

Tick-Tocking In a Digital Age

By JAMES LOMUSCIO

FROM the sidewalk, passersby catch glimpses of rich wood, deep burls and the dark mahogany of long case clocks. Each 17th- and 18th-century timepiece has a different face — a face that has marked the minutes from before the American Revolution.

The shop is the Horologists of London on Main Street in Ridgefield, a place where muffled ticking, the movements of gears and the mellifluous sounds of chimes are a tribute to the art of mechanical clockmaking. And in the back of the shop, seated at his work bench, is Gerald Grunsell. A London-trained horologist, Mr. Grunsell, 60, remains committed to his profession of handcrafting gears, springs, escapement levers, pendulums and weights. In short, he keeps the clocks ticking in an age of quartz movements and digital time.

"We are the guardians," said Mr. Grunsell, who nearly 40 years ago was awarded the title of Fellow of the British Horological Institute. With a

No quartz movements need apply here.

worker's apron over his shirt and tie and an eyepiece magnifier, Mr. Grunsell evoked a sense of Dickensian London as he detailed with intimacy the inner workings of a carriage clock he worked on.

A combination artist, engineer, sheet metal worker and Newtonian physicist, he described how he could replace every component on a mechanical clock from its tiniest gear and pulley to the sturdy, yet delicate-looking ornate hands of a grandfather clock.

When not at his work bench or talking to customers on his showroom floor, Mr. Grunsell lifts a trap door at the rear of his shop and heads toward his basement

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Helen Neafsey for The New York Times

Gerald Grunsell at the Horologists of London in Ridgefield.

Still Tick-Tocking in a Digital Age

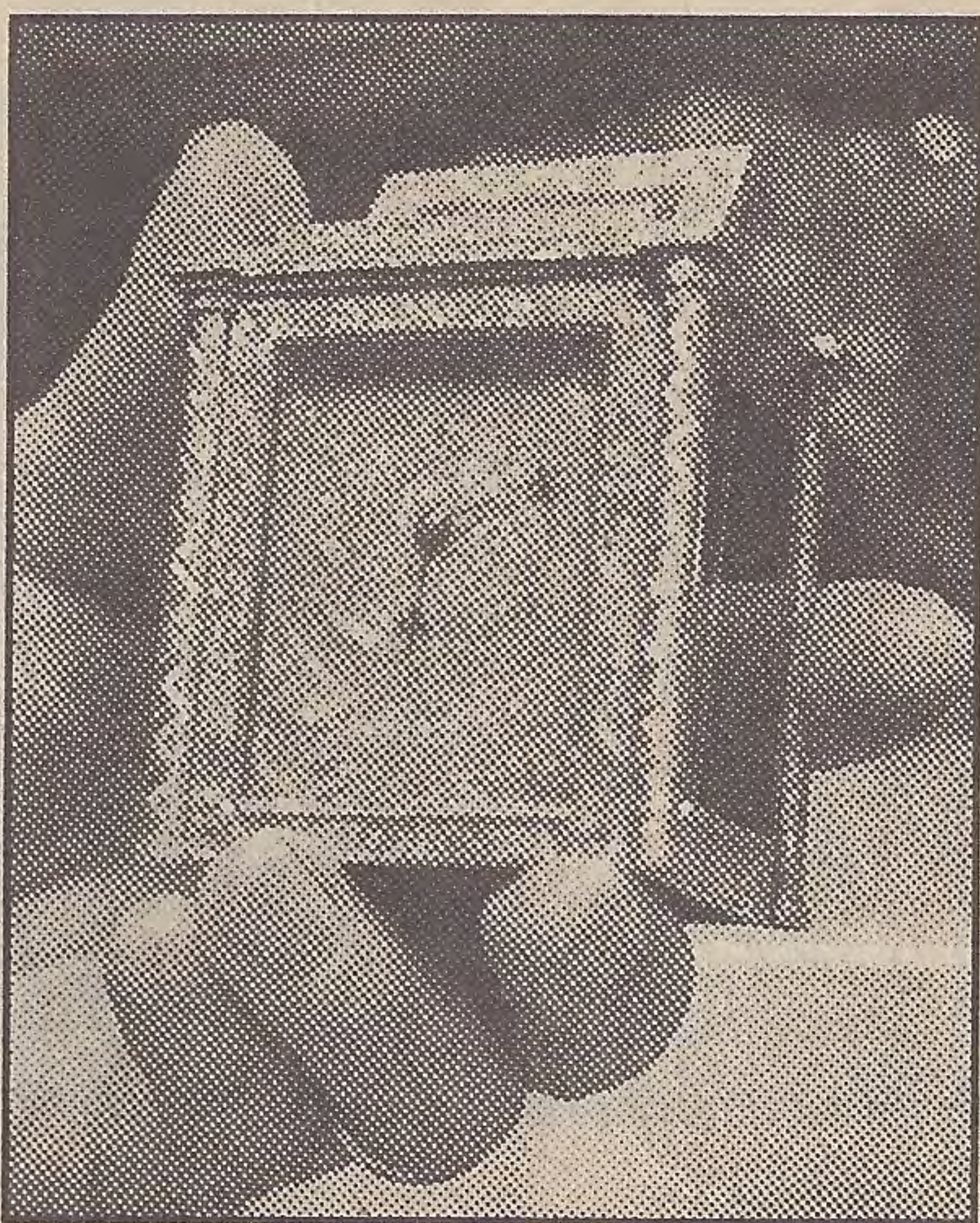
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workshop, where the remains of antique clocks await restoration. "This is an old ebony bracket clock I have to get around to," he said holding up the casing. "It's from the 1700's."

