Max Low: A Watchmaker and His American Dream

By Andrew Dervan, NAWCC Silver Star Fellow (MI)

The United States formally entered World War II after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. Before Pearl Harbor, the US was indirectly involved as a supplier of essential war material to the Allies. World War II was unique in its demands for war production, including the vast number of military and civilian ships needed to deliver products and military personnel around the globe. US watch factories quickly switched from making civilian watches to timepieces for military use. The Allied navies and merchant marine required thousands of timepieces for general timekeeping as well as rugged and incredibly accurate marine chronometers for navigation. These services were especially needed because of the number of ships sunk throughout the war.

A number of companies quickly adapted to fill these needs. The Roth Bros. in New York City acquired highly jeweled railroad watches and cased them in gimballed boxes as navigational timepieces, while the Hamilton Watch Co. created and ramped up production of its Model 21 marine chronometer. The Chelsea Clock Co. increased its clock production and manufactured approximately 200,000 clocks during the war. Seth Thomas joined in as well with its Mark 1 (Mk 1) bulkhead clock.

This article will focus on Max Low, a watchmaker who specialized in repairing marine chronometers, complicated watch movements, and marine clocks at his New York City business, M. Low Nautical Instruments.[1] At the war's outset, he contacted the US Naval Observatory in Washington, DC, and was quickly contracted to supply marine chronometers as well as produce a line of naval timepieces called bulkhead clocks similar to those made by Chelsea and Seth Thomas. He set up a manufacturing operation to produce these bulkhead clocks, but few of them survive, and we have very little information about Low and his wartime business.

He continued selling and servicing these clocks after the war. In 1962, he acquired the T.D. & J.D. Negus chronometer company that had been in business in New York City since 1848.[2] He offered replacement black dials for Seth Thomas Mk 1 deck clock radium dials as people became aware of the danger of radium.[3]

Low had two sons, Jacob ("Jack") and Charles ("Chuck"), and they all worked together in the nautical instrument business. Jack joined the firm in the early '40s as his father's assistant. Chuck joined the business after earning a degree in electrical engineering at Norwich University in Vermont in 1950.

Searching *Watch & Clock Bulletins* yielded three references to Max Low. The first was a reply by Ron Bechler to an Answer Box question. He provided some general information on the company based on his observations of several clocks he had seen over the years. He noted that Low movements looked similar to Chelsea movements but were really very different. Bechler said that Low bought the Elgin Chronometer Co. in 1950 and produced a few chronometers, though he didn't provide any evidence to support that claim. He also said that he had seen some Low Bakelite cases stamped "General Electric" and a few stamped "Chelsea". He believed that both Chelsea and Low bought their cases from General Electric. Bechler said he had seen some Low movements in Chelsea cases, and he suggested that Low movements were possibly swapped out of damaged cases.[4] Bechler was a Chelsea clock dealer for many years.[5]

Bob Frishman commented in a Letter to the Editor that he had a break-circuit M. Low marine chronometer in a gimballed box that he thought might have been produced by Mercier in England.[6]

Also in a Letter to the Editor, John W. Luce said that he was a classmate of Chuck Low's, having studied electrical engineering at Norwich University in 1946-50. He visited the company in New York while in college and later had business dealings with them: "During one visit [Max Low] showed me a machine that was making clock pinions. He also showed me some special resilient mounted wall clocks he was making for the Navy." In 1964, Luce visited Max and Chuck at their booth at the New York Boat Show, where Max was selling chronometers from his collection. Luce and Chuck continued to see each other at Norwich University reunions.[7]

WHO WAS MAX LOW?

Max Low was born on April 6, 1889, in Stanislau, a city in the Austro-Hungarian Empire that's today known as Ivano-Frankivski in Ukraine.[8] He was the son of Gershom (1861–1954) and Ida Low (1863–1949).[9]

Max Low had a keen interest in mechanical devices from a young age. His family sent him to Poland and he lived with an uncle who was a watchmaker. He quickly learned watchmaking and exceled at it. He moved to Switzerland to hone his skills.[10]

Prior to 1912, Low worked at the Recta Watch Co. in Bienne, Switzerland.[11] Recta was founded in 1897 by Antoine Muller and Alcide Vaucher and originally called Muller & Vaucher Fabrique d'Horlogerie. In 1898, the name Recta was registered.[12] Low sailed from Hamburg on the SS *Kaiserin Augusta Victoria* and arrived in New York City in February 1912.

