



Rubel's Castle Tower Clock

by Ken McWilliams

Nestled in the foothills of the upscale residential community of Glendora, California, sits a Castle made of stone. It doesn't exactly blend in with the ranch style homes surrounding it. The Castle was created by Michael Rubel, a man with a dream similar to William Randolph Hearst's, but lacking his financial resources. This technicality did not discourage him and he dedicated his life to building his Castle. He completed his goal in 1986 with the help of an army of volunteers, donations, and stones from the local canyons.

In February of this year, fellow member, Ernie Jenson and I paid a visit to Rubel's Castle. Our primary purpose was to examine the triple train Seth Thomas tower clock that was installed in the Castle. We arrived at 10 AM, took a two hour conducted tour of the Castle, had lunch in downtown Glendora, and then returned to the Castle to meet with John Lundstrom, the caretaker of the clock for the past six years. Before we get to the clock, a little background on Michael Rubel is necessary to better understand this very unique individual and how the tower clock found its way to his castle.

Michael was fascinated with building fortresses as a child. When he was nine years old, he and some friends built a three-story fort. Michael continued improving and building bigger and better structures. He had little interest in school and even less when it came to preparing for a life in the business world. When he was 19, he purchased a 2.5 acre citrus orchard. The following year he built a bottle house similar to one he had seen at Knott's Berry Farm. (The bottle house still stands within the Castle.) His vision of building a castle was becoming clearer and he began designing and constructing in earnest. The Castle, including the clock tower with clock, was completed in 1986. He lived in the Castle and continued to improve it until his death in 2007. Michael lived his childhood dream his entire life, never having to join the adult mainstream. You might say he was a modern-day Peter Pan.

Michael's mother, Dorothy, was a chorus girl for

the famous Ziegfeld follies in New York. She later teamed with her sister as singers. They were billed as the Deuel sisters, and headlined on Broadway with many famous stars such as Fanny Brice, Oscar Shaw, and Jack Benny.

Michael's father was an Episcopalian minister and also a gag writer, songwriter, and script writer for various radio shows and Paramount pictures. He died when Michael was only six years old. A neighbor became a substitute father and was very influential in Michael's development. Michael often said that he could not ask for a better father figure.

Michael's mother was also a super hostess, giving elaborate parties with hundreds of guests. The guest list read like a who's who list of the time, and included regulars such as; Bob Hope, Alfred Hitchcock, Jack Benny, Edward G Robinson, politicians, her close friend and neighbor, fan dancer Sally Rand, and many other members of the rich and famous.

Michael once said, "With that kind of a background, you'd hardly expect me to be normal." Michael was anything but normal. He was very likable, a salesman, and a storyteller. If the truth made for an uninteresting story, Michael had no problem with adding a few embellishments. Here in lies one of the problems that I encountered while researching his tower clock.

I have divided this article into three parts. First, the story as told to friends and visitors by Michael and the one that is used by the tour guides today; the party lines so to speak. Second, John Lundstrom (the present caretaker of the clock,) will tell of his experiences with the clock over the past six years. And lastly, I will tell you what my research of this clock has uncovered.

Michael Rubel's Clock Story

Michael's vision of his Castle included a tower clock from the beginning. In fact, he began construction on the clock tower in 1964; 20 years before it would become a reality. While visiting Stanford University with his grandfather (a Stanford alumni,) he had the opportunity to observe the manual wind Seth Thomas



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tower clock on the campus. He decided then and there that this was the clock that he wanted for his Castle.

He also commented that it was a precise timekeeper because it had a mercury temperature compensating pendulum.

Michael had a friend in Pasadena who owned a clock shop. He asked him to help locate such a clock. His friend put a want ad in his organizations magazine for a Seth Thomas three train tower clock. (NAWCC Bulletin???) The ad ran for about a year with no results. A few people called with offers of different tower clocks, but Michael declined. He wanted a Seth Thomas tower clock. Then, early one morning, a Doctor Peabody called from a large clock museum in Columbia, Pennsylvania. Dr. Peabody was a bit irritated and asked Michael if he knew that there were only six clocks like this ever made? Michael said no, he thought that there were thousands. Dr. Peabody then said, "There is only one available now, and the museum has been trying to acquire it for 16 years." Michael said, really? Dr. Peabody said, "Yes, and they won't give it to us." Michael said, I guess I may have to give up on that idea. Peabody said, "I wish you would."