The feel of timelessness is enhanced by the hand-hewn, worm-holed wood beams above his work station, a metal lathe. With high tech precision, he turns the lathe to cut out the individual piece of a gear from a blank circle of brass he has sawed out by hand after scribing it on a brass sheet.

"It takes about 10 minutes to cut a wheel," he said. "But then, you have to put all the windows in to lighten it up. It would take about two and a half to three days to do it so that it would be indistinguishable from any of the other parts in the clock."

In his late teens, Mr. Grunsell began as an apprentice to a leading London watchmaker, W. J. Gazeley. Paid just a pound a week for five years of his seven-year apprenticeship, Mr. Grunsell said the reward was "learner's skill," one that would allow him to hand-file a brass dimple down to the tolerance of within a few



Helen Neafsey for The New York Times

Gerald Grunsell's next project: a carriage clock.

thousandths of an inch. "It's a totally different work ethic, a sense of vocation," he said.

In 1959, Mr. Grunsell said he was sponsored and passed a battery of rigorous hands-on and schematic drawing examinations to be awarded the title of Fellow of the British Horological Institute. Today, the F.B.H.I. appears after his name. He was the 6,900th person to be awarded the title since the Institute formed in 1820.

From 1960 to 1970 Mr. Grunsell operated his own shop, The Horologist, at several locations from the surrounding countryside to central London. It was on a buying trip to the United States in 1970 that he decided to make his home in America. He operated a small shop in White Plains, N.Y., for several years before relocating to East 61st Street in Manhattan. But the fact that New York City never sleeps, he said, made it too noisy for his clockmaker sensibilities.

"The cabs would stop running at about 3 A.M. only to start up again and hour later," he said. "So I moved out to the country, and I bought a house in Ridgefield."

He has been at his Main Street location for about 20 years. The fact that he is one of but a dozen F.B.H.I.'s with shops in the United States, he said, keeps him with a full workload repairing antique clocks.

In addition to drawing clients and customers from New York and Massachusetts, Mr. Grunsell receives shipments for repairs from around the country. On a recent day, his part-time administrative assistant, Nicole Coffitt-Levy, who keeps a computerized client list, talked about a long case clock movement that came in all the way from Portland, Ore.

To assist him with repairs, Mr. Grunsell has several trained clockmakers, most of whom are former engineers, to whom he occasionally farms out work.

"I'm his apprentice," said Richard Sobeck, a Kent clockmaker for more than 30 years. Mr. Sobeck walked over to a grandfather clock and noted how Mr. Grunsell replicated the hands on its face. "Look at the thickness of that hand, yet it has the illusion of delicacy," said Mr. Sobeck. "Modern technology would have just stamped that out."

Along with mechanical clocks and watches, Mr. Grunsell and Mr. Sobeck also transfer their skills to the repair of antique Swiss music boxes, scientific instruments like barometers, even the occasional wind-up mechanical toy. Mr. Sobeck described how Mr. Grunsell would repair and replace each pin on the roller of a Swiss organ music box from 1860.

"We would make anything required," he said.

Repairs aside, Mr. Grunsell said that the sales of expensive, antique British clocks are the main thrust of his business.

"Usually, the buying of a grandfather clock is associated with the buying of a new home or having a child," he said. "It's a heritage thing. And when you think of it, it's been ticking for over 200 years, and this becomes an heirloom."

