

The Bicentennial Commemorative Clock

by Andrew H. Dervan, FNAWCC (MI)

Some years ago, I met Rocky Romeo at a Great Lakes Regional, and he highlighted the trials and tribulations that he and Tom Eurich had while they developed, manufactured, and sold their Bicentennial clocks during 1975-1977. I thought it was a fascinating story, because they experienced problems similar to those of clockmakers in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The project had to wait a few years until I had an opportunity to get more information from Rocky. Unfortunately, Tom Eurich had died several years earlier.

Tom and Rocky, two longtime Dearborn, MI, friends and clock collectors, were discussing the upcoming U.S. Bicentennial in the fall of 1974 and wanted to do something to mark the occasion. They thought producing a special clock would be an interesting and a challenging project.

They considered using one of the most famous and uniquely American clock styles—Simon Willard's "Improved Timepiece," known to many today as the "banjo" clock. However, they wanted a different look and chose a timepiece variation: the "Lyre" clock. John Sawin, a nephew of Simon Willard's brother, Aaron, is credited with its development around 1825. He originally named it "Elegant Harp," but, in time it became known as the lyre clock.

Before making any technical decisions about their proposed clock, Tom and Rocky took a philosophical approach and established the clock's design goals:

- The clock and all the components must be completely American made.
- The design would be typical of the post-Revolution period but not necessarily an exact reproduction.
- Craftsmanship would be as close as possible and practical to standards used during the Revolution.
- The movement should be brass and weight driven.
- The case was to be finished solid wood, either mahogany or walnut.
- Each reverse-painted glass tablet would be individually hand painted.
- The case front was to be carved in keeping with most clocks of the period.
- The clock would embody American symbolism, because it would be a Bicentennial timepiece honoring, in part, revolutionary-era citizens. The symbolism includes a 13-star colonial flag, our current 50-star national



Figure 1, top left.
Lower reverse-painted glass.

Figure 2, above. Mahogany case lyre clock.

flag, and an exquisite justice figure posed against “America the Beautiful” “from the mountains to the prairies to the oceans white with foam.”

- The clock would include a religious element (the Bible), because the majority of early patriots were moved by their religious backgrounds.
- Flanking the Bible would be the Declaration of Independence.
- A graceful eagle with ruffled feathers would link the Bible to the Declaration of Independence (Figure 1).
- It would be a limited edition—500 clocks all numbered and properly recorded.

Having outlined their clock’s design goals, they were faced with many questions: What is the clock actually going to look like? Who is going to supply the cases, reverse-painted glasses, and movements? Who is going to assemble it? How do we sell it?

Tom and Rocky had different skills that complemented each other for this project. Tom owned a furniture store, was an excellent salesman, and had many contacts in the furniture business. Rocky was an engineer with Ford Motor Co., was accustomed to designing and building

cars, had experience repairing, restoring, and refinishing his own clocks, and would assemble the clocks.

They came up with an initial lyre case design and went through four case design iterations before settling on one that satisfied their goals (Figures 2 and 3). They asked their clock-collecting friends, dealers, and parts suppliers for leads on carvers, casemakers, movement makers, and reverse-glass painters and traveled to a number of states to visit people in the business.

Tom was referred to a retired craftsman in Rockford, IL, for the carvings. Tom met him and showed him the design. The craftsman said he could make the master carvings, but could not produce them. The craftsman gave Tom the name of a small furniture shop that could produce the carvings. Tom visited the shop; the owner showed Tom his master carving machine that could produce ten components at a time. Final carvings on each one, would be done by hand if necessary.

A few weeks later Tom and Rocky returned to Rockford and met the craftsman to inspect his initial bezel carving. They liked it and asked him to proceed with all the parts. They met him again a few weeks later and inspected the full carvings in both walnut and mahogany. The walnut had too much color variation, and they decided to use only mahogany for the case and carvings (Figure 4).

When the master carvings were ready, Tom and Rocky delivered them to the furniture shop. They watched the shop owner produce a sample carving using the master carving machine. It was good. A small amount of final hand carving was required.

