

## Clues In The Clock: The Secret History Of A Timepiece

by **Kaimi Rose Lum**

The grandfather clock in our lobby is chiming again. It stopped ticking before COVID hit and stayed silent through the 14 months that the library was closed to the public, but last Thursday the repairman came and set it right. He returned the next day to make sure it was still set right, because, he said with a look like a stern librarian's, the clock is prone to "misbehaving."

The repairman said that our grandfather clock has a story to tell. Some of it is written on the 95-year-old piece of paper taped inside the case, a yellowed and slightly torn "Declaration in Connection With Artistic Antiquities," stamped by the U.S. Consulate in Dundee, Scotland in April 1927. The form is filled out by one Archie Spence, of Kirkwall, a town in Scotland's Orkney Islands. It took me a while to decipher his spidery fountain-pen script, but what Archie reports is that the clock was built in Kirkwall in the early 1800s by "P. Bews" and that it had been in his family for the previous 100 years. Archie declares that he is "forwarding" the clock to his sister, a Mrs. Harvey in North Grafton, Mass., because "it was willed to her by my father and she is anxious to have some memento of the old home."

The repairman, a horological hobbyist, told me that the clock was "the Rolex of its day" and that whoever owned it would also have been able to afford "a two-horse carriage and a footman." That — plus the Orkney Islands twist — made me curious about Archie and his family. The wonderful thing about working in a library is that curiosity of any sort can be salved by the research materials in its collection. I started with U.S. Census records provided by Heritage Quest online, one of Snow Library's genealogical databases, and from there I was launched into the idiosyncratic world of online Orkney archivists.

What I found out is this:

Archie Spence was a ship's chandler on Bridge Street in Kirkwall in the early 1900s. His father, Nicol Spence, founded the chandlery around 1869. "Nicol Spence & Son" was quite the hub in its day, and it stayed in the Spence family through the 1950s. Some Orkney old-timers recollect its "distinct smell of sailing ships, hemp and tarred ropes."

"Many a Saturday was spent in this shop buying a bamboo cane, a hank, oh, fishing line, a yard. . . . Then off to Scotty Watson's fish shop for a cod head for bait, then down the pier to catch sillocks," recalled Lewis Munro in a 2007 post to the Orkney Photo Library. Others alleged the chandlery was haunted — footsteps on the back stairs, keys rattling and furniture moved overnight. Did our grandfather clock oversee any of this? I wonder.

Nicol Spence and his wife Margaret had four other children and lived in a house grand enough to be given a name, "New Pitten," on Dundas Crescent. There they raised their family, and

perhaps there the clock resided. Their eldest child, born in 1872, was named Margaret after her mother. She was 10 years older than Archie, and at the age of 22 she married David Harvey, a Scot from Loch Winnoch. In 1894 Margaret and David immigrated to the U.S., where David took up work as supervisor of a thread mill in Grafton, Mass. In 1898 they had a daughter, Florence.

When Nicol died in 1926, he left the grandfather clock to Margaret, the "Mrs. Harvey" Archie referred to on his 1927 declaration form. Margaret and David died 25 years later, and the precious "memento of the old home" was handed down to Florence. The granddaughter of a ship's chandler had grown up to be a schoolteacher, married, and moved to Cape Cod, where her husband owned and ran the Smith Bros. hardware store in Orleans. Florence became a trustee of Snow Library. She and her husband had no children, and when she died the clock was given in her memory to the library.

And that is how a tall mahogany case clock built 220 years ago in the Orkney Islands came to grace our main lobby — sometimes to be opened up and gawked at by wonderstruck young children. "Now it's working again, so that's another part of its story," the repairman said to me last week, with a wink. We haven't told him yet that it's been ticking a few minutes too fast. After all that it's been through, the twists and turns of two centuries, I suppose we can't blame it for "misbehaving."

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