

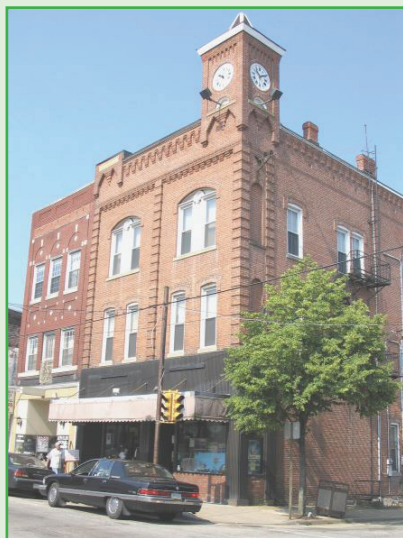


We preserve our local history, promote the history of the Norwin Community and embrace the opportunity to educate the Community about the people, places and events that comprise the history of Irwin, North Irwin, and North Huntingdon Township.

2023 SPRING NEWSLETTER



McWilliams Bldg 1914: Built in 1877, the McWilliams Building was originally a two-story structure. The third floor and clock tower were added in 1905. (Postmarked December 8, 1914, this postcard is from the Jean Soyke collection.)



The McWilliams Building, at the corner of Third and Main Streets, was enlarged in 1905 and restored in 1993 and 2014. It has become a symbol of the revitalization of Downtown Irwin. (Photo courtesy of Jim Drylie)

Irwin's Town Clock . . . an Historic Landmark!

by Bob Cupp

On a sunny Saturday morning in 2005, well-known Madison watchmaker, Jack Keck, and lifetime Irwin resident, Jim Drylie, were together at the corner of Main and Third Streets in Irwin. Well, they weren't exactly "on the street," they were three stories above, maintaining Irwin's Town Clock. The McWilliams Building's brick clock tower was like a second home for these two gentlemen. Over the years, they became bound together by the passion and commitment they shared for the clock.

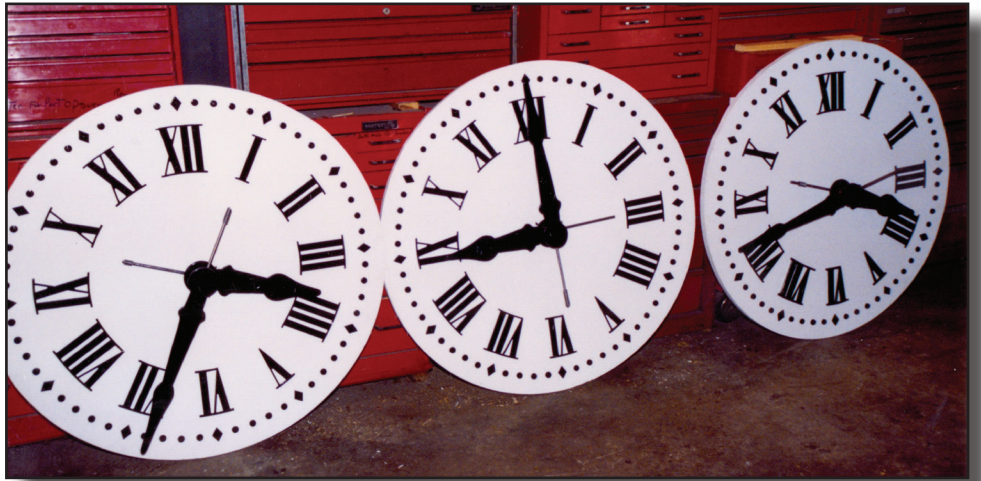


Jim Drylie (left) and Jack Keck (right), Irwin's "Partners in Time," regularly climbed 68 steps to reach the roof of the McWilliams Building where the clock tower is located. (Photo by Bob Cupp)

Unless you're from the Irwin area, you probably don't know Irwin has a town clock. It may not be as famous as London's Big Ben or the Kaufmann's Clock in Pittsburgh, but nonetheless, it's a beautiful display of craftsmanship in downtown Irwin. The stately tower clock has been watching over the streets of Irwin for well beyond a century now.

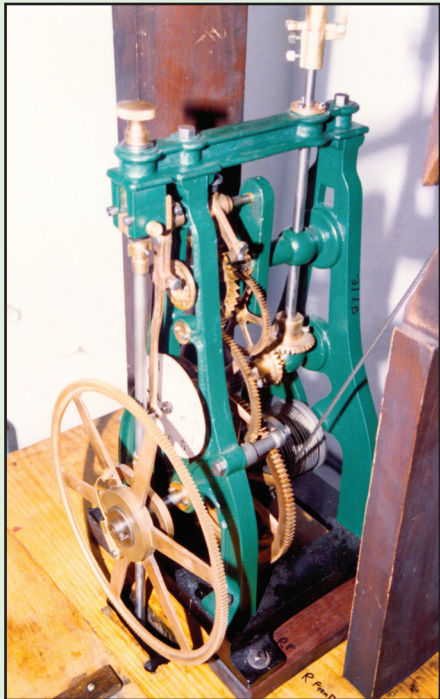
Jim Drylie explained, *"The Irwin tower clock is uncommon because nearly all tower clocks today, even most restored ones, have been electrified. This clock, however, is mechanically powered as it was originally."* You can rely on the accuracy of anything Drylie ever said about the clock. He compiled a comprehensive history of this unique Irwin timepiece.





