

[Charles Saum]

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Charles Saum

Yankee—employed at Seth Thomas for 63 years

Elm street, Thomaston

Conversation with Mr.Saum was rather unproductive, despite his lengthy service with the company, and he referred to several other old men who, he said, would be better able to give me information on the “old days”. To put him at ease I told him I wasn't looking for any particular sort of information and eventually he began to {reminisce?}. As with Mr Richmond, however, his language was devoid of any trace of the jargon of his trade. I reproduce it as best I can from memory.

“So you heard the story about Aaron Thomas and the foreign clock? Yes, that's true all right. Aaron was a great character. Son of the Original Seth Thomas. Superintendent? No, he was president of the company.

“Aaron was a great hand for playing tricks, but all in a spirit of fun, there wasn't anything mean about them. Just to give you an example, I remember one time he was coming through our room and he stopped at Farrell Fox's bench, Farrell had a new razor he hadn't used at all yet and he had it on a shelf up above his bench, brand-new box and all.

“The old man spotted the razor and he stopped and took it down from the shelf. 'Mind if I look at it?' says he. 'Go right ahead and look.' says Farrell laughing, 'I ain't using it on your time.'

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"So Aaron took it out of the box and drew his thumb along the edge. 'It ain't very sharp, Farrell,' he says. 'Maybe I could sharpen it up a bit for you.'

"Well, all right," says Farrell, but he doesn't care much for the idea of anybody monkeying with his new razor. So the old man takes it over to a grindstone we had and goes to work on it, while Farrell was sitting on the anxious seat. Pretty soon he brings it back and hands it to Farrell as solemn as an owl.

"There you are, Farrell," he says; "better than when it came out of the factory." It was honed right down to nothing. Farrell's face dropped about a foot, but he didn't say nothing and the old man walked away, while the rest of us had a good laugh. But the next day Aaron sent up a brand new razor, just like the one he'd spoiled.

"That's the kind of thing that went on in those days. There was more real friendship between the men and the bosses. We used to have a stock room that was made to order for people to hide in.

"Aaron would catch some of the men loafing around there 'most every day, but he was cute about it. He knew they were there, usually hiding behind big piles of cases and he got so he was wise to all the good hiding places. Some of them even used to sleep there. So he'd walk through the room whistling or humming and make believe he was going out the other door.

"But he'd jump behind a case as quick as a flash and work his way up along the back of the room. Every ten steps or so he'd scare up a man, just like he was flushing partridge. When he caught 'em he'd just give 'em a good boot in the tail and holler: 'Get the hell back where you belong and don't let me catch you out here again or by Godfrey's I'll fire you!'"

"But he never fired anybody and he never had any particular watch set over the stock room. They used to say he enjoyed it, made kind of a game out of it.

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“None of that kind of stuff goes on these days. Everything is business. And with all their business ways they don't make the clocks they used to make. Others have told you the same thing? Well it's true. They don't make the clocks and they haven't got the type of workman they used to have.

“Clock making isn't the trade it used to be. Too much speed and efficiency, they call it. You can't tell 'em anything either. Men that have 3 worked there all their lives and know the business from the inside out have to take orders from young whippersnappers who don't know an escapement from a balance wheel.

“You go to see Art Botsford, son, he'll tell you more in ten minutes about old time clock making than I can tell you in an hour.”

It might be well to remark here that Mr. Saum's unconcealed bitterness toward the new regime in clock making seems to be general among the old timers throughout this clock making community.

For 125 years clock making has been the mainstay of the town, and the name Seth Thomas, natives will tell you with pride, has become throughout most of the civilized world synonymous with clock perfection. From generation to generation, up to the World War period and possibly a little after, clock makers proud of their craft have passed on their knowledge father to son and the highest possible praise of a man was to say “He is a good clockmaker.” Introduction of machinery and the abolition of many of the ancient methods and operations has brought about a drastic change and the old clock makers are bewildered and resentful. Nothing will convince them that the product of the present day is not inferior to the clock made 50 years ago, and it may be that they are right.