lawson was offered on eBay and sold for $450 (Figure 78). It had the style of numbers and spherical feet like those found on most early Lawsons, but it had no identification tag, impression, or label. The motor was also of the Hayden or Synchron type, which is consistent for Lawsons of the time, but without better provenance it is difficult to determine if this is in fact a Lawson.

This black lacquered case with Asian motifs obviously has works by Lawson (Figure 79). A naïve collector, as I was when I purchased it, might not realize that the case was not original to the clock and think it was
a rare find. Because the mounting holes on the frames of such works are consistent, it is easy to construct a new case or to exchange the works between cases without the telltale extra screw holes often seen on many wooden case marriages.

In addition to a metal plate, an embossed impression, or a yellow paper label, after 1942 Lawson clocks were also sometimes identified with a small Lawson script decal on the metal faceplate or plastic lens covering the numerals. This cover is often missing and is also easily moved from one clock to another. Almost every genuine Lawson I have seen has an ID tag, embossment, or label attached, but not every one still has the Lawson decal on the lens or wheel cover (Figure 80).

The 1938 catalog listed prices ranging from $12.50 for the simple walnut-cased Southerner Model No. 201 to $62.50 for the ornate metal-cased, silver-finished with onyx accents Arlington Model No. 97. The highest price realized to date for a used Lawson clock that I have seen online was for a Newport Model No. 312. It went for $3,178 in 2008. Offerings of rare and distinctive items offered on private art deco sites, auction houses, or antiques stores are often even higher priced. As with any object, a Lawson clock is worth whatever price on
which a willing buyer and seller can agree. Value of all timepieces and clocks is determined by condition, desirability, demand, rarity, and whether it has been stripped and refinished. In addition to these intrinsic qualities, intense competition between bidders in both live and online auctions often skews prices upward. A few identifiable bidders seem to be willing to pay almost any price to secure a rare example. On the contrary, a lack of information by naïve sellers sometimes move them to undervalue a clock.

Regardless of any commercial value, the historic value of such electric clocks from the decades before the electronic clock age should be appreciated and a record of their various applications preserved. Many interesting stories are yet to be told of the clockmaker’s insatiable drive to improve these useful everyday items of life. The thinkers and tinkerers who wrestled with ways of projecting the time, lighting an alarm, overcoming intermittent electrical service, telling time quickly and easily, and other problems are a profitable subject of study.

Notes

1. The clocks were marked “Lawson Time inc.” italicized and without a capital I.

2. Lawson ELECTRIC CLOCK, italicized and capitalized as shown on the identification plates.

3. Fehér appears to be the correct spelling rather than Ferher as it appears in the Lawson catalog.

4. Lawson Manufacturing was a separate entity from Lawson Time Co.
5. The Los Angeles catalog calls Style 201 the Southerner, whereas the later Pasadena catalog calls Style 215 by this name, and the still later Alhambra references Style 217 by the same popular name.

6. Pasadena and Alhambra catalogs refer to Style 490 as the New Yorker.


References


About the Author

Dr. Neil Kuns retired in 2007 as a minister, serving Christian churches in Indiana and California for 55 years. He lives with his wife, Elaine, in Camarillo, CA. He has two sons, a daughter, and four grandchildren.

An NAWCC member since 1995, he was the secretary of Chapter 75 for two years and was vice president of Western Electrics Chapter 133 for four years and president for six years. He served many years as program chair for the Greater Los Angeles and for the 2012 National Convention.

He was chair for the Channel Islands Regional in 2016 in Ventura, CA. He also published an article titled “Dutch Discovery in Iowa” in the November/December 2013 issue of the Watch & Clock Bulletin on ENEM Clock Co.

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