W&C Wristwatches

by Bruce Shawkey (WI)

Pierce Watch Company: Innovative and Fiercely Independent

I was perusing a 1956 issue of the *Swiss Watch & Jewelry Journal* (SWJJ) recently and admiring all the nifty watches that manufacturers were getting ready for the Basel Watch Fair that year (now called Baselword). Seldom had I seen so many wristwatches (and different manufacturers) packed into one issue of the magazine.

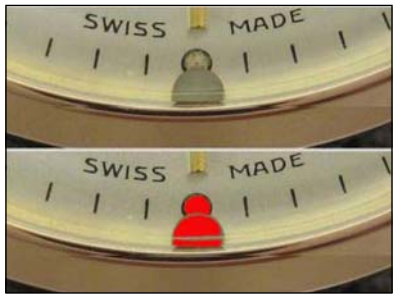
It was high times for the Swiss watch industry. Exports—particularly to the United States, which was experiencing its post-war economic boom—had reached their highest levels since the 1920s. Novelty watches, in particular, seemed to be all the rage. Alarms, automatic watches with power reserve indicators, "flippable" watches with independent dials on either side, and many other multifunction watches, were vying for the trade's attention (remember, SWJJ was intended for the trade and was not a consumer magazine, per se).

But of all the novelty watches, the one that caught my eye was an alarm watch called the Duofon, made by a somewhat obscure watch company named Pierce (Figures 1 and 2). It was the first such watch I had seen with a dual alarm switch. By rotating the alarm crown a quarter turn, the user could make the alarm either vibrate ("alert" mode) or clang ("alarm" mode). A small window on the dial below the 6:00 position showed either a red dot (for alarm mode) or a white dot (alert mode).

No one had ever done this before. Other makers of alarm watches (Vulcain and Revue were the first, and a whole slew of others followed) made their watches one way or the other. But Pierce thought of a way (a simple mechanism, actually) to deactivate the tiny hammer inside the movement and prevent it from striking the tiny gong. In this mode, the gong would simply vibrate, and the user would "feel" the alarm more than hear it.

Thus, the user could be in a business meeting, for example, and set the watch to alert, and not scare everyone in the room when the alarm went off. If an actual wake-up call was needed, the user could set the watch to alarm mode and—presuming he set the watch close enough by his side—be roused from a sound sleep.

This got me to thinking about other "cool" Pierce watches I have seen over the years … the Parashock, with its back secured by multiple screws; the chronographs with their unusual "up-and-down" subsidiary dial configuration (most chronographs have their subdials arranged side-to-side); and others. I had never recalled seeing a history of the Pierce Watch Co. and decided to investigate.



Figures 1 and 2. Normal and closeup views of the Duofon. An indicator disk below the 6:00 shows white or red depending on whether the alarm is set to "alert" or "alarm" model.


LÉON LÉVY & FRÈRES
BIENNE
AU ROCKALL, Faubourg du Lac 103a (en face de la Poste)
Manufacture d'horlogerie pour tous les pays
Usine électrique à Moutier
Spécialité pour la Russie, l'Autriche, l'Allemagne, l'Italie, l'Angleterre, la Hollande, la Suède et la Norvège de montres bon courant, système bascule et à pont, lépine et savonnette, cylindre et ancre, métal, acier et argent de toutes les grandeurs.
Marque ECLIPSE
Médaille d'argent à l'Exposition cantonale de Thoune 1899
Adresse télégraphique : LÉON BIENNE TÉLÉPHONE

Figure 3. A 1902 Leon Levy & Freres ad from a Swiss trade journal showing the "Eclipse" logo used on cases; the name Eclipse was also used on some dials.

Established in 1883

Pierce is one of those companies whose history is virtually unknown. No definitive history has ever been written about them, to my knowledge. A few paragraphs appear here and there. The rest must be pieced together by mining through clues left in Swiss trade magazines from the past 100 years or so.

The company was founded in 1883 in Biel, Switzerland, as "Leon Levy et Freres" (Leon Levy & Brothers). The company's first pocket watches were signed on their cases "Eclipse," which they had also formed into their first logo (Figure 3). Early wristwatches can be found signed Leon Levy et Freres on the cases, with several model names on the dial, including Eclipse, Wizard, Rocail, and other names (Figure 4). The company made mostly

Figure 4, left and below left. This early Pierce wristwatch is signed "Wizard" on the dial. Wizard is again inscribed on the 7-jewel movement, along with "Leon Levy & Freres Swiss." Circa 1910s.

