

Capitol Clocks

Time is of some importance when you're running the government, especially at the statehouse, where committee meetings follow a published agenda. It was important enough in the early days of Idaho's capitol that they installed a system of clocks, each controlled by a single master clock. The master clock stood about six feet high with a pendulum the size of a dinner plate.

Problems with the system developed almost immediately.

The September 20th, 1914, Idaho Statesman reported that "All the clocks in the capitol building proper are regulated and set every few minutes by the master clock in the office of the state board of health on the top floor, and as this has been out of order for some time the whole system has been stopped, and for some reason, each separate instrument stopped at a different hour."

This resulted in some confusion as visitors moved about inside the statehouse only to find that time seemed to be rushing ahead or falling back at random, according to the 27 clocks on the system.

The clocks throughout the building were notorious for not working. They went for years at a time without moving at all, offering a "wide variety of time." They underwent repair several times, costing taxpayers about \$500 per fix, each of which would last a week or two. It wasn't long before maintenance staff just gave up.

At least a couple of times, a Statesman reporter would take it upon himself to report the time in various offices to goad the government a bit. In several state offices, they covered the clocks to avoid confusion. And embarrassment.

One clock was so thoroughly covered that it disappeared even from memory. An ornate clock behind the justices of the Idaho Supreme Court was covered by a false wall. That courtroom became the setting for the Joint Finance and Appropriation Committee meetings when the court got its own building. The clock was rediscovered during the repair and remodel following the statehouse fire in 1992 and was restored to its original grandeur (see photo). It is the last of the capitol clocks that once—occasionally—ran on signals from the master clock. The mechanism has been replaced so that it ACTUALLY TELLS TIME.

JFAC members, I thought you might enjoy this post I'll be rerunning on my Speaking of Idaho blog this weekend. —Rick Just