On June 20, 1918, a marriage license was issued in the Bronx to Max M. Low and Bertha White. They did not marry until March 1, 1919. Bertha was born Belinkaja Basse on January 19, 1895, in Mogilev, Russia. She emigrated from Liepāja, Latvia, arriving in New York City on August 14, 1911, aboard the SS *Kursk*.[13] Her family's name became Wihet (perhaps changed by New York immigration officers), and she is recorded as the daughter of Charles and Chifna Wihet. The name was further changed to White, likely because it was easier to say and spell in English.

Max and Bertha's first son, Jacob J. Low ("Jack"), was born on December 18, 1919, in New York City. The 1920 New York City directory lists Max working as a watchmaker at 25 West 42nd St. and living with his family at 747 East 181st Street.[14] The 1920 census lists Max as a watchmaker in his own shop. He began the naturalization process in 1916, and he obtained his US citizenship on July 23, 1923. The 1925 New York City directory lists Max working at a jewelry store on Fulton St. as well as at another shop on East 181st St.[15]

Low specialized in repairing repeaters, as he liked the challenge of complicated timepieces.[16] He became intrigued with chronometers and mastered repairing them as well. He expanded his business beyond selling and repairing chronometers to include other nautical instruments.[17]

A second son, Charles Lewis Low, was born on July 21, 1928, in New York City. The 1930 census indicates the family had moved to East 178st St. and lists Max's occupation as a watchmaker in a jewelry store.

Between the 1930 and 1940 censuses, Max and Bertha divorced. In 1940, Max was listed in the census as the proprietor of a watch and clock establishment. His son Jack was listed as an apprentice.

Max registered for the draft on April 25, 1942. His draft registration card stated that he owned his business at 42 Fulton St., and he resided at 10 Monroe St. in New York City. Jack's draft card listed his occupation as a watchmaker and also involved with marine clocks. On May 25, 1945, Jack married Doris D. Haydel in New York City. Doris was born on October 29, 1921, in Norfolk, VA. Jack and Doris had two children, Seth and Beth.

The 1950 census lists Max living with his son Chuck as well as Jack and his young family at 16 Monroe St. Jack's occupation was recorded as repairing instruments, which would have included chronometers and other mechanical or electronic instruments used by commercial freighters. The 1960 New York City telephone directory lists "Max Low Incorp." as a producer of nautical instruments located at 44 Fulton St.[18]

Max Low died on March 24, 1974, in Pinellas, FL, at 84. He was buried with his mother, father, and sister in the Beth David Cemetery in Elmont, NY. After Max died, Jack and Chuck continued in the business but expanded

into real estate. Chuck later became an actor and was in several movies with Robert De Niro; he passed away on September 18, 2017 in Allendale, NJ.[19] Doris Low passed away in 2006 in Slidell, LA; there was no mention of Jack Low in her obituary, but her children and parents were named. Jack passed away in 2017 and was buried with Doris in Slidell.

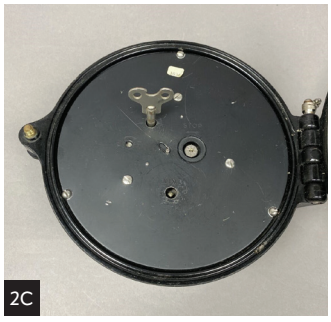
Figure 1. A 6" bulkhead clock with a white dial signed "M. Low U.S. Government", showing the bezel closed and opened. AUTHOR'S PHOTOS.

M. LOW PRODUCTS

The company produced 6" and 8" dial bulkhead clocks in black Bakelite cases. The cases were dust- and moisture-proof with a built-in bulkhead mounting plate. They were typically hinged on the right and opened by unscrewing a nut on the left side, just like Chelsea bulkhead clocks. The dials were typically white or black with a silver sweep second hand in the center. The dials were signed "M. Low" and "U.S. Government" and had large black or white numerals 1–12 and a secondary row of smaller numerals 00–24 for military time (Figure 1). The movement was typically wound, set, and regulated from the front.

Most Low clocks resembled the typical Chelsea bulkhead clock. Some differed in that they had a black dial with white numerals, were hinged on the left, and opened by unscrewing a nut on right (Figure 2). The company also produced a model that looked like the Seth Thomas Mk 1 bulkhead clock, and some of those were wound, set, and regulated from the back (Figure 3).

