

## ***IT'S ABOUT TIME***

**Presented by Stephen P. Thomas to a Joint Meeting of The Chicago Literary Club and The Fortnightly of Chicago, Friday, March 3, 2017**

When I was asked last May to speak at this evening's program on the topic "going back in time," it occurred to me how much would be revealed just between then and now. Such as - who would be the next President of the United States, whether the Cubs or White Sox would win a pennant or World Series, whether Illinois could manage to adopt a state budget, whether Britain would remain in the European Union or head for the Brexit, and finally, whether gasoline prices could remain under \$3 per gallon.

We now know the answers to all these questions about which there was great divergence of opinion just nine months ago. Had I recorded my own expectations on these matters I would not have lodged a single correct prediction. Proving that I can see more clearly in the rear view mirror than around the next corner. So I'll take several steps back in time for my remaining remarks.

In the middle 1950s – I was younger then – I had a summer job in downstate McLean County doing maintenance work on government grain storage bins. In those days groups of these bins could be found throughout the rural Midwest. They were used to store surplus corn which the United States Department of Agriculture purchased from farmers during the harvest season at pre-set prices as part of the then price support program.

The bins were empty during the summer, last year's corn having been shipped out to make room for the new crop. They were made from curved panels of a corrugated aluminum material held in place by being bolted to upright metal shafts extending from the ground to the top. Our job was to visit each bolt in a bin (there were several hundred) and make sure they were tight, or to tighten them if they were loose as a result of

weather forces, temperature fluctuations, load pressure, and the like. To do this one worker was outside the bin (typically on a ladder), and another inside. We then moved in pairs opposite each other from bolt to bolt, side to side, up and down, using taps against the metal to signal to each other what needed attention or was secure. Sounds interesting? It was usually more comfortable to work outside rather than in, so we would trade places every half hour or so.

One late morning, as we moved about a bin site, I asked an older worker (likely well into his 40s) – “Joe, what time is it?”

His response: “What time you talkin’ about, boy? Sun time? Government time? Or railroad time?”

I responded – “Joe, I just want to know how close it is to lunch time.”

Many in this room will, I think, recall that “Government time” during the summer months simply meant Daylight Savings Time. This was Federally mandated subject to certain local options to remain on CST or Central Standard Time. “Railroad time” referred to the fact that railroads in those 1950s days and before refused to reprint their timetables to accommodate seasonal time changes, staying on standard time throughout the year. “Sun time” had much more relevance in the 19<sup>th</sup> and earlier 20<sup>th</sup> centuries when each community decided for itself when the sun was exactly overhead, thus prompting the ringing of a bell or other signal to let everyone in the area know that noon had arrived – dinner time. Never mind that a few miles to the east or west in another community the noontime bell or siren would ring slightly later or earlier. Each community kept its own time without government regulation or interference.

By the 1980s I had left my Central Illinois roots and acquired a wristwatch which kept me well aware of the time – a very useful device for a working lawyer since marking time had become the basis for client charges. Every lawyer needed to know how to cram at least eight hours

of chargeable time into a six hour day. One day, along Jackson Boulevard just past its intersection with LaSalle Street, by what was then known as the Continental Bank, I noticed a wall plaque (it is still there) reading as follows:

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## ***THE STANDARD TIME SYSTEM IN THE UNITED STATES***

***ADOPTED ON THIS SITE -- OCTOBER 11, 1883***

***Chicago's famous Grand Pacific Hotel, then on the site of the present Continental Bank building, was the location of the General Time Convention of 1883 which, on October 11 of that year, adopted the current Standard Time System in the United States. The Convention was called by the nation's railroads. Delegates were asked to develop a better and more uniform time system to govern railroad operations.***

***Previously, time had been determined by the position of the sun, with high noon as the only existing standard of exact local time. More than 100 different local times resulted from this method.***

***The new plan . . . established four equal time zones across the country, each one hour ahead of the zone to the west. All railroad clocks in each zone were to be synchronized to strike the hour simultaneously.***

***The Standard Time System was inaugurated on November 8, 1883. On that Sunday, known as the "Day of Two Noons," the Allegheny Observatory at the University of Pittsburgh transmitted a telegraph signal when it was exactly noon on the 90<sup>th</sup> meridian. Railroad clocks were then reset on the hour according to the time zone.***

***Although implemented by the railroads, the Federal Government, states and cities began to use the system almost immediately. On***

***March 19, 1918, Congress formally acknowledged the plan by passing the Standard Time Act.***

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That's how and when the United States was divided into four time zones, Eastern, Central, Mountain and Pacific, the boundaries of which have remained relatively intact to this day. The railroads did it. Ironically, here was a situation crying for Federal regulation, and private enterprise filled the void on its own. The railroads could not coordinate operations and publish timetables if the time of day changed every few miles and was subject to the whim of local timekeepers over whom they had no control.

Daylight time (or daylight savings time – from early March to November -- by which the sun is directed not to set until a governmentally prescribed moment) was a product of the first World War. It was thought in Europe that deferring sunset would save fuel and increase war production. The United States followed suit. There is no conclusive evidence to this day to support those assertions. But daylight savings time came to be generally approved by the public. It gives us extended outdoor time during the warmer months. We would likely not change back to standard time in early November of each year but for the fact that scarce morning daylight is needed so that children do not have to leave for school in the dark. Standard time promotes public safety in winter.

So now you have a concise history of time as it has unfolded in these United States. It sometimes calls to mind Mark Twain's remark about the weather: *Everybody talks about it, but no one does anything about it.* We take for granted easy access to the correct time. It was not always so. In rural 19<sup>th</sup> century America farmers could check the time by the position of the sun, if they could see it; or listen for the noon bell or siren from the nearest village or town. Watches were expensive, required winding and maintenance, were not always accurate and could

be ruined in a rainstorm. Many field workers described their working day simply as: “from *can see* to *can’t see*.”

Fred Francis, a farm boy from Kewanee, Illinois (about whom I have written for our Club) was rewarded by the Elgin Watch Company in the 1890s with royalties for his invention of a device which increased the success rate installing delicate mainsprings in watches from 20% to 80%. He retired at age 34 purchasing land in Henry County on which he lived the balance of his remarkable life. Earlier, while at the University of Illinois, Fred and his engineering classmates built by hand a tower pendulum clock as a gift of the class of 1878. This clock became the official time keeper for the University.

Prior its installation with reliable quarter hourly chimes, the start and end times of classes were subject to the whims of each professor’s idea of what the time might be. Fred’s tower clock is now carefully restored in a museum setting at the University, still keeping perfect time. However, the clock face to which Fred’s mechanism was attached remains on the clock tower above the Illini Union reading: (instead of the usual numerals 1 through 12) *THE CLASS OF 78* such that only the numerals 7 and 8 correspond to the correct hour. Check it out when you are next in Champaign; then walk a few steps to the Lorado Taft *Alma Mater* installation where a 24 hour webcam on the University’s website will confirm your presence for all to see.

It’s time to wrap up. Most of you are familiar with Lorado Taft’s famous *Fountain of Time* installation at the west end of Chicago’s Midway Plaisance. The figures are in a long procession including those of all ages from the very young to the very old. It was inspired by a line in Henry Austin Dobson’s 1886 poem – *Paradox of Time*. The line reads: *Time goes, you say? Ah no. Alas. Time stays, we go.* So we say – yesterday is history; tomorrow is a mystery; all we have is today. That’s why it’s called *the present*. And this parting thought: Time flies like an arrow. Fruit flies like a banana. Thank you.