

ENTREPRENEURS

Time is on the side of the Cincinnati Watch Company

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Years ago, Jordan Ficklin was mugged in South America. They took the watch off his wrist.

It was no heirloom, just an inexpensive tool. But Ficklin went looking for something that would be harder to steal and chose an old pocket watch.

Mesmerized by the gears and seemingly magical engineering, Ficklin decided to pursue a career in watchmaking.

The New Mexico native moved to Pennsylvania where he attended the then-newly formed Lititz Watch Technicum. In 2004, he was in the third class to graduate.

He found himself in an industry with an entire generation of people missing. Decades ago, conglomeration and cheap quartz watches drove the watchmaking industry from the United States.

But now, it's coming back.

"There are not enough watchmakers today. End of story," Ficklin said. "They are needed so badly that these major brands are providing free education."

Seven years after graduation, Ficklin moved to Ohio to take the job of executive director of the American Watchmakers-Clockmakers Institute. That's the trade organization for industry in this country, and it's headquartered in Harrison.

Most people might not associate a Rolex or Omega with Harrison, Ohio, but watch insiders most definitely do. People travel there from all over the world to learn more about the craft.

This year, Ficklin started looking for a new job. He emailed Rick Bell.

Cincinnati Watch Company

While Ficklin was in South American, Bell was back here in the Northern Hemisphere.

About a decade ago, the College Hill resident with a background in electronics also found himself obsessed with the dancing inner workings of mechanical time.

"The excitement there for me is all these gears and springs organized, and they're telling time," Bell said. "There's no CPU in them. There's no processor. There's no battery. They are eternal motion. That blew me away."

He started the Cincinnati Watch Company with his friend Mark Stegman in 2016 and together they designed a watch based on the Union Terminal clock.

What Cincinnatiophile wouldn't want that piece of history on their wrist? And a portion of the profits went straight back to the Museum Center.

The watch was a sell-out success and other models followed. Each one benefitting a charitable organization.

Watch enthusiasts would call the Cincinnati Watch Company a "micro brand." There are hundreds in the United States now.

The availability of movements (the guts in the watches that make them tick) and better connectivity with overseas manufactures allow Bell and many others to produce a diversity of watches that the world hasn't seen in decades.

One of the Cincinnati's Watch Company's early releases was called the P-40. It benefited the Tri-State Warbird Museum and was inspired by the Waltham mechanical clock in the cockpit of the P-40 Warhawk the museum restored.

"The internet has allowed people to connect with factories directly and connect with consumers directly as well. The internet brought the collectors together," Ficklin explained. "The internet has created both the demand and opened up the supply chain."

But being a "micro brand" wasn't Bell's goal.

Assembled in Cincinnati

Cincinnati had its own watch company for more than half a century. It was called the Gruen Watch Company and sat on Time Hill on McMillan Avenue near Interstate 71.

Gruen sourced movements from Switzerland and assembled their watches here.

It's the same model Bell, Finklin and Stegman are following with the Cincinnati Watch Company.

Finklin joined the company in August. Stegman summed up the change.

"I can't express the momentum that the Cincinnati Watch Company has with Jordan," he said. "From Rick working with the 'breakfast club' to Rick working with Jordan, it's elevating Rick and Jordan. What were creating now has a lot more energy. I'm lucky to get to watch it."

Stegman explained that the industry runs deep in Cincinnati.

"Cincinnati has a rich horological culture," he said. "We're a maker city. We made stuff here."

The Verdin Company still makes clocks and bells. There was the Wadsworth Case Company in Northern Kentucky. For more than a century, the Herschede Hall Clock Company made grandfather clocks here. We even had a watchmaking school.

Bell, Finklin and Stegman said they have three goals: making watches that tell great stories, giving back to the community and shepherding a return of watchmaking to America.

"There are between 200 and 300 micro brands in the world," Bell said. "Twenty or less have a watchmaker in house, and even less of Jordan's qualifications, assembling their watches."

Aspirationally, the three men behind the Cincinnati Watch Company want to grow large enough to hire even more watchmakers, and so far they are on the right path, they said.

Big sales

At the end of this summer, Bell was scared. He was about to announce his biggest launch ever in the middle of a pandemic.

On tap was an updated version of the Union Terminal Watch. The Captain is a gold-dialed watch based a Gruen design for Pan Am pilots. The Cincinnati has a retro flair with a small seconds dial. All three benefit the Museum Center.

The Cincinnati Field Watch, a military design inspired by the Roman general's civic virtue, benefits the Freestore Foodbank.

The Diver's Edition benefits the Dive Pirates Foundation, a non-profit that does special dive trips for physically disabled individuals, many of whom are American combat veterans.

It was a huge investment.

"It has proven the opposite of what I would have imagined. Our sales have been the strongest they have ever been," Bell said. "There's some great organizations that are going to get some money. The more success we have, the more success our partners have."

Even though the watches have a Cincinnati flair, Bell says they appeal to watch enthusiasts and sentimental Cincinnatians alike. He said more than half of sales are not local. He's shipped watches all over the world.

Finklin said the quality parts, design and affordable price point allows the Cincinnati Watch Company to succeed in both markets.

Pre-orders for the watches are still coming in.

Soon, the timepieces will be overflowing out of Finklin's Fairfield workshop where he will assemble and test each one by hand. The first orders will ship to customers at the beginning of next year.

More than a micro brand

In the meantime, the company has launched a repair and service division.

Finklin is repairing and servicing everything from antique railroad pocket watches to Rolex.

"We get other micro brands, too," Bell said laughing.

He said that he believes people are becoming more interested in watches because of they are the anthesis to disposal digital technology. The music industry has seen the same renaissance with vinyl records.

Finklin explained that people don't throw away watches. The watch they wore when they ran their first marathon or when they were married or the antique passed down from their grandfather will all sit in a drawer long after they stopped working.

He said the watches coming out of the Cincinnati Watch Company will meet that expectation

"I still have the little Casio I have from when I was a little kid. The rubber band is broken, but I still have it sitting there in the drawer because I wore it for so long," Finklin said. "We had no choice but to design our product to last because its what people expect from watches."

Bell said it's this very thing that drew him to watches.

"They do and can last forever," he said.