

# THE CULVER CLOCKS

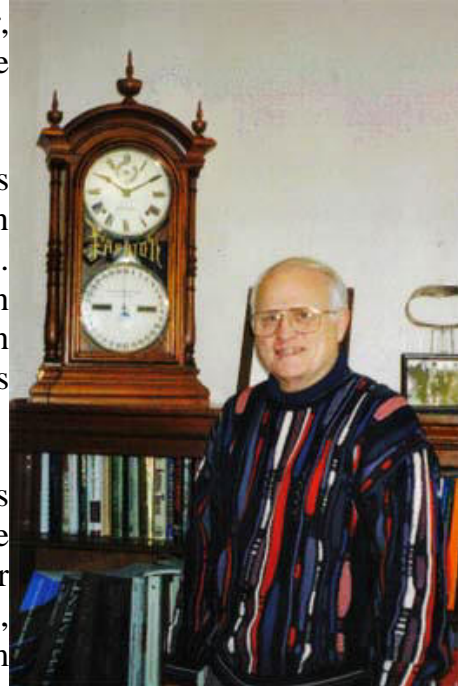
## Part I

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While students of Culver Military Academy are generally aware that the founder of the school, Henry Harrison Culver, was involved in the stove business, almost none know of the family's clock business.

Henry Harrison Culver and his brothers grew up on a farm in Ohio. At the age of fifteen he joined his older brother, Wallace, in St. Louis. Shortly thereafter they were working for John McCreary, a hardware dealer, peddling cast iron cook stoves and sad-irons off the back of wagons in Indiana, Illinois and Missouri.

As young entrepreneurs, the brothers decided to strike out on their own with the founding of a company to sell The Culver Brothers "Farmers Cooking Stove". The stoves, which they sold by the direct sale method from farm house to farm house, were cast for them by a foundry in Covington, Kentucky. The business apparently thrived until the Panic of 1873. With money in extremely short supply, the brothers returned to a farm to wait out the recession.



### The Southern Calendar Clock Company

Farming was, however, not the calling of the Culvers, so in 1875 the brothers decided to try their hand at selling clocks. On March 2, 1875 Henry Harrison, Lucius L. and Wallace W. Culver incorporated the Southern Calendar Clock Co. in St. Louis, Missouri. It is not known exactly what induced them to enter the clock business other than they were "hedging" in the event of a further decline in the stove business and clocks were of general appeal as a household necessity.

Sold under the name of “Fashion”, the clocks were manufactured by the Seth Thomas Clock Co. in Connecticut. The relationship between the two companies was described as long and pleasant. Attesting to the accuracy and reliability of the clocks, the Culvers reported that the Seth Thomas Clock Co. had made approximately thirty thousand “Fashions” for them in the first ten years of the Southern Calendar Clock Co.’s existence, presumably making them Seth Thomas’ largest customer.

There is no exact record of the number of clocks sold, for no records of the Southern Calendar Clock Co. were saved and the Seth Thomas Co. advises that no records exist for that period of time. It has been estimated that each sales group sold a minimum of 100 clocks a month. With nine sales groups, the sales would be around 1,000 per month, and since the company was in business for about fifteen years, it is reasonable to assume that from 175,000 to 200,000 clocks were sold. This is a far cry from the 30,000 clocks the Culvers reported on buying from the Seth Thomas Co. during their first ten years in business.

### The Calendar Clock

Calendar indicators on clocks are ancient in their origin, with Renaissance clocks often having them in one form or another. Calendars were common on handcrafted tall clocks from the late 17th century, and inexpensive Connecticut wooden tall clocks offered simple calendars indicating the day of the month at a slightly additional charge.

The common use of calendars on brass clocks was a phenomenon, which began at the end of the Civil War and continued for about fifty years. “Simple” calendars had a device added which daily tripped a third hand that pointed to numbers 1 through 31 surrounding the rim of the clock dial. These calendars were usually offered as options to existing clock models, often costing only an additional 50 cents to \$1.00.

The “complex” calendars, as found on the “Fashion” clocks were more complicated and expensive. Though not always, these clocks often had separate dials for calendar indications. Usually the complex calendars give the day of the week, day of the month and the month of the year.

The “Fashion” calendars were perpetual, meaning that the mechanism was so geared that the clock would automatically correct for the different days in the month and would even add an extra day in February for leap year.

