

4-Wheel Time: Dr. Ron Frank, the World's Foremost Collector of Auto Clocks

Collecting watches can take many forms. Some people collect within a brand, while others might choose chronographs, divers or aviation watches as their theme. Then there are people who just buy what catches their fancy.

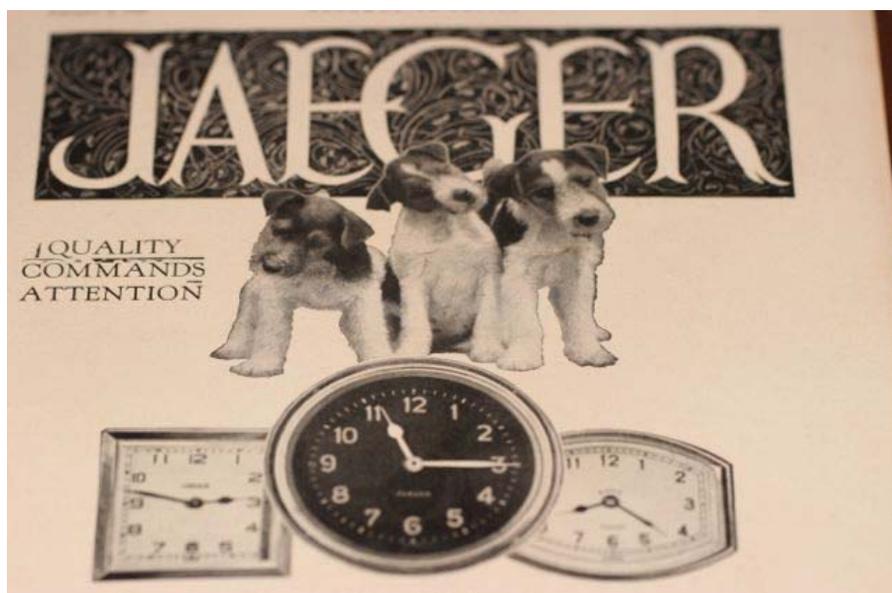
Dr. Ron Frank, a urologist practicing in New Jersey, is a horology collector too. But in a seldom considered area. His interest is in auto clocks, and it's very likely he owns the most extensive collection in the world.

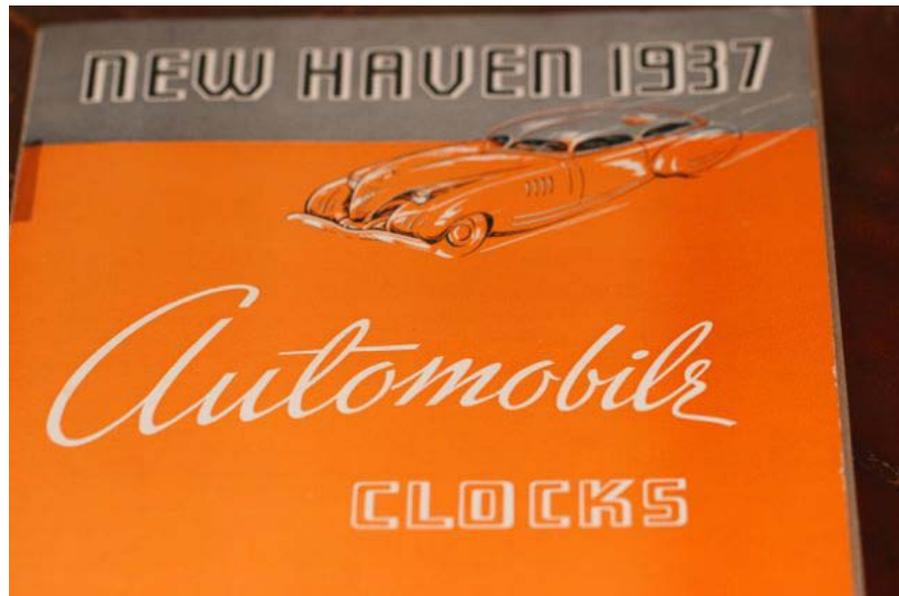




Dr. Frank began his love affair with auto clocks 20 years ago when he found his first one—a Waltham K1 with 7 jewels used in a Rolls Royce—at the Triple Pier Show for antiques. He hadn't a clue what it was or if it was worth anything but he didn't care because he was smitten. But what exactly is an auto clock? Just like it sounds, it's a clock meant to ride along in a car.

