

A Unique Canadian Tramp Art Clock

By Allan Symons, FNAWCC (CAN)

Author's note: With the exceptions of Figures 1 and 2, all images are courtesy of The Canadian Clock Museum, Deep River, Ontario.

Introduction

This horological story started with an Ontario antiques dealer's advertisement in the March/April 2019 issue of *Canadian Antiques and Vintage* magazine (Figure 1). The unusual clock was prominently displayed as being offered for sale at the upcoming Folk Art and Antiques show scheduled for later in April in Bowmanville,

Ontario. I was able to contact the dealer before the show to obtain some information for, and pictures of, the clock. He had acquired it in 1998 from a picker who had tracked down some details about the maker. Some of those details turned out to be inaccurate, which I discovered during subsequent research. By prior arrangement with the dealer, our museum (The Canadian Clock Museum, Deep River, Ontario) purchased the clock at the show. Several weeks later we loaded it into my van at his home.

The clock was made in 1934 or early 1935 in Welland, a small city in southwestern Ontario. The dealer had

Figure 1. The advertisement that caught the author's attention. The subject clock is in the center. PUBLIC DOMAIN.

We are doing Bowmanville By the Book.

Pieces we own that have been in a book, publication or exhibition are coming to Bowmanville. There are twenty of them. Of course these will be among our usual Bowmanville quality offerings.

1. Glengarry County rocker
2. Victoria County candle stand
3. Prince Edward County cupboard
4. Rice Lake hanging cupboard
5. Tramp art clock, Welland
6. Polychromed shelf, Quebec
7. Simcoe County shelf
8. Half hull of the ship "Kingston"
9. Louis Jeremy moose head

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recently loaned it for display from March 2017 to late 2018 in the *No Idle Hands* exhibition at the Museum of International Folk Art in Santa Fe, NM (Figure 2). That exhibition was focused on the myths and meanings of tramp art.¹ The clock was included in the massive book produced for the exhibition (Figure 3).²

The Clock

The elaborate wood case design, with its “thousands” of carved notches characteristic of tramp art, was created as a tribute to Britain’s King George V’s Silver Jubilee over the British Empire from 1910 to 1935. The cast metal animals appear to represent Canada, India, and Africa. The case is 38” high, 24” wide (base), and 9” deep (base). Figures 4–7 show the front of the whole clock plus details in the three sections, top to bottom. From the style of the dial and hands, they and the movement were probably

taken from a mantel clock imported at the time from Germany by the Black Forest Clock Co., which was in business in Toronto, Ontario from 1928 to 1941.

The picker had determined that this clock was awarded second prize in the craft competition at the Canadian National Exhibition in Toronto in 1935. That information (in fact, honorable mention) was later confirmed by me thanks to a column in the August 24, 1935, edition of the *Welland Tribune*. The column (Figure 8) contained an interview with Harry Sykes about his clock and reported that the judge had downgraded his valuation because the animals were not carved from wood. In addition, Harry stated that it took him many months of work. There were 986 pieces of cigar box wood plus “scores” of carved wood rosettes.



Figure 2. The subject clock on display in 2017–2018 in the Museum of International Folk Art in Santa Fe, NM. COURTESY OF DAVID FIELD.

