

## Tom Marshall's Weekly News, October 19, 2015

**Men's Pocket Watches:** I don't know when the first wristwatches appeared, but my guess is about 100 years ago. Mechanical clocks with conventional faces were certainly around in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Fine tall and shelf clocks were made, mostly by hand with beautiful cases, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. My impression is that the first pocket watches also appeared in that century, and with the coming of the railroads in the 1830s, it became absolutely necessary for those involved in moving trains to know exactly what time it was. Although fine clocks and watches were made in Europe, this story is what little I know about American pocket watches.

In the mid-1800s, a good pocket watch was an essential part of a successful man's jewelry. Like the latest shelf and wall clocks of the period, it was activated by a mainspring that normally required winding every 24 hours. This was usually done by turning a small knob that extended through the case of the watch opposite 12 o'clock. Pulling the knob out until it clicked made it possible to set the time, which also needed to be done frequently. A watch's accuracy often depended on the quality of its movement, and by 1900 pocket watches were available in all price ranges. Good watches were advertised as having 17 jewels, or even 21 jewels, which meant the number of tiny jeweled bearings that made up the movement.

Next to a pen knife, a pocket watch was the most important item needed by a successful man. Businessmen and those in high society wore business suits with a vest, and in one of the front vest pockets, with appropriate gold chains attached thereto, they carried their time piece. It was easy to pull out the watch to check the time, and this was often done as a matter of habit rather than of necessity. Working men bought trousers that had tiny watch pockets, accessible just below the belt. Sears Roebuck & Co. sold pocket watches through its catalog for under \$10; fancy high-quality watches could cost \$200 or more. Some had a "double case," with a snap hinged door covering the crystal lens that had to be opened to see the face. A very good Hamilton, Elgin, or Waltham pocket watch, all American-made, was in the \$35 to \$75 range; its accuracy would not compare to a modern Timex wristwatch, and it had to be wound at least once each day (most were wound several times a day).

Railroad watches carried by members of train crews were slightly different and had a safeguard to prevent the time from being set incorrectly by mistake. Instead of the winding stem being pulled to set the time, these watches were "lever set" by an interior lever accessible only by opening the case. The faces of these watches had very bold numerals and black hands, making it easy for engineers, conductors, and trainmen to read the time in subdued light. All main line railroads had contracts with watchmakers along their routes to check the accuracy and condition of the watches worn by those in train service. It was mandatory for such employees to check in with the approved shop once a month to have their watch checked over, cleaned, and adjusted if necessary. The Pennsylvania Railroad had such a watchmaker on Market Street in Wilmington.

I was given my first watch about 1928, when I was four. It was a small but bulky child's pocket watch commemorating Lindbergh's transatlantic flight from New York to Paris. On the back was engraved the Statue of Liberty on one side and the Eiffel Tower on the other, and a tiny airplane between. I could never understand how the two cities could be so close together, but I could soon "tell time." As mentioned last week, in the late 1930s my father gave gold pocket watches as the prizes in the Handicap the last day of the Yorklyn trapshoot each year. I won such a Hamilton watch in 1938 (retail value \$45), which is still in our collection. After World War II, good wrist watches superseded pocket watches as prizes, but they still had to be wound every day. Their accuracy was inferior to pocket watches, as the movements were much smaller.