



It's About Time!

By Peggy Gill



Throughout history, man has been fascinated with the concept of time. We find ourselves scurrying to be on time for an appointment or event, and then trying to save time by multitasking. Our lives, it seems, revolve around that small flat dial embellished with numbers and the rotating hands that mark the passage of time on a daily basis.

A Brief History

The first mechanical watches appeared in the early 1500's. Peter Henlein of Nurnberg, Germany is attributed with developing the first "pocket watch" sometime around 1505, but this has been disputed by many historians. Nevertheless, the watches consisted of a single hour hand and were meant to be carried in the hand or worn on a chain around the neck. It wasn't until 1675 when Charles II of England introduced the waistcoat, and pocket watches became thinner and flatter in order to fit into the small waistcoat pocket. This also kept the watch "out of sight" to would-be robbers on the highway. Over the many years of development, the mechanics of the watches evolved to become not only more durable and accurate, but works of art with their intricate movements, jewels, and engraved faces and cases.

At least two watchmakers have purportedly claimed to develop the first wrist watch. The earliest is Abraham-Louis Breguet, a Swiss watchmaker, who according to the archives at Breguet (the current company in Switzerland), presented a watch to fit on a wrist as a gift to Caroline Murati, the Queen of Naples in 1812. Later, in 1868, Patek Philippe developed the "ladies bracelet watch." Philippe is more often credited with inventing the wrist watch. Nevertheless, other watchmakers throughout Europe soon began making wrist watches, which were often a modified, small cased pocket watch attached to a strap; the first true mass production of these time pieces were ordered by Kaiser Wilhelm I of Germany to be made for German naval officers. Soldiers and aviators in the early 20th century found that having a timepiece on their wrist freed their hands for more necessary and important endeavors. Consequently, up until World War I, wrist watches were worn mostly by women. One such watch referred to as the "wristlet" was made for women and became even more popular in the 1920's. The general opinion held by many prominent gentlemen was that these wristlets were simply a passing fad instead of a serious timepiece. Although pocket watches were still being used after the war, people began accepting the wrist watch as being more practical and by 1930, the ratio of wrist watches to pocket watches was 50 to 1. *As a side note, I found it interesting that in looking through my 1929 *Sears, Roebuck and Co.* catalog, there were eight pages of wrist watches, and four pages of pocket watches; my 1931 *Montgomery Wards* catalog contains six pages of wrist watches and three pages of pocket watches.

Finding a Watch from the Model A Era

During the Model A era, both pocket watches and wrist watches were being worn. New watches purchased during our era were still mechanical but were styled differently from earlier watches. But that didn't mean you dumped "Grandpa's" watch and bought a new one. However, if your intent is to enter fashion judging and use a watch as one of your accessories, you need to look for a watch that was available for purchase during the Model A years. Watches are readily available at many antique stores

or on eBay, and if you know what to look for, you can often find a deal. Please remember that to earn full points in judging, your watch needs to be in good working condition.

The best way to know that your watch is from the Model A era is to determine the date of your watch. American watches, such as Elgin and Waltham, can generally be dated by their serial number which was stamped on the movement itself. If your watch happens to be an Elgin, the company maintains a data base online (elginwatches.org) that you can type in the serial number and get detailed information about the movement itself. Another resource is an article written by Kevin James entitled “How to Determine the Age of a Watch” which is available at www.thewatchguy.com/pages/DATING.html. You do need to be familiar enough with how pocket watches work, as far as opening the cases without damaging the case or the movement to locate the serial number. The same article mentioned above has further information on how to open your watch case. Please note that many antique dealers do not know how to do this and are often unwilling to try to do so without the booth owner’s presence; if you are a pocket watch aficionado, they will usually allow you to do so if you ask permission.

The number of “jewels” in the watch movement is evidence of the quality of the watch. The jewels are used as bearings for the moving parts of the watch. Lower grade watches typically contained 7, 15, or 17 jewels. Higher end watches contained 19, 21, and even 23 jewels.

Finding an era watch becomes much easier if you can recognize some basic key features in a Model A era watch. Below are some examples of watches, with tips on what to look for. Keep in mind though that like all fashion trends, these tips are not an absolute but things that can generally be found.



Pocket Watches

Pictured at left is a typical pocket watch from the Model A era. It shows both a watch movement dated to 1929 and a case typically found in our era. Pocket watches come in different sizes, and the more typical size for our era was a 12 or 16, although it was still possible to purchase 18’s. (The smaller the number, the smaller the movement; for example, a size 12 is approximately 1 ¾ inches in diameter, a 16 is about 2 inches in diameter, and an 18 is about 2 ¼ inches in diameter.) Generally, the numerals on the face were Arabic, and with the exception of Railroad Watches, the numbers were usually smaller in size. The length of the stem on the case is shorter, and the bow is flattened or geometric—not completely round.

The watch itself is usually thinner and smaller than earlier watches. The cases themselves are usually engraved and are often monogrammed on the back.

The Elgin watch at the right is a 14 kt. gold ornate case and movement from 1928





At left is a Hamilton dated 1930 in a railroad case. Railroad watches typically had larger Arabic numerals.

Below and to the right is a 1931 Elgin in a white gold case. Notice the engraving and monogram on the back of the case.



Pictured left is an example of what often occurred. The movement inside the case is dated 1929. The case, however, is from an earlier watch. Notice the taller stem, and the completely round bow. This case also is thicker.

Pocket watches and their cases were interchangeable. If a watch movement died, you could purchase just the movement and continue to use the old case. Conversely, if the case was badly dented or scratched but had a working movement, just a case could be purchased.



Wrist Watches

As stated earlier, wrist watches were becoming more and more popular due to their practicality. Below are some examples of both men's and women's watches from the Model A era. Most watches could be interchanged with different watch bands, given the owner's preference and occasion. Men's and women's watch bands could be found made of woven mesh, available in nickel or in 1/10 14 kt. white

and “natural” gold filled. For men, also popular were leather straps, adjustable metal expansion bands, or flexible metal wristbands. Women’s watches also came with black silk ribbon bands with gold-filled or solid gold clasps (depending upon the quality of the watch), flexible expansion metal bracelets, gold-filled or 14-karat solid gold. Many high end women’s watches were sold with a gold or gold filled bracelet and included the black silk ribbon band as well.

Men’s



Women's



Enjoy the hunt!

Sources:

[Montgomery Ward & Co., Fall and Winter 1930-1931, Catalogue No. 113.](#)

[Sears, Roebuck and Co., Fall and Winter 1929-1930, Catalog No. 159.](#)

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