The clock is an 1875 Seth Thomas Model 127, manufactured between 1896 and 1905. Drylie described its operation: *"An escarpment, or toothed wheel, governs the let-down of power by controlling the weight, which is connected to the clock by a cable through a series of three gears and the escape wheel. The cable is wound around a cylinder at the back of the clock. A wheel drives two 90-degree pinions, which in turn drive a vertical shaft through a differential above the clock unit. This distributes the power to drive the three clock dials."*

The person responsible for the clock's existence was Thomas L. McWilliams. The McWilliams Building was constructed in 1877 as a two-story structure with a clock mounted on the exterior front wall. In 1904, McWilliams awarded a contract to John F. Graham to add a third story to the building with a clock tower on the northeast corner and a clock with three dials. If you look closely at the building's brick facing, you'll notice a difference in the bricks between the second and third floors, especially on the North side.





Jack Keck (right) inspected, lubricated and fine-tuned the clock for two decades after he brought it back to life in 1993. Jim Drylie (left) learned more about the clock's history than anyone could have imagined. (Photo by Bob Cupp)



The clock tower lights up the night above Irwin's Main Street. (Photo by Larry Cole)

When "The Republican Standard" newspaper reported McWilliams' death in November, 1918, the obituary provided insight into the building's landmark clock. *"He established a clock in its tower, of his own design and, for the most part, of his own construction, and thousands have benefited by the three great dials that have become familiar to them as they traversed the streets. Its winding mechanism was an invention exclusively his own and was a result of his native genius, coupled with many experiments. The device is electrical and automatic and is absolutely self-acting. When it unwinds, it instantly winds itself up, without push buttons or any other action, except that within its own mechanism."*

The clock began keeping time in 1905; no one seems to know exactly when it quit. However, long-time Irwin resident, William Brentzel, occasionally climbed up the fire escape ladder to lubricate the clock mechanism prior to entering the Army in 1942. When he returned home in 1945, he found that it was no longer operating. Sometime during his absence, the clock tower door had blown open. Exposure to harsh weather, dirt, and bird and bat droppings, combined with a lack of maintenance, made time stand still for the next half-century.

Master watchmaker, Jack Keck, first noticed that the clock wasn't operating when he was still a student in 1948. Because of his love for unique time pieces, he offered to repair it. However, he was unable to obtain permission. Over the years, Keck volunteered his services several times, but couldn't generate any interest from the building's owners.

Things changed after Tom and Karen Witman acquired the property in 1991. The Witmans were delighted when approached by Bill Kunkle of the Downtown Irwin Business Commission for permission to restore the clock tower and clock. Tom, a charter member of the Norwin Historical Society, believes in preserving the past. Restoration of Irwin's Town Clock presented a unique opportunity to do just that.

A Clock Project Coordinating Committee, consisting of Bill Kunkle (chairman), Joe Plues, Lenny Santimyer and Jim Drylie, was formed to oversee the restoration. Drylie was asked to research the history of the clock. He made use of every reference at his disposal, including books, post cards, the Norwin Public Library's microfilm of old newspapers, Jack Keck's collection of clock publications, and old deeds provided by Tom Witman. Witman observed, *"The more Jim Drylie investigated the history of the clock, the more interesting it became."*





Jim Beiter removing dial from tower clock, 1993. (Photo courtesy of Renee Drylie)

Dave Slafka installing lights on clock tower, 1993. (Photo courtesy of Renee Drylie)



Jim Beiter was selected as general contractor to repair the tower interior, remove and replace the weathered clock dials. Dave Slafka was contracted to perform all electrical work, including the addition of exterior lighting. Funding for repair of the tower and electrical work to illuminate the clock was provided by Irwin's 125th Anniversary Committee, which donated \$7,000 for the project, using surplus funds from the 1989 celebration.

Jack Keck's unadvertised Madison shop was known throughout the region and the country as the place to take rare and antique clocks and watches for repair. He always tackled the difficult jobs no one else could or would attempt. No job was more challenging than this one, but he had been waiting for this opportunity for over four decades. Without Keck volunteering his time and unique expertise over a nine-month period, restoration of the clock would have been an impossible task.



A birds-eye view looking South on Main Street, from the roof of the clock tower building. (Photo courtesy of Larry Cole)

Keck took the clock to his shop, dismantled it and shot blasted the brass mechanism. New parts were machined to replace those he couldn't restore. He also made new hands from poplar wood and replaced missing or broken numerals. When it gets too cold outside, the oil used to lubricate the clock becomes too thick. Keck concocted a way to thin the oil, eliminating that problem. He found a way to overcome every obstacle.

