

Clock Watching

By *RALPH GARDNER JR.*



It often happens that as soon as you write about something—whether the subject be an outdoor hotel suite, vodka or a community garden—the next day you'll receive an email from someone, or their publicist, suggesting that you write about their even more astonishing hotel, alcohol or community garden. Although I have little doubt they're all worthy of attention, the problem is that you just wrote the story. And it's unlikely that you'll want to revisit the subject for a while.

Such was the case in March after I wrote about Ronald Grelsamer, a knee surgeon, and his collection of 1960s memorabilia. Within days, or perhaps hours, I received an email from Ronald Frank, a urologist, suggesting that I might want to trot out to Livingston, N.J., and then write about his collection.

In Dr. Frank's defense, his passion wasn't also Beatles and space program artifacts, but antique car clocks. Imagine a majestic Rolls Royce Silver Cloud. Now, take away everything else on the dashboard. In fact, take away the entire dashboard and the rest of the car—everything except the clock; that's what Dr. Frank collects.



Bryan Thomas for The Wall Street Journal

The irony is that I wasn't completely disinterested, especially after he included photographs. Some of his clocks are, indeed, beautiful. I'm also a collector, a vice I believe gets passed from one generation to the next and, I also believe, will eventually be traceable to a particular gene. So I'm not unfamiliar with the passion to collect and, even more so, to share your enthusiasm with anybody willing to listen.

Also, I have a thing for dashboards. I think it's a guy thing. It has to do with gadgets and the urge to be in control. And what better manifestation of control exists than a gleaming panel with lots of dials, buttons and switches that you can consult, and that respond instantly when you push or flick them?

I responded promptly to Dr. Frank's email. Actually, I responded promptly to his fourth or fifth email after having neglected the previous several. He revealed a bit about himself, including that he lives in New Jersey, as I mentioned, but also that he has an apartment in my neighborhood where he spends weekends. I suggested the two of us, and a few of his better car clocks, get together in the city at some point in the future.

I've got nothing against New Jersey. But to brave traffic in and out of the Lincoln Tunnel requires a story of substantial moment—say, birding on Cape May or riding in the [DirecTV](#) blimp. I'm not sure that Dr. Frank's clocks, lovely as they seemed, rose to that level.

He offered to pick me up and take me home. Apparently, if I saw only one or two, or five or 10, of his clocks, I wouldn't be fully able to appreciate his collection, which numbers in the dozens. It was about the critical mass, the visual impact. I had to see all of them, together.



Bryan Thomas for The Wall Street Journal

So one day last week, Dr. Frank picked me up in his wife's [BMW](#) SUV—he has a Porsche 911, but apparently it was on the blink—and we headed out over the GWB. "I went to the Triple Pier Show," Dr. Frank started as soon as I got in the car, apparently referring to an antiques show. "I found one of these clocks. I had no idea what it was, or worth. I looked it up. I found a dashboard book. I started with one or two clocks. People thought I was crazy. Now I have hundreds. More importantly, they're all manual, windup. I also have all the literature, the catalogues.

"I give little talks," he went on. "Some of my clocks were in a magazine. I hope to one day publish a book. I approached a lot of publishers, but I haven't found the right one yet."

I was curious about the urologist's feelings toward dashboards. If he liked antique car clocks, wouldn't the whole dashboard, with all its other gadgets—speedometer, tachometer, cigarette lighter, fuel and oil gauges—be even better?

"I'm not fanatic about it," he shrugged, quickly returning to clocks. He explained that in the old days, dashboards, then known as instrument boards, were basically blank slates that the motorist would accessorize according to his needs and whims. "You'd buy a speedometer," the doctor explained, "you'd buy a clock. The clock was the focal point of the dashboard. You'd go to a jeweler. People would go to Tiffany to buy a clock."

When we arrived at Dr. Frank's home, a quaint mansion in a development of McMansions on what he explained used to be a Kean family estate, we were greeted by his wife Robin, who these days runs her husband's medical practice. The physician assured me that even though his wife may at first have been skeptical about sharing her home with a vast number of clocks, she has come around to appreciating their beauty. Besides, she's a collector herself: among other things, of apothecary bottles and Oswald wooden animal clocks, the owl or kitten's bulging glass eyes somehow telling the time. "She's becoming a believer," Dr. Frank assured me. "She sees there's some validity, she sees people are interested."

Nonetheless, Robin Frank didn't sound entirely sold on her husband's horological pursuits. "This has taken over our lives," she sighed. "I can't handle it another minute. I just want it to end somewhere."

Dr. Frank pulled out his collection's pièce de résistance—a black-faced Jaeger-LeCoultre chronometer from the 1920s or '30s that would have gone into a Duesenberg or a Bugatti. "It's probably worth \$5,000," he said. "I paid \$1,000 about 15 years ago."

He's also got Art Deco Walthams, an Omega, clocks made by [Abercrombie & Fitch](#), clocks made for Fleetwood, Lincoln and Ford and embossed with their logos, clocks embedded in rearview mirrors.

Dr. Frank seemed just as smitten by the boxes his clocks came in. "I got it from Bulgaria," he said of a yellow Longines box. "Forty dollars."

"For the clock?" I asked.

"For the box."

"I don't get involved," Ms. Frank said. "He has his own PayPal account. I don't get the box thing. Why would he pay \$40?"

Dr. Frank led the way into the kitchen, where his wife had put out a lovely spread and where there awaited stacks of binders filled with catalogues and brochures—all about car clocks.

"This is the greatest piece of promotional material I've ever seen," Dr. Frank stated, as he pulled out an ad in an ancient automotive magazine. "When you order your subscription, you get a free clock. Isn't that wild?"

I agreed but told him I had to get back to the city.