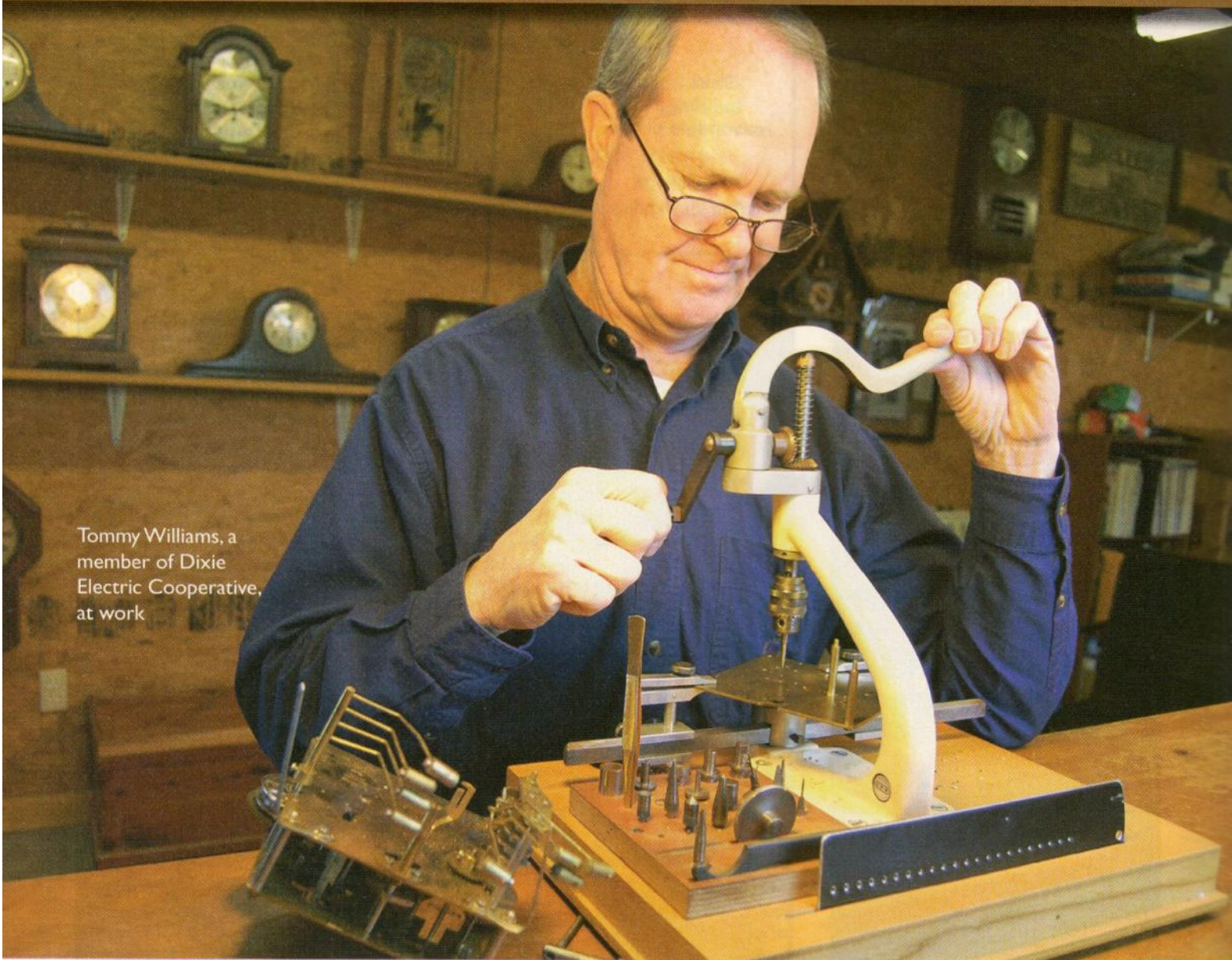


Tick Tock Tick Tock



Tommy Williams, a member of Dixie Electric Cooperative, at work

Time is money for the Clock Man of Montgomery

Story and photos by Nick Thomas

A century ago, families monitored the march of time with mechanical clocks powered by coiled springs and weights attached to swinging pendulums. But as electric and battery-operated clocks became more popular after World War II, the antique timepieces were relegated to attics and closets, or just left to gather dust on shelves as curious mementos of a past era – too precious to discard, but too bothersome to maintain.

Today, these ancient mechanical keepers of time are prized by collectors. But people are also resurrecting their family's old, broken clocks, according to clock expert Tommy Williams of Montgomery.

"It's the sound," says Williams, 62, standing in his east Montgomery home workshop. "That tick-tick-tick noise will often bring back special memories of an earlier time."

Williams, who grew up in Georgia, should know. The sound of his own mantel clock prompts childhood memories of weekend visits to his grandparents' one-bedroom home where the clock loudly ticked the night away.

"My granddaddy bought it used for \$12 back in 1942," says Williams, who later inherited the timepiece. The clock eventually stopped working, and Williams paid several "experts" to fix it back in the '80s. They all failed.

Williams kept the clock and didn't give much more thought to it until about eight years ago after the Macon, Ga., company he worked for down-sized, and he moved to Alabama.