Later that day, Michael decided to call Dr. Peabody back and ask him about the other clocks that he was offered. His secretary answered the phone and he told her that he wanted to talk to Dr. Peabody about a tower clock. The secretary said that he wasn't in, and excitedly blurted out, "Are you from Bausch & Lomb in New York"? Michael didn't know how to answer and paused then she said "Are you Mr. Johnson?" Michael decided that it was time to hang up.

Michael now had a company and the name associated with the clock he wanted. Though Bausch & Lomb had a lot of Johnsons in their company, he eventually found an Everett Johnson who was in charge of the clock. Michael campaigned for months to convince the Bausch & Lomb board of directors to sell him the Seth Thomas clock. One day Mr. Johnson called Michael and told him that the board had agreed to sell him the clock and gave him the price. It was much higher than he had expected, and Michael apologized for wasting his time. Lorne Ward, a good friend of Michael's, and one, who made many donations of tools and supplies to Michael's Castle, was present when Michael took the call. He asked what the problem was, and Michael told him that he couldn't afford the clock. Lorne told Michael that he would pay for the clock provided he never revealed to anyone how much he had paid for it. Thus Michael acquired the Seth Thomas clock that he wanted. When it arrived there was a surprise bonus, the bells were included in the shipment.

The history of the Seth Thomas clock, as told by Michael, is as follows: in 1890 the city of Rochester, New York purchased a tower clock from Seth Thomas. About the same time, electricity had come to the city, and the thinking was, why use a mechanical clock when you could just plug one in. It was then sold to Bausch & Lomb who stored it for over 90 years, everything still in its original crates. And that is how Michael claimed that he received the clock, still in its unopened, original crates, just as Seth Thomas had shipped it in 1890.

John Lundstrom's Clock Story

John has been the keeper of the clock since about 2006. He had no prior experience with clocks; it was an on-the-job-learning experience. John was a gracious host and gave Ernie and me a great tour of the clock. The following is John's adventure with "Old Seth," his nickname for the clock, in his own words:



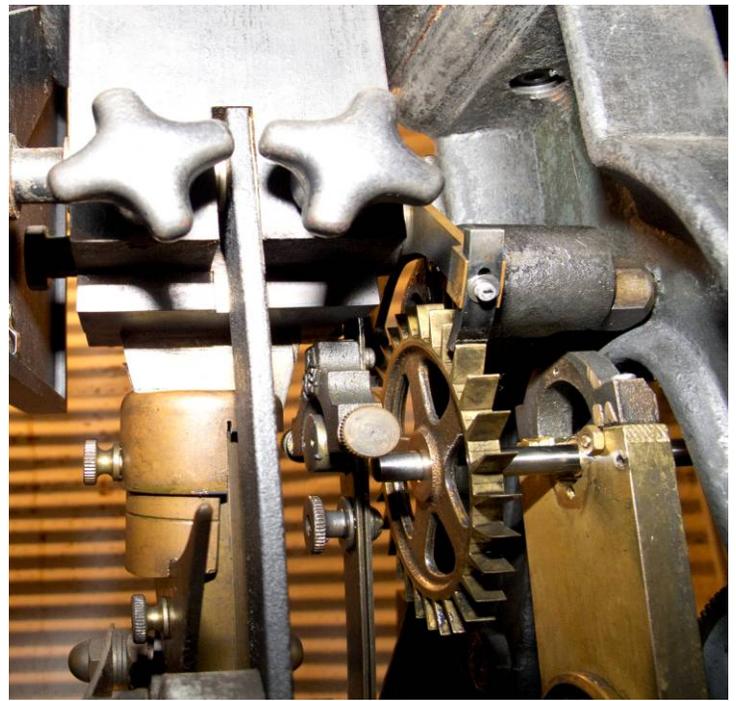
John Lundstrum and "Old Seth"

Michael assembled and installed Seth in the Clock Tower, completing the work about 1986. Seth has become a neighborhood background sound ever since. Michael gifted the Rubel Farm and Castle to the Glendora Historical Society in 2005. I took over its maintenance and care about 6 years ago.

Michael had a habit of lubricating mechanical things with a spray can of oil, and thus Seth was liberally bathed in oil and the attendant grunge which collects when dirt and dust finds the oil. Why did I not clean it? Well, when the floor of the clock room is brick, and damp, and the room is not well ventilated, a coating of oil will protect it from the rust. But which is worse, accelerated wear, or decomposition from rust? Second reason, there is not enough room to properly lay out the pieces in an order that would facilitate reassembly. And third reason, the instruction book that I suspect accompanied Seth is long gone. That's been my dilemma for 6 years now. So I wipe down what I can, let the large gear teeth run dry and lube only the bearings.

