

OLD TIMER CLOCK SHOP ESTABLISHED 1981

The two-hundred-year-old English grandfather clock was supporting more weight than its antique legs could bear any longer. The rotting wooden feet at its base finally began to give way and slowly the heavy clock teetered. Its owner sat across the room and watched in horror as it fell, smashing to pieces on the floor.

That was nine months ago. Today the grandfather clock sits in the back workshop of Bob Larson's Old Timer Clock Shop on West Thirty-fifth Street, in the last stages of a meticulous restoration that has reinforced the structural integrity of the legs and interior body, as well as the clock mechanisms and woodwork. The six-foot-tall timepiece is gleaming and gorgeous, looking as if it just came out of the craftsman's shop in England two centuries ago.

"Grandfather clock repair is a booming business for us," says Larson. "We can't keep up with the work, and can only handle about fifty percent of the service requests we receive." He and his wife, Chong Larson, started the business out of their garage in 1981, and today they still make service calls together. "We used to do four service calls a day, but now we're slowing down. We make one call in the morning, then have lunch together and go to another appointment in the afternoon," says Larson. "My wife is my third hand; she anticipates what tool I need next like a nurse in surgery. It enables us to do what we love and spend our time together."

Larson's clock and watch business started as a hobby when he was stationed in Germany with the Air Force, in the mid nineteen-sixties. He saw an advertisement for a grandfather clock for sale and contacted the owner. "I bungee-corded that big clock to the luggage rack of my VW and drove off with it," Larson says, laughing. The clock didn't work, but he had paid only ten dollars for it and was interested in tinkering to see if he could get it running. When he did, an Air Force buddy offered forty dollars for it, and Larson saw possibilities for a small sideline hobby that could generate a little extra income.

He started looking for more clocks and fixed them up in the basement of his apartment building. On



Bob Larson

by Shelley Seale
Photo by Barton Wilder Custom Images

his lunch hours he went to a German clockmaker, language dictionary in hand, to try and learn more about the craft. Soon the clockmaker invited Larson to come in the evenings to apprentice. "I think he just got tired of me coming by every day," Larson says. "I took him a bottle of whiskey occasionally and I think that helped his interest in me. But he also appreciated the fact that someone wanted to know about this dying trade." The pastime grew into a considerable business. Larson went into partnership with his commanding officer and eventually secured a warehouse for all the clocks he was repairing and refurbishing.

His newfound talent went by the wayside after he was stationed in Korea, where he met and married his wife, and then Japan. After eight years away from the United States, Larson and his family returned to set-

tle in Austin in 1979. They bought a house and enrolled three teenage sons in school. Nine months later the Air Force issued orders for him to return to Japan. With a new home and a feeling of settlement for his family, Larson didn't want to go. "I had been in the Air Force for twenty years by then. They gave me the option of the Japan assignment or retirement, so I chose to retire," he says.

Larson went to work for Motorola and then Advanced Micro Devices Inc. (AMD). He also began tinkering with old clocks again. After setting up a workshop in his garage, Larson ran small ads for clock repair service in the local papers. A booth at a home and garden show jump-started the enterprise with a year's worth of business. He put in for a six-month leave of absence from AMD and never went back. Moving his workshop into a leased one-room showroom

on Thirty-fifth Street, the Old Timer Clock Shop was born.

Since then the business has grown considerably. Larson credits two lucky breaks to his success. In 1983 the shop put in a bid to restore the tower clock on the Williamson County courthouse and was awarded the contract. The job resulted in tremendous television, newspaper and radio publicity, and business boomed. Then in 1994 when restoration of the State Capitol began, the project planners came directly to Old Timer Clock Shop, based on its reputation, to restore and hang nine antique clocks original to the Capitol that had been in storage for years. Larson's son joined the business, staff was hired and watch sales and repairs were added to the store's offerings. Ten years after it opened, Old Timer Clock Shop moved down the street to 1803 W. Thirty-fifth St., where it is today.

"Gradual expansion allowed us to afford the space and still keep growing," says Larson. The business employs a manager and two watch and clock repair specialists, and contracts with four additional repair experts to handle the volume of service they do. "I'm really fortunate that I've got a great team," Larson says, adding that finding the right people has proved his biggest challenge. "The thing you hope for is to find honest, loyal employees. But it's a two-way street—you have to treat them right, too, and they need to feel good about their jobs."

Larson's newest venture is serving on the board of directors for the Southwest Clock and Watch Museum slated to open next year in Lockhart. He is excited about the project, and the prospect of presenting the craft of old-fashioned clockmaking to the public. His business has brought him a great deal of satisfaction. "It was just a hobby that got out of control," Larson says, "but I've had more good fortune than I deserve." ☺

After visiting the Old Timer Clock Shop and talking with Bob Larson, Austin freelance writer Shelley Seale is looking at time in a whole new way. You may e-mail Shelley at sseale@goodlifemag.com.

For more about the Old Timer Clock shop, call 512-451-5016 or visit www.bobsCLOCKS.com.