

Collecting Conversations, Episode 6: A Young Watchmaker

By John Cote, NAWCC Fellow (IN)

This is the first *Bulletin* edition of what will hopefully become many interviews with watch and clock people. Our executive director, Rory McEvoy, first thought of the idea for the *Collecting Conversations* series a little over a year ago, and they began as videos you can find on our YouTube channel: www.youtube.com/@NAWCCMuseum.

What follows is a transcript, edited for length and clarity, of my conversation with a 14-year-old watchmaker named Owen Berger (Figure 1). (If you'd prefer to watch the conversation, it's on our YouTube channel.) I met Owen (@whitewhalewatches on Instagram) and his dad, Alex, at the 2023 NAWCC National Convention, and I was intrigued by the fact that such a young person was as obsessed with a lot of the same aspects of horology as our much older general membership. At the tender age of 14, Owen is already quite an accomplished maker, as you'll see as from this interview conducted at his own watchmaker's bench.

JOHN: We first met at the National Convention in Lancaster last summer, and I assumed that you were following your dad around, but it turned out that you



Figure 1. Owen Berger, a new generation of watchmaker at his bench. PHOTO BY ALEX BERGER.



Figure 2. Owen admires a newly serviced Vulcain Cricket. PHOTO BY ALEX BERGER.



Figure 3. A pile of Vulcain Crickets awaits service on Owen's bench. PHOTO BY ALEX BERGER.

were the real watch nerd of the family. And “nerd” is not a compliment I bestow lightly. What brought you and your dad to the NAWCC National Convention?

OWEN: We had developed a strong interest in watches and watchmaking and were invited up by our friend, Eric Wind. It was our first NAWCC event. We were interested in the swap meet and especially the Breitling dinner, just to get that experience and meet Fred Mandelbaum and other collectors.

JOHN: You also attended a beginner’s watchmaking class?

OWEN: Yeah, that was the Horological Society of New York’s Horology 101 class. That was mostly an opportunity to meet the people who run that class for HSNY, to get to know them a little better.

ALEX: Yeah, it was also a great opportunity for Owen to watch his dad take the balance out of a 6497 and dangle it over the edge of the table in a disastrous fashion. He got some good laughs out of that one.

JOHN: Your dad sounds like he’s interested in watches, but you have the real passion. When and how did you get interested in watches?

OWEN: It started about a year and a half ago, just being interested in wearing watches I liked the looks of. But how I really got into watchmaking and working on them was that my dad was interested in watchmaking as well. He had bought some tools and some pocket watch movements to practice on, but he just he didn’t have enough time and put them aside in the drawer. And then I rediscovered them. I decided to try working on them and found it really fun. That’s how it caught on.

JOHN: You started with pocket watch movements?

OWEN: Yep, a couple of Elgins.

JOHN: You mentioned Eric Wind and Fred Mandelbaum. Are there any other people in the watch world who have supported you along the way?

OWEN: The main one has been Eric Wind. I met him a year ago when I went down to Florida. And he said if you learn how to fix these watches, specifically the Vulcain Cricket (Figures 2 and 3), I’ll send you some to work on for me. So about a month passed and I had bought a couple Cricket movements to practice on and eventually Eric started sending me Crickets. Then later on he started sending me watches of all sorts, which he still does.

JOHN: For our one or two readers who don’t know him, who is Eric Wind?

OWEN: He’s a very well-known watch dealer and kind of tastemaker, especially for vintage watches. He’s based in Palm Beach and he’s got a site, WindVintage.com, if anybody wants to go there. He’s one of the truly honest and good guys of the watch-dealing world.

JOHN: I would love to be a watchmaker but I don’t have the patience for it. I think you either have it or you don’t. How did you get interested in the actual hands-on watchmaking side of it?

OWEN: At first I was just interested in collecting and wearing watches and then my dad showed me these two pocket watch movements and said they’re yours. You can take them apart. Do whatever you want with them. And, you know, they weren’t running to begin with, and I wound up using one for parts to fix the other. I got one running and I thought it was really fun and just went

from there, basically straight into the Vulcain Crickets. After that I started getting all the tools and, of course, a lot more experience. Experience, I think for me, is what's made me so much better. I mean, you can learn these skills, but practicing them is the only way you really get good at them.

JOHN: One of the things that impressed me when we met is that Eric Wind had just given you a quite messed up Rolex Daytona to fix. That Eric trusted a 14-year-old with a job like this shows you've obviously advanced beyond Vulcain Crickets. Do you have a favorite brand of watch to work on?

OWEN: I would definitely say vintage Rolex. They're very reliable. They don't break a lot. Often it's just the service. I don't think I've ever had one give me trouble after being serviced.

JOHN: Being able to fix vintage Rolexes is certainly good for job security. They're the world's largest mechanical watchmaker and probably the most collected. But why? Why do you like Rolex so much?

