

Pride of Berea keeping time for another half-Century

by Marcia McHugh

There are many towns with the perfect little store carrying the finest and most interesting clocks from around the world. One of these stores in a small town near Cleveland, Ohio is excited to be celebrating its fiftieth year. In 1953 Carl Schleutermann, a German immigrant began importing cuckoo clocks and his son-in-law repaired old clocks in the workshop. Thus, in Berea, Suburban Clock was born.

The store grew steadily. In addition to importing completed clocks, Carl and his nephews Gene Unger and Rudi Kamper built clocks including a cuckoo clock billed as the "World's-Largest Cuckoo Clock." The clock stands two-stories high with animated figures and stands in the heart of Ohio's Little Switzerland community. Schleutermann at one point was flown to New York to appear on an episode of "What's your Line," in which contestants tried to guess his occupation. No one could correctly guess that he was a builder of cuckoo clocks living in the Midwest.

Schleutermann and Unger loved to decorate their town with fine clocks. The town triangle of Berea still boasts a set of four bells cast in Holland, a gift of Suburban Clock. They still ring the Westminster chime every quarter-hour just as they have a generation ago.

Schleutermann's nephew, Rudi Kamper was to take the reigns of the company after the founder's retirement. He and his partner Roy Bogardus concentrated on cuckoo clocks and antique Vienna regulators. Kamper was and continues to be a true horologist. He is a star fellow member and Past-President of the local chapter of the National Association of Watch and Clock Collectors. Kamper worked as a national officer and has helped to host two national meetings in Cleveland.

Rudi's reputation in Black Forest clock expertise led a leading clock manufacturer to ask him to import a line of cuckoo clocks to sell on a wholesale basis. Today this business has grown into North Coast Imports, Inc., a national distributor of fine European timepieces of all kinds.

The store continues to expand. Just last year the showroom has expanded to its third building and the entire complex (including workshop and warehouse) covers almost the entire city block in Historic Downtown Berea. Klaus Ludwig, another German-born master clock maker and partner, started in 1986 and now heads the repair department. He also has begun a successful business in selling clocks as corporate gifts and incentives. Rudi's son, Dolf Kamper now works with his father to expand North Coast Imports. The distributorship now imports clocks from six countries and more than ten manufacturers. This small company, full of

clock lovers, has even started designing their own clocks.

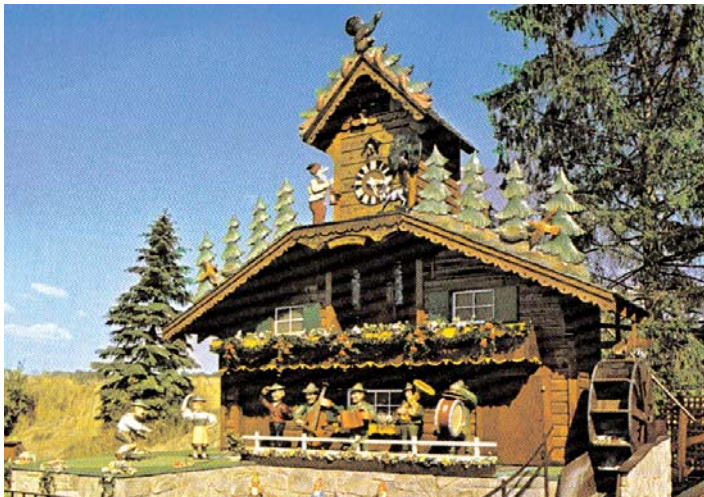
The store in Berea has become a landmark and is known among locals as simply "The Clock Shop in Berea." There is always something interesting to be found there interesting to both the seasoned collector as well as someone new to clocks.

Perhaps the most fascinating clock on display today would be



the tall clock known to employees and regular visitors simply as "Col. Sloan." It is an eight-foot piece made in Steubenville, Ohio in the early to mid-Nineteenth Century. It has a story behind it as well, commissioned by John Sloan of political prominence. The clock is a beautifully slender piece finished in a rich mahogany with excellent proportions.

Family continues to be a binding element in Suburban Clock and North Coast Imports. While the owner Rudi and his son Dolf work out how to best direct the company, Dolf's cousin Josh Broske is busy keeping track of inventory and product service. Clock store owners all over the country well know the charming voice of Beth Reams the accounts manager. "Beth is the most personable and helpful person to talk to. It's always a pleasure to talk to her," says at least one happy customer. It definitely feels like a large family inside Suburban Clock. On Saturdays they all gather around one of the workbenches for a pizza or a nice selection of cold cuts and every one of the fifteen-person workforce has their birthday celebrated with cake and song.



Rudi Kamper the owner has other interests, but they don't wander too far from the fine things in his shop. He is an avid vintage car collector, with the oldest in his collection dating from 1899. He and his wife are very proud of their collection and love especially to go on tours. "These cars were made to be driven," says Kamper. His love for old mechanics of course includes clocks, of which he has an extensive collection to say the least. His concentration is mostly on Black Forest clocks and Vienna Regulators.



The real question lies in how best to continue Suburban Clock and North Coast Imports through another three generations. Clock stores are specialty stores which are decreasing in number. This problem could be due to many factors. Many store owners point to a slow economy and many are worried about low-risk and low-responsibility sales methods like consignment shops or mail-order web sites. Although concerned about these factors the decision makers at the clock shop in Berea take a broader outlook. "In the end the dealer that can meet the consumers supply with the best service and best quality will always be successful," says Rudi Kamper, "regardless of how or where the sale is made, we need to find out the best way to make the customer happy with his purchase."



Rudi's son Dolf is quick to point out the importance in a renewal of interest. "We [as clock dealers] need to focus on the only real problem in the industry and that is the fact that a mechanical clock is no longer a necessity to the average person. When the VCR, telephone, and microwave all give us the time of day there needs to be another reason for buying a beautiful timepiece." North Coast Imports strives to find styles which are a cut above the rest. The Kamper family's love in antique clocks lead them to offer an unlimited supply of beautiful reproductions. "Many of the best trends are reworking of old styles. We listen very closely to what our customers are looking for and we have the flexibility to customize our line to what people want."



The people of Suburban Clock and North Coast Imports are proud to have been part of its fifty-year tradition. Over the years they have found ways to expand business and success through diversity. Keep an eye out for the interesting and unusual timepieces from North Coast Imports, and if you happen to find yourself in Cleveland don't forget to make a stop and say hello to the people of Suburban Clock.