

# MORBIER CLOCKS

## Introduction and Historical Notes

When most Americans think of French clocks, they usually have a childhood memory of seeing a vintage 1900 mantel clock in black marble or a crystal regulator with mercury pendulum and the name Tiffany or Wanamaker on the dial. These clocks, together with the four-column Empire style, were imported in considerable numbers during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and were a favorite wedding present for those who could afford them. For the serious clock collector there has been a tremendous variety of French clocks from which to choose, reflecting the finest workmanship and going back to the early seventeenth century. These were one-of-a-kind masterpieces in which the case was at least as important, if not more so, than the movement and were built for royalty, the nobility, or the wealthy bourgeoisie. Most of these that date from the eighteenth century are now priced out of reach for all but the most affluent, and even the reproductions made in the same styles during the late nineteenth century bring substantial prices.

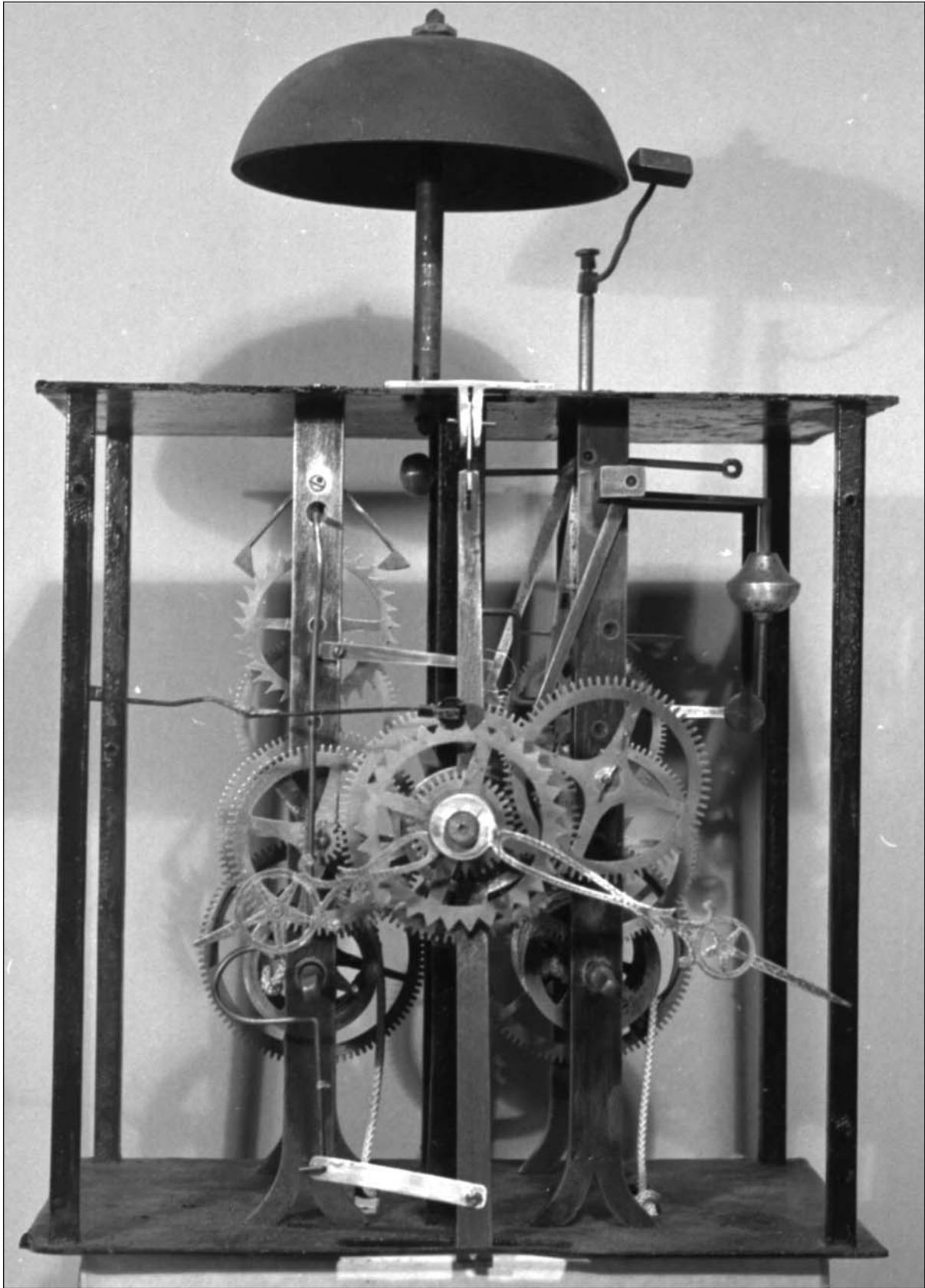
It is only recently that Americans have become aware that, during the same period that these clocks for the aristocracy were being made in Paris and other major cities, a homely clock “of the people, by the people, and for the people” was being made in substantial numbers in the then remote mountain provinces of the Jura (see Figure 3), a mountain range in eastern France and western Switzerland. Annual production of these so-called Morbier clocks reached about 80,000 from 1860 to 1880 and then tapered off, ending finally during World War I. While this number is small compared to the production of even a single factory in Connecticut during the same period, it is a considerable achievement when one looks at the product and understands the methods of production.