Figure 2. A case resembling a Seth Thomas Mk 1 with a black dial and opening on the back to wind, set, and regulate. COURTESY OF FBNSALES175.



The Max Low movement has 3 ½" round nickel-plated brass plates; the spring is housed in a barrel. It has an 11-jewel detachable escapement, an additional lower hole jewel for the fourth wheel pivot, and a platform escapement. The sweep second hand is mounted on the upper pivot of the fourth wheel, whose arbor passes through the hollow center-wheel arbor, and is the first wheel removed from the escape wheel pinion to ensure positive action and eliminate backlash in the second hand.

The nonmetallic escapement consists of a monometallic balance fitted with a Breguet-type hairspring. The balance assembly is protected from shocks by Incabloc jewels. The Incabloc system[20] shields the balance pivots from lateral or vertical shocks, thus reducing the possibility of pivot breakage. These timepieces have long, thin mainsprings (0.011" x 5/8" x 76") and will run for almost two weeks on a single winding. The movement's backplate is signed "Low New York" in a circle with a six-digit serial number (Figure 4).

The company also supplied bulkhead clocks with other dial variations, including a "radio room" dial with alternating red and silver sections (Figure 5).

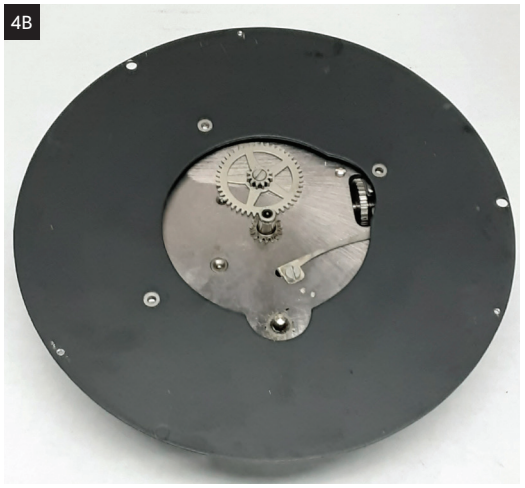


Figure 4A. A movement signed "Low New York" in a circle with serial number A642068. **B.** The movement's holding plate. AUTHOR'S PHOTOS.

Figure 3. A 6" bulkhead clock with a black dial signed "M. Low U.S. Government" and hinged on the left side. COURTESY OF NAVYMEDIC67.

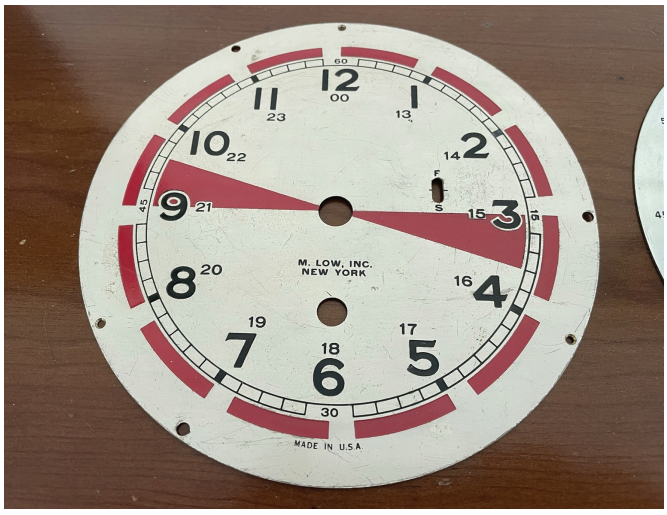


Figure 5. An M. Low radio room dial. COURTESY OF THE CLOCK BROTHERS JIM AND KARL BURGHART.

POSTWAR COMPANY ACTIVITIES AND ADVERTISING

M. Low Co. advertised in *Motor Boating* magazine's annual New York Boat Show issues. M. Low advertisements noted the company had been in business since 1830, and it supplied and repaired a wide variety of nautical instruments.