Drylie compiled a 22-page history, as well as dozens of photos and newspaper clippings that tell the story of Irwin's Town Clock. Somewhere along the way, the clock became part of his life. Beginning in 1993, when the restoration was completed, he devoted much of his time to keeping the clock running smoothly. For years, he met Jack Keck at the McWilliams Building every Saturday at precisely 1:00 p.m. to assist with inspection, maintenance and fine-tuning. According to Tom Witman, who operated his "Tee Square" business from the adjoining Third Street building, "You could set your watch by their arrival."



A beautiful weather vane was added to the clock tower in 2014 by the building's current owner, Larry Cole, as part of a restoration of the clock and tower. It features a running horse with a brass head and copper body. (Photo by Larry Cole)



Mr. Cole stated, "Because the tower is such an important part of Irwin's visual image, it was incorporated into Irwin's logo in 2010. I think preserving relics from our past, like the clock tower, is important. It helps keep the historic feel of the building and the surrounding architecture." (Photo by Bob Cupp)

In 2003, Keck moved to State College to be closer to his grandchildren. However, he still maintained a shop in Madison. You'd find him there in the old Walt's Garage every Saturday because, *"It's hard to abandon customers you've had for 50 years."* He wasn't about to abandon Irwin's Town Clock either. Drylie kept close tabs on the clock and reported any problems; then they met about once a month at 7:45 a.m. for clock maintenance. When you saw the two men together, it was apparent they had become good friends. The clock brought them together as partners with a common cause – maintaining time in Irwin.

Of course, time never stands still. In 2013, the building was sold to local businessman, Larry Cole, who also operates Reliant Systems, located adjacent to the McWilliams Building. Shortly after purchasing the building, Mr. Cole became the clock's caretaker, and continues to serve in that capacity.



Irwin's "Partners in Time" passed away shortly after the change in ownership. - 89-year-old Mr. Drylie in December, 2014; and 87-year-old Mr. Keck in February 2015. Just prior to Mr. Drylie's death, the clock tower got another facelift. The roof shingles were replaced; the masonry was re-pointed; and the tower's aluminum soffit and fascia were replaced with copper. The clock faces and hands were refurbished and the clock mechanism was cleaned and oiled. Also, a very attractive weather vane was installed above the tower.

The original clock tower had a flag pole on top that was removed during the 1940's. Larry Cole said in a 2014 Tribune-Review article, *"I didn't want to put a flag pole up there because it requires somebody going out on the roof twice a day to raise and lower the flag. So we're going with the weather vane instead."* The 44-inch-long weather vane features a running horse with a brass head and copper body. It was a perfect addition to the clock tower.

The November 15, 1918 edition of The Republican Standard had this to say about Thomas L. McWilliams, the man who created the clock in 1905: *"Mr. McWilliams, in the truest sense of the word, was a good citizen, always ready for any project that would benefit and elevate the town and the people."* The same could easily be said of the men responsible for maintaining the clock since it was brought back to life in 1993. Irwin is very fortunate to have such dedicated caretakers watching after its town clock and clock tower for all these years.

END

HOLIDAY HOUSE TOUR - 2022

On December 3, 2022, we resumed our in-person Holiday House Tour. We were enthusiastic about presenting this tour again, after a two year physical hiatus, due to Covid-19. Although we were able to present a Virtual Tour the past two years, there is no substitute for viewing the beautiful homes in person!

Since the first year of our tour in 1996, we have been able to showcase well over 140 homes in our Norwin community. The preparation done by our hosts, the efforts put forth by our Historical Society staff and volunteers to organize the tours, our sponsors and supporters, and loyal following by the Tour participants, are examples of a community coming together in the true spirit of the Christmas season.

This year's holiday House Tour was well attended, ran smoothly, and everyone seem to enjoy the evening. We know that many were thrilled to again participate in the physical tour.

Thank you to all who attended and volunteered for this event!



Very soon (in early Spring) it will be time to start looking for homes for our 2023 Holiday House Tour. which will be held on Saturday, December 2nd. If you, or anyone you know, may be interested in being on tour this year, please contact us before August (the sooner, the better) at Norwinhistoricalsociety.org or call 412-759-9771.

**We look forward to another great and successful
2023 Holiday House Tour!**



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Thank you for your interest in donating to the Norwin Historical Society! Your financial donation helps us to continue in our mission to preserve our local history, promote the history of the Norwin Community and embrace the opportunity to educate the Community about the people, places and events that comprise the history of Irwin, North Irwin, and North Huntingdon Township.

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If you also have artifacts or documents that you believe would complement our collection, please tell us about them:

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Norwin Historical Society
304 Main Street
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YOUR DONATION IS GREATLY APPRECIATED. THANK YOU!

All questions should be directed to our website or to the address below.

REV 11/2020

NORWIN HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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2023 SPRING NEWSLETTER



TO:

*Your gift to the
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helps to preserve our history!*