OWEN: Well, I certainly appreciate how they found one thing that works, in particular the oyster case. They've stuck with that for, what, 70 years now? The same is true with their movements; they've only made very small changes over five or six generations of the perpetual movement. Rolex has never done too much at one time, they've made improvements in little steps, and I think that's cool because other companies make one movement and then they make a whole other movement that has nothing in common with it. Obviously you couldn't take a part from a 1570 and put it in a 3135, but in principle they're all designed in the same way, which is as simply as possible to do their one job as best they can, as accurately as possible. And you know it's a refined watch.

JOHN: Yeah, I'm certainly a fan. When you put an old Daytona on your wrist next to another chronograph there is a certain quality to that watch that's just unmistakable. Setting Rolex aside, what is another kind of watch that's good to work on?

OWEN: I've certainly learned to appreciate a vintage Seiko, especially the manual wind and higher-grade Seikos. It's kind of the same thing with Rolex: they're two watches and they're built for a purpose and they just do their job well. The watch I wear every day is a Seiko Lord Marvel 36000. They do get quite refined, and I really like this watch. It's one of my favorites and obviously it's a very simple watch, just time-only in a steel case. But it's very versatile, and durable, and also very accurate. It's the most accurate watch I own.

JOHN: Owen, do you think that a watch should beat as fast as 36,000? When Rolex put the Zenith El Primero movements in their Daytonas, they slowed them down to 28,800.

OWEN: Part of what drew me to this watch was its high beat. I think it's pretty cool having that second hand move so smoothly. I don't think there's a whole lot of benefit in going from 28,800 to 36,000, but I certainly notice it and appreciate it. The reason the 36,000 isn't very common is because of potential durability problems. But we'll see if I have any problems with this watch.

JOHN: I want to understand something. Watchmakers have always fascinated me. My dad was a mathematician and a watchmaker, and he said that a watchmaker had to have a mathematician's brain. So when you started taking watches apart, did you have a picture in your mind about where all the parts go and how they interact with each other to make a machine that keeps time?

OWEN: What I did and still do is take the movement out and just sit with it for 15 to 20 minutes and operate it and kind of feel around to see how the parts interact, what part does what, and how to remove them (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Owen studies a watch before starting a service. PHOTO BY ALEX BERGER.



Figure 5. Owen's favorite chronograph movement: the Valjoux cal 72 upgraded by Rolex to cal 727 for an early Rolex Cosmograph Daytona. AUTHOR'S PHOTO.

JOHN: That's really great. It gives everybody a picture of what goes on in a watchmaker's mind. But time is a weird thing. You can just measure the progression of hours and minutes with a simple watch, or get more precise with a chronograph or a stopwatch, and then there are calendar watches and GMT watches. So far, in your young career, what is your favorite watch complication or time-telling function?

OWEN: I'd say probably chronographs, just because of how logical they are. Every part has a very specific function and even though they're very complicated and have a lot of parts that need to be absolutely perfect, they're still very robustly designed. Especially the Valjoux 72, which is the chronograph I have worked on the most. I particularly enjoy new complications as well. Hopefully soon I'll be starting on repeaters. They're very different than other complications, and I don't really even know how they work yet, but hopefully I'll build up to that in the next few months.

JOHN: Well, Owen, I might send you a repeater to work on. Who knows? You mentioned the Valjoux 72. Why do you like Valjoux 72s so much?

OWEN: It's probably the most famous chronograph movement, considering that they were used in Daytonas (Figure 5). They're also very nicely laid out, they're very elegant, but I wouldn't say they're particularly refined. An

Omega 321 is much nicer in finishing terms than a Valjoux 72. But their parts are very robust and not particularly hard to find. They're just easy to adjust, and the Valjoux 72 is also a very durable movement.

JOHN: The Valjoux 72 in a Rolex is more refined than in other watches, isn't it?

OWEN: Yeah, they do a fair amount more finishing. I have the Daytona that I'm working on for Eric here. Overall, a lot of the parts are the same. They didn't change them at all, which is good, especially if you need to replace them. But even still, I'd say an Omega 321 is a very, very nice movement and probably even nicer than a Rolex 727 or 722.

JOHN: I have to ask, and with the ultimate respect, Owen, you're still just a kid, if older than your years. You're still in school. What's your favorite subject in school, or are you just obsessed with watches and have forgotten about school? I hear your dad laughing in the background.

OWEN: Oh boy, definitely either math or science. I'm currently taking biology and it's pretty interesting how, kind of like a watch, all these different small parts work together to make a single big thing happen.

JOHN: Do you think that you might end up being a watchmaker as a profession?

OWEN: Yeah, certainly. I could see myself working in the watch industry because I enjoy collecting as well as watchmaking. That's definitely a possibility.

JOHN: Well, that sounds really great. I can't thank you enough for being a part of *Collecting Conversations*.



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