

Time is Precious for Local Businessman

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Don Leman knows all too well what people mean when they say time is precious. That's why he opened his own business, Antique Clock Restoration, at 2661 Wildwood Road, Columbus OH.

Leman does antique restoration and repair on American and European clocks from as early as the 1700s.

"Finding the date on the clock is the most exciting. Right now, I'm working on a clock from 1831. It's pretty amazing to know this clock was ticking away when Abraham Lincoln was chopping wood," said Leman.

Although he didn't start out in the clock business, Leman said he has long enjoyed the restoration of fine wood and the history of the objects he encounters.

"I had a frame shop in Chicago for 20 years. At one point, one of my customers brought in a clock case. I started going to clock-repair classes, and I fixed it," he said.

But he also gained first-hand knowledge of clockmaking from an employee.

"One time, I had a guy come in whose father was a clockmaker in Russia. He ended up working for me for about 10 years. I would watch him for hours while he worked on the clocks," Leman said, adding that he continues to use much of what he was taught by that employee.

Although it can sometimes be challenging to get a clock from the 1700s ticking again, Leman said, it's the restoration that's most time consuming. "There's a big difference between clock restoration and clock repair. Some of them can be real devils because they've been in the attic for many years."

Some of the most popular clocks that this University of Illinois industrial design graduate repairs and restores are American mantel clocks. "They were the most prevalent because they were cheap to buy back in those days," he said. The Long-Drop Regulator really died down during the 1940s and 1950s; they're really hot now.

Leman also repairs and restores chime clocks. "The U.S. took over the chiming clock; we wanted it to strike on the quarter of the hour (as opposed to on the hour and half hour)," Leman noted.

He also stated that grandfather clocks are among the most popular clocks he brings back to life. "They were originally called tall case clocks. After a guy wrote a song called 'My Grandfather's Clock,' it became known as a grandfather clock."

One of the European clocks Leman works with is the weight-drive clock. "An example of this would be a Vienna Regulator," he said. "There's the one weight: This only gives the time. The two weight gives the time and strikes on the hour and at the half-hour. The three weight has a quarter hour strike,"

Leman said the average case restoration for these different clocks could take up to three to four months. "Most of my hours are spent on the case."

The Chicago native explained that most clocks he works

on have more value to their owners than to antique collectors.

"There are some clocks that are very collectible and costly, but it seems like most of my clocks have sentimental value rather than monetary value," he said.

Because most of his customers see their clocks as priceless, Leman said, it's important he gets written consent before he works on the clock. "If they don't give me consent, I won't work on it."

Just the fact that there are no longer any American clockmakers makes many of his projects more valuable, Leman said.

"We out priced ourselves. We also had the Great Depression, which really killed out a lot of the clock businesses. Most of our clocks were to tell time and they weren't very fancy," he said.

"Still, it's amazing to know how much some of these clocks are worth today. Some of the clocks that used to cost \$9 are now worth as much as \$600," he said.

Most of the people bringing their clocks to Leman are either in central Ohio or live elsewhere within the state. "I've done business in Cleveland, Columbus, Athens, and even Dayton. So you really build a network up after a while," he said.

Leman said he prefers to work only on clocks within Ohio, so he can deliver the clock to the customer's house. "It's my policy that once I'm finished with the clock, I will take it to the customer's house and hang it on the wall. The clock needs to have an even left and right tick. When you set up the case and mechanism, it has to have the same balance. The balance might be different in the repair shop compared to when you hang it on the wall. So I want to make sure it's right."

But his network does extend a little farther west than he might at first lead you to believe.

"I fixed Doris Day's clocks while I was living in California. It was funny how I met her. My wife and I knew she was a big animal rights activist. We wanted to see if we could get a dog from her, so we met for lunch one afternoon. When she found out that I repaired clocks, I began working on hers. Some of the clocks were in even in her movies. I also ended up taking care of her pets for one and a half years," Leman said.

He said having a clock restoration business in California was probably the best decision he could have made. "After one of the earthquakes, I put an ad in the paper saying that I fixed clocks. You wouldn't believe how many calls I received from people wanting me to repair their clocks," he stated.

After several years, even though business was good, he decided to leave California and move to Columbus in 1992.

"My son lived in Columbus, and California was getting too expensive. I always said you've got to be old and rich to live in California. I was only old," he laughed.

"I'm 68 years old. My ultimate goal is to keep working until my hands can't do it anymore. I would probably drive my wife crazy if I was home all the time," he said.

"If you like what you're doing and you're good at it, a lot of people will find out about you. My dad always told me that if you can't do it well, then don't do it at all."

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