

My
Grandfather's
Clocks

GREGORY GERARD ALLISON

This story is true. The names and identifying characteristics of some persons described in this book have been changed to protect their individual privacy.

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DEDICATION

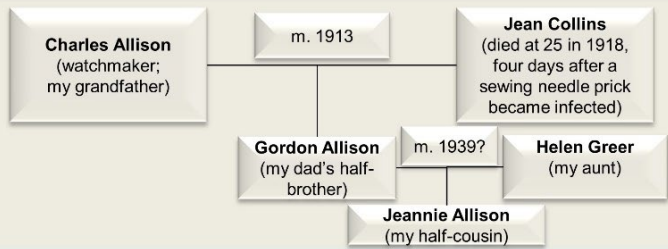
This book is dedicated to my newly discovered step-cousin
Judy Allison (of Montana)
whose generosity, kindness, and tenacity in solving mysteries
have helped me see that there is still great goodness to be found in this world.

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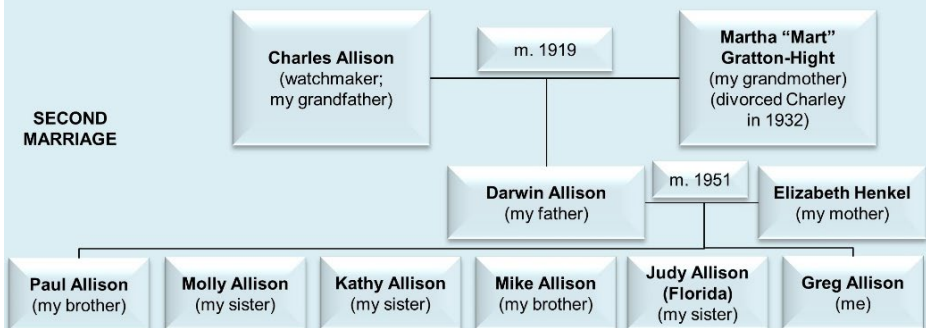
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CHARLES ALLISON FAMILY TREE

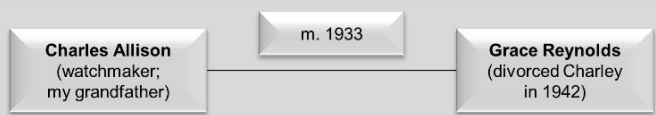
FIRST MARRIAGE



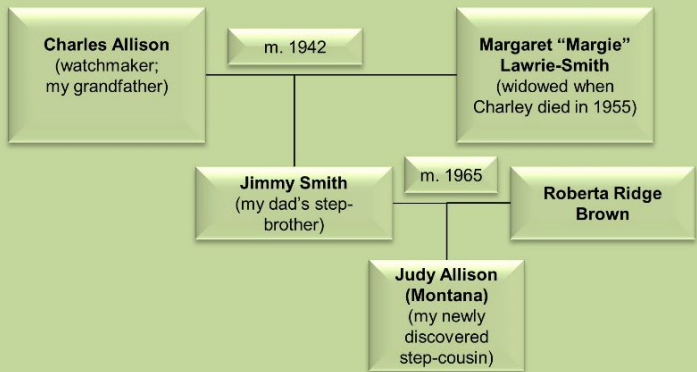
SECOND MARRIAGE



THIRD MARRIAGE



FOURTH MARRIAGE



The Charles Allison Timepiece Collection

(1936 – 1952)



1936
(est)

Allison Watchmakers' Visitors Book comments

*'Significant simplicity with true craftsmanship.
One of the world's wonders.'*

—Mrs. Lyman Moore, Washington, DC

*'Four generations of jewelers never saw
anything like this.'*

—Louis Keirtt, Buffalo, NY

*'The most incredible and wonderful [clocks]
that I have ever seen.'*

—Mary van der Winde, East Kent, England

'Now I believe in magic.'

