

# SELECTING AND USING A WATCHMAKER

By Don Goldstein

## BACKGROUND

Over the last few years, I have tried close to a dozen different watchmakers. I have found some good watchmakers who I continue to use. But, unfortunately, I have had a lot of bad experiences with other watchmakers, including work that has taken a very long time and work that is done poorly. The purpose of this document is to help others avoid similar problems.

## OVERVIEW

The most important thing to keep in mind when using a watchmaker is that this is a professional, business transaction. This may sound obvious but it is easy to lose sight of this. Would you take your car in for service, not get a quote, wait an excessive period of time, pay for the work and get your car back not working properly? No, you would not. Even though vintage watches may be just a hobby for you, you are paying a watchmaker to do a service for you. You certainly may be friendly with this person and you may develop a friendship. But, because you are paying for a service, the business side of the transaction is much, much more important.

## SELECTING A NEW WATCHMAKER

The most important thing I can recommend is that if you are going to use a watchmaker you have never used before, only use one of the following:

- A watchmaker recommended to you by a friend you know and trust who has used this watchmaker  
OR
- A watchmaker who has a well-known, national reputation.

If you select a watchmaker recommended by a friend, make sure this friend knows watches well.

I have used some nationally known watchmakers with good results who were not recommended to me by anyone in particular. Two examples are Rene Rondeau and Tom Gref. Rene is considered the leading expert on Hamilton watches. Tom is considered one of the top independent watchmakers in the USA for higher end watches.

I have found that using a person who is a full time, professional watchmaker (that is, he makes his living fixing watches and doesn't have another job) tends to result in quicker and better quality work. A lot of people calling themselves watchmakers do it on the side in addition to a regular 40-hour per week job. As a result, they don't have all that much time to devote to doing high quality watch restorations in a reasonable timeframe. Keep in mind that the longer a watchmaker takes does not necessarily mean the work is done more carefully: usually, the opposite is the case.

Another option is to use the factory that originally made the watch. Companies such as Omega and Patek Philippe will service and restore their vintage watches. You will in almost every case get high quality work. It is a very safe route for having your vintage watch restored. But, there are two disadvantages: 1) in most

cases, a long turnaround time. 2) A very high cost. I once sent a watch to the Omega factory in Switzerland for an estimate. The estimate was very professional and thorough. But, the cost of the work would have been more than the value of the watch.

Don't be tempted to use a watchmaker just because he sells a lot of watches through the Internet that look beautifully restored (i.e., he has his own website or he sells a lot of nice watches through on-line auctions). I have had some bad experiences with three watchmakers I have found this way.

## CONDUCTING THE TRANSACTION

The following is an outline of points to follow in conducting a transaction with a watchmaker you have never used before:

- 1) Call the watchmaker. Introduce yourself, tell him how you found out about him and tell him you would like to send him a couple watches to restore. Ask him how long his backlog is. Don't hesitate to ask him if he is a full time watchmaker and, if not, how much time he spends each week working on customer's watches. Tell him you understand he cannot provide a quote before seeing the watch, but ask him what his basic overhaul fee is. This can range anywhere from \$40 to \$400 for independent watchmakers (a lot more from the factory) depending on the quality and thoroughness of the work. Tell the watchmaker you would like to receive a written quote by email within two weeks of his receiving the watches including approximately how long the work will take. Ask him for an email address and his physical address.
- 2) The first time you use a watchmaker, never send him more than two watches. Don't send watches that are very expensive but don't send watches that are very cheap either (which probably aren't worth restoring). After you have selected the watches, take a digital picture of the front and the back. Send the watchmaker an email with the pictures and a detailed letter of what you want done (if you are not too familiar with getting a watch restored, you could simply ask for "a complete mechanical and cosmetic servicing and restoration".) Ask the watchmaker if it is okay to send your watches. Tell him again that you don't expect him to provide a quote before he has examined the watches, but you want a written estimate by email within two weeks of him receiving the watches. Ask him to estimate his backlog and forecast how long the work will take, including any work he has to have others do (i.e., dial refinishing).
- 3) If the watchmaker agrees to take the watches, wrap them in plenty of bubble wrap, put them in box, seal the box well and send them with a form of shipment that has full insurance for the value of the watches and signature confirmation for the delivery (i.e., USPS insured or UPS with insurance and signature confirmation). This is assuming the watchmaker is not local. If he is local, take them to him and ask him to give you a receipt.
- 4) Assuming you mailed the watches, estimate when the watchmaker should receive the watches. If you do not hear from him within two days of when the package should arrive, send him an email asking him to confirm receipt of the package. If you don't get any kind of email confirmation from the watchmaker within a week of when the watch should be received, call him.
- 5) It is a very important part of the transaction to get a detailed, written quote as soon as possible after the watchmaker receives the watches. Some watchmakers are very quick about this – i.e.,

they take 1 to 2 days after receipt of the watches. But, you should never have to wait longer than two weeks after the watchmaker receives the watches. If you have not received the quote within two weeks of receipt of the watches, contact the watchmaker and ask him to send it. If you have not received it within a week after that, I highly recommend contacting the watchmaker, telling him you will pay for return postage and asking him to return the watches to you.