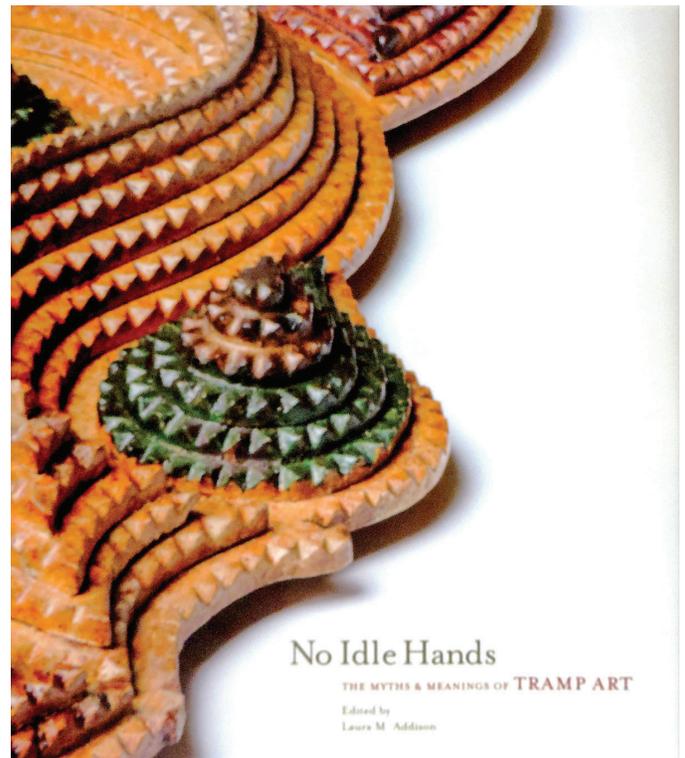


Figure 3. Dust cover of the book published for the *No Idle Hands* exhibition of tramp art 2017–2018 at the Museum of International Folk Art, Santa Fe, NM.

The wood construction technique from the early 20th century known as tramp art has been well studied. Pieces of cigar box wood were typically carved by hand with a pocketknife. Typical creations included picture and mirror frames, miniature furniture, wall shelves, and of course clock cases. But apparently none were as large or elaborate as this one. Clifford A. Wallach published the definitive book on the subject in 2012.³ Wallach included this unusual clock in the book and placed a picture of it on the back dust jacket (Figure 9).

Who Made the Clock?

The answer to the above question was the first mystery. The maker's name (Gordon Sykes) was provided to me by the dealer, who was given that name by the picker in 1998. It now seems probable that the picker purchased the clock from Gordon Sykes, who later died in 2006 at

age 90. But according to that 1935 newspaper column (see Figure 8), the maker was Harry Sykes. Harry was Gordon's older brother (Harry's 1985 obituary, Figure 10, and Gordon's 2006 obituary⁴). However, a complication arose when I discovered a high-resolution 1938 photograph of the Welland Citizens Band. Among the musicians identified were (front row) G. Sykes and H. Sykes Sr. as well as (second row) H. Sykes Jr (Figure 11).

So now the key question is, "Was the maker of this clock Harry the father or Harry the son?" It is known that Harry John Sykes died in 1985 at age 74 (Figure 10). Presumably that was Harry Junior, because his father would have died perhaps two decades earlier. Nevertheless, this does not answer the critical question concerning which Harry made the clock.

I continue to search for new evidence that will identify whether Harry Senior or Harry Junior made the clock.



Figure 4. The clock now on display at The Canadian Clock Museum in Deep River, Ontario, with an empty, old cigar box in front.

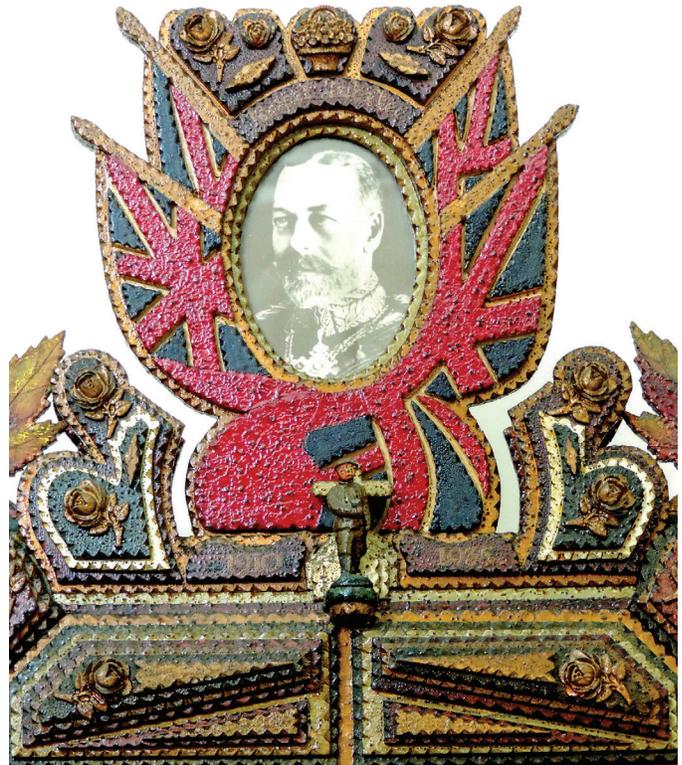


Figure 5. The top section of the clock with the photograph of King George V and two silver jubilee medallions mounted in wood maple leaves. The end of the soldier's rifle (center) is missing.



