



National Association of

WATCH & CLOCK

Collectors, Inc.

NAWCC Chapter 52 - Los Padres

Ball Biography

1

CUYAHOGA COUNTY OHIO

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BALL, Webb C.

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Webb C. Ball was born in Knox County, Ohio, and educated in the public schools of the county. His father being a farmer, the boy learned to handle the somewhat crude farm implements of that day, but this machinery did not satisfy his inclinations for mechanics of a higher grade and finer type. His was undoubtedly the natural genius which has given America some of the greatest of the world's experts in the field of mechanical invention.

The result was the Webb C. Ball was soon apprenticed to a watch maker and jeweler for a term of four years. The schedule fixed his wages at \$1 a week for the first two years, while during the third and fourth years he was to receive \$7 a week. Thus he was put to work in handling the tools and repairing the delicate machinery of watch and clock mechanism. Mr. Ball has been in the jewelry business since May 13, 1869. From 1875 to 1879 he was business manager of the Dueber Watch Case manufacturing Company, whose plant was then located in Cincinnati. This is now a part of the great Dueber-Hampton

Watch Company of Canton, Ohio.

On March 19, 1879, Mr. Ball established himself in business at Cleveland. The site of his first shop was Superior Street, corner of Seneca. He was in that location thirty-two years. The Webb C. Ball Company, of which he is president, is now located in the Ball Building on Euclid Avenue. Beginning business in Cleveland with a very limited capital, his shop consisted of two show cases and a work bench on one side of the room. There was a steady increase in the business both in quality and volume. In 1891

a stock company was formed. Prior to that Mr. Ball had been sole owner and manager of the business. The Webb C. Ball company was incorporated under the laws of the State of Ohio with a paid up capital of a \$100,000. For several years Mr. Ball was manager and treasurer of the company, after which he became president. During 1894-95-96 he was associated with the Hamilton Watch Company at Lancaster, Pennsylvania, as vice president, director and mechanical expert. As a jewelry house the Webb

C. Ball Company is one of the largest in the Middle West, but as the home of railroad standard watches it is without doubt the greatest watch business in America.

Mr. Ball has devoted practically his entire life to originating and improving watch mechanism, adapting it to every test and requirement of railroad service. He has improved railroad watch movements and many invented appliances used in their construction. His business is both a wholesale and retail jewelry house, and the fame of the firm is by no means confined to the United States but extends throughout Canada and Mexico.

The occasion which prompted him to the development of that great service which is his chief contribution to American railroad life was a tragedy. On April 19, 1891, there occurred a collision on the Lake Shore and Michigan Southern Railroad between a government fast mail train and an accommodation train. The engineers and firemen of both engines and nine United States Postal Clerks lost their lives. Investigations and trials followed by the public authorities. In these trials (sic) Mr. Ball was frequently called upon for expert testimony. It was finally proved that the accident was due to defective watches in the hands of the trainmen in charge of the accommodation train. Mr. Ball, as a recognized expert on watch construction, was soon afterward authorized to prepare a plan of inspection and investigate conditions on the Lake Shore lines.

Those who are in any way familiar with the efficient system of watch and clock time regulation now in use on practically all railroads of the country will be interested at the results of Mr. Ball's personal investigations. He discovered that no uniformity existed or was supposed to be essential in trainmen's watches. Watches were of any make which the owner wished to use. The clocks in roundhouses and dispatcher's offices were seldom regulated to any uniform schedule. After this careful study and investigation Mr. Ball evolved a plan of inspection and time comparison for the watches used by railway employees and for the standard clocks as well. This plan provides that watches of standard grades must be carried by men in charge of trains. No discrimination is permitted against any watch factory provided its products meet the requirements. There are now seven leading watch factories whose watches are accepted under the uniform standard inspection rule.

Thus Mr. Ball was responsible for the establishment of the first watch inspection service on the Lake Shore and Michigan Southern Railway in 1891, and since then that service has been extended to

include the New York Central and all other Vanderbilt lines, the Illinois Central, the Rock Island and Frisco systems, the Union Pacific, Southern Pacific Oregon Short Line, the Nashville, Chattanooga and St. Louis, Missouri, Kansas City and Texas, El Paso and Southwestern, Sun Set Central lines, Western Pacific Railway, Lehigh Valley Railway, Boston and Albany, New York, New Haven and Hartford Railroad. Fully seventy-five per cent of the railroads throughout the country employ the system of inspection instituted by Mr. Ball. As a result of that system thousands of lives have been saved, the general efficiency of railroad operation has been promoted, and a vast volume of railroad property has been conserved.