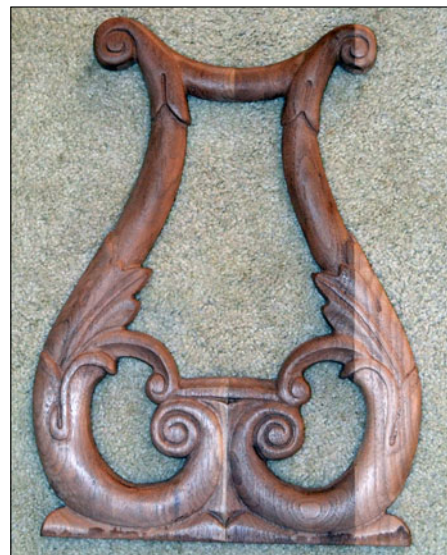
The throat frame was done in two sections and glued together (Figure 5). The bezels were carved out of a large block of mahogany, one on each side of the block. The centers were cut out, the “ears” to hold them in the carving machine were cut off, and two bezels were sliced out (Figures 6 and 7).



Figure 3, left. Gilt case lyre clock.

Figure 4, below. Discarded walnut throat frame.

Figure 5, below right. Partially carved throat frame.



Near Barrington, IL, Tom found a small shop that could manufacture the cases (Figure 8). Tom’s friend, the owner of Bollenbach Clock Co. in Barrington, agreed to finish the carvings and cases provided to him. Tom and Rocky wanted two case finishes: the first was mahogany and the second was gilt on all the carvings; both cases



Figure 6. Partially carved bezel.



Figure 7. Fully carved bezel.



Figure 8, right.
Case frame made from nine presses of wood.

were mahogany (see Figures 2 and 3). A gilded carved eagle tops the clock (Figure 9)

Tom and Rocky wanted their glass design to “Capture the Spirit of both the Bicentennial and the Country.” They worked with several artists and modified sketches for the glasses along the way. Finally Rocky sent the sketches to his friend Herschel Burt in Massachusetts. Herschel had previously done some banjo glasses for Rocky. Herschel worked through a series of designs until Tom and Rocky were satisfied (Figures 1 and 10). He painted a set of prototype glasses and shipped them to Rocky. Herschel said he would not be able to supply production glasses.

Word spread in the Detroit area about their need for a reverse-glass painter for the Bicentennial clock project. A woman from Ann Arbor, J. Cross, came to the store in Dearborn and examined Herschel’s prototype glasses. She said she could reproduce them, but wouldn’t be able to make 500 sets in two years. She borrowed the glasses for a week to study and make patterns.

Several weeks later, B. Esposito, from Dearborn came into his shop and asked about the reverse-glass painting job. She had no experience with gold leafing on glass but said, “I will learn how to do it!” Both women completed the glasses, reproducing Herschel’s design. They signed their names on the throat tablet.

Tom drove to Massachusetts and met clockmaker Elmer Stennes, who recommended Kilbourn & Proctor as a movement supplier. Kilbourn & Proctor was a partnership of two retired engineers who made a high-quality replicate of Simon Willard’s Timepiece movement. They were in business from 1971 to 1987 and manufactured approximately 4,500 timepiece movement variations (Figure 11). The movement was a boon to individuals who wanted to make Improved Timepieces, and these movements are still in high demand 25 years later. Tom met with Bill Kilbourn in Waltham, MA, and obtained movement quotes and two banjo movements to experiment with. Kilbourn also agreed to supply the signed dials (see Figure 12).



Figure 9, above. Gilded carved eagle.



Figure 10, right. Reverse-painted throat glass.

For a final decorative touch, Tom had a local jeweler engrave 1776-1976 and an eagle on the pendulum bob (Figure 13).

With all the parts in place, Tom and Rocky were ready to set the project in motion. The carver and casemaker sent their prototype parts to Bollenbach who finished and shipped them to Tom’s store in Dearborn.

The box arrived by UPS with all the parts (case, bezel, throat frames, lower box frames, and lower bracket), but everything was smashed. Despite the mess, Tom and Rocky could see that the parts had been well made. Still, they needed another complete prototype before making any final decisions.

Tom contacted all three suppliers and



Figure 11, left. Killbourn & Proctor movement.



Figure 12, right. Eurich & Romeo signed dial.



Figure 13, left. Engraved pendulum bob.

requested another prototype. He asked Bollenach to call him when the prototype was ready and he would pick it up.

When Tom and Rocky arrived at the case shop to examine the prototype, they saw that the carvings

and the case did not match—the case was half an inch too short. While they waited, the case shop made another case and all the parts fit perfectly.

Bollenach said his company could supply about 20 finished cases and parts a month. Each month either Tom or Rocky made the trip to Barrington, IL, some 320 miles each way.

Once the prototype was back in Dearborn, Rocky went to work to make sure all the parts fit properly. He found that the pendulum was an inch too long for the case. He contacted Kilbourn who said the lyre clock movement's pendulum was one inch shorter than the banjo movement's pendulum. Killbourn sent Rocky two lyre movements. They fit perfectly in the case. Killbourn recorded the sale in his ledger on November 30, 1974.

