The art of clockmaking has a rich history throughout our country. This skill is still present today, but, for the most part, on a large-scale basis. In Adair County, however, there is someone who personally makes clocks in his own way and for his own reasons. Alvin Neely in Kirksville has been making clocks for several years. His skills are not for sale but his works clutter his home and all of his clocks are very beautiful.

Naturally, clockmaking in our country started after the firm establishment of colonies in America in the 1700’s. In Europe, the early clockmakers were priests, astronomers, blacksmiths, and jewelers; however, early American clockmakers were carpenters. As a result, most of the clocks were made of wood and fashioned by hand tools. There were a few different styles but mostly they made grandfather clocks and shelf clocks.

After the revolution there was a demand for more and cheaper clocks. Many people found that they liked the luxury of knowing the time at a glance and the demand was too great to fill. Many people bought the movements from a clockmaker and had a local cabinetmaker fashion a case for it. Still others bought the movements and hung them on the wall without a surrounding case; these were known as “wag-on-the-wall” clocks. While they served their purpose, they did not look too good and usually ended up as dust collectors.

As the need for more clocks increased, something had to be done. Eli Terry then began mass production of wooden clocks in Connecticut in the early 1800’s. This was a big step forward and led to the establishment of clockmaking as an industry.

He introduced many of the well-known shelf clocks sought after by collectors today. Clockmaking had gained a strong foothold in our country and many of the styles have not changed to this day.

Now clocks are made mostly by mass production, but Alvin Neely fashions grandfather clocks of wood by hand like they were made years ago. He does not use many tools considering the exactness which is needed, and he tries to keep the process pretty basic. Nearly every room in his home has one of his clocks in it and on the hour, every hour, all different kinds of chimes can be heard throughout the house. While he shows and talks about his clocks, it is obvious how much pride he takes in them because of that special smile on his face. Clockmaking has become an irreplaceable part of his life and it will probably remain that way as long as he lives.

“I’ve always liked to work with wood,” said Mr. Neely as he began to tell how he became interested in making clocks. “I can’t remember exactly how I began making them...we were with some friends in Kansas who had a grandfather clock that someone had made, and I got interested in making one.”

A short time later, in a barbershop in Kirksville, he saw a magazine that contained an article on clockmaking. He asked the barber if he could take it with him, and from that small amount of information, he began his first clock. Although he had worked with wood before, making clocks was totally different. His first attempt gave him a lot of problems. “You learn a little each time,” he said, “and I had quite a time with my first one. I made so many mistakes, I just kept patching

Left photo: Mr. Neely is shown here in his small work-area fitting the molding on one of his clocks.
Center photo: Three of Mr. Neely’s hand-made clocks. The one on the far right is the first one he ever made.
Right photo: Alvin Neely proudly displays some of the earlier clocks that he has made.
and patching.”

After finishing his first clock, he decided that he needed more information. He ordered plans which specifically showed how to make different cabinet styles. Since then he has had considerably fewer problems, although he does not hold strictly to the plan. Depending on the style, the movements consist of the actual timepiece, weights, and pendulum. All of the movements are made in Germany and vary greatly in looks, sound of the chimes, and materials used in construction. “The first movements I ever bought cost me $87. Today the cost is at least $200 or even more depending on what they’re made of.” He usually finishes the surrounding cabinet before ordering and inserting the movements.

As he spoke, he began to point out the errors in many of his clocks. Many of the faults which he considers major can barely be seen by an untrained eye. Since most of the wood he uses to make his clocks is as much as 30 or 40 years old, much of it has holes or cracks. Mr. Neely does not feel that this affects the overall looks of the clocks, however. “Most of my wood is old and I have to fill holes sometimes,” he said. “Many people like that look in the wood though, and I sort of do, too.” He has a large stack of wood, mostly walnut, in his garage and he plans on making clocks until his wood runs out or until he is physically unable to make them.

Considering the type and exactness of his work, the time involved in making a clock is not too substantial. The time it does take depends mainly on how consistently he works on them. He has three unfinished ones in the garage which he has been working on for a while now. Usually, a clock will take him about a month to complete. If he works hard, however, he can get one finished sooner. “If I just get in and work everyday, it will take me about two to three weeks of hard work to complete a clock.” He has been alternating work on the ones in his garage, and the movements are all that are needed to complete one of them. He is hoping to finish those and start new ones soon. His only problem is that he is running out of places in his home to put them. “I want to finish this one, but I don’t know where I’m gonna put it. Maybe I will stick it at the foot of my bed,” he said with a laugh. Much of his spare house space is already filled with clocks, and in the near future he will be overrun by time.

As many clocks as he has made, Mr. Neely has only sold one of them. A man that Mr. Neely knew came to him one day wishing to purchase a hand-made clock for his wife. Every clock that Mr. Neely makes is special and unique to him and for that reason, it took a lot of pressure from his wife and daughter before he would sell one. He knew his clocks were valuable, however, and he was very frank about the situation. “When the man came to me, I told him it would cost a lot. He asked how much and when I said $1,000, he just started pulling out money.” His skills are not usually for sale due to very personal reasons. He wants very strongly to leave a clock to each of his children and grandchildren when he is gone, and he has almost made enough. He did realize, however, that selling one of them posed no threat to his goal and that is why one person, but only one person, has had the opportunity to buy a hand-made clock by Mr. Alvin Neely.

When he tried to think of how many he has made, he paused for a moment. “Well, I’m not sure,” he said. “I’ve almost made enough so far for my children and all of my grandchildren.” Although he makes clocks as a hobby and to fill time during his retirement, he again admitted that the real reason is so that when he is gone, he will have left something behind as a remembrance for his family. His beautiful clocks will be in his family for years and perhaps this is why he takes so much pride and puts so much time into his work.