

Fire stops Town Clock; repairs will take months

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Santa Cruz's 95-year-old Town Clock will have to be temporarily dismantled to repair damage caused by an electrical fire in its downtown tower Sunday night.

Though the clock itself was not seriously damaged, smoke and soot have gummed its gears, said its custodian, Eugene Corriden. The repairs are expected to take a few months, he said.

"The clock was drenched with

water, it's got charred wood and various other debris in it, the polished brass parts are coated in soot, and some of the paint work looks damaged," Corriden said. "To go through that clockwork and polish everything and put it back together will take some time."

The fire broke out around 8:45 p.m. in an electrical junction box about two-thirds of the way up the inside of the tower on Pacific

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Avenue, the fire department said. Firefighters using a ladder truck cut through the tower's decorative metal cornice to extinguish the blaze. Damage was estimated at \$10,000, including recasting and replacing the intricate cornice work.

The clock ticked and chimed through much of the commotion as firefighters sprayed the flames and crowds gathered below, but it finally stopped at 10:15 p.m.

Corriden, who did not learn about the fire until Monday, said the news was "sickening." A retired biochemist and amateur

clock restorer, he fixed the clock for its bicentennial dedication and has been its caretaker ever since. Corriden spent several weeks last year cleaning the clock's gears.

City park planner Don Van Selus said there is no evidence that electrical work to light the nearby "Collateral Damage: A Reality of War" statue for its dedication Saturday led to the fire. "It appears to be just an electrical malfunction," he said.

The original clock tower was built in 1873 atop the old Odd Fellows Building on Pacific Avenue near Cooper Street and was destroyed by fire in 1899. The tower was rebuilt a year later but dismantled in 1964.

The clock, with four five-foot diameter faces, is driven by an 80-pound pendulum and electronically wound. One of about 500 of its kind made by the Seth Thomas company of Connecticut, it lay in the basement of the city's museum until the mid-1970s, when Corriden began restoring it. The clock and its tower were replaced atop a new structure at Pacific Avenue and Mission Street and dedicated July 4, 1976.

On Oct. 17, 1989, the clock stopped at 5:04 p.m. when the Loma Prieta earthquake shook much of downtown Santa Cruz to rubble. It became a symbol of the city's resilience when it was restarted a few weeks later, kicking off the recovery effort.