Tom and Rocky created and printed a small promotional booklet titled "Story of the Eurich & Romeo Bicentennial Clock." The booklet detailed how they conceived the idea for the clock, their design goals, Bicentennial tribute, and its informal naming as the "Dearborn Clock," where they both lived and worked. The city of Dearborn was named after Major General Henry Dearborn, who served in the American Revolution. On the last page was stamped the clock's serial number, and it was signed by both Tom and Rocky (see Figures 14 and 15).

Tom and Rocky priced the clocks at \$850 for the mahogany frame model and \$895 for the gilt frame model.

To advertise and promote the clocks, they prepared a display board showing the clock and all its components. They were going to take it to local clock shows, but it was too heavy to move around. Tom arranged to have it displayed in the lobby of the Dearborn Inn near the Henry Ford Museum for two months. Then the display was moved to his furniture store. *Detroit Free Press* writer Lillian Jordan Braun visited Tom's shop to see the clock. Her article on the clock was published March 26, 1975. Tom took out an advertisement for the clock in the local newspaper. He and Rocky also attended local and regional clock shows to promote their clock.

As the orders came in, Rocky assembled the clocks. Working in the evening, the first clock took him four days to assemble. How could he work full time at Ford and assemble enough clocks at night to fill the orders, he wondered. Fortunately, assembly got easier and faster as he built each clock. He developed a few simple jigs to make it easier and to ensure that the movement and frames were lined up properly. Eventually, he could assemble one and a half clocks per night and five or six during the weekend. He could just about keep up with the incoming orders. Each clock case was serial numbered and recorded in the booklet (e.g., 123/500).

One of their first clocks was donated to the NAWCC Museum in Columbia, and it is still there.

Tom knew Michigan State Senator Pat McCollough, who offered State Resolution No. 167 "A Resolution Commending Thomas Eurich And Rocky Romeo," supporting their Bicentennial banjo clock project. The resolution was adopted on June 12, 1975 (Figure 16).

There was talk of donating a clock to the White House, but the curator there could not guarantee the clock would ever be displayed and they did not pursue the donation.

The clocks sold very well. In 1977 production stopped because Tom had serious health issues. They sold all the

clocks that had already been produced. In two years they sold 268 clocks (based on the number of movements purchased). The mahogany framed case was a much more popular seller than the gilt frame case.

In 1977 while Tom was recovering, Rocky made a limited run of 26 timepieces in cross-banded cases. A local woodworker built the cases, Herschel Burt supplied the reverse-painted glasses, and Kilbourn & Proctor supplied the banjo movements.

Five years later, after Tom's health recovered, they considered manufacturing more clocks, but when they began pricing components the costs had risen significantly. They would have had to almost double the earlier asking price to make money on them, so they scrapped the idea.

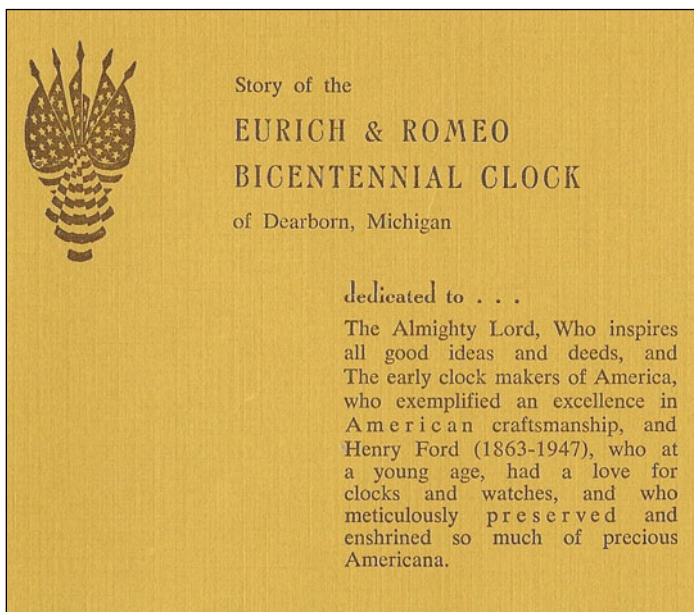


Figure 14. Booklet cover.

