

The Illinois Grade 105 and its “Worthy Competitors”

In memory of my friend
William F. “Bill” Meggers, Jr.

Why the Grade 105?

- Bill Meggers was the most avid of researchers on pocket watches and especially the products of the Illinois Watch Co.
- Even with all the high grade railroad watches produced by Illinois in the Bunn Special and Sangamo Special product lines, or even the beautiful Diamond, Ruby and Sapphire, Bill considered the Grade 105 the “Breakthrough Watch” for the company and it was always his personal favorite watch.
- This presentation is intended to help you understand why Bill felt so strongly about this “simple 15 jewel watch.”

Illinois' Market Position

- The year was 1883
- Illinois was a distant third in the market behind Waltham and Elgin
- Both of the larger competitors had developed high grade 16 size watches for their prestige market.
- The more traditional 18 size full plate watch was considered a technological backwater
- Illinois decided to make their mark in the high grade, 15 jewel, adjusted watch for railroad service

Jewel Counts

- Until the late 1880's and early 1890's the best watches in regular use were “fully jeweled” 15 jewel watches.
- Putting jewels in the center of the watch had been discredited by the best English watchmakers and was also denigrated by E. Howard & Co.
- Very few watches were produced with center jewellery and these were confined to the prestige lines of Waltham, Elgin and others, which were not intended for every day use by working men.
- The general consensus was that center jewellery made the watch less reliable rather than improving performance.

Open Face Watches

- The traditional arrangement of the gearing in a keywind watch produces a hunting case model with the stem at the 3:00 position when fitted with stem winding.
- Making both open face and hunting style watches required either two completely different designs to rearrange the winding mechanism or some special trick to allow the same basic design to be used for both hunting and open face.
- Elgin had reacted to this problem by producing the Elgin Convertible and the Elgin Center Seconds watch.
- Illinois and Aurora came up with the interesting idea of simply adding a 5th idler pinion to carry the second hand at the desired 6:00 position.

The 105 Precursors

Illinois high grade watches started with the gilt Stuart Grade

This was followed by the nickel Grade 104

These grades were produced in both the model 2 hunting case and the model 3 open face with a fifth pinion to carry the seconds hand as in these two examples



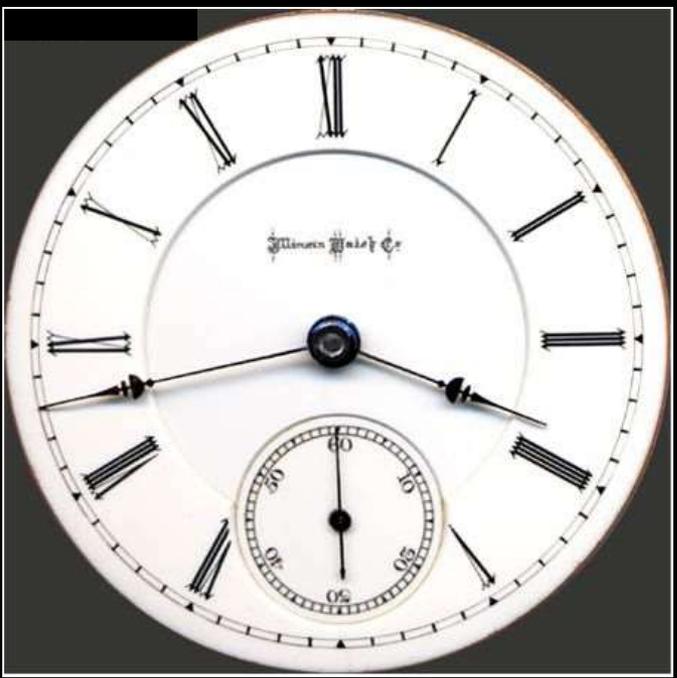
5th Pinion

Making the “Big Splash”

- The Stuart Grade did not capture the imagination of the market even though it provided an open face, stem wound, adjusted watch.
- The Stuart was followed by the Grade 104, which added a nickel finish but the market continued to be unimpressed.
- The Grade 105 was introduced as the very best watch Illinois was capable of producing.
 - It introduced the Breguet hairspring to the Illinois line.
 - It was finished with gold jewel settings and fine matched ruby jewels.
 - All the steel work was polished to a high finish.
- It was certainly the very best watch Illinois was capable of producing and may have been the best full plate watch produced in America at the time.

