

A Book Review

Upstate New York State Clockmaking — Really!

by Bob Frishman

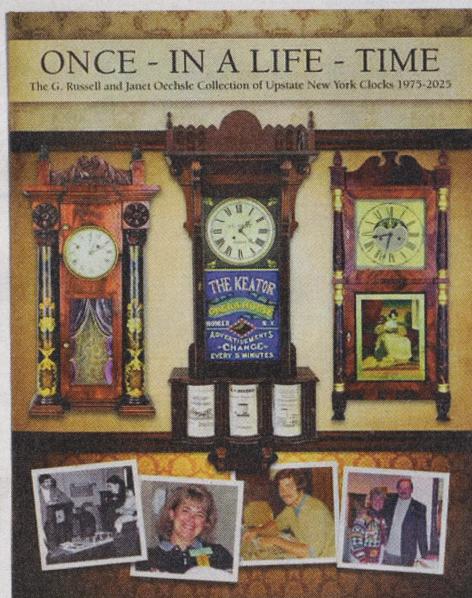
Connecticut—that is where most think that 19th-century factory-produced American clocks originated. Eli Terry (1772-1852), whose mass-produced wood-movement clocks birthed the industry, Seth Thomas (1785-1859), about whom everyone seems to have heard, Chauncey Jerome (1793-1868), whose cheap brass-movement clocks saved the industry in the late 1830s, and dozens more such men were the Connecticut clockmaking entrepreneurs whose names were boldly printed on the clock dials and paper labels that are still seen in large numbers today.

But thanks in large part to collector, restorer, and scholar, Russ Oechsle, it is known that dozens more clockmakers, beginning in 1796, worked in the upstate New York region where Oechsle has lived and researched for more than 50 years. Oechsle is far more than a typical collector; for decades he has edited, published, lectured, volunteered, organized and led groups, meetings, and conferences, donated, and generously shared with institutions and with his countless friends and fellow collectors.

While working his day job for 29 years administrating a district of the New York State United Court System, Oechsle amassed more than 150 examples of New York clocks, as he mined area archives—pre-Google—for their stories. Many of those clocks and makers were featured in his 2003 book, *An Empire in Time: Clocks & Clock Makers in Upstate New York*, coauthored with Helen Boyce and published by the National Association of Watch and Clock Collectors (NAWCC). Written profiles of those makers fill that earlier book's 185 pages.

Once - In A Life - Time: The G. Russell and Janet Oechsle Collection of Upstate New York Clocks 1975-2025 by G. Russell Oechsle

G. Russell Oechsle, 2025, 296 pages, hardbound, \$65 plus S/H from Russ Oechsle, 5 Clinton Street, Homer, New York 13077 or russoechsle@gmail.com.



This new book is different. It documents the highlights of Oechsle's collection with full-page, full-color photographs and descriptions, showing multiple archive-quality images for each clock to reveal its hidden movement, interior labels, case carving and stenciling, and other distinctive attributes. As the book's subtitle reveals, Oechsle's wife, Janet (d. 2023), was a key partner and collaborator, as well as being popular throughout the NAWCC for her ceaseless energetic volunteer work.

Most of early 19th-century clocks in the collection are rare; most maker names are unfamiliar; and most deserve to be known. The author's first purchase, in 1975, was a stenciled column-and-cornice shelf clock, circa 1831, by L. & J. Frisbee of Chittenango. There are wood-movement shelf clocks including one, circa 1836-37, by E.W. Adams of Seneca Falls; a circa 1834-36 example by Bunnell & Scoville of Owego; and another by Carter & Weller of Stockbridge, circa 1839. Most have large colorful reverse-painted glass tablets or silvered mirrors in the case doors.

Brass movements, usually of the frugal "strap" or skeletonized styles to save on costly metal, were mounted in examples by clockmakers such as Jared Arnold Jr. of Amber, 1835-37; Philip L. Smith, 1836-42, of Marcellus; and Munger & Benedict of Auburn, 1831-33.

Better recognized among antiquers is the Baird Clock Company of Plattsburgh. Toward the end of the century, Baird Clock Company manufactured distinctive dark-red papier-mâché advertising wall clocks, but the company bought eight-day movements from Seth Thomas. Best known are clocks by the Ithaca Calendar Clock Company from after the Civil War. The innovative perpetual calendar mechanisms were made in Ithaca, but the timepiece movements were shipped from Connecticut.

Like other collectors of advancing age, Oechsle realized that these clocks needed more enduring homes where they would not again be dispersed and under-appreciated. Eighty-two were donated to the New York State Museum at Albany, including a circa 1848 Andrew Meneely tower clock movement, 43" high, that Oechsle completely restored. Other historically significant examples went to the NAWCC Museum, Columbia, Pennsylvania, and to the American Clock & Watch Museum, Bristol, Connecticut.

Sixty-plus makers are represented in the book, creating not only a comprehensive permanent visual record of the author's unique collection but also a valuable resource, joining his 2003 book, for any collector with an uncommon 19th-century upstate New York clock.

The book's foreword, by Chris H. Bailey, a preeminent author, curator, and scholar of American clockmaking, describes his long friendship with Russ Oechsle, and he writes that "this compilation will round out the amazing published historical data and photographs of these rare and scarce timekeepers."