

# Round Up

Montgomery County

## Artisan Continues Tradition of Fine Clockmaking

Text and photograph by Sandra Weber

In a workshop behind his house, James Shott of Schwenksville cuts and carves planks of walnut, tiger maple and cherry wood into majestic grandfather clocks. One of only a handful of artisans building tall-case clocks today, Shott is keeping alive the tradition of fine clockmaking, a skill prevalent in Montgomery County from 1750 to 1830 when several prominent clockmakers lived there.

"People just love grandfather clocks," he says. "Many people have fond memories of the family clock and decide they want one of their own."

Shott, who worked as a cabinetmaker for 25 years, began to make clocks after studying hundreds of them, including his father-in-law's original clock from Sunnyside. He admits he made lots of mistakes on his first clock, but he soon mastered the craft. "A clock is one of the most challenging projects for a woodworker," he says.

Shott reproduces styles, such as the Montgomery, the Hilltown and the Skippack Creek Clock, which were prominent in the 1700s and 1800s. For inspiration, he travels to museums, historical sites and private homes to examine old clocks.

Shott's clocks are not exact replicas of the antiques. Instead of nine feet tall, as most tall-case clocks made in the 1700s were, his clocks are about eight feet tall to accommodate today's lower ceilings. Though he uses some modern tools to cut boards, Shott relies on the same construction techniques that clockmakers used 200 years ago. He hand cuts the dovetails, rosettes and finials, and since he does not use nails, all joints are pegged mortise and tenon.

Shott says he often sells clocks to family members who didn't inherit the heirloom clock or to those who can't afford to pay \$30,000 to \$100,000 for an antique. Sometimes people want a custom-made clock to fit a certain space or to match existing furnishings.

One of his most extraordinary requests was for a reproduction of a mahogany Philadelphia Chippendale case with a brass dial featuring a rocking ship. "It is satisfying to think that their family members will still be admiring my clock 200 years from now," he says.

Visits to Shott's woodshop must be arranged by appointment. His clocks can also be seen at the Traditional American Craft Show hosted by *Early American Life* magazine at the Valley Forge Convention Center in September. For more information about Perkiomen Clock Co., contact James Shott at 610-287-4142 or [www.perkiomenclockco.com](http://www.perkiomenclockco.com). ▼

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James Shott will take four or five months to make a batch of four grandfather clocks. His tall-case clocks sell for \$9,000 to \$14,000 each, but he also makes a dwarf clock, which sells for around \$4,000. Shott makes the tall case of the clock and works with two other craftsmen to complete the clock: one supplies the eight-day movement and other metal parts, and the other craftsman hand-paints the metal dials with popular patterns.

## The History of the Grandfather Clock

Tall-case clocks were first made in England for kings, queens and nobles. The clocks' large mechanical parts made the pieces large, and the tall case that was needed to house and protect the long pendulum was usually decorated and trimmed to reflect the furniture styles of the era. Eventually clockmakers brought down the costs, but tall-case clocks were still only affordable to wealthy families. A tall-case clock in a home was an unmistakable symbol of the family's social status.

The clocks were called tall-case clocks until 1876, when the song "My Grandfather's Clock" swept the country and the nickname of "grandfather clock" stuck. ■