Figure 5, right. A 1931 trade ad showing a variety of wrist and one pocket watch and also movement calibers, which by this time were made in-house.

low-end watches containing pin-lever and cylinder movements, but it did reportedly make some higher end watches as well. All movements were obtained from outside suppliers during this time.

The company was, in fact, too successful. Sources vary, but by the mid- to late-1920s, the company reportedly employed between 1,200 and 1,500 workers and was flooding the market with wrist and pocket watches, most of them cheaply made. Concerned that Levy was single-handedly undermining the reputation of the Swiss watch industry, a group of watch manufacturers forming a consortium that would eventually become known as Ebauches S.A. (ESA), stepped in and asked Levy to join them for the purpose of regulating the industry.

Levy did not wish to play ball. He wanted to remain independent. When the formation of the consortium was completed in the late 1920s, it basically blacklisted Leon Levy et Freres. And the Swiss government—in a move that I believe was unprecedented—officially sanctioned the arrangement.[1] Levy suddenly found himself without movement suppliers and no legal recourse.

Rather than give up, Levy changed tactics and decided to develop and manufacture his own movements in-house, a few of the cylinder movements, but most of them higher- quality, jeweled-lever movements. The result was that the company eventually came up with 33 distinct calibers of its own making, including two chronographs, a triple-date moonphase, a unique (see Figure 11) automatic movement (patented in 1933 before most other companies invented theirs), an alarm, and numerous time-only calibers.[2] The movements ranged in size from 4.5 to 10 ligne (a baguette movement for ladies' watches) to 18.5 lignes for use in pocket watches. That is an amazing feat when you consider that only a handful of top tier Swiss watch manufacturers—Patek Phillipe, Vacheron & Constantin, LeCoultre, IWC, and a few others—made their own movements during this period. (Pierce would eventually obtain some movements from ebauche supplier A. Schild in later years.)

By the early 1930s Levy established a distributorship in the United States, on Beekman Street in New York City (and later West 48th Street). We see a variety of watches being produced during this time—rounds, squares, and rectangles—and still bearing a variety of names on dials, including the Rocail previously mentioned, as well as Tibet and Admirable, to name a few, as well as the name Pierce. A 1931 trade ad (Figure 5) gives you an idea of the variety of watches offered. Of all the model names, Pierce seemed to draw the most attention by jewelers and the public. So by 1939 the company officially changed its name to Manufacturers des Montres & Chronographes Pierce S.A. It also replaced the Eclipse with the "Pi" symbol as its logo. The reasons for this are not entirely clear, but we can speculate that Pi represented the first two letters in the Pierce name. We can further speculate that Levy wanted a strong, recognizable symbol to accompany what arguably was (and is) a strong name. Regardless, the Pi symbol became synonymous with Pierce watches in the horological world (see Figure 13) and is used by the company to this day.

Chronographs

By the mid-1930s, Levy wanted to manufacture a chronograph that could be afforded by the masses. Up until this time, they were fairly expensive and appealed to a relatively small niche market. Levy came up with an ingenious (some say disastrous, as we'll see shortly) design for a movement with a central wheel (or disk) that replaced many of the springs and levers found in previous chronograph movements. The movement's design ended up placing the two registers (constant seconds and minute counter) in an "up-and-down" orientation on the dial rather than "side-to-side." It was radical, but somehow aesthetically pleasing to consumers, and other chronograph movement makers would copy this dial configuration (the Venus 170 movement comes to mind).

Figure 6. The Pierce Caliber 130 chronograph, with single pusher button, ca. 1936. Chrome case with stainless steel back.

First to come out was the Caliber 130, in 1936, with a single button for start/stop/reset (Figure 6). Some early examples of the 130 can be found signed "Troubadour" on their dials. A two-button version, the Caliber 134, followed in 1939 (Figure 7). They were a huge success, and Levy marketed them around the world, often in conjunction with major athletic events (including the Olympics) in which the company would feature popular athletes' names on the chronograph dials. The two register model became the official pilots' watch of the Trans Caribbean Airlines during the late 1940s and early 1950s. The British Royal Air Force ordered a quantity of the two-button chronographs as official military issue watches for its pilots and other flight personnel. The watch even garnered a place in fictional literature and is mentioned in Michael Crichton's *The Great Train Robbery*. To coin an often-used but apt phrase, the watches became the Volks-chronograph of their day. They were attractively packaged and came with a full set of instructions, including how to use the telemeter and tachymeter chapters on the dials. (Most other manufacturers up to this time just shipped their chronographs in plain boxes without instructions, assuming the users already knew how to use them.)