During the winding and maintaining, I found Seth to be a very finicky time keeper and prone to stopping in a hard rain. These problems gradually got worse with time. A year or so ago, I started an investigation of the dead beat escapement which was the option that was chosen when Seth was built. The clocks that were shown running on you-tube had pendulums that were vigorously swinging. Poor old Seth was barely able to tick. So, I located the monograph on Dead Beat Escapements, studied it and was amazed to find that the escape wheel was installed on the shaft reversed, so it was running backward.

When I took the top end apart, I found that there were two "Boston Gear Co" gears, and they were installed such that Michael used a small ladder chain to drive the escape wheel shaft. I also found that the escape shaft was quite loose in the bearings, and had the appearance that it had been machined with a file. So I set about to reverse the escape wheel, replace the escape shaft with a precision shaft, and install new bronze



bearings. After fussing a while about the location of the escape shaft relative to the escape pallets, I finally hit on the right combination and Seth just came alive. The pendulum swing is now vigorous, and there are no more stoppages by not having enough drive power with the original weights.

O.K., let's get Seth regulated. I couldn't get it to run fast enough. Do I have to rebuild the pendulum rod?? So I set about raising the pendulum center of mass by adding various lumps of iron just setting on the flat top surface of the pendulum. It's running faster! Here is where I concluded that with the escape wheel running backward; it was pushing the pendulum at the ends of its swing, instead of in the middle as is the dead beat design. Michael had to make the pendulum rod longer to get it to regulate, and drive power was consumed in the process of incorrectly pushing the pendulum. When I did a rough check on the actual center of mass location it turned out to be about 44 inches, instead of 1 meter.

My experimenting with odd weights brought about the final solution that I created, which was to cast a lead lump that could be mounted on the pendulum rod just above the top of the pendulum weight container. This turned out to be a lead cylinder that was made in two pieces allowing it to be clamped on the pendulum rod where it was necessary to be located to cause a one second beat.



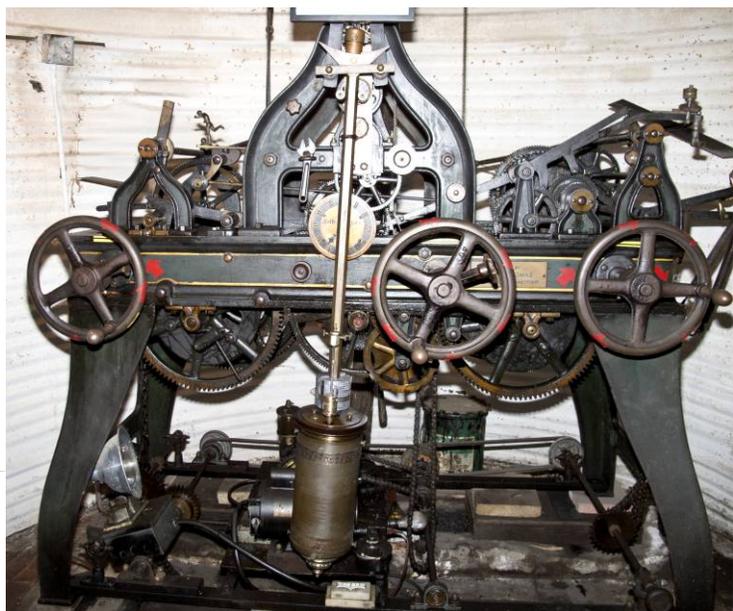
Pendulum with added weights

My goal for time keeping of this clock is plus or minus 1 minute per day. Why so bad? It appears that the cable drum running the timekeeping part of the clock is not original. Someone tried to add a maintaining power feature to it, and some of the springs have broken so that I don't feel that I can trust the operation of this feature. Thus, I stop the clock when I wind it. The clock needs winding every day due to the limited weight drop. So I have set Seth to run one minute fast per day, and the stopping of the clock when winding accommodates for the daily winding time.

