The Western Union clocks came in various sizes and shapes, ranging from the smallest dials which were nine inches in diameter to the largest which were about eighteen inches in diameter. Some had sweep second hands; others did not. Some had a little red light bulb on the front which would flash. The typical model was about sixteen inches, and was found in offices, schools, transportation depots, radio station offices, and of course in the telegraph office itself.

The one thing all the clocks had in common was their brown metal case and cream-colored face, with the insignia "Western Union" and their corporate logo in those days which was a bolt of electricity, sort of like a letter "Z" laying on its side. And in somewhat smaller print below, the words "Naval Observatory Time."

The local clocks in an office or school or wherever were calibrated by a "master clock" (actually a sub-master) on the premises. Once an hour on the hour, the (sub) master clock would drop a metal contact for just a half second, and send about nine volts DC up the line to all the local clocks. They in turn had a "tolerance" of about two minutes on both sides of the hour so that the current coming to them would yank the minute hand exactly upright onto the twelve from either direction if the clock was fast or slow.

The sub-master clocks in each building were in turn serviced by the master clock in town; usually this was the one in the telegraph office. Every hour on the half hour, the master clock in the telegraph office would throw current to the sub-masters, yanking them into synch as required. And as for the telegraph offices themselves, they were serviced twice a day by -- you guessed it -- the Naval Observatory Master clock in Our Nation's Capitol, by the same routine.

Someone there would press half a dozen buttons at the same time, using all available fingers; current would flow to every telegraph office and synch all the master clocks in every community. Western Union charged fifty cents per month for the service, and tossed the clock in for free! Oh yes, there was an installation charge of about two dollars when you first had service (i.e. a clock) installed.

The clocks were installed and maintained by the "clockman," a technician from Western Union who spent his day going around hanging new clocks, taking them out of service, changing batteries every few years for each clock, etc.

What a panic it was for them when "war time" (what we now call Daylight Savings Time) came around each year! Wally, the guy who serviced all the clocks in downtown Chicago had to start on *Thursday* before the Sunday official changeover just to finish them all by *Tuesday* following. He would literally rush in an office, use his screwdriver to open the case, twirl the hour hand around one hour forward in the spring, (or eleven hours *forward* in the fall since the hands could not be moved backward beyond the twelve going counterclockwise), slam the case back on, screw it in, and move down the hall to the next clock and repeat the process. He could finish several dozen clocks per day, and usually the office assigned him a helper twice a year for these events.

He said they never bothered to line the minute hand up just right, because it would have taken too long, and ".....anyway, as long as we got it within a minute or so, it would synch itself the next time the master clock sent a signal..." Working fast, it took a minute to a minute and a half to open the case, twirl the minute hand, put the case back on, "stop and BS with the receptionist for a couple seconds" and move along.

The master clock sent its signal over regular telco phone lines. Usually it would terminate in the main office of whatever place it was, and the (sub) master there would take over at that point.

Wally said it was very important to do a professional job of hanging the clock to begin with. It had to be level, and the pendulum had to be just right, otherwise the clock would gain or lose more time than could be accommodated in the hourly synching process. He said it was a very rare clock that actually was out by even a minute once an hour, let alone the two minutes of tolerance built into the gear works.

"...Sometimes I would come to work on Monday morning, and find out in the office that the clock line had gone open Friday evening. So nobody all weekend got a signal. Usually I would go down a manhole and find it open someplace where one of the Bell guys messed it up, or took it off and never put it back on. To find out where it was open, someone in the office would 'ring out' the line; I'd go around downtown following the loop as we had it laid out, and keep listening on my headset for it. When I found the break or the open, I would tie it down again and the office would release the line; but then I had to go to all the clocks *before* that point and restart them, since the constant current from the office during the search had usually caused them to stop."

But he said, time and again, the clocks were usually so well mounted and hung that "...it was rare we would find one so far out of synch that we had to adjust it manually. Usually the first signal to make it through once I repaired the circuit would yank everyone in town to make up for whatever they lost or gained over the weekend..."

In 1965, Western Union decided to discontinue the Time Service. In a nostalgic letter to subscribers, they announced their decision to suspend operations at the end of the current month, but said "for old time's sake" anyone who had a clock was welcome to keep it and continue using it; there just would not be any setting signals from the master clocks any longer.

Within a day or two of the official announcement, every Western Union clock in the Chicago area headquarters building was gone. The executives snatched them off the wall, and took them home for the day when they would have historical value. All the clocks in the telegraph offices disappeared about the same time, to be replaced with standard office-style electric wall clocks.