Keeping Time in the Old West & Why You Should Still Carry an Almanac

8-10 minutes ⋮ 12/7/2020

Denver, Colorado – 1869

The pre-dawn air was still in the small bedroom of Clell Garrett's farmhouse as he rose to greet the day. The dogs barked at a passing coyote as the chickens began to stir from their roost. He stretched while taking in a deep breath of cool morning air, then took up his matchsafe from the bed stand. The flare of a fuzee created a hundred dancing shadows before setting the room into the warm glow from the chamberstick. He then carried the light out into the front room where kindling was set in the charcoal stove and the coffee pot put to boil. Clell used this time to let out the hens, feed the stock, attend to his morning necessary and wash up for the day. Soon, the coffee pot was at a rolling boil as the rich aroma of ground Brazilian beans filled the air.

The young farmer settled the grounds, filled his cup and peered out the back window toward the growing light of the eastern sky. An almanac hung from a nail on the doorframe. Fishing out his pocket watch, he checked the almanac date and sat down on the back

porch to set the time and rewind. He savored the hot brew as the first beams of a golden sunrise peered over the plains bathing him in a warm caress. With the sun now cresting over the horizon, he set his watch in motion and stood with the tiny ticking cadence to face another long day. He finished his cup while also setting the mantle clock in the main room. Coming out of the front door, there were the Rockies in their bronze and purple majesty. The farm was awake and the good earth beckoned that her fertile fields be tilled and sowed once more. With so much work to be done, Clell stepped forward with a smile accepting the challenge as the door closed softly behind him.

How Did People Tell Time in the Frontier American West?

Unless you are a rural American, it's a statistical likelihood that you neither have an Old Farmer's Almanac or feel the need to have one but here are reasons why our pioneer ancestors carried them and why you should as well. In the days of wind, hooves, and steam, there was no internet, television, or radio that gave people the exact time. Perhaps some people in towns set their watches by the local clocktower but how did the workmen know to set the time whenever the clock had to be stopped? How did people who lived far away from clocktowers tell time? This is the part where people start telling me how they whip out their sundial compasses and mention 'old Indian tricks their grandfather told them about'. Although such methods are fun to learn and teach, they are only good for telling the approximate time without being able to measure precisely minute-by-minute. So how did people measure time accurately down to the minute? The answer involves the combination of a timepiece (watch or clock) and an Almanac.
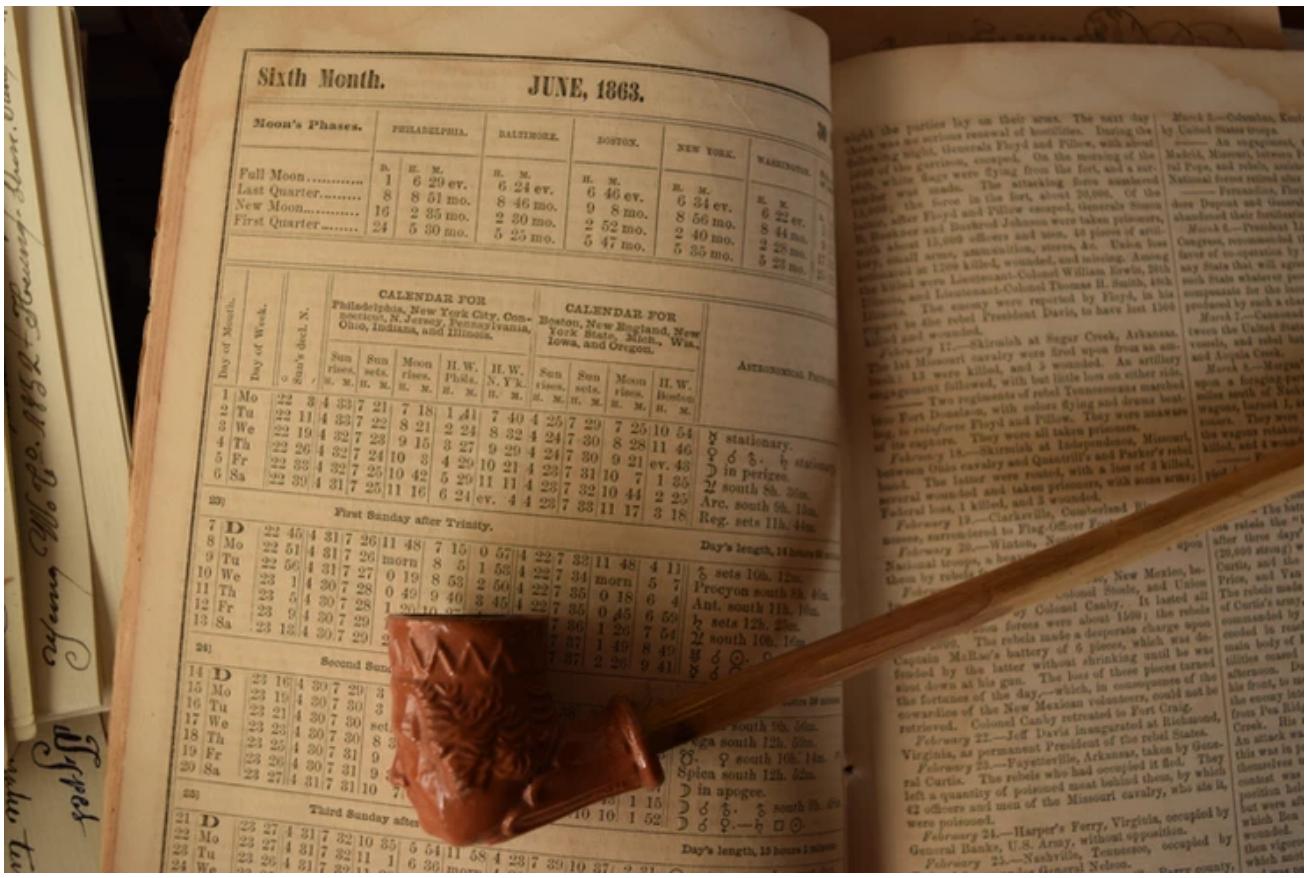
Almanacs were incredibly common in the recent centuries previous to ours. They gave information on local events, the currency exchange, postage and government offices, banknote value, local industry and business statistics in addition to advertisements for regional companies. Many even contained stories, jokes, and vital information on planting & harvesting as well as useful tips for the household. Most importantly, they contained charts that are astronomically measured to tell you at which minute of each hour the sun rose and set on every day of the year. Some even gave times on the cycles of the moon.

