

## The Waterbury Clock Company, United States Time and Timex

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I have been wearing **Timex** watches most of my life. When I moved to Middlebury in 1975, I was elated to find that the company's world headquarters were a stone's throw away. When my watch needed a repair, I telephoned the Middlebury office, only to find that the repair facility was in Little Rock, Arkansas! No matter, I was proud to be in the same town with **Timex** Corporation, now the **Timex** Group USA, and its history is integrally entwined with the town's.

Clock production in the Naugatuck Valley had begun before 1812; **Eli Terry Sr.** (1772-1852) introduced the mass production of clocks, and Waterbury soon became a clock manufacturing town, as described in a wonderful book by **Kathleen McDermott** ("*Timex: A Company and its Community*," 1998), from which most of this history is written.

The **Waterbury Clock Company** was founded in 1854 by the Waterbury brass manufacturing company **Benedict & Burnham**. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, **Waterbury Clock** partnered with the **Robert H. Ingersoll & Bro.** watch company; in 1896 it produced the Ingersoll Yankee, a dollar pocket watch. It became so popular it was known as "the watch that made the dollar famous."

The advent of the transcontinental railway in the middle and late 19th century forced citizens everywhere to gradually (and sometime begrudgingly) adopt a nationwide understanding of time, partly due to the need for schedules. This ultimately included time zones and daylight savings time changes, and spurred the demand for all kinds of timepieces. Wristwatches became very popular after World War I. In 1922, Waterbury Clock Company purchased **Robert H. Ingersoll & Bro.** (owned by **Robert Hawley Ingersoll** (c 1861-1928)) for \$1.5 million and began to produce the Ingersoll Watch.

In 1929, a character named **Mickey Mouse** bounded onto the American scene in a cartoon called "Steamboat Willie." The Waterbury Clock company secured an exclusive license to produce the Mickey Mouse watch, and sales took off after it was introduced at the 1933 World's Fair in Chicago (I was later the proud owner of a Donald Duck watch –which one did you have?).

By the 1930s, **Waterbury Clock Company** was also making bomb fuses for the British government. As the world edged closer to war in 1940, Hitler's Nazis invaded Norway; the families of **Joaquim Lehmkuhl** (1895-1984), an electrical engineer, industrialist and anti-Nazi, and **Thomas Fredrik Olsen** (1897-1969), owner of **Fred Olsen Shipping Co.**, also an anti-Nazi, fled the country with their lives. The **Lehmkuhl** family trudged over mountains to Norway's west coast "on skis, on foot, and by truck and horse," hiding by day and moving by night. They were picked up in a life boat in the North Sea and finally arrived at the Orkney Islands north of Scotland; they completed their journey aboard a Cunard liner to New York (**Joaquim Lehmkuhl** obituary, *The Hartford Courant*, (Hartford, Connecticut), 1984). The **Olsen** family also fled their country for America.

Both families arrived in the United States in 1940 and wanted to establish a Norwegian shipping center in New York. They joined forces to discover new opportunities to help the war effort in this country, and they thought the **Waterbury Clock Company** could be their road to help.

In February 1941, **Thomas Olsen** bought a majority stake at Waterbury Clock Company and subsequently became chairperson of the board and president in 1942. Serving on the Board with him were **Lehmkuhl**, who chaired its executive committee, and **Bernt Balchen** (1899-1973), an aviator, aircraft engineer, military leader and recipient of the Distinguished Flying Cross. **Balchen** had been co-pilot and navigator with **Floyd Bennett** on **Admiral Byrd's** flight to the North Pole and back in 1926, and served in the United States Army Air Force during World War II.

After the Pearl Harbor attack, **Olsen** received governmental permission to build a brand new plant to manufacture precision defense equipment in Middlebury. As World War II unfolded, April 1942 witnessed the start of construction of a new 120,000 square foot building off Straits Turnpike on Park Road Extension. It took 700 workers just 88 days to complete this most modern of buildings for the Waterbury Clock Company. **Kathleen McDermott** describes it best in "*Timex: A Company and its Community*":

The exterior of the plant had an extraordinary strategic feature. Built on a seven-hundred foot elevation known as Ingersoll Hill in honor of the Ingersoll brothers, the factory could be completely flooded and covered with water.

Enemy planes scanning the countryside from above would see only a calm and quiet pond nestled among the Middlebury hills.