Figure 6. The central section with the clock dial and four cast metal animals.



Figure 7. The detail in the bottom section of the case, including two cast metal soldiers on horseback, a tiger (upper left, partly hidden by the wood maple leaf with a beaver on its front), and a lion.

MUCH INTEREST IN PT. COLBORNE AND WELLAND EXHIBITS

Albert Weaving's Fretwork Piece, "Nelson's Monument", Takes C.N.E. First Prize

UNIQUE CLOCK

Jubilee Timepiece Imposing Entry — Made by Fireman Harry Sykes of Welland

(Special to The Tribune)

Toronto, Aug. 24. — Welland and Port Colborne exhibits figured prominently in the special hobbies section at the C.N.E.

Albert Weaving, Port Colborne, won a first with his unique fretwork piece, Nelson's Monument, Trafalgar Square London, and he gained honorable mention for his model of the Lord Mayor's coach, London, England.

Fireman Harry Sykes of Welland gained honorable mention for his Jubilee clock, which however, the judge, Augustus Studyck, well known artist from Holland, found difficult to judge, he stated yesterday because the clock was not completely fashioned from cigar boxes but had metal model incorporated in its general plan. The judge told officials that it was truly a work of art, and a model which must have taken an enormous amount of labor and patience in its making.

Another interesting exhibit from the Welland-Port Colborne area was Albert Weaving's plaque with a fretwork face, inscribed in gold lettering with The Lord's Prayer.

C. F. Walling, Toronto, who has charge of the hobby exhibits at the fair and who, in fact originated the idea of these exhibits, so he told The Tribune stated yesterday that Welland and Port Colborne were to be congratulated upon the eight exhibits from this area, Albert Weaving having no less than seven.

Months of Effort

Genius went into the making of the cigar box eight-day clock. Harry Sykes spent months in the fashioning of this unique timepiece, using up all his spare time outside of that devoted to the Welland Citizens' Band in creation of the clock which is his tribute to the silver jubilee of the accession of Their Majesties King George and Queen Mary to the throne.

Topped at the centre with a photograph of His Majesty King George V the clock is flanked at the sides with silver jubilee medallions and Maple Leaf emblems, this device centred with the inscribed dates 1910-1935

Thousands of notches are noted by the visitor to the C.N.E., who views this strange timepiece. The clock comprises 986 pieces of wood and scores of rosettes, as well as several miniature models of elephants, bison, lions, tigers brought together in a comprehensive study in cigar box pieces that together symbolize the six great component parts of the great federation of the British empire, Great Britain, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, India and South Africa.

It is an altogether unique production and quite original with Mr. Sykes.

Figure 8. August 24, 1935, column in the *Welland Tribune* that included Harry Sykes' "Jubilee" clock.

Would you bet your money on the father or on his 24-year-old son in 1935?

Meanwhile, this Harry Sykes masterpiece is now the new centerpiece in the Exhibits Room at The Canadian Clock Museum.

Acknowledgments

Determining the critical information about the maker of this unique clock would have been impossible without the 1935 *Welland Tribune* newspaper column provided by Cathy Comar at the Welland Public Library. She also found in that newspaper the obituary notice for Harry John Sykes (Jr. assumed) from 1985. The new mystery of which Harry Sykes actually made the clock arose thanks to the high-resolution image of the 1938 photograph (with names in the legend) for the Welland Citizens Band. This image was received from Katelynn Best at the Welland Museum.