The Grade 105

“The Best Finished, Most Accurate, and Reliable Warranted Timekeeper before the public for the money”

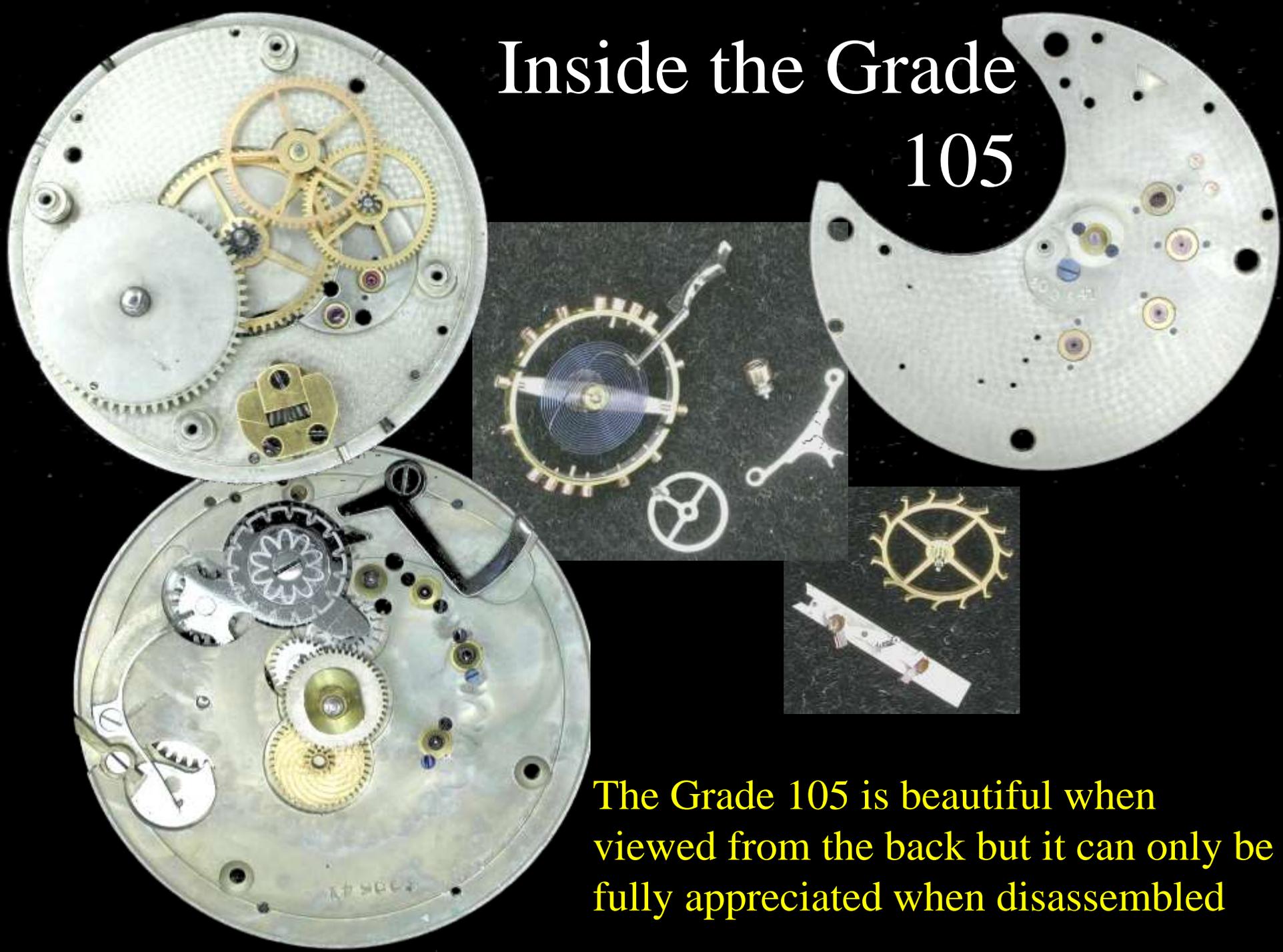


Grade 105 Model 3

The elusive Grade 105 Model 3 is a 17 jewel watch with jewellery on both pivots of the fifth pinion.



Inside the Grade 105



The Grade 105 is beautiful when viewed from the back but it can only be fully appreciated when disassembled

Grade 104/105 Production Numbers

Where have they
they all gone?

- Grade 104
 - 2 runs of Model 2, Hunting Case
 - 300 Total planned production: 7 known survivors in two runs
 - 1 run of Model 3, fifth pinion, Open Face
 - 200 Total planned production: 10 known survivors in one run
- Grade 105
 - 5 runs of Model 2, Hunting Case
 - 560 Total planned production: 10 known survivors in three runs
 - 2 runs of Model 3, fifth pinion, Open Face
 - 150 Total planned production: 5 known survivors in one run

The 100-S Late Production

Six years after the Grade 105 in 1889, Illinois produced a series of watches with the Grade 105 finish from old Grade 100-S material.

