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When Time Runs Out for the Meter, Not the Car

By SEWELL CHAN

The last New York City mechanical parking meter -- an emblem of street life, object of driver frustration and source of fascination for children since 1951 -- was withdrawn from service yesterday.

The demise of the mechanical meter was painless but not swift. Since 1995, when the city began using battery-powered digital meters and quickly found them to be more accurate, reliable and vandal-resistant than the older spring-loaded devices, the days of the mechanical meter have been numbered.

By the start of this year, the mechanical models made up only 2,000 of the 62,000 single-space meters in the city.

Yesterday morning, in a somber but unpretentious ceremony on the southwest corner of West 10th Street and Surf Avenue in Coney Island, Brooklyn, the last one was retired.

Fifteen employees of the City Department of Transportation watched as the meter was lifted out of its iron casing at 10:25 a.m. (The mechanical and digital meters both fit the same casing, which includes the transparent plastic display.) A new digital meter was slipped into its place, ready to take quarters.

"The world changes," the transportation commissioner, Iris Weinshall, said by telephone. "Just as the subway token went, now the manual meter has gone."

Ms. Weinshall admitted to a measure of nostalgia. "A lot of our employees feel very connected to these meters," she said. "This type of meter will go into museums, just like other memorabilia of the city."

Ms. Weinshall, 53, recalled that as a child in Midwood, Brooklyn, her father, a cabdriver, would use his taxi to run errands on weekends. "Whenever my father would park, it was really a thrill to put the coin in the meter and turn that little handle," she said.

Victor Rosen, the assistant commissioner who oversees the Parking Operations Bureau, enumerated the advantages of the new technology.

"The new digital meters guarantee true time, every time, because they're a digital clock, in essence, so you never get shorted time -- as could happen with the old mechanical meter," he said. "Secondly, these meters are very vandal-resistant because there's no handle to turn or be broken off. Additionally, these meters have an electronic footprint, which guarantees that any slugs or foreign coins cannot be used to pay for parking."

With no moving parts, digital meters are also easier to fix. The city's meter-repair shop in Maspeth, Queens, has to fix about 200 meters a day, down from 500 to 600 a decade ago. "It's akin to repairing a computer versus a manual typewriter," said Gary R. Wink, assistant chief of meter maintenance.

The first parking meter was introduced in Oklahoma City in 1935. After a trial run, meters were introduced in New York City on Sept. 19, 1951, to ease congestion -- and provide revenue.

"It's just another way of getting money out of people," the boxer Sugar Ray Robinson grumbled at the time as an official dropped a dime into the first meter, on West 125th Street.

Mechanical meters work like wind-up clocks, with gears and springs. The original meters had no handles, according to Stephen Kerney, a meter-repair supervisor. Coins activated the devices, but, like old watches, the meters had to be wound every week, by a worker using a detachable handle.

Eventually, handles were installed, but they promptly became targets of vandalism.

"People would just knock the handles off using a hammer, to break the meters so they could park for free," said Theodore R. Collins, chief of meter collections.

Other mischief-makers inserted gum, paper or foil into the coin slot. Still others -- cheap drivers and confused tourists -- inserted metal slugs or foreign coins. So many metal slugs accumulated in the meters that the city took to burying them at the Fresh Kills landfill on Staten Island. The city sold the foreign coins to collectors.

The city stopped buying mechanical meters about 10 years ago. Since then, as the meters were retired, they were disassembled, their parts used to repair other meters.

From a heyday of 69,000 on the streets in the late 1980s, the city has fewer than 5,000 intact mechanical meters now, all in storage. They will be sold for scrap or sold as mementos, said Michael Pipitone, director of field services at the parking bureau.

George A. MacKay, president of MacKay Meters of New Glasgow, Nova Scotia, a longtime meter supplier to the city, paid his respects yesterday as the last mechanical meter was retired. His company no longer makes mechanical meters; his customers, which include the cities of San Francisco, Chicago and Miami, buy only digital meters now.

In 1996, New York City introduced multispace meters, called Muni-Meters, that accept prepaid parking cards. About 600 of the 2,100 Muni-Meters now accept credit cards as well.

And in an experiment that started last year, about 100 of the 62,000 single-space meters now accept parking cards as well as coins.

But the city has no plans to do away with single-space meters or stop accepting coins.

After all, said Toni Turcic, director of research and development for the Parking Operations Bureau, of \$120 million in annual parking revenue, \$96 million comes in the form of quarters.