The results of my research

Before I begin, I would like to acknowledge the sources of the information contained in this article. For the first two parts: *David Traversi's book, "One Man's Dream", Huell Howser's 1990 interview with Michael, John Lundstrom, and tour guides Richard Macy and Ruanne Skeels.*

For my research: *The Rochester, NY Historical Society, Bausch & Lomb, Rochester, NY, The Public Library of Rochester, NY, NAWCC's Seth Thomas tower clock records, NAWCC staff members Nancy Dyer and Pam Lindenberger, and, of course, the wonderful internet search engines.*



Seth Thomas #17G, as it is today

I'll start with my first impressions of the clock when John gave us the tour. The clock was a three train, time, strike, and bim bam chime. And as John said, it was very grimy with a combination of oil, dust, dirt, and wear particles. Despite this, it was running, and the pendulum had a decent swing. One of the first things I noticed was the unusual escape wheel and it's mounting. None of the escapement was original to the clock. As you can see in the photos, the brass bar, Boston gears, ladder chain, and support bracket, have all been added after the clock left the factory.



Homemade escape wheel drive

The second thing that I noticed was that the original nameplate had been replaced. The original nameplate would have given me the date of manufacture and serial number.

Overall, this is a magnificent clock, and one of the largest that Seth Thomas ever made. It is very similar to the one that we

recently restored at the Santa Barbara courthouse, but without the automatic winding system. (Although, there were the remains of an attempted auto winding system.) John has done an amazing job maintaining this clock, especially when you consider that he has had no formal training in clock making.

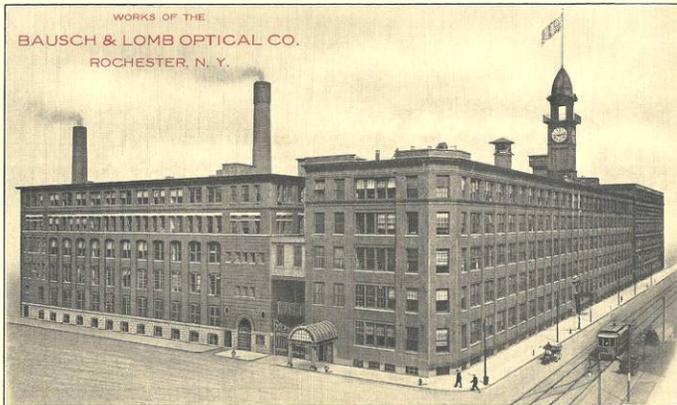
My plan was to identify the model number, date of manufacture, original purchasing data, and establish the clock's timeline from when it left the factory to when it was installed in Rubel's Castle. Thanks to Tran Duy Ly's book on Seth Thomas clocks, Volume 2, the first part was easy. Rubel's clock is a Seth Thomas Model 17. The NAWCC's library has acquired all of the known Seth Thomas factory records. The library scanned them and has made them accessible for online inquiries by members. I checked the log to see what was sold by Seth Thomas to the Rochester, NY area. There were a total of 14 clocks sold, but only one Model 17, and this was



TOP: A real Seth Thomas plate

purchased by Bausch & Lomb in 1906. This undoubtedly, had to be our clock. So it began its life in 1906, not 1890 as Michael stated.

Now, I had to determine what Bausch & Lomb did with this clock. The Rochester Historical Society and the Rochester library archives proved to be very helpful in this endeavor. Bausch & Lomb built a new factory around this time, so the question was, "Did they install the Seth Thomas clock in this building?" While rummaging through the Rochester library's archives, I uncovered a 1910 postcard of the new Bausch & Lomb factory. It clearly shows a tower clock prominently in the center of the building.



1910 postcard showing the new Bausch & Lomb factory with tower clock.

Discussions with some old-timers at the Rochester Historical Society substantiated the clock's existence, and that the building was demolished in 1977. This accounts for 67 years of its life. We know that it was installed and working in the Castle in 1986, so I only have nine more years to account for.

I decided to try to determine when Dr. Peabody contacted Michael about the clock. Michael stated that Peabody was from a large clock Museum in Columbia Pennsylvania. This could only be the NAWCC Museum, so I contacted some of the staff there. As it turns out, there isn't, and never has been a Dr. Peabody associated with the Museum. It looks like this was some of Michael's fictional storytelling.

Since Michael's inspiration came from seeing the tower clock when he visited Stanford University with his grandfather, I decided to see what I could find out about that clock.

The tower clock at Stanford University was a Seth Thomas Model 16 B, and was installed in 1899. The 1906 San Francisco earthquake destroyed the clock tower. The clock sat in storage for 77 years. In 1983, it was restored and installed in its present tower. So the earliest Michael could have seen this clock, was 1983. This narrows our window to three years. As a side note, Michael could not have seen the Mercury compensated pendulum at that time, because Stanford students didn't install it until 1997.

