



## THE ILLINOIS WATCH

For those who collect true American brands of wristwatches, the scarcity of any comprehensive reference material “out there” has long been a source of frustration and disappointment. Oh, there is information scattered here and there in magazine articles, and collector guides by Meggers, Ehrhardt, Shugart, et. al. But if you really wanted a “meaty” reference book about any of the major U.S. wristwatch manufacturers (Hamilton, Elgin, Waltham, Illinois, and Hampden), you were out of luck. Then, in 1992, Don Sauers came out with the book “Time for America.” At last, collectors of Hamilton wristwatches had something they could sink their teeth into. It was a seminal reference work in that it talked about the Hamilton company as much or more as its watches. It remains today the definitive reference on Hamilton.

It’s been a long dry spell. But 12 years later, collectors of American wristwatches finally have another cause for celebration. *The Illinois Watch: The Life and Times of a Great American Watch Company*, by Fredric Friedberg, is a tour de force on this masterful watch company that made its home in Springfield, IL.

Right off the bat, I’ll say that I do have a few “issues” with the book, but by and large it is a wonderful work and obviously a labor of love for Friedberg. It’s been on the drawing table for six years, and in production for the past three, consuming every bit of the author’s free time. It combines the best qualities of a “coffee table” book (pretty, with lots of photos—many of them in color) along with a meaty reference book, chock full of enough data to satisfy even the most diehard purists among Illinois wristwatch collectors (much of that data never before published).

Many are familiar with Friedberg through his “Anything Illinois” want ad, which has been running—pretty much unchanged—in the NAWCC Mart for as long as anyone can remember. (Fourteen years, according to the author.) He really does mean anything. He’s collected Illinois watches since 1989. But he has also amassed an amazing collection of Illinois “stuff,” including dials, movements, catalogs, manuals, advertising, tools, dies, etc. I’ve often wondered: “What is he doing with all this stuff?” Well, one answer is clear from this book: He has decided to share this amazing collection with us, and we are the richer for it. The book is replete with photos of not only watches, but other

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Illinois “goodies” that, taken as a whole, present what I believe is the best picture yet of an American watch manufacturer and, by extension, of America itself.

It has often been said the study of watch manufacturing in America is one of the best ways to learn the history of this country. Within the “golden age” of watch manufacturing lies the key to understanding the American model of capitalism and all its subcategories: industrialism, labor practices, product distribution, and advertising. Take, for example, the notion of assembly line production. It is popularly believed that Henry Ford “invented” the process. Heck, Aaron Dennison was doing it more than 50 years earlier at the Waltham Watch Company before Ford’s first Model T rolled off the assembly line in 1908. And the Illinois Watch Company was doing it decades before Ford.

Moreover, the story of U.S. watch manufacturing is a story of America at its technological zenith. We look back today as though it were a quaint little industry run by so many elves in Keebler-esque workshops scattered across America in cities like Lancaster, Pa., Elgin, Ill., and Waltham, Mass.

But in its day, watch manufacturing put America at the height of its technical prowess. Watch manufacturers were making parts with tolerances within thousandths of an inch. They were making parts so small, that more than 36,000 of them would be required to fill a teaspoon. They were making lubricants so fine, that a mere four quarts would oil all the watches a factory produced in a year. Moreover, they were building the machines that made these parts. You don’t just pick up a Sears catalog and order a machine to make hair-springs for a watch’s balance. You have to build the thing from scratch!

America was building watches that rivaled—and in many cases surpassed—the technical excellence of any watch coming out of Switzerland. I don’t think it’s an exaggeration to say that watch manufacturers during 1880-1930 put America at a technological level that would not be rivaled again until the “moon-shot years” of NASA.

Yet few writers have capitalized on this notion of watch manufacture as a microcosm of American ingenuity and capitalism. In all fairness, the Sauers book

touches on this. But Friedberg has perfected the idea. This is the first book (at least that I am aware) that places watch company history within the larger context of American history. Each chapter contains historical notes about the “goings-on” of America at large. It is immensely helpful in assisting the reader to figure out, for example, why certain styles of watches were popular, why watch production dropped during certain times, why Illinois Watch Company made certain decisions, and why it eventually went out of business.

