

Cat Box Scratchings

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Watchers of the Times

By W. B. Hopp Jr.

On the final Wednesday of February of this year, I stopped at our local Walgreen's Drugs in order to purchase a watch battery for my wife's neglected and forlorn Timex. Janice rarely wears a wristwatch. For many years she did not own one. Jewelry, watches included, tends to give her a rash. I bought this inexpensive and somewhat masculine looking timepiece as a gift for her several years ago because it had a second hand. She was then working as a nurse's aid. Occasionally she had need of a chronometer with a second hand in order to time the pulse rates of one or another of the nursing home residents in her care. Given her sensitive skin, she carried this wristwatch in a pocket of her scrub outfit while on duty. She rarely carried it after work or on her days off. Four years ago, Janice quit work in order to return to academia in preparation for the launch of a new career in speech therapy. The Timex fell in to disuse. Most often, it could be found in a drawer in our kitchen, nestled with our household collection of pencil stubs, expired grocery coupons, bits of string, bent paperclips, and other small essentials. Sometime during the last year, it went missing altogether. When Janice found it

again, it had quit running. She remarked on this fact and left the watch on the kitchen table. I eyed it guiltily for a couple of days. At length I decided to take action by replacing the battery. Sure enough, an expenditure of \$3.17 for a new CR 1025 button battery did the trick. I'm not even certain what motivated me to replace the battery.

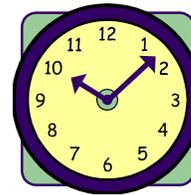
Janice manages to keep track of time very nicely without carrying a watch. It is likely that in a few years, this new battery too, will expire in obscurity in a kitchen drawer. But, until that day, the Timex will keep on ticking and keep good time in the bargain, all without further human intervention. Watches are so much less alluring now that the dominant technology is electronic. After the initial novelty wore off, I quietly put aside my last digital watch in favor of the friendly familiarity of an analog clock face at my wrist. Even now, I'm still not that comfortable with a quartz watch. It doesn't seem to need me, except when a battery expires or a wristband breaks. Although, quartz watches are, being electro-mechanical devices, not so silent like their digital brethren, they do not produce the positive and resonant tick of a purely mechanical watch. Most of the clockwork watches that I encountered in my youth needed to be wound on a regular basis, usually each day, in order to keep tension in the mainspring. This stored mechanical energy was the force that kept the watch running. Without regular tending to, a mechanical watch quickly expended its stored energy and stopped running. True, there was a period of a few years where "self-winding" watches enjoyed a certain vogue, but even those innovative

devices depended on the movement of the wearer in order to spin a small weight concealed inside the watch case and thus tightening the mainspring without the conscious intervention of the wearer. After a short period of disuse, a self-winding watch would run down, just like any other timepiece driven by a mainspring.

In the early 1990s it was Janice who gave me a Timex watch as a gift. It was a quartz watch with a squared-off stainless steel case and a flexible stainless steel wristband. It, in addition, had a date “window”. When properly set, a number indicating the current day of the month would be visible on the face of the watch in the position ordinarily reserved for the numeral three. This was accomplished by means of a wheel hidden behind the watch face that had the numbers 1 through 31 marked towards its outer edge. Every twenty-four hours the wheel would rotate slightly, exposing the next number in the 1 to 31 sequence. As result of this simple arrangement, as far as the watch was concerned, each month had thirty-one days. At the end of shorter months, the watch had to be set forward one to three days, in order to indicate the correct day throughout the following month.

I wore this watch day in and day out for several years, replacing the battery as needed. The first sign that a new battery was needed was when the watch stalled each evening just before midnight. Extra energy was required for the mechanism to turn the concealed wheel indicating the day of the month. As a battery neared the end of its service life, it still had power sufficient to run the watch hands accurately during the day, but couldn't

muster the energy to move the hands and the date wheel on to the next day unassisted. When this occurred, the watch hands would typically stall at 11:42 P.M., or thereabouts. Each morning, I would then set the watch forward to the correct time, mechanically changing the indicated date in the process. After being reset, the watch would run flawlessly throughout the day, only to stall again that night. A battery in this weakened state would typically give a few more weeks of service in this nightly rest mode – allowing me to replace the battery at my leisure. At last the day came when a new battery was not powerful enough to cure this syndrome. Just to be sure, I tried another new battery. No luck. Then I installed yet another replacement. Again, I had no luck. The problem



was with the watch itself. Due to wear and tear, there was simply too much mechanical resistance between moving parts to allow the date wheel to click over automatically at night. I continued to depend on the watch in this condition for several months. I simply reset it to the correct time each morning. While using the watch in this fashion, I happened to be called on to travel to a nearby city with a younger colleague. We went by car. During the drive, our conversation led me to describe the reduced level of function of my aging watch and the morning ritual that I followed to prepare it for use during the day. It seemed to shock him that I would, in his words, “put up with” this situation, something he swore that he would not do. It dawned on me then that I had grown up with mechanical clocks and watches. He had not. Having been accustomed

to winding a watch each day, it was normal behavior for me to spend a brief time each morning to maintain my watch. This behavior was inconceivable to him. This led me to think about just how very much our perceptions and expectations are conditioned by the lives we lead, and by the artifacts that we each encounter in our dealings with the world at large. Given the rapid pace of technological change in our society, is it any wonder that each generation has a worldview that seems at times wholly alien to members of the previous and succeeding generations?

When newspapers became solvent, they lost a good deal of their old venality, but at the same time they became increasingly cautious, for capital is always timid.

- H. L. Mencken, quoted from
Minority Report #97. p. 76

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Guest editor's note: My favorite picture of Bill and Janice Hopp. Ailurophiles of the first order, they are blessed with a loving menagerie of four cats, each with distinct, unique personalities and idiosyncrasies. Janice is a speech therapist and reading disorder special education teacher. Bill is an avid reader, and is a fine writer with extraordinary interests.

J. Hill Hamon