The main office of this extensive inspection service is located at Cleveland and local inspectors are appointed at division points along the various railway lines. To these local inspectors trainmen must report every two weeks for time comparison. They are furnished with a clearance card certificate which must record any variation in their watches, the limit being thirty seconds per week. If anything is found amiss the trainman must secure a standard loaner watch and leave his own for adjustment. These loaned

watches are furnished without expense to the trainmen. By this card system a perfect record is kept and the trainmen cheerfully comply, as it safeguards the service and themselves as well. The Ball inspection service requires a large office force in Cleveland, Chicago, San Francisco and Winnipeg, with a number of

traveling assistants. The railroad lines in eastern and central districts are administered from the Cleveland offices while the railroads in the Chicago, middle western and southern districts are administered from the Chicago office, the Pacific lines from the San Francisco office, and from the Winnipeg office the Canadian Railroad lines are handled. Correct records of all the watches carried by the employees of the different railroads are on file in one or other of these offices.

Today the name "Ball" is a synonym for accuracy in construction of railroad watches throughout the entire country. In this field Mr. Ball's ingenuity and mechanical skill have a free play. He made a special study of the requirement of railroad men in the matter of timepieces and has been able to keep abreast of the marvelous strides of recent years in railroad speed and equipment. His genius as an inventor has produced several distinct watch movements, covered by his own patents and trade marks, and

each adapted to fulfill the requirements of their users. Many times Mr. Ball has been referred to in recent years as "the man who holds a watch on one hundred seventy-five thousand miles of railroad" and also as

"the time and watch expert."

Besides his noteworthy place among Cleveland citizens as a business man Mr. Ball is a charter member of the Cleveland Chamber of Commerce, a member of the Union Club and Advertising Club, a director of the Cleveland Convention Board five years and its president in 1902. In politics he is a republican. Mr. Ball was married in 1879 to Miss Florence I. Young, of Kenton, Ohio. They have one son and three daughters.

In August, 1913 Mr. Ball established a wholesale watch and jewelry business in Chicago, known as the Norris-Alister-Ball Company, with his son Sidney Y. Ball as president. Branches have since been opened in San Francisco, California; Portland, Oregon; Winnipeg, Manitoba; Birmingham, Alabama;

Cleveland, Ohio; and Syracuse, New York.

The Webb C. Ball Company

The Webb C. Ball Company is a great business institution. As is true of every great business its primary principle and object is service. The company not only sells merchandise, but supplies an indispensable service in more fields than one. It is a composite organization. In fact few people of Cleveland appreciate the magnitude of the work that goes on and is directed from the office of the Ball Organization in the Ball Building on Euclid Avenue. There are four distinct departments. It is the home of the Ball Railroad Standard Watch, of the Ball Watch Company, of the Ball retail jewelry store and of the Ball system of railroad watch inspection.

All of these services have a personality behind them. That personality is Mr. Webb C. Ball, whose interesting career and achievements are the subject of another article on other pages of this publication. Like other great business men Mr. Ball has not depended entirely upon his own energies. He has built up a great business around the loyalty and faithful cooperation of men and women who have made special studies of their particular line and who have found it profitable and pleasant to say with the organization for years. It is for the purpose of furnishing some additional facts concerning this company and noting some of the major personalities involved besides Mr. Ball that the present article is written.

In the production of the Ball railroad standard watch the superintendent and head of the mechanical department for the adjusting and finishing of these watches is Mr. L. N. Cobb, who has been connected with the company since 1891. Mr. Cobb is a man of enthusiasm as well as an expert in his particular field. He has made his department a marvel of efficiency and has introduced some new principles of shop management. In many watch factories it is customary to furnish each workman with a small equipment of tools valued at perhaps \$10 to \$20, while in the department supervised by Mr. Cobb each man has a complete set of individual tools valued at from \$500 to \$3,500.

Of the requirements maintained for efficient service in this department some interesting facts have been furnished by Mr. Cobb. "The very efficiency of a watch-adjusting establishment," he says, "depends on the length of service of the watchmaker or adjustor. Before a man can reach a position to be of real value in the work he must have served with close study for at least five years. Then he has much to learn in regard to adjustment for heat, cold and position, that only experience can teach him. In this department we have a staff of men and women who have been with us for years and who are thoroughly skilled." The assistant superintendent of this department is C. P. Gerdum, with thirty-five or more of other expert finishers and adjustors. Miss Mary Foot has kept the shop records and she is an expert statistician.

One of the chief men connected with this department as well as with others is Mr. H. L. Mowatt, who has been identified with the Ball organization for thirty years. He was largely responsible for making the Ball watch known all over the United States, Canada and Mexico. He spent several years introducing

the Ball railroad standard watches and clocks on the railroad lines in Mexico.