These watches are similar to the Grade 105, but have Chalmer's Regulator and are marked "Safety Pinion" rather than "Patent Pinion."

Examples have been found in model 1 keywind, model 2 hunting case and model 3 fifth pinion open face.

The Grade 100-S, model 1 keywind represents the highest grade keywind ever produced by Illinois. Only one example is currently known. There is also one known example of model 2 and two known examples of model 3 finished to the Grade 105 standard.

The three runs all have serial numbers in the 300,000 range



Model 1



301,627

Grade 100-S



Model 3

301,825



Model 2

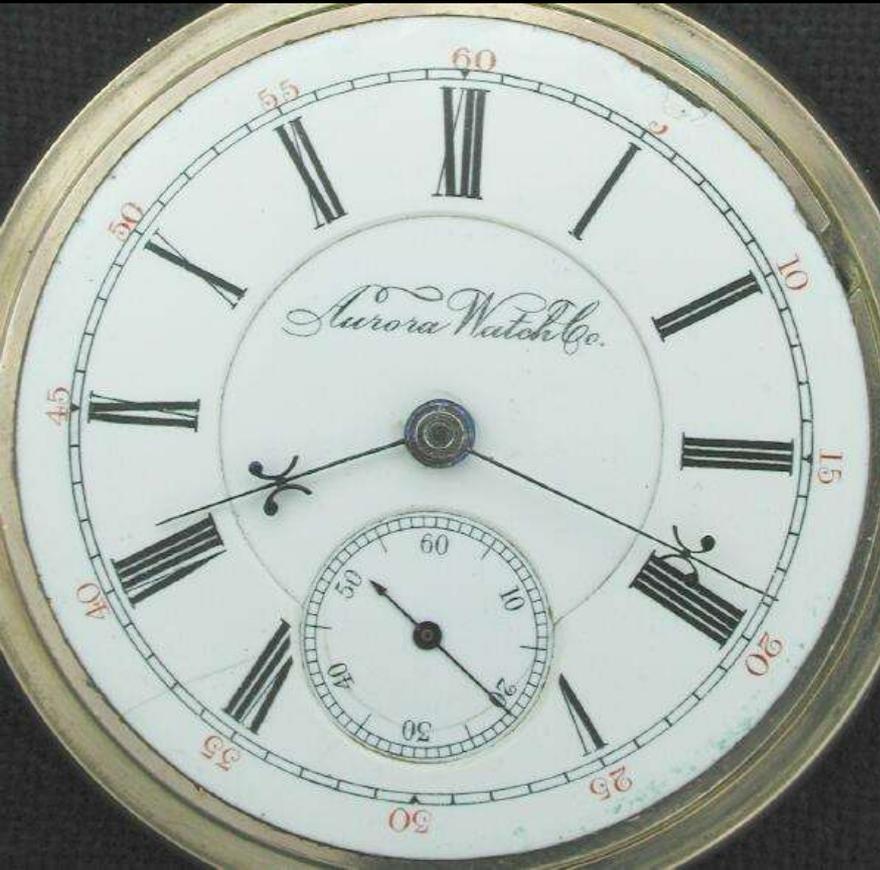
301,680

The “Worthy Competition”

- Competitors are defined to be:
 - American made
 - 18 Size
 - Full Plate
 - Manufactured ca. 1884 to 1887
 - High Quality judged by finish and adjustments
 - Damaskeened nickel finish
 - Similar wholesale price of \$50 or more
- Companies and models that make the grade include:
 - Aurora No. 10 “15 Ruby Jewel”
 - Columbus No. 18 and 99
 - Rockford No. 40 “17 R”
 - Fredonia Special
- Elgin and Waltham cost less and were only later fully adjusted *

* The Waltham model 83 Crescent St. was the ultimate winner with over 25,000 produced over a 15 year period

Aurora No. 10 “15 Ruby Jewel”



- Aurora's highest grade
- 5th pinion is 17 jewel even though marked 15 Ruby Jewel