So let's dissect this book and see what makes it tick, if you will pardon the pun. Published by Schiffer Publishing of Atglen, Pa., the book is 272 pages long. It measures 12 by 9 inches and weighs in at slightly more than 3 pounds. It's printed on high-quality gloss paper and has a lovely dustjacket, designed, by the way, by Friedberg's wife, Joy. It has 10 chapters, followed by 14 appendices (that's right; more appendices than chapters!). The bibliography lists a mere eight sources, which immediately gives the reader a big clue as to just how much of this book is based on original research and is not merely a rehash of available source material. There is a two-page index, which is adequate though by no means exhaustive. (My own tastes lean toward a more thorough index, but this one certainly covers most of the bases.) And, like all Schiffer watch books, this one contains a price guide. Price guides are a mixed blessing, more about that later.

For now, let me just say that there is so much to like about this book, that the few criticisms I have about it almost seem trifling and could, if the author so chose, be easily addressed in a future edition, which I am guessing there will be. After a brief page of acknowledgements and an introduction, the first chapter gives us a history—from start to finish—of the Illinois Watch Company. I like this approach, versus breaking down the history chapter by chapter. Devoting a chapter to a “straight-through” history provides the reader the equivalent of “one-stop shopping” if he or she wants a quick reference without having to ferret it out by reading the whole book.

One small criticism on Chapter 1: A timeline would have been nice. In this day and age of attention-deficit readers, it simply provides a quicker way to get information about key dates in the company's history. Another issue deals with a statement made on page 13: “Up to 1912 the Watch Company's product is acknowledged to have been of ‘cheap and medium grades.’” I asked Friedberg about this, because I know the company made many fine pocket watches prior to 1912. Turns out this is a typo. It should have read 1902 rather than 1912. This makes more sense, but still the statement is not completely accurate. Though high-end pocket watches may not have been the company's primary market, Illinois did make many fine pocket watches (with a least 17-jewel movements) prior to 1902. Many examples can be found posted (and photographed) on Illinois watch collector websites. These watches were as good or better than anything on the

market at the time. In all fairness to the author, this is primarily a book about wristwatches. Pocket watches are not his forté and they are understandably glossed over in this book. But the author might want to rethink that statement (even after it is corrected to 1902) if a subsequent edition is in the offing.

Chapter 2 gives us a brief history of the wristwatch, or “strap watch” as it was called in the early days. As most collectors know, the idea of a man's wristwatch was slow to catch on because they were considered too feminine for men to wear. It was only after World War I, when GIs were required to wear wristwatches in the field of battle, that wristwatches began to be considered acceptable for men. Friedberg provides an interesting side story in Chapter 2 about a trial that took place in 1919 in which one of the attorneys was wearing a wristwatch. The judge halted the proceedings and asked the attorney if he served in the war. When the attorney replied no, the judge ordered him to remove his wristwatch because he didn't feel the item was “appropriate attire” for the courtroom!

Chapter 3 talks about life at the Illinois watch factory, and this is where things get even more interesting. Among the sources that Friedberg uses are former factory worker interviews conducted from the 1980s through 2001. And not just one or two, but several workers. Some of these people were in their 90s when they were interviewed. This is amazing stuff. It's hard enough to find people who worked in watch factories in the 1950s and '60s. These folks worked in the Illinois watch factory in the 1910s and '20s. Through photos and words, the reader is able to get a realistic sense of factory life.

Chapter 4 devotes 27 pages to watch movements (again, wrist and not pocket) and takes the reader through a fascinating tour of how a movement is created from drawing to finished product. For those who do not understand the various parts of a movement (power source, balance, and, escapement) and how they all interact to create a timepiece, this chapter contains an excellent layperson's explanation. The next two chapters deal with other “components” of the Illinois wristwatch, the dial and the case.

Chapter 7 really shines and for many is undoubtedly the backbone of this book: the identification guide. It is the longest chapter, at 147 pages. It is without a doubt the most comprehensive identification guide to Illinois wristwatches ever published. It is the first identification guide to give serious attention to ladies' watches. The acknowledgement of ladies' wristwatches in this hobby is long past due. I applaud the author and fellow Illinois watch collector Farrell Gay (whom Friedberg acknowledges as contributing much of the help to identify the ladies' models) in this effort. The other wonderful thing about this chapter is that Friedberg has put together a system of “coding” to help the reader determine not only the identity of the watch, but case and dial details, production dates, and even rarity of the model (relative to other models).

There is also a code for the rather subjective quality of “collectibility” (i.e., how popular and sought after the model is by Illinois collectors).

