

An Omega Wristwatch with an Altered Serial Number

by Robert E. Wagner (VA)

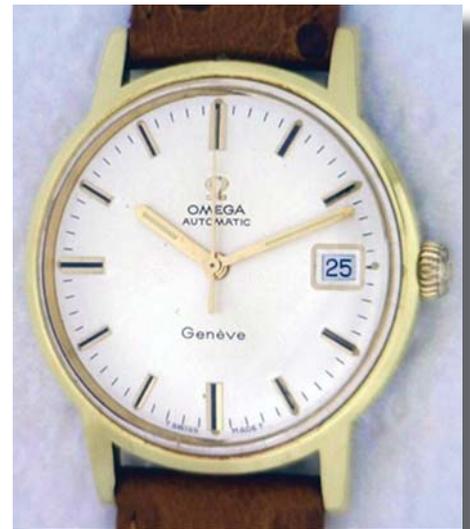


Figure 1. An overall image of the curious Omega wristwatch that gave rise to this article.

My passion for the restoration of vintage wrist and pocket watches has flourished over the last 25 years. The modus operandi used during that time period has typically been to buy anything that catches my eye (that I could afford) and then squirrel it away for another day. My normal haunts include all the local antique shops and malls, antique fairs, flea markets, as well as purchases from family, friends, and acquaintances. I am sure that there are many of you out there familiar with this routine! I am embarrassed to say that over the years I have acquired quite the menagerie of horological-related stuff. Anyway, I recently was looking through my various boxes and bags of “waiting to be worked on pieces” when I happened upon a relatively nice Omega wristwatch. It appeared to be in very good condition; an automatic with plated head (20 micron), a stainless steel screw back (with a Seamaster emblem), original dial, hands, and crown, and in running order (Figures 1, 2, and 3). The Omega brand has always been one of my favorites, and this watch looked like an excellent project for my next restoration.



Figure 2. Case back view of the same Omega watch displaying an engraved Seamaster emblem.

My normal procedure for starting a restoration is to inspect the piece visually for any cosmetic problems and then proceed with removing the movement from the case for a similar inspection and disassembly. I typically record all the pertinent information regarding the watch manufacturer, movement type, style, model, and serial numbers in my small “working” notebook. I proceeded in my usual manner by removing the case back and inspecting the movement. This one turned out to be a very nice Omega caliber 565, automatic with 24 jewels and very clean (Figure 4). Upon further inspection..., I received quite the little revelation ... The last four digits of the serial number were drilled out!!! My immediate thought was, “What the heck.... could this watch be stolen!” (You can take that boy out of Brooklyn but some of Brooklyn is still firmly entrenched in that boy!) I was quite upset by this, having no desire to be dealing in merchandise that might have such a dubious provenance. My best recollection was that I had purchased the watch from an antique dealer several years back, but I could not remember the specifics of that purchase. I calmed down after a short time and went back to the inspection, with somewhat of a dejected attitude. It was then

Figure 3. Image from inside of wristwatch caseback displaying the familiar Omega Watch Co. “triangle,” the case model number (166.070), and the case manufacturer’s mark (C.G.).



Figure 4. Overview of exposed watch movement (caliber 565, 24 jewels) captured in case with caseback removed.



that I noted that the drilling-out process performed on the serial number digits was quite skillful (Figures 5 and 6). It had a very neat and professional appearance. The question arose in my mind as to why a thief would take the time to go through the trouble of being so accurate and precise to remove four of the eight digits of a serial number? After all, this is a very nice watch but certainly not one of any serious monetary value. In all the years I have been interested in horology, I could not recall ever seeing another movement where an attempt was made to alter a serial number. The more I thought about it, the more it really didn't make any sense. My interest and curiosity was heightened, and my next reaction was to head to the Internet.