## What Is a Morbier?

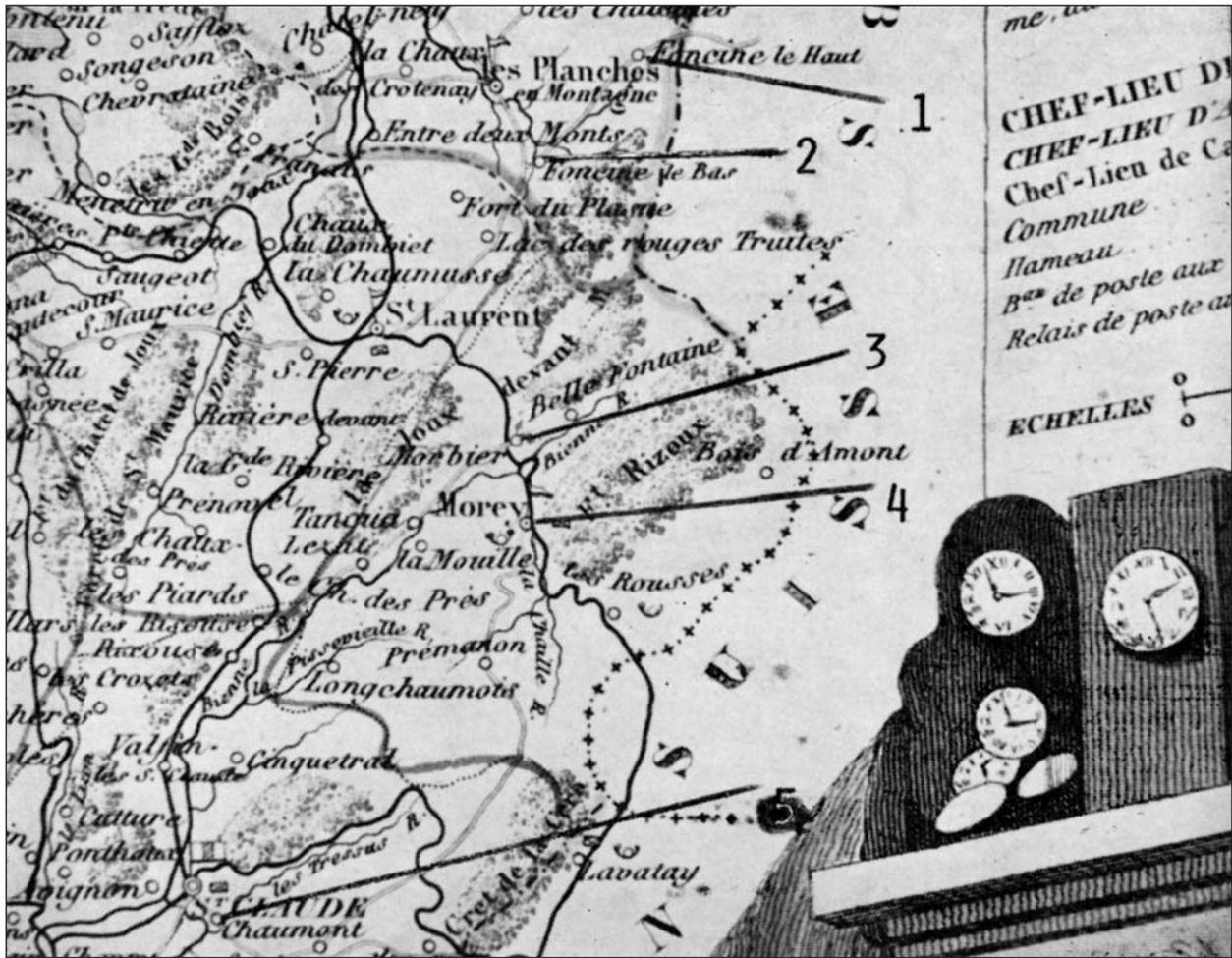
Figure 1 shows the typical Morbier clock of the late nineteenth century exhibiting these external characteristics: enameled dial bearing the name of the clock merchant (not the maker) and his city, stamped brass hands and the fronton<sup>2</sup> or dial embellishment of thin repousse or embossed brass, depicting a romantic scene, usually with a rural background. Associated with such a clock was a pendulum, also of repousse brass with fanciful decoration of flowers, fruit and even animated figures (see Figure 11), and frequently painted in simple bright colors.