Columbus No. 99



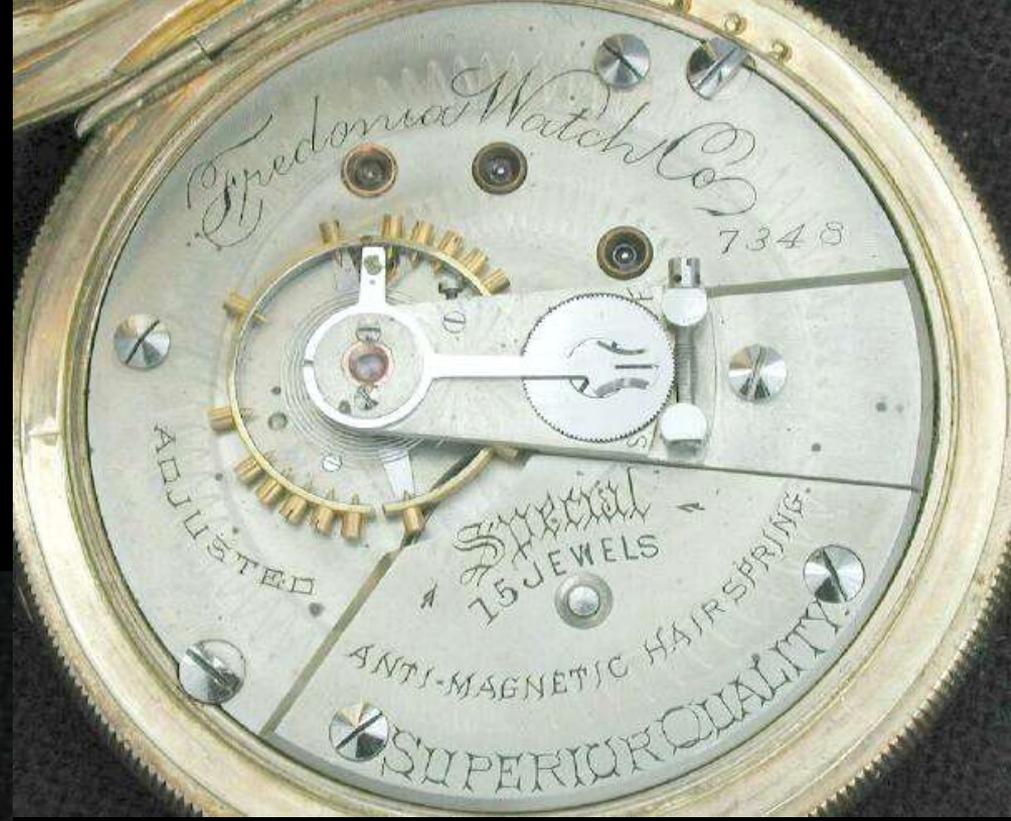
- Along with the No. 18 Open Face Columbus' highest grade watch
- Superior in finish to the higher jewel grades and earlier

Rockford No. 40



- Marked 17 *R* for Ruby Jewels
- Successor to the early “19 Ruby Jewel” and “15 Ruby”
- Very few known examples
- Likely ca 1884

Fredonia Special Superior Quality



- Produced in Fredonia NY following the collapse of the Independent Watch Co.
- Became the Peoria Watch Co. in 1885
- Lacks the Breguet hairspring but interesting for the early use and promotion of the non-magnetic hairspring.

Easily Overlooked Watches

- No “name” on the plates
- No or low jewel count marked on plates
- Full plate construction with details of finish hidden inside the movement
- Look for:
 - Gold Jewel Settings
 - Breguet overcoil hairspring
 - Unusually fine engraving
 - Interesting and unusual damaskeening patterns
- There are likely at least 100 surviving Grade 105 watches that have not been identified
- There are similar high grade watches from Rockford and other low production makers
- Substantial numbers of these “sleepers” are still waiting to be found

Summary

- The major push to high grade watches by all but the “Big 2” was based on new 15 jewel nickel designs.
- When Waltham noticed the increased popularity of these watches, they countered with the adjusted nickel versions of their new Church Model (1883) Crescent Street Grade.
- While the smaller companies could not really compete with Waltham, they had established a niche market that survived almost 15 years.
- The push into 17 jewel and higher watches in the early 1890’s led to the final demise of these great watches.
- A remarkably small number of these watches have been documented based on the number produced.

Acknowledgements

- Thanks to Russ Snyder and Greg Frauenhoff for their efforts as co-authors on the August 2002 NAWCC Bulletin article on the Illinois Grade 104 and 105
- Thanks to John Cote for his wonderful web site at www.InterstateTime.com and permission to use the picture of his pristine Grade 105
- Many of these watches are available for viewing at the www.NAWCC-info.org web site along with numerous other watches and horological artifacts contributed by NAWCC members

Questions?