—Ruth Bradley, Venice, CA



1937
(est)



1938
(est)



1939
(est)



1940



1941



1943
(est)



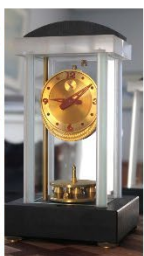
1944



1945
(est)



1946
(est)



1948
(est)



1950
(est)



1952

To the reader:

I encountered many people in my travels to solve this mystery. Where I've changed names to respect others' privacy, I've indicated that I renamed them.

As you'll learn in the coming pages, I've worked hard to uncover the details of my grandfather's life and relate them for you in an accurate, digestible, chronological format. In some cases, I have letters, photographs, and official records, which give me actual dates, times, and details. These facts I'm sure of.

In other cases, I've heard about my grandfather through the oral history of my family—from my grandmother, from my uncle, from my father and mother, and from my siblings. Some of these stories have been confirmed by records I've uncovered; for others, there are simply no records to corroborate what I've heard. That said, I believe them all to be reasonably reliable—and I've called those details out as 'family lore'.

Finally, just based on the immensity of my research into my grandfather's life (including the physical clocks themselves, their innovations, and, in some cases, corrected flaws), I have gained a sense of who he was and what might have motivated him. In those cases, I've called out my speculations using words like 'probably' or 'most likely'.

Believe me, I couldn't make this stuff up if I tried.

—Gregory Gerard Allison
Spring 2024

Time is the wisest of all things that are;
for it brings everything to light.

—Thales, Greek philosopher

PROLOGUE

Summer 1975

The clock is about six inches tall, but it's hard to know for sure because it's under a glass dome. It's on one of the upper shelves in our home library, out of my nine-year-old reach. The clock has been there as long as I can remember.

I know a few things about it. It's old. My grandfather, Charles Allison, made it. My dad, Darwin Allison, broke it.

With the Western New York skies serving up sheets of rain to drench the grassy acres surrounding our brick farmhouse, I'm looking for indoor ways to break the boredom. This afternoon, the clock has grabbed my attention.

I pull the ottoman away from the library's reading chair and position it next to the shelves. We don't actually read in here—my dad's baby grand piano fills a good chunk of the room and, with east-facing windows and cherry-wood paneling, it's one of the darkest rooms in the house.

Climbing up, I turn on the flashlight I've retrieved from the cubby hole in the laundry room. I stare at the clock, trying to act like one of the Hardy Boys or Nancy Drew examining an important clue.

It's a miniature grandfather model. The case is a dull silver metal, with a rounded top and pedestal base. A brass-colored pendulum and chimes hang down the middle.

The hands on the brass face of the clock are stuck on the two and the ten. They never move—and I know why. Family stories have told me that my genius grandfather gave this clock to my left-handed dad as a wedding gift. Without any instructions, my dad accidentally wound it the wrong way—right-handed—on the very first turn.

The clock broke in 1953. Shame has kept it broken.

I wonder if this is part of the reason my dad gets mad so much.

Mom has told me a few things about my father's childhood. That his own dad, the watchmaker, left New York for California when my dad was twelve, right after the divorce from my grandmother. That my dad began playing piano in an East Rochester bar two years later, right after Prohibition ended. That he started drinking around the same time.

MY GRANDFATHER'S CLOCKS

I train the flashlight on the little clock's face. Tiny letters spell out 'ALLISON' in fancy script behind the clock's hands. My last name. *Cool.*

At the bottom, there is a tented note card, like you see in school trophy cases. On the side facing me, I recognize my father's printing and reread the familiar note:

SEE IF YOU CAN FIND ONE LIKE THIS. LOVE, DAD

I read it again and think it through. Why would my father write this note in his own wedding gift? It doesn't make any sense.

Finishing my examination, I put the ottoman and flashlight back, then head to the kitchen. My mom is there, making a Saturday afternoon batch of fudge to raise our spirits on this gloomy day. As the youngest, I often get to scrape leftovers out of the pan after she does the finished product onto a platter.