For reasons not totally understood, Levy decided to make the central wheel/disk in both the Calibers 130 and 134 out of plastic. Plastic was quickly becoming the new "wonder material" during this time, and Levy could have had a number of motives: cost, friction-free characteristics of the material, or perhaps a belief (misplaced as it turned out to be) that this plastic part would last forever.

But whatever his motives, the decision turned these watches into a disaster for many of today's collectors. While the plastic wheels certainly lasted for the duration of use by their original owners, the wheels eventually started breaking. Many more were broken in later years by watchmakers who did not understand how to service them. Today, they are the bane of many a collector, and many watchmakers refuse to work on them. The couple of watchmakers I talked to about this movement likened their reassembly to putting together a Chinese puzzle block. All parts actuated by the wheel must be in perfect alignment before pressing down and securing the chronograph mechanism. If the levers that are actuated by the wheel are so much as a whisker off alignment, you can be virtually certain the plastic disk will snap when pressure is applied to the screws holding the chronograph mechanism in place. (And supplies of original replacements for these central wheels have long been exhausted.[3])

Figure 7. A Pierce Caliber 134 chronograph, ca. 1950s, with dual pusher buttons. Introduced in 1939, the Caliber 134 had a much longer production run, possibly as long as into the 1960s. All kinds of case variations can be seen, from snap back to screwed-on back (Parashock). Case materials can range from base metal to solid karat gold.

But to a fiercely loyal following, these Pierce chronographs remain hugely collectible. They are plentiful at NAWCC shows and on eBay. The key is to find them in working condition and/or to find a watchmaker willing to work on them when they need servicing. I urge caution when buying these chronographs at online venues such as eBay, where the seller states the chronograph "needs work." I am willing to bet that 99 percent of these have a broken disk!

The Parashock

During this same time, many watch manufacturers were trying to design a watchcase that would better protect the movement from shock, dust, and moisture. Actually, this had been going on almost since the inception of the wristwatch, but manufacturers were constantly refining their methods with an eye toward outdoing their competitors. Levy patented a system it called the Parashock. Why the company chose this name is unclear, but the term Parashock does sound good and rolls off the tongue easily and became another big success with the watch trade and consumers. The design basically uses screws to secure the back of the watch case to the bezel. A gasket between the back and bezel further isolates the movement

from dirt and moisture. The first design employed four screws, and was used both in round and square/rectangular models (with the company suggesting this design was good for both dress and sport watches). A later design employed six screws, and was used more on round, sport watches (Figures 8 and 9). Dressier watches from the late 1940s and beyond (Figure 10) returned to the more traditional snapback cases. The 6-screw Parashock design was also used in several chronograph models equipped with the later Caliber 134 movement (with dual pusher buttons).

Figure 8. This early Pierce Parashock model, ca. late 1930s or early 1940s, used four screws to secure the back to the case.

Today, Parashock watches are sought both by collectors of Pierce watches and collectors of unusual case designs. The four-screw Parashock models are a little harder to find. Make sure when you buy them that the screws themselves are not rusted, as this will create a headache if your watchmaker has to drill out a screw and find a replacement.

Figure 9, left. A later Parashock model utilizing six screws to hold the case together. This later design was utilized in many of Pierce's sport watches, including manual winds, automatics, and chronographs.
Figure 10, right. This dress watch from the 1940s features a scalloped yellow gold-filled bezel. The stainless steel back is the usual "snapback" construction used on most other dress watches of the time.

Automatic and Alarm

As previously mentioned, Levy patented an automatic watch movement design in 1933, but it did not go into production until circa 1940.[4] This caliber, the 861, uses a sliding weight that rolls back and forth across the basic movement. This was radically different than the rotating counterweight design, which by then had been adopted by virtually every other watch manufacturer. (Other manufacturers had experimented with sliding mechanisms prior to Levy's patent, but the rotating counterweight had been found to be the most efficient method of transferring power to the mainspring.) The initial Caliber 861 used a small seconds; another 861 was introduced circa 1945 that had center seconds, and this later 861 was made both in 17- and 21-jewel versions.

