

Living History

By Philip Schreier

Time To Get It Right!



Photos by Lynne McCready

"Nae man can tether time or tide"

—Robert Burns

As Burns so simply put it, time can not be tethered, but you can put time on a nice chain or a decent strap and wear something appropriate and authentic to the next military event you attend. So often at reenactments, the simplest of anachronisms can spoil the

whole karma of slipping back in time through the portals living history events offer. How many times have you looked down the ranks and seen some poor guy still wearing a quartz watch and Perry Ellis eye glasses? Well if you are doing a Desert Storm event that might be OK, but at the Second Battle of Manassas it can, shall we say... ruin the moment. (Be warned you farbs out there, proper eye wear will be addressed in a future issue

Many watches, such as this open-face Spanish-American War vintage Waltham, incorporated patriot motifs to appeal to the military buyer.

of Military Classics Illustrated.)

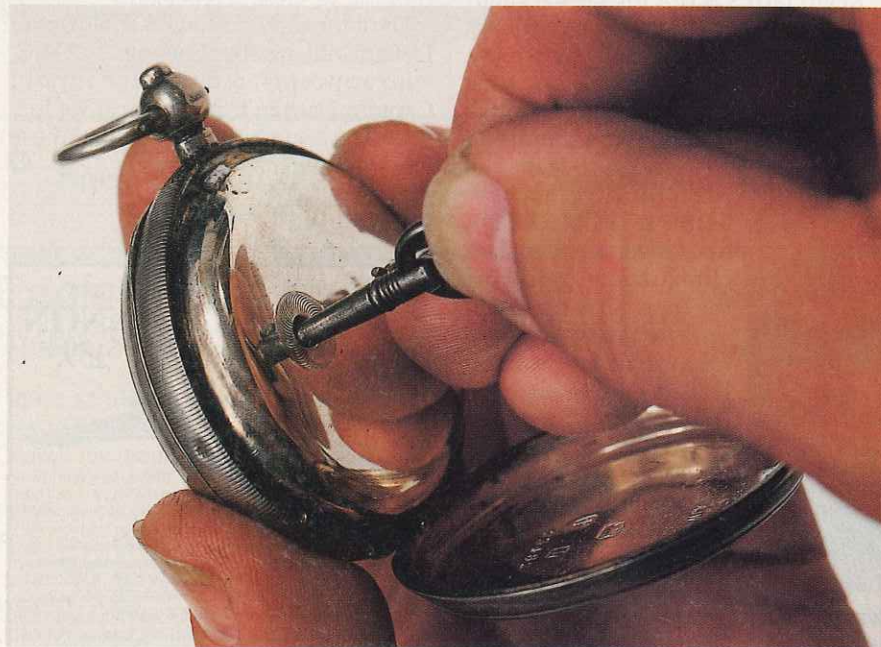
It has been reported that during one scene in the movie *Dances With Wolves*, one Indian raises his arm to deliver a fatal skull-crushing blow to an adversary and you can see what appears to be a Rolex Presidential gold watch strapped to his wrist. Such faux-pas are inexcusable in a feature film but commonplace on the battlefields of today's weekend warriors.

This issues column will attempt to give you a few tips and some interesting information on selecting an appropriate time piece for your impression.

EARLY PERIODS

The first clocks made their appearance in the early to mid-1200s. Much like the room-filling computers of the 1940s & 50s, they were huge and cumbersome, and available only to the richest of the aristocracy. Personal timepieces came into vogue in the mid-1500s and continued to be the accouterments of the wealthy until some 300 years later in the 1850s.

The industrial revolution of the mid-1800s was the catalyst for many changes in society. As goods for the consumer were manufactured on machinery capable of producing interchangeable parts, the price of those goods dropped, making the trappings of the elite available to the common man. Such was the way of watches and firearms in the ante-bellum period.