I now turned my attention to the escapement. I did a little more digging through the Seth Thomas logbooks and discovered that the original clock was a Model 17 G, with a gravity escapement. There is no way of telling when the gravity escapement was replaced with the homemade deadbeat escapement, but I suspect that Michael had a hand in it.

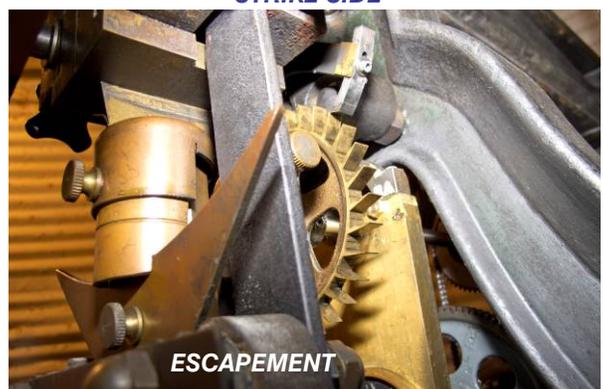
Huell Howser interviewed Michael in 1990 for his show "California's Gold." When they got to the clock room, Michael admitted that he was fascinated with the clock and could not leave it alone. Fortunately, the cameraman got some nice video of the clock. John Lundstrom was correct, the pendulum swing was weak and slightly out of beat. But more importantly, I could determine from the seconds hand, that the entrance drop was almost nonexistent, and the exit drop was enormous. This substantiates John's finding that the escape wheel was installed backwards, probably from the beginning.

In summary; the clock was built and installed in the Bausch & Lomb building, Rochester, NY in 1906. It operated there for 71 years and was stored for probably six or seven years until Michael Rubel acquired it. It has been running, pretty much continuously, since 1986. While Michael's story is fascinating, the truth isn't a bad story either. It would be nice to see this clock restored to its original grandeur.

The tour of Rubel's castle in Glendora is worthy of being added to your bucket list. The tour is only conducted twice a month and reservations are required, so a little planning is needed. For more information go to <http://glendorahistoricalsociety.org/Castle.html>. ■



STRIKE SIDE



ESCAPEMENT

Rubel's Castle, Glendora, California
<http://GlendoraHistoricalSociety.org>



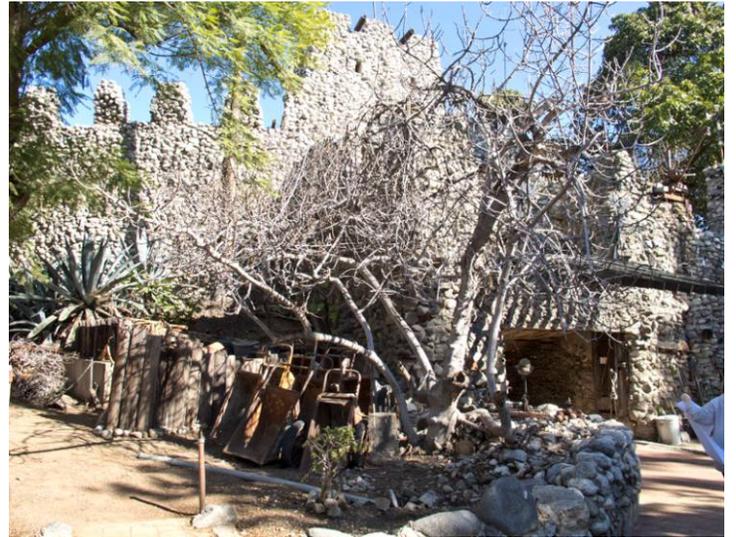
Entrance to the Castle



Michael would embed anything that was handy into the walls, such as a motorcycle



There are many old cars, tractors, farm equipment and machinery scattered around the grounds



The Castle complete with a draw-gate



Wind mill



Caboose, furnished



Clock tower and bells

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ALL PROCEEDS GO TO CHAPTER 190



Stacy Perman

A Los Angeles native now based in New York City, Stacy is an inveterate globe trekker, and has lived in Germany, Israel and Japan. Her positions as a BusinessWeek staff writer and previously as a correspondent for Time have taken her even farther, across

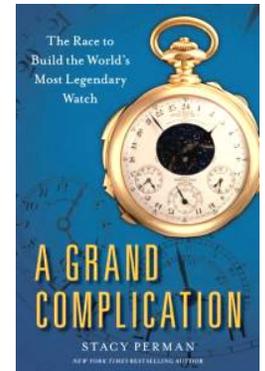


five continents and over two dozen countries. Her work has also appeared in publications including the Los Angeles Times, the Wall Street Journal, Los Angeles and Inc. magazines and Sports Illustrated Women. She has a Bachelor's degree from UCLA and a Master's degree from the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism.