I directed my questions regarding this Omega watch serial number anomaly to the usual Internet search engines. Most of the site returns were not related to any serial number alteration, but there were two that looked promising. The first item was a post to the NAWCC member message board.¹ A member had purchased an Omega Memomatic watch through a familiar online auction house back in March 2011. Upon inspection of the movement, he noted that the last five digits of the eight-digit serial number had been drilled out. This sounded eerily similar to my Omega serial number alteration with the exception that my movement only had the last four digits drilled out. There were no photographs posted, but the member indicated that the watch dated from 1971. My watch dated from a similar period, the 1969-1970 time-frame. The author of the post, as well as other members replying to his post, expressed serious concern about the ethical nature of the seller and the provenance of the watch. This reaction appeared similar to my own, but I certainly was intrigued by a second Omega movement with a similar serial number alteration. An attempt was made to contact the member for more information regarding the watch, but no reply was ever received. The second hit from my Internet search routed me to the legal site www.openjurist.org. Imbedded in a legal document at that site were several references to drilled-out serial numbers on Omega watches..... Pay dirt!!

This document from the United States Court of Appeals was the summary of the legal proceedings from a civil suit that was brought by a Norman M. Morris Corp. against a Hyman Weinstein (d/b/a Bright Star Enterprise) which culminated back in August 1972.² The Morris Corp. was seeking a temporary and permanent injunction against Mr. Weinstein from doing certain acts that it alleged constituted unfair competition against it. The Morris Corp. had for 40 years (since 1933) been in a legal agreement with the Omega Watch Company of Switzerland to be the sole distributor for Omega Watches in the United States and Puerto Rico. (Note that the name "Omega" is listed as a legal trademark for the Omega Watch Company of Switzerland in the United States.) The Morris Corp., located in New York City, operated by



Figure 5. Image of movement train bridge depicting movement caliber (565) and serial number anomaly!



Figure 6. Train bridge image at higher magnification offering a clearer depiction of the serial number drilling alteration as described throughout the article (s/n 2894XXXX).

taking orders from their regional and state employees who had solicited them from various retail businesses. It would then ship the watch orders directly to the various retail locations in the United States by interstate transportation.

This document continued with a deposition provided by Mr. Weinstein (Bright Star Enterprise) in which he indicated that his place of business was located in Oak Park, MI. He revealed that over a two-and-one-half year period he made trips to Europe and purchased Omega watches from six different retail dealers in Austria, Germany, and Italy. Note that Mr. Weinstein did not divulge the name of these retail dealers throughout the course of the deposition. He stated that he personally brought the watches back to the United States, legally passed them through customs, and paid the appropriate import duties. Mr. Weinstein indicated that he used the U.S. mail service as well as personal solicitation to sell the watches

across the United States. The watches were shipped from Michigan to the various retail locations that had placed orders. He also indicated that these watches bore no identifying serial numbers (?), which is likely a reference to the drilled-out serial numbers. It appears that Mr. Weinstein had quite a lucrative ongoing business venture; he stated that during this two-and-one-half year period he sold about 3,000 of these Omega watches!

In the next segment of the document the court established that, "The watches were sold by Weinstein in Florida and other states as new Omega Watches, when in fact the digits in the serial numbers on the movement of such watches, with which they could be identified as watches made by the Omega Watch Company and tied to a guarantee by the Omega Watch Company, had been drilled out." It appears that a problem arose (for Mr. Weinstein) inasmuch as the Morris Corp. would not honor the guarantee of these Omega watches. In the eyes of the Morris Corporation, the alteration of the serial numbers invalidated them as being genuine Omega watches. This point along with the fact that the watches had not been distributed by them, led the Morris Corp. to conclude that they had no responsibilities to provide any service or repair. In an effort to circumvent this obstacle, it appears that Mr. Weinstein prepared his own guarantee card and it is implied that he set up some type of alternate repair service. A statement is then provided by a Milton Davis (employed by the Morris Corp.) that two of his retail customers in Florida had purchased from Mr. Weinstein Omega watches purported to be genuine but that such watches had their identifying serial numbers drilled out. In an affidavit, one of the firms stated that Mr. Weinstein sold to him a number of Omega watches and that at the time of the sale it was not disclosed that the serial numbers had been altered. It was only revealed after a subsequent inspection that the last six digits of the movements' serial numbers had been drilled out. At this time, there appears to have been some back-and-forth legal haggling and an appeal between the Weinstein legal team and the court.