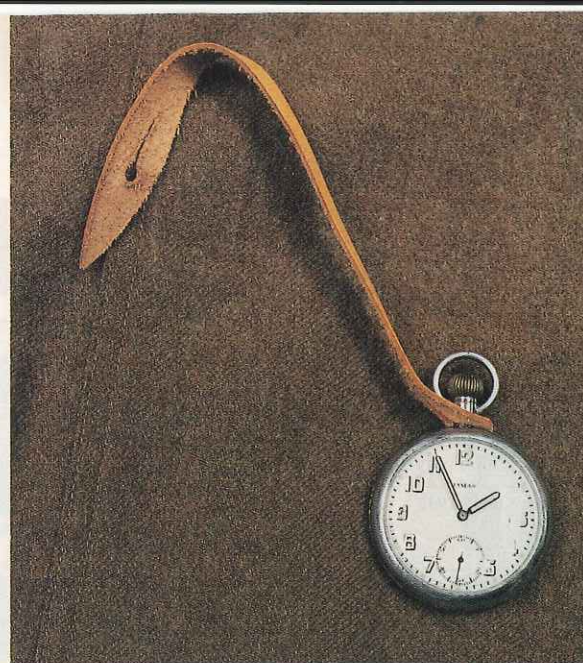


The earliest of mass-produced pocket watches were wound by a separate key. This would be the proper timepiece for a Civil War impression, as stem winds did not really appear until after the conflict.

THE CIVIL WAR YEARS

The American Watch Company was one of the first to offer a dependable pocket watch for the masses beginning in 1853. The Roxbury, Massachusetts company sold nearly 200,000 watches through the Civil War years (1861-1865) at a cost of \$40 each—or \$13 for just the movement—the watch was still an impressive investment. Colt revolvers sold during the same time for half as much. Needless to say, the average corn-fed infantryman of either army went into battle without a personal time piece.

If you feel that your Civil War impression calls for a pocket watch, try to keep a few things in mind when you search for an authentic tick-tock. The coin silver watch case, the most popular of the time, came in one of two styles, a hunter case or open face. The hunter case was a silver case that had a full cover on both the front and back. A downward push on the stem, popped the case front open to reveal the dial. This style was generally more expensive and provided protection to the fragile crystals of the period. The open face watch was the most common and the crystals were generally thicker to withstand the punishment an exposed watch face could expect. Usually mounted in a coin or nickel silver case, the open face watch is the one most often encountered at antique shops and flea markets. An average price is in the \$90-\$225 range for a decent key



This British military issue pocket watch of World War I/III vintage, sports a simple leather keeper that could be attached to the wearer's tunic buttonhole and then be secured inside a breast pocket.

wind, open face, German silver watch at today's prices.

Once you have procured a proper key wind watch for you impression, you need a chain to hang it from. Most antique stores offer an assortment of gold filled chains with a bar guard for slipping through your vest button hole. (See the George S. Cook photo of J.E.B. Stuart for an example.) Other fasteners included



Watch chains varied from simple to fairly complex. The most common was the single chain with simple bar guard (left). The guard could be worn inside or outside the buttonhole. The "Albert" (named after Queen Victoria's consort) was a single chain with an added chain for the display of a fob (right) and the double Albert (above) featured two chains. Usually a fob would be suspended from the center, and another keepsake, such as a knife or medallion, worn on the end of the chain not securing the watch.



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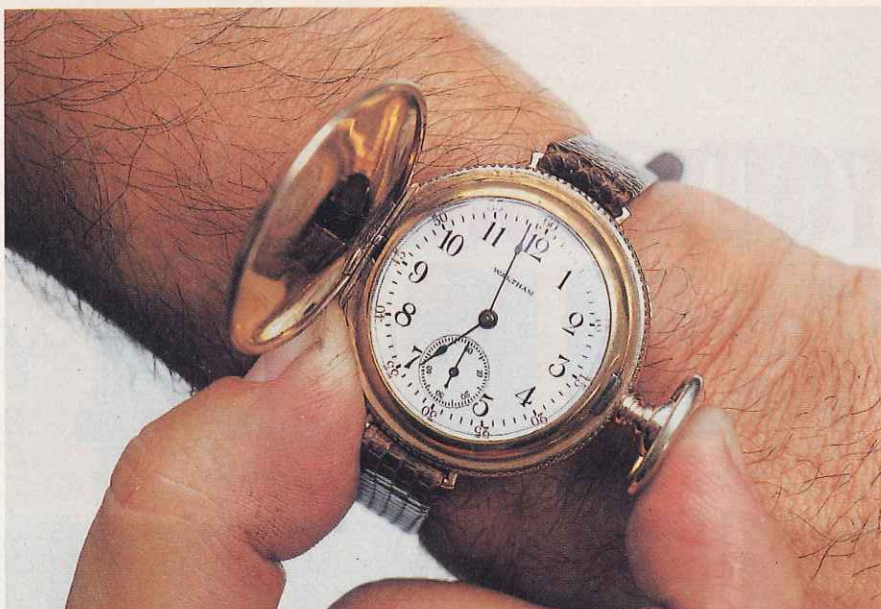
braided hair chains, usually a homemade gift from a loved one, or gold chains with a closed eye-loop clasp that was fastened through a button hole as well. A Gardner photo of Abraham Lincoln clearly illustrates this chain. Lincoln wore a William Ellery model of the Waltham watch.