Dr. Frank learned more about auto clocks after he found a book on dashboards. More details turned up in old catalogues and advertisements he found at flea markets and on the Internet. A few clocks grew to a dozen, and over the years turned into over 100, which he displays in a showcase in his home. He's scoured the globe to find every example of auto clock and scrap of information he could get his hands on. In the process he's become an expert in this little known or examined niche of clock/watch history.





Before there were the ubiquitous digital clocks blinking from the dashboard, mechanical clocks kept four-wheel travelers on time. From the beginning of the 20th century when Henry Ford rolled his first Model T off the line, people started accessorizing their cars, and a clock was an essential item. The first auto clocks were modified pocket watches fitted in brackets and placed on the dashboard, visor or in the back compartment. Over time they evolved into their own special area, culminating in their heyday of the 1950's, after which they were replaced by the more convenient electric clocks.

At first, auto clocks were cased in brass, but were then replaced with nickel to reduce costs. The clocks ranged from the simple to those with more complicated movements and adornments like enamel dials, bakelite cases or borders with fancy engravings. More than just a functional item, auto clocks became decorative items and the focal point of the dashboard. Dr. Frank explains that people would go to stores like Tiffany to outfit their car with an auto clock. The power reserve on the most inexpensive clocks was 36 hours, but most had higher grade 8-day movements. Both European and American companies produced auto clocks, such as Jaeger, Waltham, Smith, Longines, Omega and Chelsea.

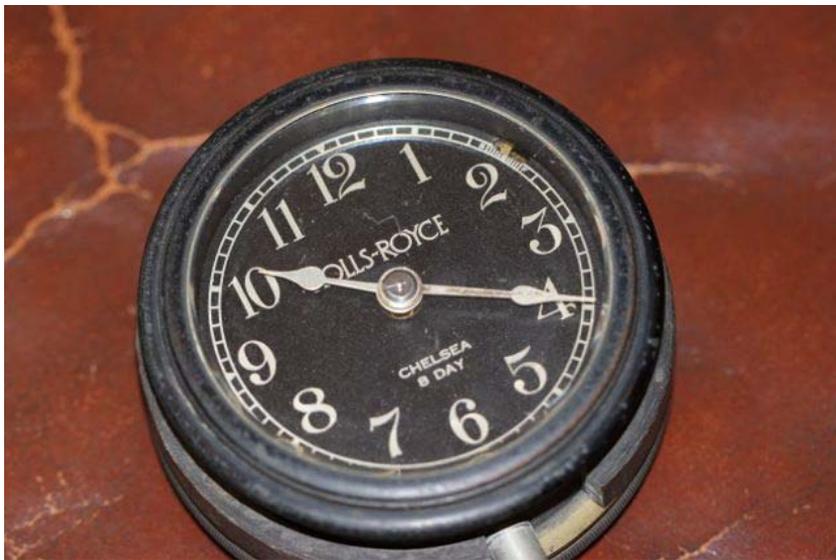


From the start, there's always been a close relationship between timekeepers and cars, which continues today with a lot of the watch brands partnering with cars and races. This idea traces its roots to around 1907 when car makers began to co-brand

with higher end companies, putting their name along with the maker on the auto clock. These partnerships brought an air of exclusivity to both parties.



No matter what the price range, auto clocks watches were rugged. They had to withstand driving conditions like vibrations, jarring and temperature changes. Sturdy cases housed large, temperature compensated and shockproof balance wheels. The better the car, the nicer the clock. Dr. Frank points out his prized piece, a Jaeger chronometer dated to the 1920's or 30's, a handsome clock with a solid build and a sophisticated movement. Considered top of the line, Jaeger auto clocks were placed in the most expensive cars such as the Franklin, Bugatti and Duesenberg.



Because auto clocks are a bit off collectors' radar, the cost to acquire them is much less than wristwatches or clocks. For example, the Jaeger chrono, a top-of-the-line

clock, would only set you back \$5,000. Most of the other auto clocks can be picked up for a few hundred to a thousand dollars for good examples. Obviously originality and condition matters, the same as in watches.

While no book on the subject exists, Dr. Frank hopes to write one featuring his comprehensive collection soon.