Architects and engineers expressly designed the plant for high-volume production of precision timers. Its air-conditioning kept the temperature at a constant 72 degrees Fahrenheit. Extensive humidity controls protected sensitive instruments and a suction system absorbed dirt particles. Simulated daylight fluorescent lights created an ideal visual environment for work with small parts. ...the *Waterbury-Republican* described the new facility as ‘one of the most modern air-conditioned factories in the world. It has all the aseptic qualities of a hospital, is vacuumed from floor to ceiling every day to keep it meticulously clean. A drop of dust or lint could conceivably ruin a tiny gyroscope worth thousands of dollars.’

On June 1, 1942, **Joakim Lehmkuhl** became president of the **Waterbury Clock Company**, succeeding a 36-year member of the company, **Charles H. Granger**, who remained as vice-chairperson of the board. **Lehmkuhl** remained chairperson and CEO until September 1973. At that time, annual sales exceeded \$200 million a year, employing 17,000 people around the world. **Lester Brooks** succeeded him.

The company ceased all civilian products and concentrated on products such as gyroscopes and bomb timing devices to assist the war effort. In December 1943, the name of the company was changed from **Waterbury Clock Company** to the **United States Time Corporation**.

In October 1945, **U.S. Time** received its official rights to the trademark name “**Timex**.” “**Timex**” is actually a portmanteau, composed from *Time* Magazine and *Kleenex*, according to **Fred Olsen** (b. 1929), son of **Thomas** and wife **Henriette Olsen** (*Fortune Magazine*, 2015). **Thomas Olson** also was an art collector, the original owner of Norwegian artist **Edvard Munch**’s *The Scream* paintings.

After World War II, **U.S. Time** began advertising aggressively, running newspaper cartoon ads by artist **Mischa Richter** (1910-2001), best known for his cartoons in the *New Yorker Magazine*. A refugee of communist Russia, he attended Yale University and became a WPA muralist, and lived in Provincetown, Massachusetts (Wikipedia).

When television became popular in the 1950s, advertising turned to it exclusively. While many of us never saw the original television commercial by **John Cameron Swayze**, it is safe to say that most know that **Timex** is the watch “that takes a licking but keeps on ticking.” The “**Timex** torture tests,” wherein a **Timex** watch was subjected to extraordinary tests such as strapping one onto the propeller of a boat’s outboard motor, became an extraordinary but fun advertising staple. The watches always survived.

By 1960, **U.S. Time** was the only watch manufacturer remaining in Connecticut, and 15 years later the only independent watch company in the United States. In 1969, the **United States Time Corporation** officially became **Timex**. By the mid-1970s, **Timex** had about two dozen sites around the world and 30,000 employees in eight countries. (McDermott). The **United States Time Corporation** of Waterbury was at one time the largest producer of wrist watches in the world. In 1993, Middlebury’s **C. Michael Jacobi** became CEO of **Timex**.

**Timex** opened the Timexpo Museum in Waterbury in May 2001 in the former executive office of the **Scovill Manufacturing Company**, built in the 1850s. With **Cathy Conti** as director, it treated thousands of visitors to a history of timepieces in Waterbury and indeed, the country. Its purpose was “to give the community back a little of its history as a gift,” as Cathy reported (Caryn B. Davis at inkct.com). The museum closed on October 1, 2015, and exhibits were dispersed to major museums, including the Mattatuck in Waterbury.

A December 01, 2004, a *New York Times* article by **Robert A. Hamilton** states the 278,000 square-foot old **Timex** building on Park Road in Middlebury will be sold to **Thylen Associates** on January 19, 2005, for a combined total of \$3,700,000 (including auction costs). It included 29 acres, 1,500 parking spaces, two helicopter landing pads and an aircraft hangar building.

A *Middletown Press* article of July 22, 2001, stated that **Timex** has a new 81,000 square foot corporate headquarters on Christian Lane in Middlebury designed by **Douglas Disbrow**, a Fletcher-Thompson associate and design architect for the project. The last day of operation for the old **Timex** building was Friday, July 20, 2001. The company’s 275 employees began the following Monday at the new building under the leadership of **Jose Santana**, the company’s CEO at that time. By 2024, the Timex property was sold and the company appears to be leaving Middlebury permanently.