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[CEO Forum](#)

[Employee Recognition](#)

[Employee Activities](#)

[Metro Projects](#)

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[Events Calendar](#)

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History You Can Hold in Your Hand

- Quality Assurance supervisor collects vintage watches

By MICHAEL D. WHITE
Staff Writer

(April 14, 2009) Time may be a fleeting thing to some, but not to Jon Harting.

In a way, Harting, an equipment maintenance supervisor in Quality Assurance, has made time stand still.

Harting is a horologist – a person interested in repairing and collecting vintage timepieces.

“I became interested a little over a year ago when I acquired my grandfather’s pocket watch and wanted to learn more about when, how and by whom it was made,” he says. “One thing led to another and I found that I really enjoyed studying them and working on them.”

The extraordinary level of artistry and the craftsmanship that went into producing the vintage watches, he says, can’t be fully appreciated “until you remove the back of a watch and see the beautiful, intricate engraving and the inter-working of hundreds of interacting parts” – some of which are so small that Harting requires a microscope and specially-made, imported Swiss precision tools to position them.

A life-long student of history who not only repairs and maintains his own modest collection of pocket watches, but, habitually carries one, as well – Harting has a particular fascination with railroad watches, which, he said, are particularly prized because of their precision craftsmanship.

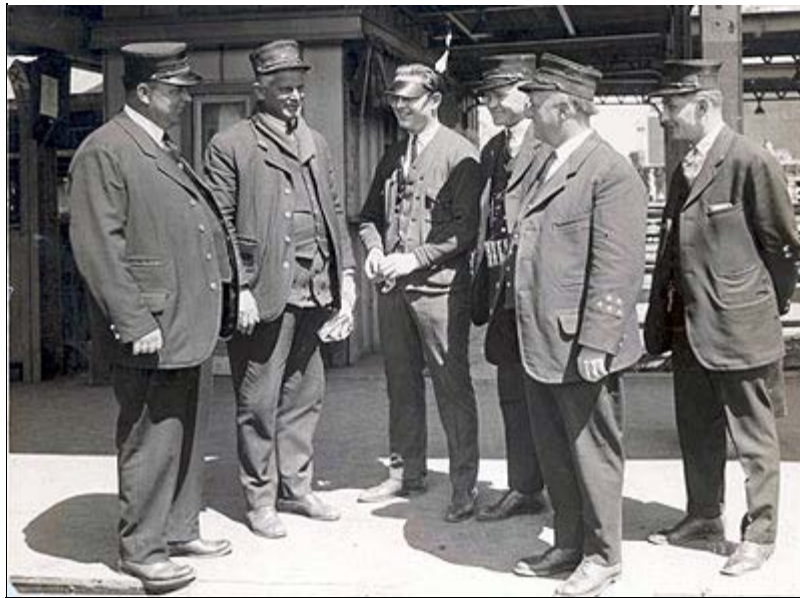
“Railroad watches are particularly prized because they had to be reliable under all sorts of conditions,” he says. Hot, humid, rain, snow, or just plain freezing, a railroad watch had to work and it had to be accurate.



A 27-year employee, Harting uses Metro classifieds, yard sales and Ebay to find new treasure. Below, a new 1930s Ball watch once sold for \$93. Harting snatched this one up at \$450 and estimates its value at \$600.



A 1930s Pacific Electric crew depended heavily on a finely-crafted railroad



watch to stay on schedule. Here, the crew takes a break at the 6th and Main Streets station in downtown Los Angeles.

A century ago, a train conductor or engineer miles away from any station had only his watch to consult for accurate time. He had his schedule and knew where the train was supposed to be and when. If his train was off schedule, he'd get the engineer to either pick up the pace if they were behind, or slow down if they were ahead.

No mere decorative status symbol, every watch was examined by a specially-trained American Railroad Association "time inspector" who certified that each "railroad grade" timepiece met stringent and rigorous standards in an industry, where in years past, the incorrect time could and, sometimes, did prove disastrous.

In fact, it took a disaster to spur the mandating of the highest possible standards for the watches used by railroad personnel. In April 1891, an Ohio train engineer's watch stopped for four minutes and then started again. The temporary mechanical failure led to a train wreck that cost nine lives and within a few months, the "time inspectors" were at work in an effort that, over the ensuing years, saved countless lives and trainloads of freight from destruction.

Thousands of railroad watches were produced by a handful of American companies and remain among the finest timepieces ever produced. Many have survived to become highly prized collectables that serve as a link to a day not that long ago when America's railroads served as the arterial system through which the country's economic life's blood flowed.

"These watches are a connection with our past that you can hold in your hand," says Harting. "Each one is a genuine work of art and a tribute to the skilled craftsman that produced it. I could never hope to actually make one of these. I'm satisfied just being able to work on them and share them with others."