

# Find

After Bill began collecting in earnest in 1973, he spent the next twenty years amassing his collection. He bought six clocks in 1974. From 1975 through 1989 he averaged twenty-two clocks per year. In 1990 he bought just eight clocks. The number fell to only three a year during his last three years as a collector.



1930 New Haven Alarm Clock

He bought most of his finds at local auctions in Hastings and in nearby places like Kalamazoo, Lansing, Charlotte, and Marshall. He also ventured farther afield, buying in Florida, Pennsylvania, Arizona, North Carolina, Maine, Indiana, Ohio, and Illinois. For several years in a row, Bill and Jessie made a trip to Marshalltown, Iowa, for a large annual clock auction, many times bringing home several clocks.

Although he preferred auctions, Jessie's catalog records buys from classifieds and from private individuals in and around Hastings. Summer antique markets, like the one in Centerville, Michigan, were likewise fruitful.



1900 Davies

The record indicates Bill was a buyer, not a seller or sometime dealer. He only sold 13 clocks of the 379 listed. He gifted three of them and junked but two. That means he loved the hunt and enjoyed the prizes he found.

To learn more about clocks, watches and collecting, contact the *National Association of Watch and Clock Collectors (NAWCC)* at [www.nawcc.org](http://www.nawcc.org)

*This brochure was generously written by Richard Weiderman.*

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*Richard and John are members of the Western Michigan NAWCC, Chapter 101.*

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for environmental education

## Pierce Cedar Creek Institute

# Clock Collection



Seth Thomas Mantel Clock

## An Unexpected

Upon entering Pierce Cedar Creek Institute's Visitor Center, one may be surprised to find a large clock collection displayed throughout the building. The collection was amassed by Willard (Bill) G. Pierce, the founder of Pierce Cedar Creek Institute. At the time of Bill's and his wife Jessie's deaths, a few clocks were given to their sons and a select few friends, and the rest were bequeathed to the Institute. There are approximately 330 clocks in the Pierce Collection, most of them on display in the Visitor Center.

Bill purchased his first clock at an auction in Hastings in 1957. He paid all of two dollars for a Seth Thomas Adamantine black mantel clock with green marbled top.

Adamantine is a veneer developed by The Celluloid Manufacturing Co. of New York City. The Seth Thomas Clock Co. purchased the right to use adamantine in 1880. Sometimes referred to simply as "celluloid," it is found on clocks in various colors. It was often used to simulate marble or alabaster.



1890's Seth Thomas Adamantine Mantle Clock

According to the inventory Jessie kept of his collection, following his first purchase in 1957, Bill's interest in clocks lay dormant for the next 16 years. But then in 1973 when his father died, Bill acquired his father's old Sessions wooden kitchen clock.

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# One Man's Collection

Bill Pierce's second clock was a Sessions wooden kitchen clock, he acquired from his father.

Horologically it is just a stereotypical American-made, time-and-strike clock popular from 1870 until 1920. Renown for methods of industrial mass production, American-made clocks competed with better made, higher grade clocks from England, Germany, and especially France. Thanks to low-wage workers, cheap materials, and semi-automated production, kitchen clocks made their way into the homes of the American working class, who in the past had to depend on public clocks on churches or in towers above the town square.



1910 Sessions  
Walnut Kitchen Clock

Kitchen clocks were typically produced either in oak or walnut. Both were overly ornate. Those in oak had their front panels pressed under heat and pressure to create a faux carving similar to that found on the pressed-back oak chairs of the time. Walnut clocks too had a faux-carved look. In the case of walnut,



1900 Gilbert  
Kitchen Clock

however, the manufacturers achieved the effect by applying turned and scroll-sawed ornaments to the case. In both instances, ornate cases were married to fancy glass panels in the doors and elaborately "carved" pendulum bobs. They exhibited all the excesses of design found in the so-called "fancy furniture" of the day.

Some factories in Grand Rapids, the nation's "Furniture Capital," devoted their entire output to

it. The Oriel Fancy Furniture Company, later Berkey & Gay, is one such factory. Fortunately, around 1900,

the Arts and Crafts Movement introduced a reform that chastened the earlier design.

The Pierce collection admirably portrays the unpredictable changes in kitchen clock production. It has ample examples of impressed oak cases seen in the houses of the humble and the more elaborate and more expensive middle-class offerings in walnut with mirrored sides and statuary that some collectors call "parlor clocks." Additionally, there is an oak Sessions kitchen clock in the plain style of the Arts and Crafts movement. Most are examples of the ubiquitous shelf clock. However, there is also an occasional example of the much-less-common wall variety. Thus, Bill Pierce covered the gamut of this interesting variety of American Clock in material, style, and function.



1900 Waterbury  
Kitchen Clock

In addition to its strength in kitchen clocks, the Pierce collection is also strong in black mantel, or flat top clocks. Black mantels, or "blacks," originated in France. The French made their cases from black slate, often incised and the incision gilded. Many had applied fire-gilt ormolu. The movements were some of the finest ever



1890 Gilbert  
Mantle Clock

made, circular ones about four inches in diameter, called *pendule de Paris*. During the latter 1880s, French blacks made heavy inroads into the American market, threatening the authority of American makers. True to form, the Americans met the French invasion head on, doing battle in the market place with their ultimate weapon, a cheap price. At first the Americans

tried imitating the French, using black slate, a choice that proved too expensive. Next they tried enameled cast iron, but eventually they settled on wood, either painted or veneered in celluloid. The strategy proved successful, the French were repelled and the Americans retained their market. One way to tell American blacks from the French is the distance between the winding holes in dials of time-and-strike clocks. The winding holes on the round compact French movements are closer together than on the typical American clocks with larger movements.



1910 Waterbury Oak  
Mantle Clock

Bill also favored French four-glass regulators, also called crystal regulators. They have brass frames with glass panels, beveled on four sides on the more expensive models. Escapements are often exposed. Movements are fitted with gridiron or mercurial pendulums. French regulators are usually fitted with the ubiquitous *pendule de Paris* and thus can be identified by close-set winding holes in the dial, as opposed to the wider set holes on American imitations.



Le Coultre  
Perpetual  
Motion Mantle Clock

Unique among crystal regulators in the Pierce collection is the Swiss Atmos clock. The brass frame on these clocks is gold plated. The movements are virtually perpetual motion machines. They rarely need winding, thanks to a bellows behind the movement that contains a rarefied gas that is highly temperature sensitive. As the temperature in the room

rises and falls, the bellows contracts and expands, keeping the movement fully wound.

Another area of strength in the Pierce collection is China case clocks. Easily molded into shapes both fancy and plain, china clocks have colorful and beautiful designs. The case is ceramic on all sides and the top. The bottom is open to allow placement of a wooden platform with a coiled gong.



1900 Waterbury  
Ceramic Clock

A brief survey of the total eclectic collection demonstrates Bill preferred American clocks over the more expensive and better made European clocks. Though he could have pursued the quality and workmanship so evident in French clocks, or sought the weighted, precision regulators housed in cases inlaid with the finest rare woods from Vienna, Bill preferred clocks made in his own country. He wanted clocks made in America in all their forms and appearances. Therefore, he collected representatives not only of kitchen clocks, but also of black mantel clocks, porcelain-case clocks, and novelty clocks. Thus there is a happy intersection of history and sentiment in the Pierce collection.



Bill and Jessie Pierce