



# A matter of timing

By J. NORMAN MCKENZIE

**W**HEN THE pocket watch first came on the scene in the middle of the 17th century as a new-fangled way of telling time, some people dismissed it as a gimmick. One critic grumbled that no time-piece lacking a bell to strike the hours could possibly catch on.

But the watch did catch on. And today some of them do indeed have bells—even buzzers—not only to tell the hour but to remind you when to take a pill or call the office. The newest wrinkle—the digital watch—has eliminated springs and wheels and cogs in favor of a tiny quartz bar that vibrates like mad. The watch hands have gone, too. You press a button and a miniature electronic scoreboard on your wrist flashes the time. Some also tell the day and date. Temperature readings and your pulse rate no doubt lie in the offing.

As an exercise in technical gymnastics, these things are indeed impressive but they cannot compare with the impressiveness of my late father as he pulled his shiny gold watch with its battleship chain from his vest pocket and consulted it. The watch had been his father's and therefore deserved the respect my father gave it.

Asked what time it was, my father would reach into his vest pocket, pull out the watch, flip open the gold lid guarding its white face, then snap the lid shut and announce, "It's exactly nine twenty-three." There was no pussyfooting, no ifs, ands or buts.

The deliberateness of the act, the snapping shut of the lid like a golden trap, lent such authority to the announcement of the time as to make disagreement unthinkable. If my father's father's watch said it was exactly nine twenty-three it was. To question the accuracy of a man's watch in those days was equivalent to impugning his honor or doubting the sincerity of his political views.

The only other authority figure whose watch habits compared favorably with the father's was the conductor on the "local" that huffed and puffed by our railroad station. We kids loved to see him step gracefully off the train ahead of the passengers. He would nod to each, pass the time of day with the "regulars," and superintend the boarding of new passengers. When the final breathless straggler had scrambled up the steps, the conductor would reach into his vest (it had more pockets than any vest I have ever seen) and pull out his watch.

Deliberately, as if the world held its breath, he would scowl down at the face, then, reassured, would flash the signal with uplifted arm and the engineer had permission to go. Again, leisurely returning his watch to its lair, the conductor, at the last split-second, would grab the handhold and swing aboard with the same easy grace used to dismount. The train might be late but you knew the conductor was confident his watch was running right on the dot.

In those days watches, and those who knew how to use them, had style. That's where we miss the boat today. Take the airlines, for example. Nobody in charge of anything ever looks at a watch—although everybody has one strapped to a wrist. Occasionally, a stewardess might flash a glance at hers to wonder about serving lunch, but there's no evidence those guys up front ever look at theirs. They probably get the time from the control tower and the control tower gets its time from an impersonal electric clock hung on a wall and connected to a faceless master clock somewhere in the dark recesses of the airport.

It may be that in the world of the '70s where the radio blasts out the time every few seconds, there is less need for the pageantry that was part of telling time with a pocket watch. Maybe it is too much work to reach into a pocket and grope for the time. We prefer to shove our wrist under our noses and apologize, "I'm a couple of minutes fast" or, "It's about nine twenty-three—or four."

My father and that railroad conductor—indeed that entire generation—would have been appalled at such heresy. To them, a watch was a possession to be prized. Even removing it at the end of its day's work was a ritual as precise as the *corrida* or High Mass.

Getting ready for bed, my father would unfasten the watch from its chain, then hang the chain in a felt-lined wooden frame on a wall by his dresser. Next, came the winding. A watch, he was fond of advising us, should be wound the same time each day—preferably at night. We never questioned this dictum. Like his watch, its very utterance smacked of accuracy and was therefore, like Caesar's wife, above suspicion.

Upon being wound, the watch was hung on its own hook beside the chain. Other men, less fastidious, might lay their watch—still lashed to its chain—upon a table or dresser. Perhaps they were not so fortunate as to have a felt-lined wooden frame for proper housing of a watch at rest.

Somehow, the sight of that watch hanging beside its own chain in its own cubicle engendered a sense of security. You felt that when the morning came the world would still be turning, no worse off than the night before and—just possibly—even in a little better condition.

Now we are told we can wear our digital watch to bed, in swimming, digging for clams—anywhere. And we go to bed with clock radios that never need winding and that blast us from sleep with the latest jumpy news from Beirut and other troubled corners of the world.

It's more efficient, I suppose, but the whole thing lacks style. Somehow, the timing is off, and if your timing's not right, nothing is. ■

*The author of this free-lance article lives in Squantum, Mass.*