The retail store at Cleveland has been under the able management of Mr. W. S. Gaines for the past thirty years. Mr. Gaines is one of the best known local jewelers of the city. While he is a veteran in the work Mr. Ball has many other capable assistants who have been with him for many years. Mr. Gaines is head of the diamond department in the retail store, and his assistant is H. R. Avery. The head of the watch sales and clock departments is F. G. Story; George A. Sheakley has charge of the watch repair department; W. G. Edwards and Louise Montgomery, of the silverware department; Miss Catherine O'Neill, of the gold jewelry department; and E. T. Hastings, of the accounting department. Of the retail store conducted under the name the Webb C. Ball Company Mr. Webb C. Ball is president; R. J. Gross, vice president; W. S. Bowler, secretary, while other directors are F. I. Ball and S. Y. Ball. The members of the retail department take special pride in the remarkable growth of this institution, and some of them were connected with the store in its early days when it was started in one side of a small millinery store on Lower Superior Avenue at the corner of West Third Street. The store has been in the Ball Building since November, 1910, and now occupies three floors.

Several years ago Mr. Ball branched out into the wholesale railroad watch business. The rapid growth of this enterprise necessitated constant changes and additions. In 1913 Mr. Ball bought the long established Norris-Alister Company, a wholesale jewelry house of Chicago, and consolidated the wholesale railroad watch business of Cleveland with the Chicago house and changed the name to the Norris-Alister-Ball Company. It is incorporated under Ohio laws, and Sidney Y. Ball, a son of Mr. Webb C. Ball, is president. The headquarters of the wholesale business are now on the ninth and tenth floors of the Garland Building, corner of Washington Street and Wabash Avenue in Chicago. Under the direction of Sidney Y. Ball this has now grown to be the largest wholesale distributing house of railroad standard watches in the United States. It also stands on equal footing with many other large companies in the importation of diamonds, the distribution of clocks, silverware, tools, optical goods, etc. Mr. Webb C. Ball is chairman of the board of directors of this wholesale company, with his son as president, R. J. Gross, vice president, C. H. Spencer, general manager, H. F. Taber, treasurer and secretary. The company

employs about twenty traveling salesmen, covering the entire United States, with branches in San Francisco; Portland, Oregon; Birmingham, Alabama; Syracuse, New York; and Winnipeg, Manitoba.

How it was that Mr. Webb C. Ball inaugurated and became the pioneer of watch and clock inspection system for American railroads has been told elsewhere. This inspection system now requires a large and efficient organization and is a great institution by itself. As a result of the watch inspection system the railroad standard watch is now regarded everywhere as the standard authority and source of correct time. Every day in the year thousands of people set their watches to correspond with the timepieces of railroad men.

The Ball watch inspection system has on duty local watch inspectors on every railroad division and also maintains general offices in Cleveland, Chicago, San Francisco, and Winnipeg, Canada. While the main headquarters of this service are in Cleveland, the service itself is separate from the wholesale or retail departments or watch making business of the Ball Company. The assistant general time inspector is

Mr. H. L. Mowatt, together with F. A. Tinkler and H. J. Cowell. Mr. Cowell, who holds the post of cashier, is one of Mr. Ball's oldest associates. The manager and assistant general time inspector at the Chicago office maintained in the Railway Exchange Building is W. F. Hayes, with L. L. Doty as assistant. Stanley A. Pope is manager and assistant general time inspector in the San Francisco office, while the office at Winnipeg is managed by O. H. Pyper, assistant general time inspector.

In front of the Ball Building on Euclid Avenue stands a large bronze street clock. When the name The Webb C. Ball Company is read above the clock face, the mechanism takes on added significance, especially when the facts herein stated are considered, and time itself and its regulations has

a meaning that is seldom realized by the average person whose daily routine and movements must conform to a less strict standard than is required of the great railway companies.

Submitted by: Susan Marsh Carr (mobbed@aol.com)

Names in this selection:

AVERY, H. R.
BALL, F. I.
BALL, S. Y.
BALL, Sidney Y.
BALL, Webb C.
BOWLER, W. S.
COBB, L. N.
COWELL, H. J.
DOTY, L. L.
EDWARDS, W. G.
FOOT, Mary
GAINES, W. S.
GERDUM, C. P.
GROSS, R. J.
HASTINGS, E. T.
HAYES, W. F.
MONTGOMERY, Louise
MOWATT, H. L.
O'NEILL, Catherine
POPE, Stanley A.

PYPER, O. H.
SHEAKLEY, George A.
SPENCER, C. H.
STORY, F. G.
TABER, H. F.
TINKLER, F. A.
YOUNG, Florence I.

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