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TIMELY ART: REDEFINING MOUNTAIN TIME

Three watch companies in Montana find niches in a chronographic renaissance

Story by Cynthia Logan, Photography by Melanie Nashan



Time. We save, spend, waste, zone and attempt to hold it, yet the fourth dimension eludes capture. Though not all cultures measure it as a notation (people of the Andman Islands follow a “scent calendar,” while a “cattle clock” guides the Nuer in Sudan, and myriad sounds and shadows tell the Karen tribe in northern Thailand when to do what), most of us depend on calendar, clock, and watch to cue both business and social interactions. Industry requires ever increasing timekeeping accuracy; as players in a global economy we have to keep up—but how can we reconcile infinity with infinitesimal decimal and digital units? The answer may lie in that frequent glance at the wrist.

“A mechanical watch is a living, breathing thing,” states Jeffrey Nashan, massaging the hand-tooled leather band that secures his white-faced ‘1915’ model. “It’s a machine that is made and has a life. If it’s treated properly, it lives forever. It can start with your family in 1685 and be in your family in 4020.”

This insight led Nashan to the Montana Watch Company,

which he co-founded in 1998. Though the concept of time was a bother growing up, (“I hated having to be on time in school”), to look up on a clear, starry night and realize the earth is a cog in a giant universal clock was awe-inspiring. “A timekeeper represents Father Time,” suggests Nashan: “It’s much more powerful than anybody understands—it’s this really seductive thing.” Such sexiness is driving a renaissance in the art of watch making, causing people to plunk down \$2,500 to \$50,000 for a high-quality timepiece. A “mechanical” watch is one driven by a spring, not run by a battery like the quartz models that became popular in the 1970s.

Actually, it’s a bit more complicated: There are, explains Nashan, close to 200 parts in most watches, some of which are so small that 10,000 of them would not fill a thimble. Whether hand-wound or self-winding, energy travels to (via the fingers or by general arm movement) and is stored in the mainspring, a thin ribbon of steel coiled inside a tiny barrel. The mainspring’s attempt to uncoil drives the watch. On the outer edge of the barrel is a gear ring called the great wheel,

ARTISTS of the West



Clockwise from above: Montana Watch Company owner Jeffrey Nashan in his Livingston shop views mechanical timepieces as "living, breathing things." Montana Watch Company's products are one-of-a-kind, heirloom pieces featuring hand-engraved detailing as in the Highline Aviator "colt" and the custom engraved Bridger Field Watch model. Opposite page: There are close to 200 parts in most watches, some are so small that 10,000 of them would not fill a thimble. At Montana Watch Company in Livingston, Mont., technicians hand-assemble the custom timepieces, using fine tools to set the balance components, "heat blue" the casing and machine jewel the movement plates.



Dave Berghold, owner of The Last Wind-Up, researches, restores and repairs antique watches in Bozeman.

which engages a pinion (to which the hands generally attach). Other wheels and pinions form a gear train, which distributes the force with which the mainspring unwinds and conveys power to the escapement, which releases the power in measured amounts. A balance wheel, responsible for keeping the time, swings back and forth at a speed regulated by the hairspring. A balance wheel makes almost half a million swings in 24 hours, and its rim travels 23 miles each day. Astonishingly, there is as much pressure per square inch on the pivots of a balance as there is on the piston of a locomotive, making a mechanical watch the most robust machine made.

Those moving parts are collectively called the “works,” the “movement” or the “caliber,” the refinement and precision of which, in addition to the case and face, constitute its value. In 1753, John Jefferys, a freemason of The Worshipful Company of Clockmakers, created what may have been the first watch (though Germany’s Peter Henlein is officially credited with having done so in 1535). Pocket and pendant

watches, suspended by gold chains hanging from men’s vests and women’s necks, were for centuries signature status symbols.

“The transition from pocket to wristwatch was born of practicality,” states Nashan. “During WWI aviators didn’t have time to pull out a pocket watch, nor could they rely solely on their instrumentation. Instead, they strapped large pocket watches to their forearms, inadvertently creating the ‘aviator’ style still popular today.”

In 1915, men’s ‘transitionals’ were ladies’ pocket watches adapted for the wrist. From the turn of the 20th century through the 1950s, America had a heyday making watches; U.S. ingenuity developed interchangeable parts and gave England, France, Germany and Switzerland a run for their money in the trade. With the development of the very accurate quartz watch and its mass production, American watch making declined.

Nashan and Dave Berghold, who owns The Last Windup

Watch junkies appreciate the concept of watches as timekeepers.

in Bozeman, want to bring it back.

The Montana Watch Company, now based in Livingston, Mont., is the only enterprise in the United States actually machining cases in-house at a production level and hand assembling heirloom quality watches. The process begins when Nashan “peels” through images of vintage American watches until he finds something he likes, then turns to his computer to design a prototype using sketches (“and Photoshop, I have to say”); he then takes the design to Montana Watch Company’s machine shop (located in Manhattan, Mont.), where his concept and proportions are engineered using lathes, mills, and “a variety of specialized diagnostic equipment married with the same hand tools every watchmaker uses” into a case that can contain the works.

“We start every watch with a sterling silver case and a white dial with a plain strap—it has to look good enough to be bought just like that,” says the entrepreneur. “Then you can add engraving, inlay precious metals, set gemstones, ‘blue’ the metal or use machining techniques to produce coin edging or stibling. Nashan prefers vintage American case styles (including Tonneau, which is barrel-shaped, and the standard circle, popular during the 1940s), and has a particular interest in art deco. “Our latest (case style) is the ‘Tank,’” he says, adding that after a small number are manufactured, the cases come back to the studio, where they are hand-finished.