The American Watch Co.—also known as the Waltham Watch Co.—produced key wound watches from 1853-1919. Their first stem wind watch was produced in 1868. A proper Civil War period watch should be of a key wind movement. Waltham, the work horse of the watch industry, manufactured watches until 1957. Their last serial number was in the 35 million range. The Elgin Watch Company—also known as the National Watch Co.—corporate papers show their founding in 1864, however it was 1867 before their first watch was made. They made their first stem wind watch in 1871. Elgin produced watches until 1964, having made over 55 million watches. Another watch-making giant of the 1800s was the Illinois Watch Co. of Springfield, Illinois. Their first stem wind was made in 1875.

THE INTERIM PERIOD 1866-1914



This American Signal Corpsman of World War I sports a wristwatch with the then-fashionable "shrapnel guard." Pete Tuttle collection



Many early wristwatches were fashioned out of earlier pocket watches, like this gold hunter case.

The stem wind pocket watch was the country's favorite timepiece throughout the balance of the 19th century. There were a few changes, not only in the design and development of watches, but changes in the way we tell time that evolved during this period as well. A visit to the time table exhibit at the B&O Railroad Museum of Baltimore, Maryland will open your eyes to the huge mess that the country was in as far as time was concerned in the mid 1880s. Each and every town in America, kept its own time. There was no standard time in the U.S. until November 1883. Until that point, trains had to run schedules according to the accepted time in each town that bore a whistle stop. Towns that were only separated by a few miles could also be separated by many minutes as well. This caused great confusion in trying to keep trains on schedule, not only to those who were expecting arrivals and departures, but because many lines ran on only one track, schedules had to be maintained to prevent head on collisions, of which there were an ever-increasing number until the adoption of



By the time of the Second World War, military issue watches were commonplace, such as this black-dial Elgin.

"SYNCHRONIZE YOUR WATCHES"

In how many movies have we heard that line used as the harbinger of a big push or artillery bombardment? By the time the Second World War began in 1939, watch companies were filling military contracts for watches and chronometers for Naval, Artillery and Air Forces. The Hamilton internet web site reports that during World War II they produced: "18,938 pocket watches for the Army; 15,563 "comparing" watches for the Navy; 23,610 wristwatches for the Navy; 110,336 wristwatches for the Army; 18,814 wristwatches for the Marine Air Corps; 17,054 chronograph stop watches for the Navy; 5,000 chronograph stop watches for the Army; 15,614 elapsed time clocks for the Navy; 2,000 navigation watches for the British Navy; 313 mounted chronometer watches and 312 pocket navigation watches for the Canadian Navy; 3,000 wristwatches for the Russian Government; five mounted chronometer watches for the Russian Maritime Commission." And that is the output for just one supplier. Elgin and Bulova also provided watches that are U.S. Ordinance marked, as per contract regulations.

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It is very common to see Great War vintage Aussies wearing wristwatches with leather snap protective covers, such as this natty fellow. Author's collection

standard time and time zones in 1883.

By 1893, most railroads were requiring the conductors to use only regulated and inspected watches that were known to keep accurate time. The boom of the American Railroad watch began and continued as the mainstay of many watch companies until Hamilton sold the last Railroad watch in 1969. It was during this time period that Robert H. Ingersoll & Brothers introduced "The watch that made the dollar famous" with their \$1 pocket watches that made timepieces available to everyone who desired to have one. Ingersoll produced nearly 100 million watches from 1892-1944.