Notes and References

1. Per Merriam-Webster, tramp art is defined as "a style of wood carving flourishing in the U.S. from about 1875 to 1930 that is characterized by ornate layered whittling often of cigar boxes or fruit crates. Also: an object carved in this style." The following is taken verbatim from Sharp SR. Tramp art's mysterious origins and exquisite crafts. January 4, 2018. hyperallergic.com (tinyurl.com/y4oh4byo).

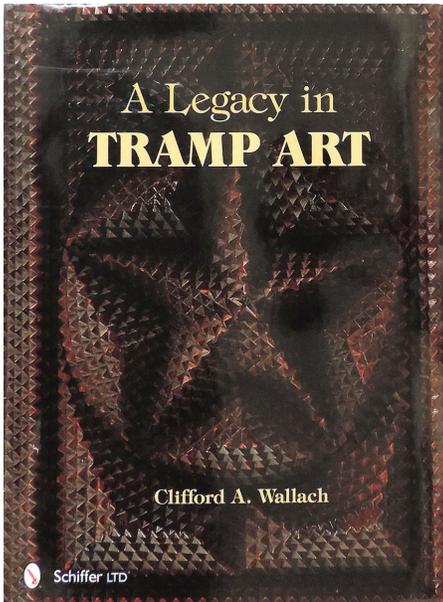


Figure 9. Clifford Wallach's 2012 book, front and back dust covers.



SYKES - HARRY JOHN. At the Welland County General Hospital on Tuesday, February 12, 1985, of 52 Duncan St., in his 75th year, beloved husband of Agnes (Bohun) Sykes. Dear brother of Gordon and Mrs. Nellie White, both of Welland. Also surviving are five nieces and five nephews. Friends are invited to call at the H.L. CUDNEY FUNERAL CHAPEL for visitations Wednesday 7-9 and Thursday 2-4 and 7-9 p.m. where the Funeral Service will be held on Friday at 1:30 p.m. Interment in Fonthill Cemetery. Memorial donations to the Brethren-in-Christ Church would be gratefully appreciated.

Figure 10. The 1985 obituary for Harry John Sykes from the *Welland Tribune*.

To the uninitiated, the phrase “tramp art” probably evokes a stereotypical hobo, train hopping with a cartoonish bindle or drinking moonshine around a fire pit. This was even the case for Laura Addison, curator of North American & European Folk Art at New Mexico’s famed Museum of International Folk Art, who organized *No Idle Hands: The Myths and Meanings of Tramp Art*, a massive survey of work within this genre.

“It was a learning occasion for me, because I had the idea that it was made by tramps,” said Addison, in an interview with Hyperallergic. “But more and more, it appears that’s not the case.”

“[Tramp art] was made by family men with settled home lives,” writes Addison in an article for the spring 2017 issue of *El Palacio*. “Signed tramp art pieces and anecdotal evidence demonstrate that it was a working class pursuit characterized by pragmatism and thrift.” Indeed, it is difficult to imagine someone with an itinerant lifestyle having any need for the decorative boxes, picture frames, furniture, and devotional objects, decorated with repetitious and painstaking care that are characteristic of tramp art.

Note 1 researched and drafted by the Editor.

2. Addison LM, editor. *No Idle Hands: The Myths & Meanings of Tramp Art*. Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico Press, 2017.
3. Wallach CA. *A Legacy in Tramp Art*. Atglen, PA: Schiffer Ltd., 2012.
4. Gordon Sykes death notice, The Welland Tribune newspaper, August 8, 2006, at age 90.

About the Author

Allan Symons has operated The Canadian Clock Museum as his “retirement” project since it opened to the public in May 2000 (www.canclockmuseum.ca). He has led more than 13,000 visitors through the museum and continues to answer questions, mostly about Canadian clocks, received by e-mail and by telephone from Canada, the United States, and around the world. He traveled to Toronto in mid-June 2019 to accept the Ontario Historical Society’s 2018 President’s Award presented to The Canadian Clock Museum for “an outstanding contribution to the preservation and promotion of Ontario’s history.” Most Canadian clock factories were located in Ontario. He has previously authored four *Watch & Clock Bulletin* articles (2007–2017) about Canadian clock companies. Currently he is drafting the story about the first 20 years of The Canadian Clock Museum. He has also recently submitted an article to the *Watch & Clock Bulletin* about early electric clocks made by the Hammond Co. of Toronto in the 1930s.

