



Streetscapes/Marvin Schneider; The Man Who Makes the City's Clocks Run on Time

By CHRISTOPHER GRAY
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FOR Marvin Schneider, New York City's Clock Master, the year 2000 problem is not as worrisome as brick dust, dangerous ladders and pigeon guano. That's because the timing equipment Mr. Schneider looks after is run not by microchips and microprocessors but by gears and weights.

Mr. Schneider's duties involve spending a few hours, minutes and seconds a week taking care of 13 classic old clocks. Seven of them are at City Hall, including its four-faced 1918 tower clock, which is still running with its original gears and bell-striking mechanism.

He makes his timely rounds -- other sites include the Brooklyn and Staten Island Borough Halls and the former Harlem Courthouse, at 170 East 121st Street -- winding, adjusting, oiling, cleaning and tinkering.

A native of Fall River, Mass., Mr. Schneider was working as a supervisor with the city's Human Resources Administration and wasn't much interested in timepieces until one day in 1979 when he was on his way to work. Stopped for a light at Broadway and Duane Street, he looked 15 stories up and had an epiphany. At the top of the city-owned former New York Life building at 346 Broadway, Mr. Schneider noticed an ornate, four-sided clock that, it turned out, had not been working for years.

The fact that its time had stopped bothered him. He mentioned it to his supervisor, Eric Reiner, and, since the clocktower's door was open, they ventured inside. Mr. Schneider remembered their first closeup look at the jammed clockwork behind the four faces.

"It was a jumble of tangled chains and gears," he said. "The place had become a hideaway for people to smoke and drink, and snow came in through a broken clock face. But it was a gorgeous piece of machinery."

He and Mr. Reiner asked the city to let them repair the clock. But the city was concerned about liability issues, so they persuaded the New York Life Insurance Company, the

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building's former owner, to donate an insurance policy.

THE two men had mechanical savvy, but no particular experience with clocks. So when they first got one set of hands moving, Mr. Schneider said, "it was a tremendous high, that we did our bit for the city."

After the clock was functioning completely, other city officials began calling him, and Mr. Schneider took more and more time off from his regular job. The time grew to such an extent that in 1992 the self-taught Mr. Schneider was officially named New York City Clock Master.

Mr. Schneider, now 59, is retired from H.R.A. -- but not from clocks. He gets about \$30 an hour for his services; when he is on vacation or ill, Mr. Reiner fills in.

The traditional old windup clocks use weights and chains and run for eight days on a single winding, Mr. Schneider says, and he still likes them best. "It's a heresy," he says, to electrify them.

He likes his clocks to be accurate, but the correct time is not an obsession -- he says he sets them "to the nearest 10 seconds," based on his 35-year-old Omega wristwatch. And is he is not a strict preservationist -- he once used coat hangers to make a pendulum for one clock (though that clock no longer had all its original parts).

Working on clocks inside buildings is pretty straightforward -- it's the exterior ones, often high above the ground, that are particularly challenging. To get to the clock in City Hall's tower, Mr. Schneider climbs a narrow ladder to a roof hatch, then ascends a slippery, steeply sloping rooftop grate with no handrail.

"My biggest enemy has been the Brooklyn Borough Hall clock," he says. "On the last leg I'm like the human fly." A vertical exterior ladder backs up to the building, he says, and he can't get a firm footing.

PIGEONS also create problems. And at the James Gordon Bennett Memorial's clock in Herald Square the works are enclosed in an unsealed brick shell, so that brick dust continually coats them. That clock -- and its statue of Minerva and the Bellingers -- was originally on Bennett's 1893 Herald Building, on the north side of 35th Street from Broadway to Sixth Avenue.

When the building was demolished in 1921 the clock and sculpture were salvaged and reinstalled in a new monument in 1940. The bellringers swing heavy hammers that appear to hit the bell and ring out the hours -- a performance that has usually attracted a small crowd. But the clock has not been working since summer.

Mr. Schneider said he expected that the installation of a new electrical line will allow him to finish his repairs sometime this year, perhaps when the park, which is being renovated, reopens.

Mr. Schneider says he is not an empire builder; his 13 clocks are enough, especially when he needs to make the rounds at the beginning and end of Daylight Saving Time.

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The year 2000 problem, which may cause difficulties in timing devices dependent on computers, is for Mr. Schneider a nonissue. When others will be monitoring computer, electrical, banking and air-traffic systems, he says, he plans to be asleep in bed.

Photos: Clock atop old New York Herald Building now stands in Herald Square. (The New-York Historical Society); Marvin Schneider, New York City's Clock Master, at work in the clock tower of 346 Broadway. (Ruby Washington/The New York Times)

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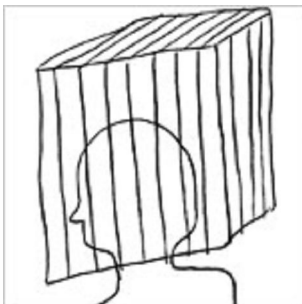
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