### The Traveling Salesmen

The procedure of direct sales by traveling salesmen had been well established by the Culvers in their selling of stoves. It was only natural that they would continue with this method of merchandising the clocks. A sales group included a supervisor, hired by the company, who in turn hired a sales force of from ten to twenty men. Each of the three brothers had three supervisors under his control, so the sales force generally varied from 100 to 150 men.

The supervisor was always mounted on a white horse and the salesmen were equipped with a light 'spring wagon', pulled by two mules. A compartment in the rear of the wagon held six or eight clocks, packed in wood boxes. The supervisor had complete responsibility for his group of salesmen and the company's dealings were with him.

The salesmen were often referred to in newspaper articles as the 'gentlemen from the Southern Calendar Clock Co.' The usual stories surrounding "traveling salesmen" obviously existed in the 1800's. The Culver brothers exacted the highest standards and behavior from their salesmen. To quote from The "Fashion" Magazine, which was the closest thing the Southern Calendar Clock Co. had to a catalog:

*"Some traveling men start out in life with the impression that the greatest falsifier is necessarily the most successful. There never was a more mistaken idea, or one calculated to do greater injury to traveling men. Experience teaches us that the most successful men in life have been those who have adhered the most strictly to the truth, no matter if, for the time being, they should lose by . . . We contend and have always advocated, that because a man is from home is the greater reason why he should be circumspect in his manner and upright in his dealings."*

Although the "gentlemen of the Southern Calendar Clock Co." were not high pressure salesmen, they were successful because of hard work and the high quality of their product. The influence exerted by these salesmen was impressive. By establishing a reputation for honesty and fair dealing, they imparted a confidence in the business future of the community. They brought the realization that there were other communities with hard-working, ambitious people, who like themselves, had a desire to improve their condition in life.

The salesmen used scrip, issued by the company, to pay their expenses. At times there was as much as \$10,000 of this scrip in circulation. Contrary to what might be expected, little difficulty was encountered in the use of the scrip, for the salesmen were welcomed by people who having little contact with the outside world, accepted the scrip without question in payment for meals and lodging.

### Marketing

The “Fashion” Magazine, previously mentioned, was not published at regular intervals, but rather as needed with additional testimonials and advertisements to bring them up to date. Booklets of this kind were an accepted part of the direct sales procedure, and were welcomed by people who had little else to read. Several companies were engaged in the preparation and publication of these booklets, which followed the same general outline.

The “Fashion” Magazine had the testimonials of highly satisfied purchasers of the clock on nearly every page. A typical example, which was reprinted from the December 22, 1877 Jacksonville, Alabama Republican read:

*“We, the undersigned citizens of Jacksonville, take pleasure in recommending the salesmen of the Southern Calendar Clock Company to the public as high-toned and honorable gentlemen in every respect. They have made their headquarters at this place over three months, and by their honest dealings, sobriety, and good conduct, established the names of gentlemen well worthy of confidence.”*

The Batesville, Arkansas newspaper of January 17, 187 ran the following:

*“As citizens of Independence and adjoining counties, we desire to add our names in testimony of the superior excellence of the Calendar Clock ‘Fashion Not only is it an exact time keeper, and beautiful ornament, but with its wonderful calendar attachment, becomes truly invaluable to the business man and farmer’*

In addition to the testimonials, there were short pieces about everything from the Great Wall of China and a mother’s influence and counsel to answering the question, “What Tongue Did Christ Speak?”

The parts of the clock and calendar were illustrated in the magazine, enabling a purchaser to order repair or replacement parts. The company maintained a complete supply of parts for the mechanisms, glass for the doors and parts of the case. The clocks were warranted for six months from the date of purchase with the replacement of any defective or broken parts.

Some repair work was probably done by clock makers, but it is likely that many an owner did his own repair or replacement of parts.

*Fred Lintner began his Culver career as a Woodcraft counselor and joined the winter school faculty in 1968 as counselor to Troop B. He joined the Development Department in 1978 in charge of Planned Giving. He was named the department's director in 1992 and served until his retirement in 1998. Not content to sit back, Fred became involved in county politics and now serves as the President of the Marshall County Council, the Fiscal arms of county government. Fred also serves as a member of the board of directors of the St. Joseph Medical Foundation.*

*He has long held a fascination with old clocks and is recognized as an authority on Southern Calendar Clocks.*