The court then issued an initial injunction which essentially states that Mr. Weinstein (d/b/a Bright Star Enterprise) and all his people "...are permanently restrained and enjoined from selling or distributing any watches bearing the name 'Omega' which have drilled-out serial numbers and which do not have with them a genuine guarantee of the Omega Watch Company...". There was then more legal haggling regarding the intent and wording of the injunction whereupon the courts expanded and modified the statement to indicate that Mr. Weinstein could not sell the described watches "...unless he tells the buyers of the watches that he purchased them from retail dealers and that the digits in the serial numbers of such watches, by which they could be identified as watches made by the Omega Watch Company and tied to a guarantee of the Omega Watch Company, have been drilled out and such watches are not guaranteed by

the Omega Watch Company;...". It goes on to say that any dealer who purchases these watches and resells them with a guarantee "...makes it perfectly clear that it is solely the guarantee of Mr. Weinstein, not the Omega Watch Company;..." and that the court in its original decree "...should have enjoined Weinstein from making any false description or representation with respect to any watch purporting to be an Omega watch, which he sells or transports in interstate commerce in the United States or Puerto Rico". Note that this whole document section was somewhat confusing and most definitely the longest sentence I have ever read. The information above was summarized from a single sentence that ran for a third of a legal page length and certainly is evidence of how legal documentation can be most perplexing to the average person.

The court then completes its summary in the "Findings Of Fact" section where it restates the reason for the legal action and confirms that the Morris Corp. is the "...exclusive sale agent to sell Omega watches in all of the 50 states in the United States and the Island of Puerto Rico (hereinafter called Morris' territory)." It further indicates that, "The defendant, Hyman Weinstein, d/b/a Bright Star Enterprise, has in the past sold watches in Morris' territory, which watches bear the tradename 'Omega' but which have the last four digits of the serial number of the movements drilled out, and such watches are not sold with a genuine Omega guarantee." It then states, "That the actions of the defendant in selling the watches ... have been detrimental to the good will and reputation of the Norman M. Morris Corporation, as the exclusive sale agent for Omega watches, and in doing so the defendant has unfairly competed with the plaintiff." This leads into the final section of the legal document listed as the 'Conclusion Of Law,' where the court confirms it has jurisdiction over this action. It then restates, in so many words, "That the action of the defendant in selling the watches in Morris' territory constitutes unfair competition" and that the plaintiff is entitled to "...a permanent injunction restraining the defendant from selling watches bearing the trademark 'Omega' which have drilled out serial numbers and which do not have or carry with them the genuine guarantee of the Omega Watch Company."

(At this time it may be appropriate to state that I am not an attorney nor do I have any legal training. I read through this legal document and tried to report a summary of the information, as best that I understood it, relaying the information that I thought is pertinent to the topic of my article.)

So...where does this leave us in our little investigation? I am convinced that the Omega watch in my possession, exhibiting an altered/drilled-out serial number, is from those watches (~3,000 in number) that were purchased by Mr. Weinstein in Europe, brought legally into the United States, and sold by his company (Bright Star Enterprise). The timeline stated in the civil proceedings (1969-1972)

is a good fit for both my watch and the watch previously discussed, which was purchased at auction by the gentlemen from the NAWCC. The descriptions regarding the drilled-out movement serial numbers in this Court of Appeals document appear to mirror what I observed in my own movement serial number as well as that described in the NAWCC member post. It was noted throughout the appeals document that the movements referred to all varied with regard to the exact number of digits drilled out; four, five, or six digits are all mentioned. My own Omega example had four digits drilled out; the watch described in the NAWCC post noted five digits drilled out while the legal document included all three digit drilling variations. This disparity in the number of drilled digits, although interesting, was probably up to the whim of the dealer or person performing the drilling operation and is not considered significant for this discussion. It was not clearly stated in the legal document what party might be responsible for the drilling-out process, but the information did suggest that it was completed by the retail dealers in Europe who sold the watches. The reason for the serial number alteration appeared to be to prevent the Omega Watch Company from identifying which dealers sold the altered Omega watches.

