

Member Spotlight: John Kuraoka

I started collecting pocket watches in the 1980s, about the time I started my first job as a copywriter for an advertising agency in Laguna Hills. The creative director – my boss – wore a suit and tie to work every day, so I did too.



I had once earned a pocket watch as a child, selling magazine subscriptions as a school fundraiser. That watch, a Westclox, soon broke. But, in the flush of young adulthood, I decided that my stylistic trademark would be wearing an antique pocket watch with my suit and tie. But which pocket watch?

I didn't want to make a \$150 mistake. So, in 1987, I joined the NAWCC and bought Shugart & Engle's price guide.

I was immediately overwhelmed with information. Being lazy, I chose to collect Hampdens, for reasons that I will share for fellow lazy watch collectors:

1. Hampden went out of business in the U.S. in 1930, so almost any Hampden pocket watch I bought in the 1980s qualified as an "antique!"

2. Hampden had a smaller production run and product line than, say, Elgin or Waltham or Hamilton. So ...

A. I could memorize four or five pages in the price guide and be at least as informed as the watch-sellers, if not more so.

B. I wouldn't be tempted to buy every old pocket watch I saw. I knew my eyes would be bigger than my wallet and choosing Hampden made the hunt more of a hunt.

3. I thought the 16-size 3-finger

bridge movement looked cool. It's still my favorite Hampden movement.

4. Hampden was a bit of a nowhere brand – not as popular as the other major makers, and yet not one of those niche brands with rabid fans. That translated into lower prices for Hampdens when compared to other watches of similar grade.

5. Hampden had an interesting business history. There were innovations like Don Mozart's three-wheel movement and the first American 23-jewel watch movement. There were bankruptcies, fires, cross-country relocations, acquisitions, and mergers. There were politics and trust-busting and sudden death. There were quixotic brand extensions. (Dueber-Hampden bicycles? What were they thinking?) The whole thing culminated in the sale of the entire shebang to the Russians. What chaos! And all in less than 70 years!

In 1989, I accepted a job at Knoth & Meads, an advertising agency in San Diego. I joined Chapter 59 shortly after I settled in San Diego. I later served as Chapter 59's librarian, secretary, vice president, and president. I also built and maintain Chapter 59's website, nawcc59.org.

As I learned more and my collection grew, I acquired a few models that I especially wanted, like a 16-size Russian Hampden, a 16-size, 21-jewel *John C. Dueber*, and a 16-size, 19-jewel *Railway*. (Hampden had to go to



court to defend "Railway" as a trademark – the opposition contended that the word was a description and ineligible for trademark protection. Hampden won.) One watch remains on my wish list: an 18-size, 15-jewel, key-wind *Railway*, possibly the very first watch model specifically named

to attract the expanding railroader market.

However, these days, I've entered a different phase in my collecting. The demands of a growing family have put me on a very short shoestring.

That shoestring opened up the world of Seiko wristwatches, another affordable, overlooked horological gem. Want an "in-house" watch? Seiko makes every piece of every watch they sell, right down to the screws and oil! I've found wonderful, horologically interesting Seikos for pocket change, and that's where I need to be right now.



But there's more to Seiko for those who dig deeper. Want a reliable mechanical chronograph? The Seiko 6138 and 6139 automatic chronos from the 1970s are as "in-house" as any maker's, if not more so, have a slight but real connection with space flight (Google "Colonel Pogue"), and wearable examples can be found for \$100-\$200.

Want a high-end thermo-compensated quartz movement? You can find 'em – the Breitling SuperQuartz, some Omegas, and I think Rolex has one. They're priced into four digits pretty easily. Or, get a Seiko with its in-house 8F-series movement for under \$300.

Don't get me wrong – I'd love to own a vintage Vacheron & Constantin, Patek Philippe, or LeCoultre. Such a watch is functional art of the highest caliber, and might never leave my wrist. But, since I can't realistically expect such a thing to happen, I'm finding tons of fun in my price range – whether it's Hampdens or Seikos.

So there really is something in watch collecting for everyone!