She's a large woman—like my dad—and her girth blocks much of the stove. Flecks of gray have recently begun to pepper her thick, dark locks. I stand at her hip and wait.

"How come Dad wrote a note in the broken clock that says 'See if you can find one like this?'" I ask, my eyes focused on the fudge mixture as she churns. When it reaches the soft-ball stage, it's ready to pour. My stomach growls.

Mom laughs. "Honey, your dad didn't write that. That's Grandpa Charley's note to your dad when he shipped us the clock."

I take this in, hardly believing that my father's and my grandfather's handwriting can be so alike. I mean the note really looks like my dad wrote it.

"Oh," I say, keeping my gaze locked firmly on the fudge. As my eyes watch the brown mixture bubble, my mind crawls over the mysteries of ancestry and DNA. My own handwriting looks nothing like my father's.

My dad is left-handed and I am right-handed. But that's only the beginning of the gulf that divides us. At six feet and 250 pounds, he seems to plow through his days as a big, angry force, glossing over details in his wake, swearing (and sometimes ranting) at life's bumps.

The very opposite of me. I want to be a detective when I grow up. Details are my bread and butter. If I find old pictures in one of our many attic boxes, I always check the backs for names and dates. When I read a Hardy Boys story, I mentally catalogue the clues to try and figure out the mystery.

And I'm pretty even-tempered. I always try to make everybody happy.

If only I had been there to help wind my grandfather's special clock that first time, maybe I could have paid more attention and it wouldn't have broken. Maybe then my dad would have had a closer relationship with his dad.

And, if all of that had happened, maybe then my father would be more like the dads on TV, who play ball with their sons and take them fishing and hug them when life gets tough.

PART ONE
CLUES

G

GREG'S STORY

(1981 – 2018)

'To Charley—thanks for giving me the works.'

*—Bud Abbott, comedian**

*(*all chapter header quotes are excerpts from Allison Watchmakers' Visitors Book)*

CHAPTER 1

September 1981

“He was a millionaire,” my father says, taking a dramatic pause to drag on his cigarette and sip at his scotch. “With a big hat and a Texas drawl. An oil man.”

Dad is drinking, so this will be longwinded. We sit around the blackened oak table in our kitchen. My sturdy wooden chair creaks as I shift for comfort. Since the onset of adolescence, the inevitability of DNA has added more than thirty pounds to my growing frame. A lot of it around my middle.

I don't usually like hanging around my dad when he's drinking—he becomes a verbose professor. For that matter, I don't usually like hanging around my dad when he's sober—his daytime, grocery-store-owner persona often barks commands at whichever of his six children is assigned to work that day.

But tonight is different. My father is telling family history, from back when FDR and JFK were alive and my ancestors fought in wars, performed music, and built things.

Tonight the topic is clocks.

“The Oil Man had become aware of the shop—your grandfather had built quite a reputation for excellence in the Los Angeles arena.” Big words. Drinking Dad always uses formal speak. “Allison Watchmakers attracted curiosity seekers from nearby Santa Monica, Beverly Hills, and Hollywood.”

My dad pauses again, this time to wipe the back of his left hand across his lips. He always does this when he's drinking. I have no idea why.

“So, like many in town, he came out to view my father's collection. There were thirteen clocks in total. They weren't for sale. My father earned a living repairing watches, but he made clocks just to see what he could create. Although, technically, his creations were also considered watches.” Drinking Dad slips easily into 'lecture mode'.

His grayish hair is puffed out a little bit on the sides, like college professors you might see in an old Sherlock Holmes movie—the chubby kind with a pipe

and thick eyebrows.

“Do you know the difference between a watch and a clock?” he asks, waiting for my answer as he blows cigarette smoke toward the family room. Given my roots, I feel like I should know things like this. But, as the youngest in our family, I’ve learned not to ask about what I don’t know. Quiet is safer than stupid.

“You wear a watch on your wrist?” I guess, raising my eyebrows to try and look knowledgeable.