**Figure 1.** The classic Morbier, made in quantity from 1860 to 1915.



**Figure 2.** Behind the dial of a late model Morbier, showing the recoil escapement, and pendulum rod in front, with slotted brass suspension spring. This model also has a calendar mechanism.



**Figure 3.** Map of Jura showing principal roads as of 1850. The distance by modern road from Morez (here spelled Morey) to Geneva is only 35 miles, but crosses two ridges, which must have been formidable obstacles in earlier times. This map is from a French atlas of 1850 and is surrounded by pictures of products of the area, hence the clocks to the right.

Behind the dial is a simple robust mechanism (Figure 2) that seemingly will never wear out and that is easily cleaned and put in order. Mounted in an iron cage or frame are bars that carry the trains. The time train, on the left hand side as you face the clock, has a verge or, in later models, a recoil escapement that drives the central pendulum through a link. The striking train has a straight rack that drops vertically and, after striking the hour, automatically repeats the hour one or two minutes later. Most people find the latter most amusing and useful too, in case they are not sure they heard all the strokes the first time.

Although I had owned and worked on French clocks for more than 20 years, it was not until 1965 that I had an opportunity to get acquainted with the Morbier clock. From 1964 to 1970 I looked at hundreds of different examples and worked on the 20 or so that I bought to illustrate the various stages of development of these clocks. In trying to learn more about the history and development of these clocks, I found that very little has been written. Practically all writers about French clocks, overwhelmed by the creations of the famous

clockmakers of Paris, found no space left for the humble Morbiers. In this writing I want to share with others what I have learned about this clock, which I like to think of as the Model "T" of European clocks. The mechanism is ruggedly made of easily obtained materials; it was produced in relatively large numbers, and sold at a price that brought it within the reach of many who could not otherwise afford a clock, and it could be kept in running order in rural areas, far from the specialized talents of the big city mechanics.

These notes should be considered as only a beginning, and I hope that others who have knowledge or experience of these clocks will comment on or add to them. In this way, eventually we all will have a better understanding of the how, where, and when of these interesting clocks.

### Where Do They Come From?

The name Morbier is derived from the little village in the Haut-Jura (Figure 3), where the production of these clocks was centered for more than 200 years from the early eighteenth century up to the beginning of World War I. These clocks are