Chapter 8 is, to me, the most interesting chapter and is devoted to Illinois ephemera. These are the items other than watches that tell the story about the Illinois Watch Company. The items include advertising, brochures, shipping containers, instruments and tools, posters, correspondence and other miscellaneous items. There is just too much to go into here. But suffice to say that I felt like the proverbial kid let loose in the candy store reading this chapter and feasting my eyes on these wonderful treasures. Many of the items in Chapter 8 (and chapter 7 for that matter) do not belong to the author personally, but rather were borrowed from fellow Illinois collectors (all of whom Friedberg acknowledges and thanks in the beginning of the book). This is a real testament to the personal character of the author, something about which I feel qualified to speak, having known Friedberg for the better part of the past 10 years. He is a consummate gentleman with respect to his hobby. I have come across many in this field who have allowed their hobby to become an obsession, bringing with it some of the darker aspects of human nature. I know collectors who would trample over their own mother to beat everybody into a mart room. They are sore losers when someone else beats them to a “buy.” And worse, they are “sore winners” when they do acquire a prize—gloating and rubbing other people’s noses in it. And rarely, if ever, do they share their bounty with other collectors through photographs, articles, postings on Internet discussion groups and the like. They squirrel their possessions away in locked cabinets or safe deposit boxes for their exclusive enjoyment.

Friedberg is the opposite of all that. He treats other collectors—novice and advanced alike—with respect and patience. He is only too happy to share information with anyone who will call or e-mail. If he misses a “deal,” he brushes it off with a “que sera sera” attitude that borders on the Zen-like. He has cultivated a philosophy in this hobby that many more would do well to emulate—a kind of watch collector karma that what goes around eventually comes around.

As this book shows, Friedberg’s skills at diplomacy, along with his respect for, and honesty with, fellow Illinois collectors has paid him back in spades. Many of his friends and even “friendly competitors” have loaned watches and ephemera for this book. Chapters 7 and 8 show Friedberg’s talent as a choreographer (bringing together pictures and information from diverse sources) as much as his talent as a writer. Any of several Illinois collectors could have pulled together enough “material” to make a book akin to a dinner-theater play. But it took a person of Friedberg’s character to pull all these sources together to make a book that is the caliber of a Broadway extravaganza.

Chapter 9, the price guide, is fraught with the usual perils contained in any price guide. By the author’s

own admission during an interview, this was the chapter that made him the most uncomfortable. But a price guide is a prerequisite for any Schiffer book on collectibles, so authors are forced to deal with it as best they can. The ranges are so extremely wide on many models, they are bound to confuse the novice collector, and confound the intermediate to advance collector. Take the Piccadilly, for example. The author states it is worth between \$850 and \$2,000, depending on whether it is average condition or perfect. That’s a pretty wide gap for a buyer and seller to bridge, especially with such subjective terms as “average” and “perfect.” And the author didn’t even mention the fact that prices can vary considerably based on whether the collector is buying wholesale (for example, at an NAWCC mart) or retail, as in a plush Fifth Avenue gallery in New York City. I don’t think I’m being too liberal when I say that the same “perfect” Piccadilly priced at \$2,000 at an NAWCC show would run you \$3,000 or \$4,000 in a posh gallery in New York or Paris. I’m not saying a price guide is without merits. At least it gives the collector a relative sense of value, i.e., a Jolly Roger is more valuable than a Cushion, but less valuable than a Skyway, and so forth. And it should help the novice avoid being taken extreme advantage of.

The subsequent chapters are notes and appendices. As mentioned, there are 14 of them, and they cover an astounding range of esoteric Illinois minutiae, from parts prices (from factory lists) to dial feet position charts. I like how all this material is placed at the end. This is the “serious stuff” that is more a reference than a book, per se. Think of it as the book within the book. Had this been interspersed with the “story” part of the book, it would have bogged down the average reader. If you are an Illinois wristwatch collector, or plan on becoming one, this is the material that will make this book a constant companion that you will pull down again and again from your bookshelf.

The book retails at \$79.95 and is available at bookstores and direct from the publisher at [www.schiffer-books.com](http://www.schiffer-books.com). But a limited number of copies are available at Friedberg’s own website, [www.illinoiswatches.com](http://www.illinoiswatches.com), at a discount, and he will even autograph it for you. Collectors of strictly Illinois pocket watches may disagree, but for Illinois wristwatch collectors, this book is a sheer delight. Open to any page of the “story” portion, and there will be a delectable nugget of information—a historical note, an interesting sidebar about railroad watch inspectors, or a story of a collector who stumbled onto a rare watch for \$5 at a garage sale. (These stories are scattered throughout the book, and are titled “Fantastic Finds.”) This book is destined to become not only the definitive reference on Illinois wristwatches, but a model for other wristwatch books to follow. You need this on your bookshelf regardless if you’re an Illinois wristwatch collector or not. It is more than a story of a company and its watches. It is a story about America.