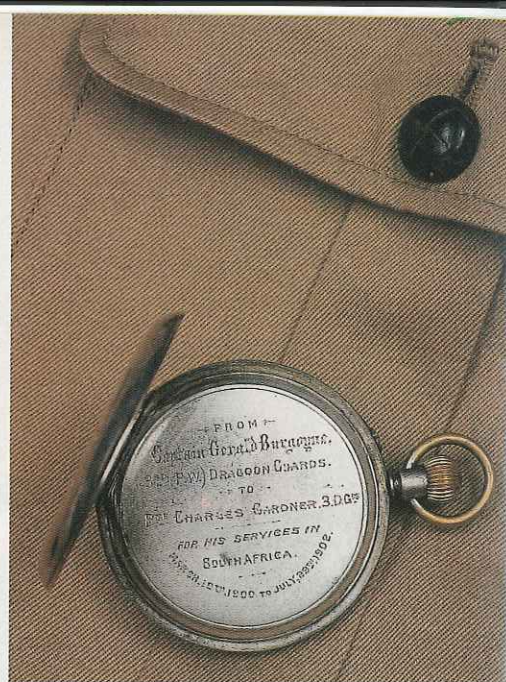
TWENTIETH CENTURY TIMEPIECES

As the storm clouds of war rolled over Europe in 1914, the timepiece of choice was still the pocket watch. However companies such as Elgin and Hampden produced tiny movements in cases that were strapped to your wrist as early as 1910. (The Empress Josephine is reported to have sported an early wristwatch as early as 1806.) However the wristwatch found little favor on this side of the Atlantic until our Doughboys took to them in the trenches in 1917. The German Navy was a pioneer in the acceptance of wristwatches in the 1880s, and not only wore them with pride, but also let out one of the first contracts for watches whose sole use would be for (literally) an arm of the military.

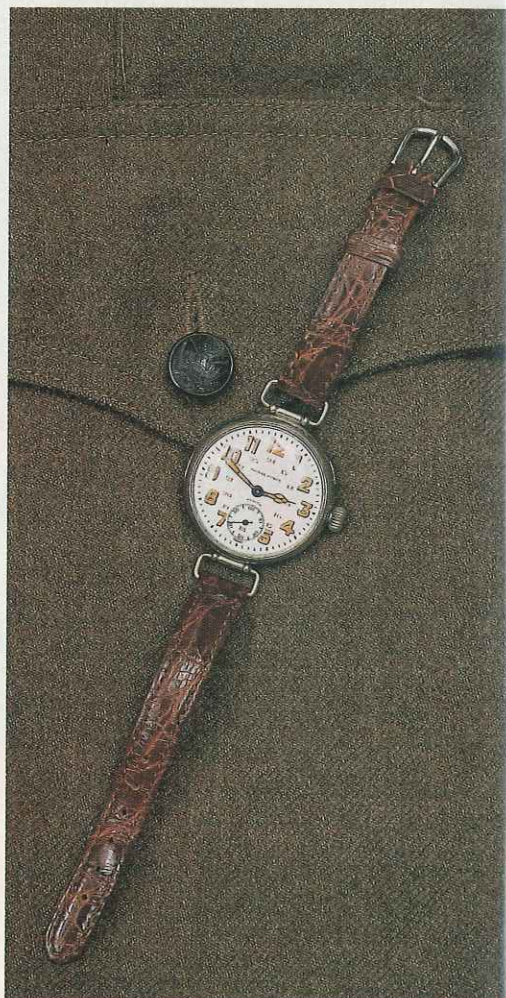
The early Great War wristwatches have many neat characteristics that make them distinctive. The first models were small gauge pocket watches that had a custom



During the Great War, civilian watches, such as this Elgin, could be fitted with special "shrapnel Guards" to protect their fragile crystals.



This British half-hunter silver pocket watch has a Boer War presentation from an officer to his batman on the inside of the back of the case.



Early on, watches were specifically tailored for the military, as witnessed by this World War I period Zenith with a 24-hour dial and "Signal Corps" markings.



While watches were issued to the military, sometimes they could be a tad hard to come by. It was very common for soldiers to wear their pre-war or PX-purchased civilian styles, such as this WWII-vintage Bulova.

leather holder and strap that was worn on the wrist. These holder/watch combos are hard to find and very delicate. The crystals of the time were seldom strong enough to endure life in the trenches (some were made with thin acetate) and many silver "crystal covers" were manufactured and easily slipped over the face of the watch to give it added protection. A leather strap with a swiveling leather cover was also quite common, and may today give you a

chance to look authentic while you search for a period watch while hiding a modern quartz time piece under the leather cover. Some watch makers to look for that produced wristwatches during the Great War period are Elgin, Hamilton, Hampden, Ingersoll and Waltham.


Daylight saving time, though an idea of Benjamin Franklin, was first implemented during the Great War, although England and Germany kept different standard time during the four year conflict. Not only did the daylight time economy provide factory workers in munitions and other war industries more time to work, but natural resources were conserved, all adding to the war effort. Due to the differences in German and English Standard Time, many battle reports will show discrepancies in the time of the day as the European time zone line ran through the middle of no-mans-land.