*Stacy will be at our April meeting to
tell us about her latest book:*

A Grand Complication

In 1999, at a monumental auction held at Sotheby's in New York City, an eighteen-carat gold pocket watch delivered in 1933 shattered all known records when it was sold for \$11 million. Secretly commissioned by the wealthy financier Henry Graves, Jr.,

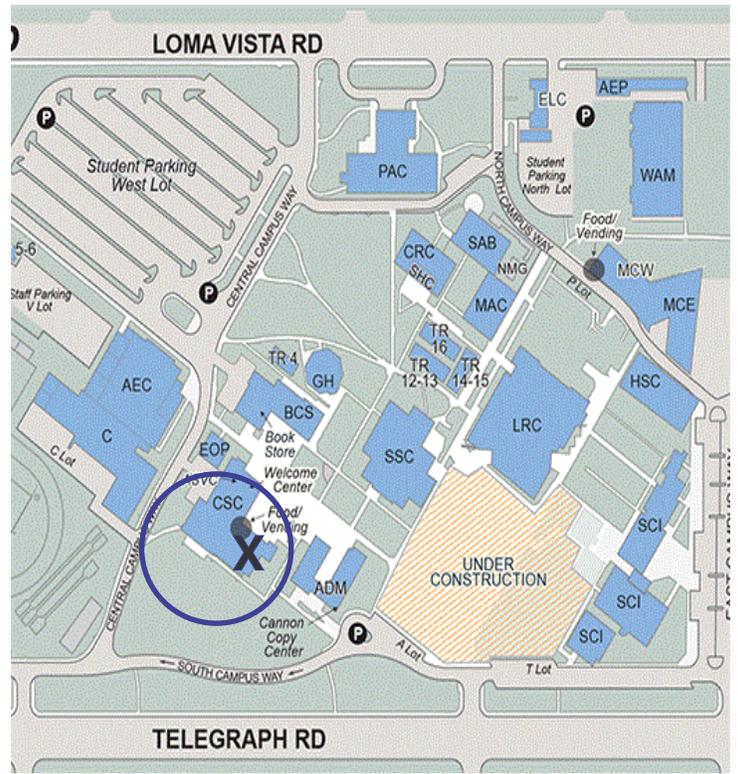
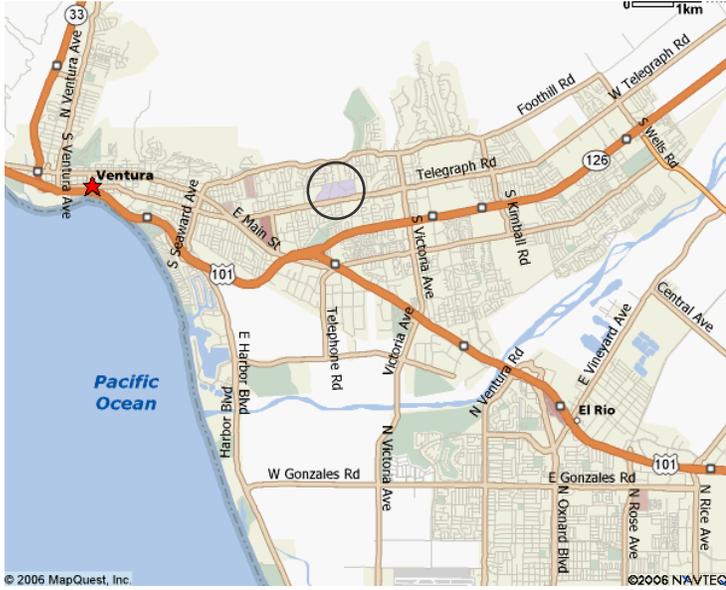


the timepiece contained twenty-four “complications,” including a celestial chart over Manhattan. Considered the Mona Lisa of timepieces,

Her previous book, the New York Times bestseller In-N-Out Burger: A Behind-The-Counter Look At The Fast Food Chain That Breaks All The Rules (HarperCollins), was published in 2009.

*So.....come to the April meeting
and visit with Stacy. If you have
her book, bring it and she will sign it.*

The Chapter 190 meetings are held the third Sunday of each month. (No meeting in December)
 We will meet in the Campus Student Center (CSC) on the Ventura College campus. The CSC is located in building "B", east of the gym and



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APRIL 21

MAY MEETING, 19th



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