My father chuckles. “Everyone makes that mistake. No, a clock is distinguished from a watch by the presence of a pendulum. If it has no pendulum, it is a watch—even if it hangs on the wall.”

I nod and purse my lips as if this is not news to me.

“So the Texas Oil Man was impressed with my father’s most unique creation: the Allison Mystery Watch.” He leans forward, setting his scotch tumbler off its coaster. My dad doesn’t pay much attention to details like this, just one more thing I can’t relate to.

“The Mystery Watch was fastened to a flat square of wood—two feet by two feet.” Drinking Dad gestures with his right hand, his cigarette dropping a few stray ashes as he makes a circle. “It had all the numbers of a clock-face, one through twelve, but there were no guts to it—no gears, no mechanics, no works.” He looks directly at me now, but his eyes are seeing something else. My grandfather’s shop, I guess, way off on the other side of the country from Western New York. I sense the awe my father has for my grandfather, a man he barely knew.

When my dad was twelve, my grandparents divorced—a huge shame in 1932. My mom told me privately that it really hurt my dad, having to choose whether to stay with his mom in New York or go with his dad and half-brother to California.

“He doesn’t really know how to be a dad because his own dad left,” she’d say, in the tone she uses to make excuses for his angry tantrums that often erupt in our household. But never when he is drinking. Drinking Dad is as pleasant as Mr. Rogers.

“The Mystery Watch had two wooden hands on it to indicate the time. They spun freely on a peg at the center of the clock. You could spin them around very fast and they would always come back to the correct time.”

A thin smile breaks across my dad’s lips. “My father thought of the design in a dream.” He hasn’t shifted his gaze, but now I feel that he’s seeing me. “That’s true genius, Son.” He sets the tumbler on the table again and wipes his hand across his lips.

“He once told me the only way that clock would stop telling the correct time was if the earth fell off its axis. He made a smaller version on a similar principle, which he called the American Mystery Watch.”

My chest expands with the thought of it. *A genius grandfather.* I think this might be where I got my good memory from—in school, I can memorize facts quickly. And I’m good at figuring things out, like when I used my cassette tape recorder to wire a house-to-Greg communication system into my detective agency in our

barn.

My father's smile increases. "So, on this particular occasion, the Texas Oil Man observed the Mystery Watch and said, 'That's the darndest thing I've ever seen! How much do y'all want for it, Allison?'" My dad adds a southern accent for the Oil Man's voice.

"Your grandfather looked at him and said, 'it's not for sale'." My dad leans in. "My father was not a man who ever let anyone tell him what to do." The pride in his voice is palpable.

"So the Oil Man says, 'I want that clock! I'll give you a thousand dollars for it.'" I like where this is going.

"And, once again, my dad says, 'it's not for sale'."

I swirl the straw in my glass of late-summer lemonade. Real stories are sometimes as good as—and sometimes better than—made-up ones.

"They went back and forth a bit and the Oil Man got so angry, he finally threw down a blank check and said, 'You fill out *any amount!* I want that clock!'"

He pauses, as much to sip his scotch as to add emphasis.

"And your grandfather replied, 'It's. Not. For. Sale?'"

My mind swirls at the thought—a blank check from a millionaire! A clock—I *mean a watch*—that worked without explanation! It's like something from a Stephen King book.

I ask the obvious question. "Where are all the clocks now?"

My father looks away.

"You're familiar with the one on our library shelf." I nod. "It was a wedding gift from my father," he says.

He pauses for the briefest of moments. The fact that he broke it on its first wind floats unspoken between us.

My father continues. "The rest of my father's clocks were supposed to go to a museum upon his death..." He exhales more smoke before he finishes the thought. "...but I don't know their ultimate disposition."

As my father takes a break to refill his tumbler, I use the opportunity to excuse myself. Heading upstairs, my mind continues to sift through the details of this exciting family story. I pull out my journal and record the facts.

I close the page with a vow: to locate my genius grandfather's missing collection someday—and maybe even solve the mystery of the Allison Mystery Watch.