

## [Living Lore of New England]

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Field Worker Francis Donovan,

Thomaston, Connecticut.

Field Copy

for

LIVING LORE IN NEW ENGLAND.

Subject,

Connecticut Clockmakers.

Informant:-

Arthur Botsford, Native Born.

80 years of age. Retired.

Mr. Botsford worked as a machine

operator for Seth Thomas Clock Co.,

Thomaston, Conn., for a period of sixty years. Retired spring of 1938.

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Clock Makers' Folklore

Field Worker: Francis Donovan

Thomaston, Connecticut.

### SETH THOMAS CLOCK COMPANY.

Employees of this company were selected as our clients for investigation because of the age of the company, its influence in the community, control over political, economic, and social life, and reputation in the trade for both workmanship and attitude toward employees. Long term service in this plant has been the rule; the personnel were almost always of either native Yankee or German parentage, steady, independent, thoroughly reliable workers. Mr E.R.Kaiser, (German) present first selectman of Thomaston, worked for "the company" for over forty years; Arthur Botsford, (Yankee), another Thomaston man we have interviewed, has sixty-five years service with Seth Thomas Clock Company behind him and has retained a remarkable store of local legend and industrial folklore.

Thomaston is a village of 4188 population in the valley of the Naugatuck just north of Waterbury. Once known as Plymouth Hollow, Thomaston was chosen by Seth Thomas, (1785-1859), as the site for his clock shop in [1812?]. Mr Thomas owned the stores, residences, controlled the church and the town hall, and even the little brass mill that rolled sheet metal for his clock works. He dominated the local scene until his death and, even after Seth died, the Thomas family ran the town. Aaron Thomas, Aaron's son Edward, and then William T Woodruff were successive heads of the clock shop.

The Thomaston school children used to chant: "Ashes to ashes Dust to dust if the Case Shop don't get you The Movement Shop must ." And they were right. 15044 2 Arthur Botsford, Litchfield Street, Thomaston, Conn., retired from active work in the spring of 1938 after a clock-making career that started when he was fifteen and continued for sixty-five years. Most of his time in the mill was spent as a machine operator and he ran them

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all. Botsford owns an 1852 map of Plymouth Hollow, boxes of spare parts for clocks and watches, old tools and outmoded clocks that keep better time than any modern timepiece. He knows the reason “why” behind almost every shift in process, in company attitude toward the worker and the trade, His memory is clear and his mind is alert. Botsford's hangout is at the firehouse, where other old cronies gather to discuss the problems of the machine age and to regretfully relive the good old days. This old worker has preserved a “time book”, over seventy years old, that he salvaged from a truckload of old records the janitor was carrying to the scrap dump. This old book is a journal of Botsford's own service with the company, carrying his work record from the day he entered the mill the first time on down to the year when he reports more efficient time keeping records were adopted. Every employee entered his name in that old Day Book, made notation as to the time he worked and what his job was for each day. Botsford runs his stubby finger over the entries and will relate exactly what happened on a given date, and why. “Look here,” he says. “That shows the exact date McLaughlin's boy died of typhoid fever. He worked up till Wednesday....the rest of the days are blank after his name. Here's the last day we worked eleven hours. Then the new law went into effect. And here is the daisy of them all....” Botsford pointed to a blank page, dated sometime in April, 1873 “All gone...young and old,” it reported in fading ink. “That meant that P.T.Barnum was playing in Waterbury.”

3 Botsford rambles, as one expects an old man will, but he converses freely about his WORK and the affairs of the town. He will not unlimber about his personal affairs, nor does he care to inform the reader as to his activities “off the lot”. Botsford speaks, from here on:— “My father came here in '47 from South Britain. (Conn.). I can remember hearin' him tell about the first railway through these parts and how he and some others walked all the way from South Britain to down around Seymour, or some such place, to see the first train. My Dad worked for Sanford four years after he came here and then he got a job in the clock shop and worked there till he died.” “There were to places in town and one in Plymouth where they used to make clock parts... not the complete article, understand...but just parts. I guess they sold to Seth Thomas, yes, I presume likely that was the principal market. One of the factories was owned by Sam Sanford over there on the corner of the

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street that's named after him... 'Sanford Avenue.'" "They made pedulum rods, wire bells, and verges there. I remember when old Sam got killed. Up off High Street there used to be a quarry and Sam and Ed O'Connell were up there quarrying out flag stones. I worked over in the Movement Shop at the time, and from the top floor you could see way over the hills. All that part that's [Judson?] Street, and Walnut Street and upper High Street now was just bare hillside and it was the fall of the year; from the top windows of the Movement Shop you could see all the people scurrying and gathering like ants. Looked as if the whole town was there." 11/3/38

Arthur Botsford

Litchfield Street,

Yankee—employed by Seth Thomas Clock Co. for 65 years. Mr. Botsford is the oldest [living?] employe of the company in point of service. His long record, beginning as a boy of 15, was climaxed last spring by retirement from active work. He has no diaries nor scrapbooks, but has however, a most remarkable method of refreshing his memory which I shall describe fully later in this report. His remembrance of exact dates he says is not good, but I believe it may be better than he is willing to vouch for. I believe in many ways he approaches the ideal informant. though he lacks familiarity with the finer phases of the trade, having spent virtually all of his lengthy service as an operator of various machines. Mr. Botsford showed me a map of Thomaston dated 1852, when the community was known as "Plymouth Hollow," and embellished by engravings of the various factories and buildings of note then [extant?]. These included the two plants in which the Seth Thomas product was manufactured as well as a reproduction of a smaller shop called "The C.F. Morse Clock Co.," and located in the Reynolds Bridge section. This was apparently a [short-lived?] venture, for little is known of it today, according to Mr. Botsford, and there is no printed record of the concern in [existence?]. He said he believed there were a few old C.F. Morse clocks still to be found in Thomaston, however. [?]