"I was painting a room in my house, and had to move the old clock," recalls Williams. "It suddenly began ticking for a few moments but stopped again." It was then that Williams decided to fix the clock himself. He ended up moving to Chattanooga for 10 weeks to enroll in a clock repair course.

Williams has been repairing clocks – his granddaddy's and hundreds more – ever since, and the results have been both financially and personally rewarding.

"The package deal I got for early retirement was really not enough to make a living, so this clock repair business, 'Clocks of Montgomery,' has worked out great. But it's also been enjoyable and satisfying – it really doesn't seem like a job!"

At any given time, Williams may have one to two dozen clocks in his workshop in various stages of repair. And every hour, a symphony of chimes, bells, gongs and cuckoos fill the workshop – guaranteed to bring a smile to any lucky visitor.

People bring or send clocks to Williams from all over the southeast. Most tell him their clock is over-wound. But he says, "It's almost impossible to over-wind the spring on a clock – it would require an enormous force to break the mainspring." Usually, he says, the problem is just disuse and dust.

Clock mechanisms are lightly coated with oil, and over the years the dust fuses with the oil.

"It forms a tacky, sticky substance that acts like glue and freezes the gears and springs. So most clocks just need a good cleaning and they'll run fine."

There are no half measures for Williams. He will take a clock to pieces, clean and oil each piece, and repair or replace any broken parts. But the work is labor-intensive and not for the impatient.

"It can take anywhere from 12-18 hours of actual work time for most clocks," he says. "The average cost is around \$250, but could be considerably more for pieces requiring major repairs."

One of the biggest problems associated with antique clock repair is finding replacement parts. All the early American clock manufacturers such as Seth Thomas, Ingraham, Gilbert, Ansonia, Sessions and New Haven have long gone out of business, and there are few sources for the myriad of springs, cogs and bushings required to bring a broken clock back to life.

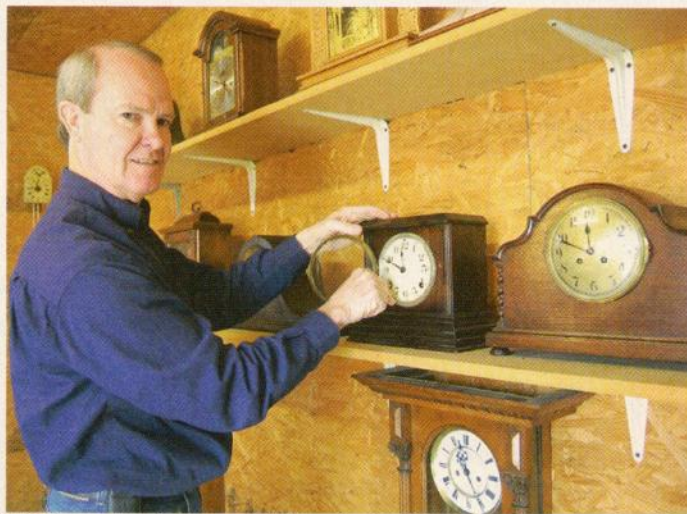
"Of course, there's eBay," says Williams with a smile. "I buy a lot of old, broken clocks for parts from there."

For anyone thinking of getting into the clock

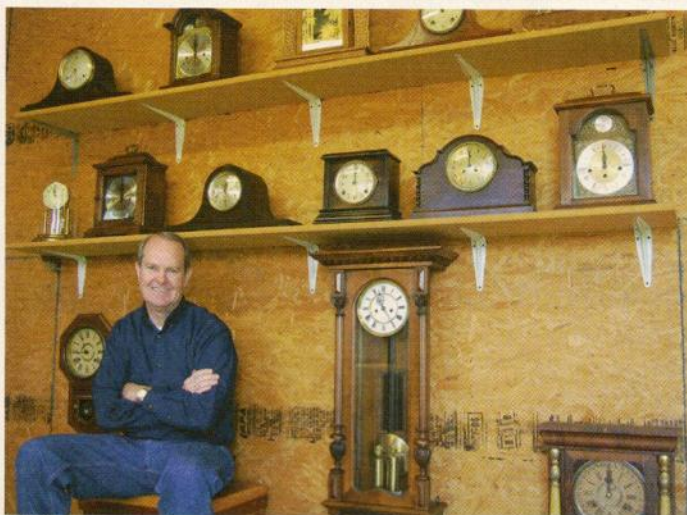
repair business, be aware that it will require more than a few small screwdrivers to get the job done properly. Williams' workshop is scattered with tools and machines specifically designed for clock repairs, like a mini metal lathe and a tiny \$2,000 drill press with accessories. Then there's the high-tech MircoSet precision timer, an electronic device that interfaces with Williams' computer and can measure if a mechanical clock is running to within a fraction of a second – essential to ensure the repaired clock is running accurately before being returned to its owner.

"There are a lot of things that can cause a clock to go wrong," says Williams, as he recalls his own experience with his granddaddy's clock. "Just make sure the person you take it to has the experience and tools to fix it – permanently."

For more information about Tommy Williams call him at 334-467-8676 or check www.clockworksofmontgomery.com.



Williams has been repairing clocks for eight years



Williams may have up to two dozen clocks in his workshop