

Heirloom

by Ron Rich

“The memories we make with our family are everything.”

Candace Cameron Bure

A timely heirloom Shortly after my dad’s passing in 1963, my mother gave me a pocket watch that had been with his belongings. Very little information about the watch was available. Some minimal notes showed that the watch had been in the family for several generations. Apparently, there was a “family tradition” regarding the watch. Each owner passed it down to the “oldest son of the oldest son” of each generation. I never heard my dad, or my grandfather Rich ever mention the pocket watch. Through Ancestry.com, Google, and other resources, I believe I have uncovered enough information to make an interesting story.

The watch movement has this elegant engraving: “J Johnstone”, “Liverpool”, and “6758”. After several hours of research, I am satisfied that the watch is a J Johnstone Verge Fusee Pocket Watch, and that James Johnstone probably made it between 1790 and 1810. The first “J” may be for the name “James.” There is a Johnstone listed in a British museum who worked in Liverpool around 1750-1812. It was hard to find anything about Johnstone, other than they knew him in Liverpool and London.

English watches from this period were made by individuals rather than by factories. Johnstone could have had 30 or more local artisans who made various parts of the watch. They often sold the watches to clock shops in Baltimore or Philadelphia. The cases were made or selected to fit the watch movements. Johnstone’s watches are of high quality. He is credited with inventing several design improvements to the pocket watch and watch movements. The fusee is a cone-shaped pulley with a helical groove around it, wound with a cord or chain, which is attached to the mainspring barrel. They used fusees from the 15th century to the early 20th century, to improve time keeping by equalizing the uneven pull of the mainspring as it ran down. Using Arabic numerals rather than Roman numerals on the watch face would help to date this watch as around 1800. A little opening on the back of the watch is where a square key may be inserted, to wind the watch. The key must be wound counterclockwise to put the mainspring into action. The key was missing when I got the watch some 58 years ago. There are six “watch papers” snugly fitted between the watch and the bottom of the case. The American Antiquarian Society has gathered a comprehensive collection of watch papers, including the papers that are in this watch case. Dr. Samuel Bemis was a dentist in Boston until the 1860s. He gathered old watches to melt for the filling of

teeth. He removed the watch papers and carefully preserved them. Dr. Bemis had the reputation of not throwing away even the smallest items, and that is how the collection began. Originally, these circular watch “papers” were made of fabric as well as paper, and they provided a packing or cushion between the inner and outer case of the watch - to keep the case more firmly closed and to protect the works from possible dust. They became popular as keepsakes up to the 1870s. Some of those made of fabric included fancy needlework. These watch “papers” were also used as an advertisement for watchmakers. As a watch was repaired or cleaned, the maker would insert his own paper, which showed information about his shop.

With this watch, there are six such papers, all from S. & T. Child, Clock & Watch Makers, No. 452 North Second St. Opposite the Jersey Market, Northern Liberties, Philadelphia. S. & T. Child is listed in Philadelphia Directories from 1844 to 1891. The significant thing about these six watch papers - the back of each paper shows the signature of the watch’s owner, a date, and, sometimes, letters to show the reason for service. (cl=cleaning, msp=mainspring, etc.) Three of the papers here are signed by Atkinson Hughes, and three are signed by Benjamin Rich. 1855 is the earliest date, when the watch was being repaired for a “bad verge”. The latest date is 1883, for “cleaning”. The latest date shows a different address (824 N. Second St.), as the shop must have moved up the street. These papers give us an actual link to our ancestors and this watch - which gives me “goosebumps” as I write this story.

So, who owned this watch? When? How did the watch find its way from 1855 to me”?

Possible owner: Atkinson Hughes (1744-1813) (4th Great Grandfather) born near Philadelphia, PA. If they made the watch around 1800, Atkinson would be in his 50s. I read his Will on Ancestry, hoping to find a mention of the watch. He mentioned his children, including his oldest son Thomas and his younger son, Atkinson - but no mention of the watch. He left his wife her “choice of any cow on the plantation,” and “sufficient firewood, hauled, and cut short” for the rest of her natural life. If the watch started here, when did the “oldest son” tradition begin? Atkinson had 9 children, but only 2 sons. I could not find any record of Thomas having a son. What we know is that seventh child, Atkinson, owned the watch in 1855.

Known owner: Atkinson Hughes (1788-1862) (3rd Great Grandfather) It is this Atkinson Hughes, whose signature appears on the watch paper, dated 1855. (Interesting note: Atkinson lived to the age of 74. The average life span in PA at the time of his death was only 58.) He had 4 daughters. His second daughter, Jane, married Benjamin Carlile Rich, and it is his signature that appears on 3 of the watch papers, the last on Feb 22, 1883.

Known owner: Benjamin Carlile Rich (1818-1894) (2nd Great Grandfather) Benjamin moved his family from PA to Kansas, around 1875-1885. His oldest son, Atkinson Hughes Rich, had one daughter and no sons. The watch was passed down from Benjamin to his next oldest son, John Comly Rich.

Known owner: John Comly Rich (1845-1933) (Great Grandfather) At age 15, he was listed on the 1860 Census as a "farm laborer". He enlisted on July 11, 1864, as Private in the 197th PA Infantry Regiment, Company G. On the 1870 Census, his occupation was listed as "Dry Goods and Grocery" in PA. Sometime between 1870 and 1880, John moved his family to Sedgewick County, Kansas, near Wichita. In 1909, he moved to Sanford, FL, the "Celery capital", where he was listed as a "farmer" on the 1910 Census report. His family moved back to Kansas before the 1920 Census. His oldest son, Oliver, had no sons. The watch was passed to his next oldest son, Thomas Laurence Rich.

Known owner: Thomas Laurence Rich (1884-1963) (Grandfather) Laurence, as he was called, grew up in Sedgewick County, Kansas, near Wichita. He moved to Sanford, FL in 1909, with his father, and it was there that he married my grandmother, Jessie Rhinehart. My father, John (Jack) Comly Rich (1910-1964) was born in FL, in 1910. Laurence and Jessie raised their family in Bates County, Missouri. The watch was later passed to Jack, as the "oldest son."

Known owner: John (Jack) Comly Rich (1910-1964) (Father) He grew up and worked in Bates County, Missouri, until his passing in 1964. He worked as a clerk and carrier in the U.S. Post Office in Butler. (I'll be writing more about him and my grandparents in future stories.) That brings us back to where this story began. I want the watch to remain in the biological family that has cared for it, for over 200 years. Future watch owners will share their unique DNA with owners from the past. I have an adopted son, Allen, but no biological sons. Therefore, I am passing the watch to my next oldest brother, David Jack, who has two biological sons. He can then pass the watch to his oldest son, Adam; and Adam can pass it to his oldest son, Landon. I hope that this pocket watch can remain a significant item and "timely" heirloom in our family for another 200 years.

And that is how I remember it.

Note: The gentleman in the picture is John Comly Rich, my Great Grandfather.