“Our niche is the engraving,” states Nashan, mentioning that Montana Watch Company has recently doubled the size



Clockwise from right: The Bozeman Watch Company's owner Christopher Wardle, and several of their signature timepieces: the Smokerjumper, Sidewinder and the Schofield.



America had a great heyday making watches; U.S. ingenuity developed interchangeable parts and gave England, France, Germany and Switzerland a run for their money in the trade.

of its "stable," and is expanding its gem setting capabilities. "We make a small number of watches for a select clientele, just 500 pieces a year, only 300 of which can be engraved. Most of our watches are simple and just tell time; we don't even put the date on them unless it's requested," he says, adding, "We love it when customers buy a \$25,000 watch and wear it every day, in every setting. We design them to be worn."

The Swiss Watch Group (known as 'Swatch') owns ETA, which makes nearly all movements; Montana Watch Company buys movements, but takes them apart to regulate and adjust them to what Nashan says is an even higher standard of accuracy. Though The Montana Watch Company is developing its own caliber, he doesn't see an American renaissance in that arena: "It's very expensive and, frankly, the Swiss have movement calibers that can't be improved upon. China and Korea make excellent, very accurate calibers, but they're mass-produced and that makes them unattractive to collectors."

Watch junkies appreciate the concept of watches as timekeepers. "Ladies generally love the craftsmanship, the gem-

setting and jewelry aspect, whereas men are automatically drawn to the mechanics," says Nashan. "True junkies are attracted to complications like Tourbillion escapements. We don't do that."

Berghold, of The Last Wind-up, does.

Walking into his store is ever so much like walking back into 19th century England. Antique, truly chic or diner chic clocks grace the walls; the ceiling is pressed tin; the floor is carpeted with that rich, swirly pattern that bespeaks elegance. Nearly 100 pocket and wrist watches tick within glass cases; among them lie Omega, Rolex, Ball, Hamilton, Longines and Patek Philippe. The choice is not just among brands: You can buy a watch from the 1700s or the most modern atomic time-piece available. Berghold, a lanky chap wearing a vest that sports a pocket watch, strides into his back office, followed by his Airedale, Ruby ("my watchdog"). He sits behind a mahogany desk and thumbs through a thick catalogue, scouring the thin pages for suitable pictures of fobs, the "ornamental doodads" attached on the right side of the pocket watch chain. "A

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fob might be the fraternal key to your college, a wax seal or a religious medallion," he notes.

As various grandfathers chime the quarter hour, Berghold displays his own fob; "I came upon this when I was studying with a watchmaker in England; it has a compass on one side and the 'order of the garter' on the other. Few have been knighted to the order," he adds with a mischievous smile. Another bong contrasts the shrill ring of the phone, yet another is interrupted by the door's automatic squeal. Windup has been a busy place for almost 17 years. A customer has broken the springbar on a watch and wants to know if Berghold can fix it. It's a simple task, one he can do right then, right there at his worktable behind the counter. He selects an appropriately tiny tool from the many surrounding the bench and, in short order, hands the watch back to its owner.

"My training and my real passion is researching, repairing and restoring antique watches. If a watch was missing a part, I would make it if I couldn't buy it," he says, explaining, "To start with brass and steel and files and saws would be an

inordinately difficult process, so I use a CAD program. From that, I generate a physical image on the screen and bring it to a four-axis machine that reads and translates the data, while you program how fast you want it to travel down the x or y axis and how far you want it to plunge." He demonstrates how he would drill a miniscule hole, then hand-bevel and finely polish the piece to a perfect finish.

"I'm used to operating a machine by holding a cutting tool on, let's say a lathe, where the steel is spinning and I cut it to 1/100th of a millimeter (about a hair's diameter), compare and fit it again and again—this is much more just—'go!'"

Manufacturing and repair work for the shop is done in Berghold's two-story garage, his inner sanctum. "The fabrication of parts disappeared from the trade for awhile. Now, for discontinued parts, you need that skill again," he declares, comparing such mechanical aptitude to that of a car mechanic or a gunsmith and mentioning the resurgence of watch making schools, such as the American Watch and Clockmakers' Institute, of which he is a member. Berghold is a walking ency-



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An artisan from Montana Watch Company, hand tools a watchband.

lopedia of fascinating horological facts: "Did you know that Bozeman houses one of three watches taken to the moon?"

Bozeman, it seems, is quite the place for the "time revolution." Opened in December 2005, The Bozeman Watch Company sells private label, limited edition watches. Uniquely designed, the Bozeman Watch Company offers high-quality timepieces like the "Smokejumper," an oversized aviator-style chronograph named to commemorate "the heroes who risk their lives to save others and our natural resources." Owner Christopher Wardle and partner Patrick Ayoub have brought the standards of global watch making excellence together with the spirit of the American West, designing watches "not to tell time, but to capture it; the combination of European mechanics and American ingenuity lends itself to a rugged, yet refined collection, appealing to both stockmen and statesmen." With six model designs in various stages of production, their "Gunslinger" series includes the "Schofield" and the "Sidewinder," both of which will be available in October 2006. Bozeman Watch Company timepieces are meant to allow a person to be in one time zone physically, while mentally relishing the experiences of another. It's what they call "Bozeman Time."

Perhaps Big Sky Country is synchronized to that universal clock; maybe Bozeman Time connects the temporal dimension with earth's three coordinates in a way that is more akin to the way time is experienced by the Andman, Nuer and Karen peoples, linking us to the past, anchoring us in the present and holding the promise of a less harried future.

Whatever it is, the watch renaissance is gearing up to make Mountain Standard Time in Montana a zone all its own. **BSJ**