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“Seth Thomas as you know, came here in 1813,” said Mr. Botsford. “He built his shops and established his business then, but he acquired most of his property in the early thirties. Not many people remember now that the old man branched out into the cotton business at one time.

“The bell from the old Cotton Mill, by the way, made in Hartford in 1833, is still in the cellar of the old building that used to house the Thomaston National bank on Elm street.

“Well, sir, they had to stop making cotton goods when the war broke out, and then they moved the clock metal works up to the old Cotton Mill and still continued to make the cases in what is known to this day as the Case shop on South Main street. Old Seth, by the way, used to buy his brass, but he couldn't get it when he wanted it. So he built the rolling mill, and that is now the Plume and Atwood Manufacturing Co.

“Not many people still remember that, either, and I doubt if you'll find many records of that transaction. It burned down in 1856 and was rebuilt the same year, and there is one shaft in operation today under the floor of that mill that was used in the original building. There's something for you to write about.

“After the death of old Seth Thomas in 1859, the mill, as I said, passed into the hands of the Plume and Atwood Company. It used to be a treat for the people of this town—I can remember doing it as a boy—to go over to the mill and see the big engine. It was a regular walking-beam steamboat engine—imagine that—and they had stairs leading up to a little gallery where you could stand and watch it in operation.

“Then sometime in the middle sixties they talked about making marine clocks. Some of the stockholders objected to the idea, thought they'd lose money on it—so they formed a new company—called it Seth Thomas Sons & Co., and they took the old sawmill in the west part of the town and built on to the west wing. But the dispute got settled or arbitrated or whatever you call it and shortly afterward they merged into one company again.

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“Marine clock? That was kind of a catch name, probably one of the earliest attempts at high pressure advertising. It was made with balance wheel instead of pendulum. They had a slogan for it printed on advertising cards about the size of a postcard. It read: 'It stands up, Lays down, and Runs all the time.' They called It 'marine' simply because it would run on the ocean, same's it would on land.

“That's how the old Marine shop got its name, and the Thomaston Marine Band, organized God knows how many years ago—more than 50 anyway, and made up of men who worked in the Marine shop. They began making watches there in the eighties, they discontinued the watches in 1914. Then they moved the metal workings department from the movement shop to the Marine shop until in 1938 they moved the whole darn business down [on?] south Main street, under one roof.

“They started making tower clocks sometime in the seventies. They built the Centennial Clock in '76, the one that went to Independence hall, Philadelphia. The two big Colgate clocks are probably their most famous products.

“But first of all they made these.” Mr. Botsford produced an ancient wooden movement, of which he was obviously proud. “I could take this clock today, and put a pendulum and a dial on it and start it and I bet it'd keep perfect time. It ain't any good as an antique though because it's a 30 hour and collectors don't want nothin' but eight days. “Did I ever hear the old clockmakers use their own special names for anything? Can't say's I did. They used to call cannon pinions “center sockets” and spring boxes “barrels” that's the sort of thing—but it didn't have any meaning.

“Yes I remember Aaron Thomas and one thing that sticks in my memory is an example of the famous temper Aaron had. He used to ride back and forth [between?] the shops on horseback—had a horse that had seen Army service and carried a big brand on its flank. I was coming along the street one day and I see Aaron stop to talk to one of his farm workmen. The horse wouldn't stand still and Aaron—he had a strap hung with

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clockweights he was carrying from one shop to the other—and he just swung it down and thrashed that horse till it behaved. He had a high temper—and in some respects he was a peculiar man

[“There's?"] another thing I want to tell you about. Years ago there was a lot of deaf and dumb people working in the shops. Must have been as many as twenty or twenty-five of them. No, I don't know as they were any better clockmakers than ordinary folks. Reason they worked there I guess to that Frank Crossman, he used to be superintendent of one of the plants, had a deaf and dumb brother and he kind of felt sorry for them I guess, and gave them jobs. “I've got a steel engraving here of Seth Thomas.” Mr Botsford brought out an album, turned a few pages, and pointed to the engraving. Mr. Thomas, encased to the chin in what used to be called a stock, I believe, and with long white sideburns and white hair combed in bangs over his forehead looked like a character from Dickens. “I got it out of one of the company's old catalogs,” Mr/Botsford told me. “There ain't many pictures of old Seth around,” he added proudly. “No there's no Swiss clockmakers in town, and none that ever came here, s'far as I know,” he said. “But I tell you what happened after the Civil War.

“A lot of Germans came here and distributed themselves around. Some went to Clock factories in Winsted and New Haven and some came here. They worked in this country quite a few years till they got the idea of clock manufacture, and then they started a big clock factory over in Germany. The Seth Thomas agent in London bought one of their clocks and sent it over here, and they found out it was patterned exactly after the Seth Thomas.

“What's that? Yes, German clockmakers are good, individually. But they didn't know anything about mass production. Oh, yes, I'll grant you German clockmakers know their business. They have to be able to assemble a clock before they can call themselves clockmakers. But they had to copy American manufacturing.

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“I saw the movement they sent over here, and that was in 1888. They say they had a [monstrous big shop over there, biggest in the world?].

“And I'll tell you something else young fellow, (and by the way I'd like to understand that my name won't be used in connection with this stuff )—Back in the eighties someone in [Meriden?] invented a metal pinion to be cast with gears and wheels complete. They peddled it around to the clock companies on this section without success—nobody could see it.

“After a while a company started making them out in LaSalle, Illinois, and that company is now Westclox, which is the parent organization of General Times Instruments, which owns Seth Thomas. Figure that out. [If?] Seth Thomas had bought that pinion maybe they'd still be making clocks on their own hook.”