What started as a relatively innocuous vintage wristwatch restoration actually turned out to be a small research project regarding the reason for the alteration of a movement serial number. The information provided in the legal document suggests that there could be as many as 3,000 of these altered wristwatches distributed throughout the United States in the late 1960s and early 1970s. I certainly do not condone what was done by Mr. Weinstein and his company, and it seemed reasonable that the court considered his actions unfair competition against the Morris Corporation. I am sure that the vast majority of the watches were purchased legitimately, likely through retail dealers, themselves not being aware of any altered serial numbers. It may have been years before anyone who acquired one of the watches was enlightened as to its problematic past, or perhaps they never knew! So, what becomes of these watches at the present time? A thought came to mind as to whether these watches can legally be referred to as Omega watches? Would the Omega Watch Company repair one of these altered watches in their authorized repair center or would they

be considered contraband? Could they be confiscated if received at an authorized Omega dealer? Since I had no answers to any of these questions, I attempted to contact the Omega Watch Corporation at their U.S. headquarters of their parent company (The Swatch Group Ltd.) in New Jersey. Their legal department did contact me and a representative indicated that, because this all occurred prior to Omega becoming a part of the Swatch Group Ltd., they had no information and did not believe they could comment. I also made an attempt to contact Omega of Switzerland by filling out an online request³ but never received any type of reply from them....A dead end.

My final thought was that perhaps I should direct my questions to the NAWCC member body. Where do they believe the status of this Omega wristwatch anomaly should be placed? I would be more than happy to entertain any comments or opinions and most interested in hearing from members who might have their own Omega serial number anomaly.

Bibliography

1. <http://www.nawcc.org>, National Association of Watch & Clock Collectors member bulletin board, "Omega Memomatic w/drilled-out ser. no.," posted by D.C., March 2011.
2. <http://openjurist.org>, 466 F.2d 137, 175 U.S.P.Q 130, *Norman M. Morris Corporation (Plaintiff-Appellee), v. Hyman Weinstein, d/b/a Bright Star Enterprise, (Defendant-Appellant)*, No. 71-2922, United States Court of Appeals, Fifth Circuit, Aug. 14, 1972.
3. <http://www.omegawatches.com/customer-service>, question submittal, 8/27/2011.

About the Author

Robert Wagner was born and raised in Brooklyn, NY, a solid member of the baby boomer generation. He graduated with a degree in chemistry from the State University of New York, College at Oswego. He was employed as a chemist/materials engineer in the aerospace industry for 33 years. His passion for vintage pocket/wristwatch history, knowledge, and restoration flourished over that same time period. Its roots are anchored, in some respect, by his father, who was a jeweler and stonemason in the New York diamond/jewelry district on West 47th street in Manhattan. Recently retired, Robert is looking forward to devoting more of his newfound free time to further explore and expand his horological interests.

Back cover description continued from inside front cover.

erates on the same principle as the sounding disc of a telephone. Instead of the hammer striking on a bell, it strikes on a disc and a horn increases the sound. On loan courtesy of Vince Angell. (2) A tattoo intermittent alarm clock, ca. 1910, from the New Haven Clock Company, CT, that features an alarm that rings 20 seconds intermittently for 15 minutes, assuring the buyer that no one could sleep through its ringing. It was patented in 1898. The National Watch and Clock Museum, 88.36.1 (3) A Turkish-dial alarm clock, ca. 1907, made in Germany. On loan courtesy of Robert Linkenhoker. (4) A Little Tillery's, ca. 1915, alarm clock that was probably produced for use with David H. Tillery and Thomas H. Tillery's patent of 1915 and 1917 that would have affixed a device to the winding stem of the clock alarm that released another mechanism at a predetermined time. The patent describes usages such as damper release and draft regulating mechanisms for furnace heaters, operating electric light switches, and similar automated applications. On loan courtesy of Byron LeCates. (5) A Waterbury Clock Company (CT) alarm clock, ca. 1920, with a dial marked marked "B. F. Polack." On loan courtesy of Byron LeCates.