The advertisements focused on selling "surplus" items, particularly Chelsea and Seth Thomas marine clocks, other small handheld navigational devices, and later miniature Chelsea ship's bell clocks (Figures 6–10). It is notable that the company claimed its origination in the early 19th century, making it clear that it hadn't acquired an existing, long-standing New York firm:

> For the past 118 years the firm of M. Low, 44 Fulton St. New York City, has supplied ships with reliable expertly adjusted marine precise instruments. M. Low carries a complete line of chronometers, marine clocks, sextants, radio telephones, automatic pilot, depth sounder, all electronic equipment, gyros, peloruses, compasses, binoculars, barometers, azimuth circles, bearing circles, loran, radar and all other marine instruments. They feature complete repair facilities. Their exhibit is a high spot of the annual Motor Boat Show held at Grand Central Palace. A talk with Max Low and his son Jack Low is like a course in nautical science. The two booths (17-18) on the third floor will again be one of the most interesting of all boatmen.[21]

A later ad in *Motor Boating* emphasized the range of instruments sold and repaired:

> M. Low, 44 Fulton Street, New York City, specializes in the sale and repair of all nautical instruments and provides complete maintenance and repair services for equipment such as: electronic navigational equipment, radar, Fathometers, loran, radio direction finders, pilots, radio telephones, radio wireless, intercommunication equipment and gyros. They are distributors for Kaar Engineering, Allen Pilot, Bendix depth sounders, and G.E. radio telephones.
>
> In the field of mechanical navigational equipment, they sell and service Chelsea and Seth Thomas marine clocks, Hamilton chronometers, comparing watches,

Figure 6. From *Motor Boating,* January 1949, 303.

Figure 7. From *Motor Boating,* January 1952, 338.

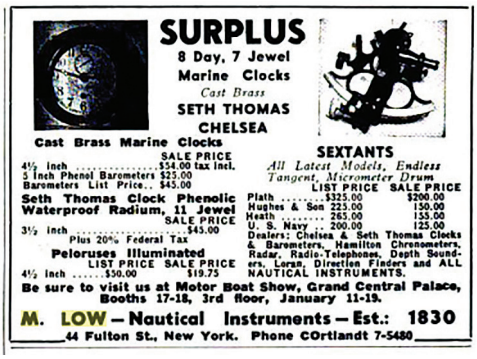


Figure 8. From *Motor Boating,* December 1953, 110.

◀ **Figure 9.** From *Motor Boating,* January 1961, 366.

▼ **Figure 10.** From *Motor Boating*, January 1965, 366.

M. LOW SEXTANTS

■ Surplus Huson micrometer-drum sextants are sold for $128 by M. Low, Inc., 69 Pearl St., New York, N.Y. 10004. The unused sextants have British Admiralty emblem and certificate and are sold with a one-year guarantee. Specifications include full-size shade, two-power telescope, horizon and index mirrors, adjusting tool, oil and case.

> stop watches, mechanical logs, barographs, anemometers, barometers, parallel rules, dividers and protractors.
>
> Optical navigational instruments . . . include compasses, sextants (Husan, Health, Plath) azimuth instruments, alidades, telescopes, and peloruses.
>
> Maintenance and repair branches in the South are represented by Justins Haydel, 2118 N. Claiborne Ave., New Orleans, La., Geoffrey Chapman, 16 Soth Water St., Mobile, Ala. The firm also specializes in manufacture of custom-built instruments.[22]

The company began advertising in *Motor Boating* in 1949 and appears to have ended in the mid-1960s. It had probably sold most or all of its nautical World War II surplus items. On June 15, 2017, a warehouse quantity of marine clocks, cases, dials, and movements left over from the business was auctioned off by Westport Auction in Westport, CT.[23]

CONCLUSIONS

Max Low was born in Austria, and he moved to Poland to learn watchmaking from his uncle. He moved to Switzerland for further training before emigrating to the US. He started as watchmaker and built a reputation for repairing complicated watches such as repeaters and chronometers.

When the US entered World War II, he saw an opportunity and secured a contract from the US Naval Observatory to supply the US Navy and Merchant Marine with chronometers and bulkhead clocks. The latter were basically knockoffs of Chelsea and Seth Thomas designs. After the war, the company continued selling and servicing nautical timepieces, along with a variety of nautical instruments.

By the mid-1960s, the market for nautical instruments and their servicing was shrinking and Max was getting old. His sons expanded the company to include real estate management. Max Low passed away in 1974, and the surviving bulkhead clocks are his company's legacy.

Acknowledgments

Robert Manke provided the majority of genealogical information on Max Low and his family. Thanks also go to Jim Burghart; Karl Burghart; Darren Dagnoli; Douglas Dittman; and Arnie Van Tiem.