"And when I sell them, they remain with families," he added. "They're out of circulation for at least 50 years."

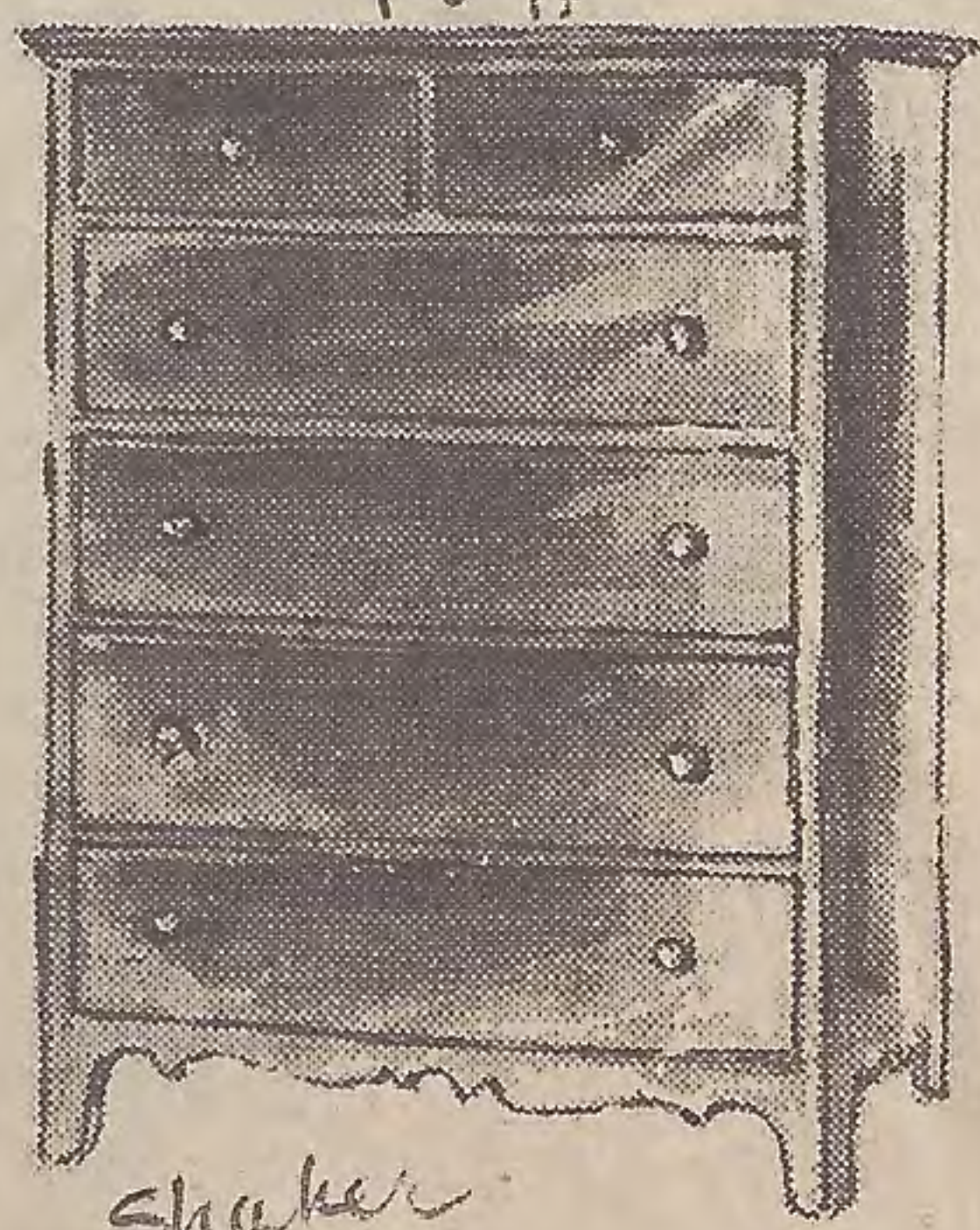
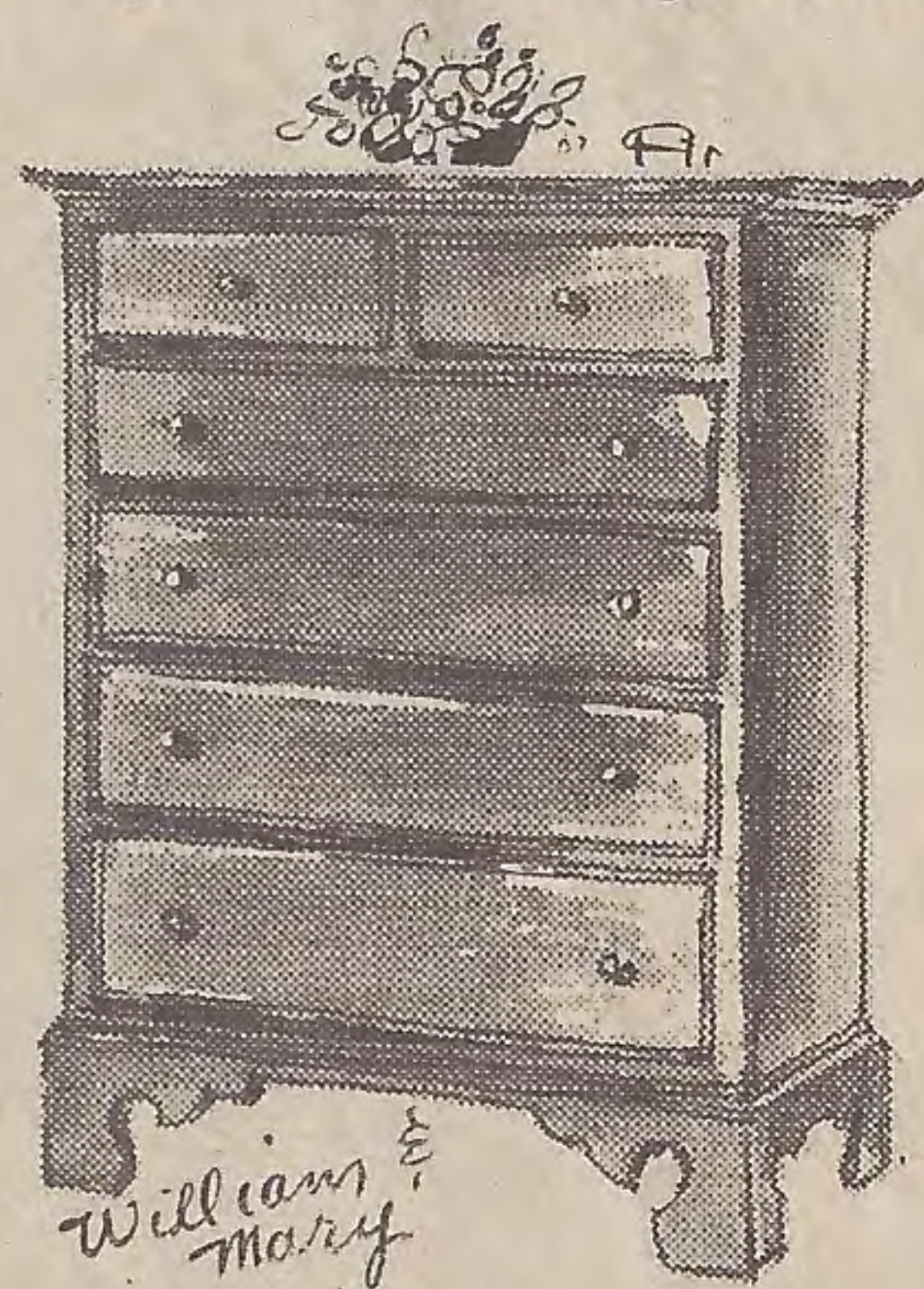
Part of the reason is also the fact that antique clocks can be very costly. Mr. Grunsell's inventory ranges from a low of \$10,000 for a British Thomas Sparrow long case clock made in 1772 to \$250,000 for an early 1700's Christopher Gould grandfather clock made in the early 1700's as a gift for the Medicis. "Antique clocks are pricey but they're a proven investment," Mr. Grunsell said. "A \$3,500 long case clock 10 years ago is now more than \$10,000. That Knib clock built in 1673 over there, the person paid \$1,200 for it in the 1950's. Now it's selling for \$30,000. It's kept up with a lot of investments, or is better, because the resource is dying."

And along with the resources, the art of mechanical clock making is also becoming a much rarer commodity, said Mr. Sobeck.

"There will always be mechanics, good mechanics who can fix them," said Mr. Sobeck. "But the art is where Gerald comes in. Duplicating the style and feel of that period is an art. And when it's gone, it's gone." ■

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