Opening the back and viewing the Pierce 861 movement is unlike seeing any other automatic wind movement (Figure 11). It looks ungainly and some say almost freakish. But it accomplished the job and today is considered quite collectible based on how radically different it is. As with chronographs, the Parashock case was sometimes used in conjunction with the automatic movement.

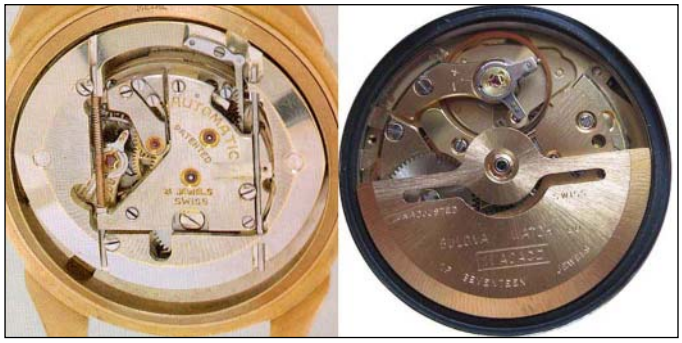


Figure 11. Construction of the Pierce Caliber 861 (left) is radically different from the construction of the typical automatic (e.g., the Bulova shown at right). In the Pierce, a frame slides back and forth over the movement on rollers, transferring power to the mainspring. On most other automatic movements, power is transferred by means of a semicircular counterweight, affixed at the center of the movement, that rotates 360 degrees.

As mentioned at the start of this article, Pierce came out with its Duofon alarm watch about 1956. It was apparently not as big a hit with the public as previous models, for today they are somewhat rare. Pierce did license the movement to Gruen, which used the same model name—Duofon—for the watch. The only difference was that the Gruen model used red and green to indicate whether the watch was in "alarm" or "alert" modes. Consequently, some collectors refer to the Gruen alarm as the "stop and go-light" model because of the color scheme. The Gruen model is also fairly rare.

The way in which the Duofon was announced in the 1956

Figure 12. An advertisement in the April 1939 issue of *Popular Science* magazine extols the benefits of the Model 130, single-button chronograph. Consumers could buy the watch direct from Pierce for as low as $19.75 in a base metal case ($34.75 in a gold-filled case). A comparable single-button model by Gallet with the same features sold for $46 at around the same time.

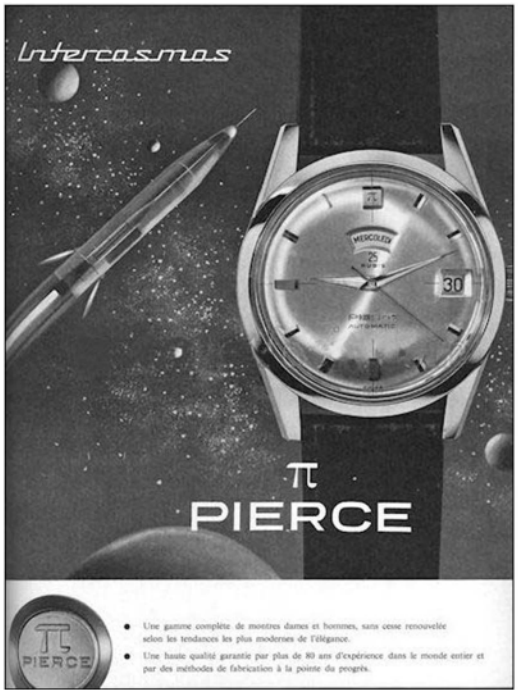


Figure 13, above. An ad for the Pierce Intercosmos, an automatic model with date at 3:00 and day indicator below 12:00.

issue of SWJJ illustrates the uneasy relationship that continued to exist between Pierce and the rest of the watch industry. From what I can deduce, Levy (and later Pierce) was treated as somewhat of an "outsider" by the rest of the watch industry during its entire life. As mentioned earlier, the only member of ESA to make a concession to Pierce was A. Schild, which supplied ebauches to make the company's Caliber 1698 and 1699, both of which were rather nondescript 11.5 ligne manual-winding round movements (the 1699 has a date function).