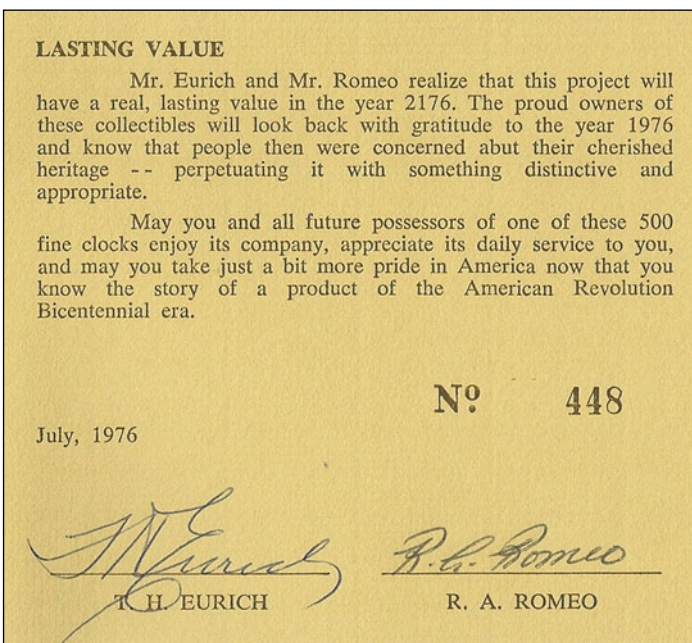


Figure 15. Booklet back page.

Conclusion

It was more a labor of love and devotion to the Bicentennial than financial reward to produce this unique clock. We owe a lot to Tom and Rocky for undertaking such a project and now allowing me to share their story with NAWCC members.

About the Author

Andrew Dervan joined the NAWCC in 1997 and found clock collecting fascinating. He has found researching the histories of various makers and companies as challenging and exciting as collecting. His principal collecting interest is weight-driven clocks from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He recently retired from DuPont Performance Coatings and spends some of his free time writing articles for the *Watch & Clock Bulletin*.

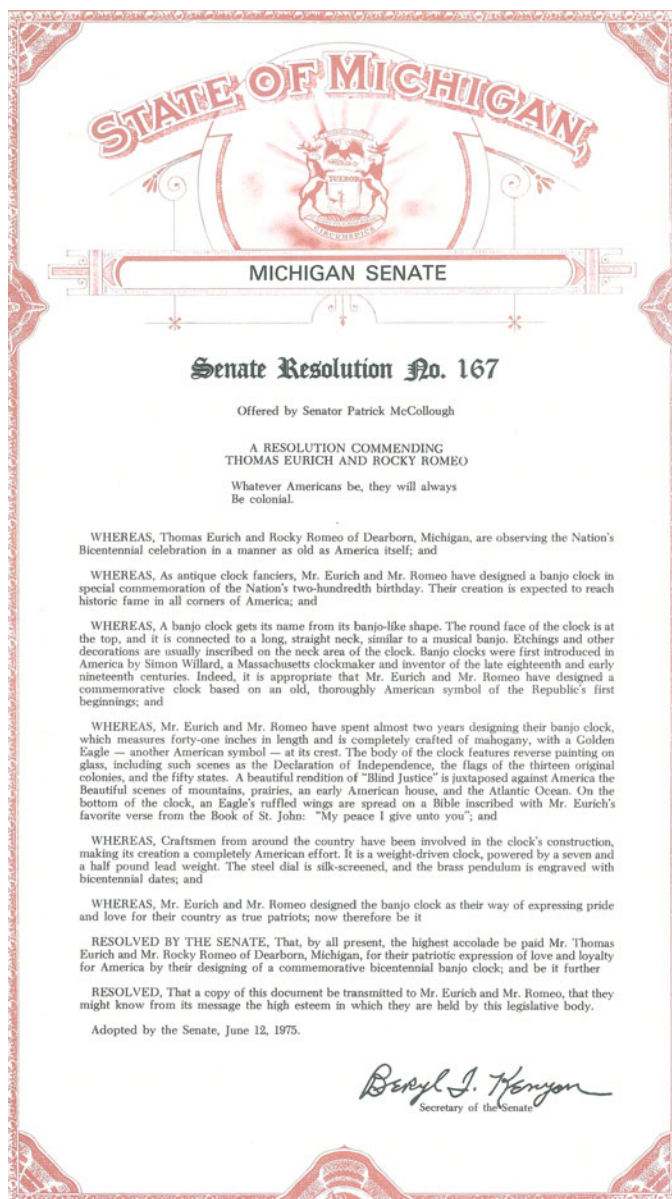


Figure 16. Michigan Senate Resolution.