This method of setting clocks by the dawn as opposed to following time zones is called **local mean solar time**. It varies from meridian to meridian which is why just one almanac is not universally suitable to every part of the globe. Remember, there would not be the established railroad 'time zones' as we know them today until their official implementation on November 18, 1883. Time zones made better sense with the advent of high-speed transit. Once steam power (ships & trains) followed by air travel became the norm, local mean solar time was no longer an efficient method.

Types of Watches and Clocks Available

The industrial revolution was bringing about great strides in efficient manufacturing processes. By the 1860s a cheap Swiss (yes, I said Cheap Swiss) pocket watch could be obtained for as little as a dollar and change while better quality "working man's" nickel silver watches were available for a few bucks more. Owning a watch then would have been like owning a smart phone today. People who had to follow schedules for their occupations typically had them. In regards to styles, there are two main categories. Either they had a **'hunter's case'** where the front face had a protective metal cover that closed over it or the **'open face'** which used a thick crystal glass face that is more resistant to breakage. Previous to the American Civil War, watches were key-wound. The keyless dial was not a common feature at all until after the war's end.

Clocks for the home and business - Although free-standing clocks such as the grandfather clock were commonly made, they were expensive then as they are now. Transporting them by ship or wagon to points out on the frontier was expensive. A wall or mantle clock made better sense. They were much more affordable, portable, and available.

So, How do You Set Your Time With an Almanac?

Almanacs were a common fixture in pre-20th Century American homes. Typically, a hole was punched in the top left-hand corner and a string or twine loop was run through so

that it can be hung on a nail by the door or window. It was preferable if that door or window afforded the best eastern view of the sunrise. The almanacs were regional, based on meridians and would tell you the precise time in which the sun will crest over the horizon. Sunset can be used in the same way in setting your watches or clocks.

- **Even if you were so far out there that you forgot what day it is, the moon cycles would help you determine the exact date.**

- **Next, look up the present date. If the sun is set to rise on (example) April 4, 1856, you can look up the sunrise time as 6:29 am.**

- **If there are hills and mountains to the east of you, sunset will be at 5:56 pm. Another option is to consult the moon rise, half-way, and set times in the same way.**

If you lived in broken, mountainous terrain, someone will need to command a high enough vantage point over the horizon to get an accurate reading…or a traveler can share the precise time as he's passing through.

The need to reliably tell time then was as important as it is now. Watches served a valuable role around the workplace or homestead to help its owner manage daily tasks then as now. To the frontier traveler, it served an equal value keeping a wagon train or small traveling group on schedule. It could also fulfil a variety of roles such as measuring an individual's pulse during a medical examination, timing intervals between telegraphs by smoke when traveling through Indian territory, or keeping track of the time remaining before sundown.

Why is This Still Relevant Today?

You never know when the proverbial 'grid' may go down. Today's almanac still tracks the sun and moon cycles so that you can mark time without the aid of electronic devices. It still gives valuable tips about reading the weather and managing your rancho, farm, or homestead. Electricity may fail but a print book will never lose power. Just one more way to take your dependence back from one source so that it's your responsibility again.

The sky turned bronze in twilight's afterglow as Clell returned to the barn. The horses were fed and put away; hens were back in the coop and the farm was settling down for the night. Clell checked his watch as the dogs loped alongside him back to the house. His cousin's wagon was coming down the road with a shipment from Denver and a promise that he would not be late for supper. About that time, the dinner bell rang. Knocking the dust off his hat, Clell muttered to himself *"Well I'll be, he's right on time afterall."*

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