

The Court House Tower, Bell, and Clock

Last week we heard a little about the building of the Court House and how the tower had the clocks installed because the city stepped in and helped pay for them. We're going to focus today on some more early references in the newspaper to the tower.

It was reported on November 13, 1895, only three years after the Court House was built, that the County Board was going to take some action regarding the rebuilding of the tower, which had been "so badly demoralized by the recent earthquake(?) as to make it dangerous." I read nothing more about the examination of these damages, nor saw any reference to any work being done on the tower.

The editor asked on March 17, 1897 how much it would cost to put a glass cover over each dial of the Court House clock to keep the storms out that were "ruining the clock and also the tower."

It appears that they were trying to reinforce the clock tower in March 1903 as scaffolding was set up "to support workmen who will place irons above some of the windows where the stone is cracked." This was only a dozen years after the building was erected.



This wonderful photograph of the Court House at night is another that came from the collection of the late Howard Schulz. It was taken from the northwest corner of the square sometime before 1913. Please take note of the prominence of the weather vane.

Less than three months later, members of the county board received letters signed by "Your Faithful Friend" who predicted the collapse of the Court House. The letter said, "I am fearful that a great calamity is going to happen which will result in death and great suffering and I deemed it my duty to so advise you, notwithstanding that some of my neighbors think that I am a fool of a crank, but in the past my versions [sic] have become true. To make it clear to you, of late I have had several fearful dreams to

the effect that the court house is going to collapse and fall in but I pray God to be merciful and that He in his wisdom may see fit to prevent such a calamity.”

Some of the officers took it as a joke, while others “tiptoed through the building making a survey of the cracks in the plaster and scrutinizing closely for new one.” One of the officers went into the attic to make sure the roof was solid, but left quickly when the tower clock struck 11:00. Again, nothing more was found in the newspapers about this.

Sometimes the “news” about the clock tower was as simple as a statement that “a dove perched itself on the minute hand of the east dial” at 8:45 on April 6, 1904 and stopped the works. The bird was driven from its roost with an air gun even though it had been “reluctant to leave the time piece.”

It was announced on October 17, 1908 that N. S. Speck was given the job of giving the clock its first thorough cleaning. The faithful clock was stopped at 1:30 on Friday afternoon and was back in action by noon on Monday. It was shared in the same article that Caper Scheisser had been the custodian at the Court House for 13 years. It was his job to wind the clock, which he had done 676 times. It took 15 minutes each week “to pull up the heavy irons that make the hands move and the old court house bell toll.” The clock had “never been stopped for any length of time before except it has been frozen up during extremely cold weather or sleet has frosted its faces.”

Mr. Speck gave the clock its second cleaning in August 1914 with it being out of service for only one day. Speck said that it was “a mighty good clock,” which was kept regulated to Western Union time with a little oiling and the regular winding. Speck gave the clock another cleaning in November 1918.

Time was “somewhat out of joint” here for several days in February 1927. The clock was from five to seven minutes ahead of the clocks that were supposed to be “regulated hourly by Western Union.” The editor added, “The result is a general mix-up, especially at noon when bells, sirens and whistles sound the 12 hour over a span of about five minutes, depending on the timepiece followed.”

The weather vane was removed from the top of the tower on July 26, 1935 by steeplejacks Robert Haden and Sam Rubi. Heiden pulled himself up on a rope that had been flung around the apex of the tower roof after crawling out a small window near the top of the slate-sided roof to do the dangerous work. “He found the base of the weather vane rotten with age.” The cross piece was also worn and the only thing to do was to lower it to the ground. It was much larger than it appeared from the ground, measuring 12-feet high by 10 feet across. The Court House committee decided to replace the vane with a metal ball at the point of the tower. People missed the only downtown wind indicator.

The clock stopped again on Sunday morning, January 3, 1937 because of sleet and cold weather at 2:40. Otto Schneider, court house custodian, was to make efforts the next afternoon to get it started again. Nothing more was reported, so he must have been successful.

A study was done by an engineer from the state in October 1946. The report said, “that there is slight danger of the 850-pound weight . . . breaking and endangering property and lives.” It went on to say, “The sizes of both the pulleys and cables are larger than required, presenting an additional factor of safety. The wood beams through which the pulleys are attached are of sufficient size to carry the loads.” This cable had been installed in 1932 and did not show any evidence of undue wear. The cable for the 350-pound weight remained from the original installation.

It appears from all current reports that the Court House tower will be enjoyed for decades to come. Wishing each of you a great 2024.