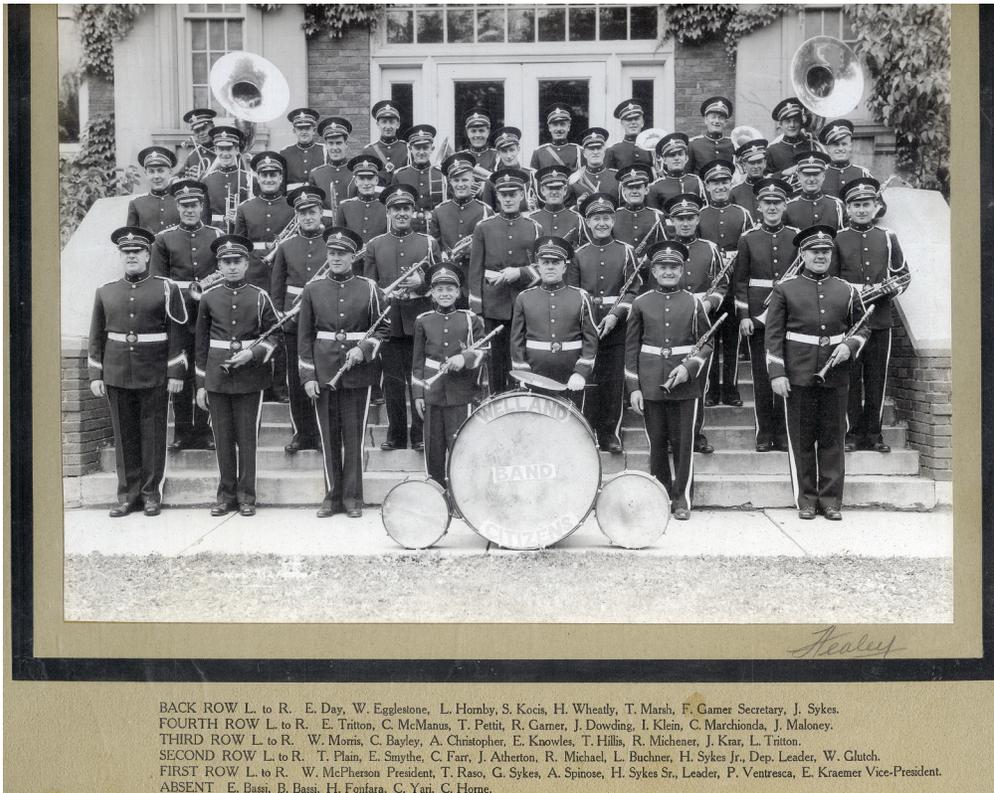


Figure 11.
High-resolution copy of circa 1938 photograph of the Welland Citizens Band.

BACK ROW L. to R. E. Day, W. Egglestone, L. Homby, S. Kocis, H. Wheatly, T. Marsh, F. Garner Secretary, J. Sykes.
FOURTH ROW L. to R. E. Tritton, C. McManus, T. Pettit, R. Garner, J. Dowding, I. Klein, C. Marchionda, J. Maloney.
THIRD ROW L. to R. W. Morris, C. Bayley, A. Christopher, E. Knowles, T. Hillis, R. Michener, J. Krar, L. Tritton.
SECOND ROW L. to R. T. Plain, E. Smythe, C. Farr, J. Asherton, R. Michael, L. Buchner, H. Sykes Jr., Dep. Leader, W. Glutch.
FIRST ROW L. to R. W. McPherson President, T. Raso, G. Sykes, A. Spinose, H. Sykes Sr., Leader, P. Ventresca, E. Kraemer Vice-President.
ABSENT E. Bassi, B. Bassi, H. Fonfara, C. Yari, C. Horne.