Today it is second nature to look towards your wrist to gain an accurate accounting of the time, however during the first decade of the 20th century, wristwatches were considered most un-manly. Edgar Guest wrote in his 1918 book of verse entitled *Over There*, how the wristwatch man was considered; "soft and flabby", "a parlor dude a-prancing", "a puny pacifist" and a host of other derogatory terms meant to elicit chuckles and laughs from those who would encounter such a fop in public. However as naval officers, and then artillerymen, saw the advantages of having handy access to reliable time, the attitudes of the average soldier changed to the point where the

wristwatch man, as Guest wrote: "He's the finest of the finest, he's the bravest of the clan. And I pray for God's protection for our wristwatch Man."

During World War II and Vietnam, many thousands of watches were actually purchased by the various services. Still, it was very common to see a soldier wearing his old pre-war civilian time-piece. As long as the period is correct, either would be proper for use with either of those impressions.

Hamilton continues to make U.S. military watches and made hundreds of thousands during the Vietnam period. The familiar green and black faced watch with the web strap was a favorite for the military in the late 20th century. Today's internet shopping pages are full of British RAF, Czech Army and Russian military watches. Buy a good reference book on the watches you desire for your impression and enjoy hitting the yard sales and flea markets for your deal of the century. A bad watch can spoil a good impression. Of all the unauthentic items we mistakenly use, a watch is one of the easiest to get right.

Acknowledgments: The author wishes to thank his parents who gave him an Ingersoll "Mickey Mouse" watch for his 5th birthday in 1967 and it is still keeping good time, Garry James for the watches and images, Peter G. Tuttle for the use of his photographs and Stephen McGeorge for research information. For further reading consult: The Complete Guide to Watches 2002 by Cooksey, Shugart & Gilbert; The Concise Guide to Military Timepieces 1880-1990 by Z. M. Wesolowski; and The History of Clocks and Watches by Eric Burton. 

I AM THE WRISTWATCH

Before the war I was worn by women. Bejeweled and fragile, I hung about their dainty wrists, looked at more for the gems than adorned me than for the time I kept.

I was also worn by lounge-lizards, the boys who had their handkerchiefs tucked up their sleeves, who would soon be seen without their highly-polished canes as without their trousers, the little lads tried to sport monocles and endeavored in vain to grow moustaches and to cultivate unAmerican accents.

I was the mark of the woman and the she-man. I was ridiculed by stage comedians, by cartoonists of the press, by haberdashers and men's outfitters of all sorts. To buy me was to buy a social ostracism at the hands of ones fellow creatures. To wear me in public, in the allegedly more rugged portions of the Middle West was to invite physical violence. To flaunt me in the face of the Arizona cowboy—my whole works tremble to think of the consequences!

But now—behold me, revived, re-glori-

fied, part and parcel of the practical equipment for the most practical of wars!

Tuned to the minute, I give the time for the marching millions from the base ports to the front.

From the General down to the newly arrived buck Private, they all wear me, they all swear by me instead of at me.

On the wrist of every line officer in the front line trenches, I point to the hour, minute and second at which the waiting men spring from the trenches to the attack.

I, the once-despised, am the final arbiter as to when the barrage shall cease, when it shall resume. I need but point with my tiny hands and the signal is given that means life or death to thousands upon thousands.

My phosphorous glow soothes and charms the chilled sentry, as he stands, waist deep in water amid the impenetrable blackness, and tells him how long he must watch there before his relief is due.

I mount guards, I dismiss guards.

Everything that is done in the army itself, that is done for the army behind the lines, must be done according to my dictates. True to the Greenwich Observatory. I work over all men in khaki my rigid and imperious sway.

I go where I please without passes. Perched above the deft and delicate fingers of surgeons, I am present at all operations. On the hairy forearms of the husky artillerymen, I am there with every tug of the lanyard, and can feel the firm biceps tighten from below.

I am in all and of all, at the heart of every move in this man's war. I am the chronicler of every second that the war ticks on its way. Lifted forever and forever above the poodle-dog class of useless ornament, I am the instructor, the arbiter, the consoler, the friend of every officer and every man.

I am in this war, the indispensable, the always-to-be-reckoned-with.

I am the wristwatch.

Stars & Stripes 2/15/18