

# DOES ANYBODY REALLY KNOW WHAT TIME IT IS?

— KEITH W. STRANDBERG

Imagine that every city and every region in the U.S. operated on its own system of time.

**What would businesses do? Travel would be difficult if there were no standard for time from city to city. How would we live our lives? Well, surprisingly, only a little more than a hundred years ago, that was exactly the situation. There was no such thing as Standard Time.**

Today, we know that when it is 10 pm in New York, it's 7 pm in Los Angeles. Until 1883, the entire country operated on a chaotic system of varying local times determined by the position of the sun. In New York, local time varied as much as a minute or more from one side of the city to the other. When it was 12 noon in New York City, it was 12:12 pm in Boston, MA, 11:56 am in Philadelphia, PA, 11:46 am in Richmond, VA, 11:36 in Pittsburgh, PA, and 11:30 am in Cleveland, OH – all these cities in the same time zone, Eastern, today. The differences in local times are because the moment that the sun rises in Boston is different from when it rises in New York. The ball dropping in Times Square on New Year's Eve is similar to what happened every day in many cities. The authorities would drop a ball at noon, or the railroad station would blow a whistle, and people would set their watches and clocks based on that signal. It was the private railroads that eventually introduced Standard Time to the nation. Although people certainly adapted to the local time method, it was disorganized, confusing and dangerous for the railroads, which soon began to lobby for a national standard system.

A plan for geographic time zones was adopted by the railroads on October 11, 1883. It was not implemented, however, until Sunday, November 18, 1883, which became known as "The Day with Two Noons" because in each time zone there was a noon based upon sun-time; then clocks and watches were set back from one to thirty minutes to the new Standard Time.

## NEED FOR ACCURATE TIMEPIECES

Once Standard Time was introduced, the railroads needed to find a way to synchronize timekeeping and to make sure that the watches used on railroad lines were accurate. Accurate timekeeping was so important that railroads employed inspectors whose sole responsibility was to travel the railroad, inspecting station clocks and engineers' watches. If an engineer was found to have a malfunctioning watch, it was cause for a fine or even a suspension.

On the Strasburg Rail Road in Lancaster County, PA, the oldest continuously operating railroad in North America, engineers still synchronize their watches to each other's and to the station's clock when they hand off an engine. "Our trains are run on a timetable schedule with set departure times, and train orders are issued based on standard railroad time," says Linn Moedinger, president and chief mechanical officer of the Strasburg Rail Road Company. "It's the way we've always done it. Time is very important to the safe and efficient running of any railroad."

You can be thankful to the railroads for the standard system of timekeeping we use today. There are, in fact, nine time zones in America, the four biggest being: Eastern, Central, Mountain and Pacific. ▾

PATEK PHILIPPE'S EIGHT-DAY GOING RAILROAD WATCH, CIRCA 1865, A LARGE, NICKEL-CASED, HALF-OPEN-FACED POCKET WATCH FOR RAILROAD USE.



IMAGE COURTESY OF ANTIQVORUM



IMAGE COURTESY OF THE STRASBURG RAIL ROAD