As for trade journals (such as SWJJ), they tended to announce Pierce's technological achievements in "squibs" (small notices) rather than big splashy multipage news articles, as were bestowed on other manufacturers. The reason for this seems clear: It doesn't appear that Pierce advertised in trade journals very much during the 1940s and 1950s. (They did advertise direct to the public in various consumer magazines, see Figure 12.) It's kind of an "unwritten rule" in trade magazines that those who spend the most on advertising tend to get rewarded by the most editorial coverage. Editors of such magazines don't like to admit it, but this is the "politics" of the relationship between watch manufacturers and trade magaines. If a company doesn't spend any ad dollars, the trade press will not completely ignore the company's news, but they will relegate it to the back pages of the magazine with the rest of the minor news items. In the case of Pierce and its Duofon alarm, it's almost as if SWJJ didn't want to risk alienating other watch companies (and their potential advertising dollars) by making a "big deal" out of Pierce's achievements.

One further observation is that Pierce was not listed among the exhibitors at the Basel Fair that year (1956). It appears their presence at the fair was sporadic at best. Kathleen Pritchard's *Swiss Timepiece Makers 1775 - 1975* indicates that Pierce did exhibit at the fair in 1949 and 1950. They were also listed as exhibitors in 1954. It has never been clear to me whether exhibition at the Basel Fair was/is open to anyone, or whether exhibitors must be "approved" by a board of governors. Pierce's sporadic attendance at Basel might be further proof of the contentious relationship that existed between it and the Swiss watch industry as a whole.

Another model, introduced in 1959, is worthy of note, the Correctomatic. This automatic watch featured a push-piece on the case whereby the user could make minor adjustments in timing without opening the case.

The 1960s marked the beginning of the decline for Pierce. I was not able to find any information on the Levy family history and how ownership passed from one generation to the next. Presumably, Leon Levy and his brothers passed away at some point, and by this time the company was controlled by the second, or perhaps even the third generation. We simply do not know. One final "hurrah" was heard around 1964 when the company came out with the Intercosmos, a day/date watch where the day was located in a semicircular window below the 12:00 position, and the date was located in a window by the 3:00 position (Figure 13).

The company virtually disappeared after that, although Pritchard states that various Swiss horological journals continued to list Pierce as being a business entity as late as 1974. What happened after that is unclear. We do know that Pierce never built a quartz watch. The current owners of the company (see below) claim that the company never officially went out of business. But if they produced any more mechanical watches after the 1970s to circa 2003, they are not often seen.

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The Company Today

The Pierce name appears to have been resurrected some time around 2003, and today it can be found at www.pierce1883.com, with main headquarters listed in Germany and satellite offices in Italy and the United States (Wilmington, DE) The owners state that the company is "once again in family ownership," but they do not specify *which* family (i.e., whether the family is descended from Leon Levy, or a new family). An inquiry to the company on this matter has gone unanswered as of press time.

The company's current offerings include a number of time-only models and two chronographs, though neither is a "tribute" model to their earlier 130 or 134. One of the company's current models, the Ocean Drive is shown in Figure 14. The company uses Swiss movements, and the watches are assembled at the main headquarters in Germany.

Figure 14. A current model Pierce, called the Ocean Drive, with automatic movement and date. No price is given.

So it appears the jury is still out on the quality and "collectibility" of vintage Pierce watches. Some dismiss them as "junk" and say they are not worth collecting. Others say they are worthy of attention, if for no other reason than their innovation and the company's willingness to "go it alone" when the rest of the watch-manufacturing community shunned them. Beyond that, their vintage watches are plentiful and eminently affordable, which I dare say cannot be said of any other watch manufacturer that made its own movements. I tend to find myself in the latter camp. But then, I'm always rooting for underdogs and renegades!

Notes:

1. www.joseph-watches.com
2. *Bestfit Encyclopedia of Watch Material* (NY: B. Jadow, 1976).
3. It's my understanding that a supplier has emerged with a steel replacement equivalent for the disk. (See www.mijnoudespulletjes.nl/pierce.html. Also, a seller on eBay is offering a remanufactured replacement part.)
4. Heinz Hampel, *Automatic Wristwatches from Switzerland* (Atglen, PA: Schiffer Publishing, 1997).