- 6) Once you receive the quote, review it carefully. Don't hesitate to email the watchmaker any questions. If the quote does not include a time estimate, ask the watchmaker to revise the quote and include this.
- 7) Once you agree to the costs and the timeframes, email the watchmaker and tell him the following:  
1) You will not accept or pay for any additional costs unless you are informed beforehand of the work along with the cost and any additional time required. 2) If the work takes longer than originally estimated, you should be contacted. Never tell a watchmaker "to take your time" or "there is no rush". Some watchmakers will interpret this that you are not very interested in getting the work done or they can take care of other customers before they take care of you. Remember, this is a business transaction.
- 8) One of the things that is important to understand when dealing with watchmakers is that most take quite a bit longer to finish the work than they originally estimate. I have never figured out why that is, since even if they need to outsource some of the work, they should know how long it will take. Figure that it will take the watchmaker twice as long as he originally estimated. But, there is no excuse for going over the cost in the original estimate without contacting the customer first. Never accept additional costs though unless you are contacted first.
- 9) Most watchmakers do not require any payment up front. Some require a small amount to cover their time spent to examine the watch and do the estimate; this amount is applied towards the final bill. I recommend any additional payment up front. Rene Rondeau is the only watchmaker I know who asks for a form of payment up front but doesn't use it (i.e., charge the credit card or deposit the check) before work is completed. But, with him, I am fine with that since he is so reputable, trustworthy and reliable. I probably would not trust many other watchmakers in those regards.
- 10) Don't be surprised if you are not contacted while the work is in progress. Some watchmakers do and some don't. The watchmaker I use to restore my tuning fork Accutron's – Stan Kalista of Bassar Company – contacts me every few days with an update while he is working on my watches. Certainly I don't expect this from any watchmaker. It is nothing negative against the watchmaker if he doesn't contact you while the work is in progress. If you want, contact the watchmaker when  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the time has elapsed and ask him if he will be on time.
- 11) If the original estimated time of completion has elapsed and you have not heard from the watchmaker, contact him and ask him when he will be done. Again, don't be surprised or disappointed if he takes longer than he originally estimated. Ask him for a revised time estimate.
- 12) Keep repeating the cycle of contacting him when he says the work should be done until it is done.
- 13) If more than twice the amount of time has passed than was originally estimated, this is a bad sign. Contact the watchmaker, politely tell him you would like him to put the watches back together and

that you will pay him for has been done so far. Do not be nasty because you might get your watch back in pieces (this has happened to me) but be firm.

- 14) Assuming the transaction has gone smoothly, once the watchmaker informs you that the watches are ready, ask him if he can send you digital pictures. You can get an idea of how the watches will look before they arrive and sort out anything the watchmaker didn't do. Some will and some won't send pictures. Try to pay the watchmaker with a credit card in case there is a dispute. Pay for adequate shipping insurance to cover the full value of the watch (including the repair work).
- 15) Once you receive the watches back, inspect them immediately. First make sure all the cosmetic work was done as originally agreed upon. Check for any visual imperfections in the dial and case and contact the watchmaker to clarify. Next, set the time and wind the watch all the way (but with not too much force). In the case of an automatic, shake it several times over the next few hours. Put the watch in a safe place and let it run until it is no longer running. The watch should run for at least 24 hours. If it does not, contact the watchmaker and ask to send the watch back. Next, set the correct time and keep winding it (or shaking it as necessary) so it runs continuously over two days. If the watch is off by more than two minutes a day, send it back. If it comes back again and it is still not keeping good time, the watchmaker has done a poor job. Ask your credit card company for at least a partial chargeback.
- 16) If you find a good watchmaker, tell your watch collecting friends! Truly good watchmakers are not common and deserve more business.

## **SOME NOTES ON DIAL REFINISHING**

Dial refinishing on a vintage watch is a controversial subject. Some collectors do not want dials refinished; they prefer the dial in original condition, even if it is significantly worn. Some collectors want dials restored to like-new condition. If the dial is refinished, the preference is for a high quality job with the end appearance matching the original factory finish as closely as possible (original color, original fonts, original markings, etc). You may want to consult the watchmaker on whether or not to have the dial refinished.

A dial refinishing can cost anywhere from \$40 - \$200 (or higher). This depends primarily on which dial refinishing company the watchmaker uses. It also depends on the complexity of the dial.

The most popular dial refinishing companies in the USA are Kirk Rich (they are generally considered the best and they are generally the most expensive), International Dial, Eagle Dial and Kirk Dial. A watchmaker will usually use a dial refinisher that he has had good experience with, regardless of the cost.

Even the best dial refinishing companies all too frequently make mistakes (i.e., wrong colors or poor refinishing). They will fix mistakes but the result is a delay in your getting the finished watch back from the watchmaker. It is unfortunate that they don't catch their mistakes. But, the watchmaker should always catch the mistake before the watch is returned to you.

## **SOME NOTES ON WATCH BANDS**

Color, style, quality and the amount to pay for watch bands is very much a personal preference. Some people want simple leather bands that cost \$8 and other people are willing to pay \$250 for top-of-the-line crocodile. Most watchmakers do not deal with bands. Once you get the watch back, take it to a local jeweler (most sell bands), find a band you like and have him install it. Ask him to install new springbars (the pins that hold the band to the case).

The fit of the band is important though. It should not be too long or too short for your wrist. Also, it should fit between the lugs properly. There should be no gap between the band and the lugs (indicating the band is not wide enough) and the band should not be squashed between the lugs (indicating that the band is too wide).