Notes and References

1. Advertisements up to 1953 show the company's name as M. Low Nautical Instruments, and then ads run from 1961 on use M. Low Inc., so the name changed sometime in the middle to late 1950s.
2. Marvin Whitney, *Military Timepieces* (Cincinnati, OH: American Watchmakers Institute Press, 1992), 303; Marvin Whitney, *The Ship's Chronometer* (Cincinnati, OH: American Watchmakers Institute Press, 1991), 380.
3. Author's email correspondence with Jim Burghart, March 11, 2023, regarding Max Low and his company providing replacement dials.
4. Ron Bechler, "Max Low Military Clocks," *Watch & Clock Bulletin* 56, no. 408 (March/April 2014): 215.
5. I met Ron Bechler at the 2005 Pasadena Regional in Pasadena, CA, and purchased an original Chelsea Clock Co. key from him. He was extremely knowledgeable about Chelsea Clock Co. products.
6. Bob Frishman, "Max Low Military Clocks," *Watch & Clock Bulletin* 56, no. 410 (July/August 2014): 341.
7. John W. Luce, "More on Max Low," *Watch & Clock Bulletin* 56, no. 411 (September/October 2014): 452.
8. The birth date and location are from Max Low's naturalization declaration and World War II registration. The naturalization papers (located by Robert Manke) say he was born in Galicia, Austria; the World War II draft registration says Stanislov, Poland. Stanislov, or Stanislawów, was part of Poland before 1939 and then came under Ukrainian control, first as part of the USSR and then in Ukraine.
9. Max Low's burial marker lists him as a "brother." Also listed on markers in the same Beth David Cemetery in Elmont, NY, are "father," Gershom; "mother," Ida; and "sister," Ester.
10. Whitney, *The Ship's Chronometer*, 377, 379. In his US naturalization papers, Low declared that his last residence was in Switzerland.
11. "T.S. & J.D. Negus – New York," hans-weil.faszination-uhrwerk.de/negus-new_york.pdf.
12. "Rare Vintage Recta Watch for Men with NATO Strap," DuMarko, dumarko.com/products/rare-vintage-recta-watch-ww2-military-swiss-watch-with-nato-strap.
13. The marriage date and emigration details are from Bertha Low's naturalization papers.
14. *Polk's (Trow's) New York City Directory 1919–1920*.
15. *Polk's (Trow's) New York City Directory 1924–1925*.
16. Marvin Whitney made this comment in his book *Military Timepieces,* 303. Whitney possibly met Max Low during World War II while working at the US Observatory.

17. Whitney, *The Ship's Chronometer*, 379.
18. *Manhattan, New York City Area Code 212 Telephone Directory*, 1959–1960.
19. Chuck Low appeared in several movies with Robert De Niro, including *Goodfellas*, *The Mission*, and *Sleepers*; imdb.com/name/nm0522797/. The two became friends when De Niro was a tenant in a building that Chuck owned in New York City; latimes.com/local/obituaries/la-me-chuck-low-20171003-story.html.
20. The Incabloc shock protection system was developed through Swiss engineer Fritz Marti's research and patented in 1933 by the Swiss firm Portescap, founded by Georges Braunschweig; incabloc.ch/en/history/.
21. *Motor Boating*, January 1950, 238.
22. *Motor Boating*, January 1951, 156.
23. Author's conversations with Karl Burghart and Darren Dagnoli at the NAWCC New England Regional, April 25, 2025. Details about the auction are available at "Estate Nautical Clocks Watches Chronometer," Westport Auction, auctions.westportauction.com/auctions/1-C4NP2/estate-nautical-clocks-watches-chronometer?limit=36.

About the Author

Andy Dervan began collecting antique clocks in 1997 and joined the NAWCC. He found clock collecting to be a fascinating hobby, and his principal collecting interest is 19th- and 20th-century weight-driven clocks, particularly banjo clocks. Researching the manufacturing histories of various makers and companies was more challenging than simply collecting; he has published many articles in the *Watch & Clock Bulletin*, the American Clock and Watch Museum's *Electronic Timepiece Journal*, and *Clocks Magazine*. In 2011, he retired from DuPont Performance Coating, volunteered at The Henry Ford, and continues his horological research. In 2011, he became an NAWCC Fellow, in 2016 he was awarded the NAWCC's James W. Gibbs Literary Award, and in 2017 he became an NAWCC Silver Star Fellow.

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