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Not Just a Matter of Time

The Bozeman Watch Company sells watches — and a lifestyle — from its flagship location on Main Street

Chris Wardle,
Bozeman Watch Company

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Bozeman location
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Not Just a Matter of Time

The Bozeman Watch Company sells watches — and a lifestyle — from its flagship location on Main Street

BY NICOLE ROSENLEAF RITTER
PHOTOGRAPHY BY THOMAS LEE

As a purely practical question, the death knell for the wrist watch should have sounded right about the time that the time became widely available everywhere else. Pretty much everyone these days has the time — on their cell phones, their DVD players, their dashboards — whether they wear a watch or not.

Luckily for Chris Wardle of the Bozeman Watch Company, the people who buy his limited-edition luxury watches — with rugged, evocative names like The Sidewinder and The Smokejumper — aren't really looking for the time. They're looking for the life.

"I think people want to take a little bit of this American company and the West home with them," he says of the customers who buy from the

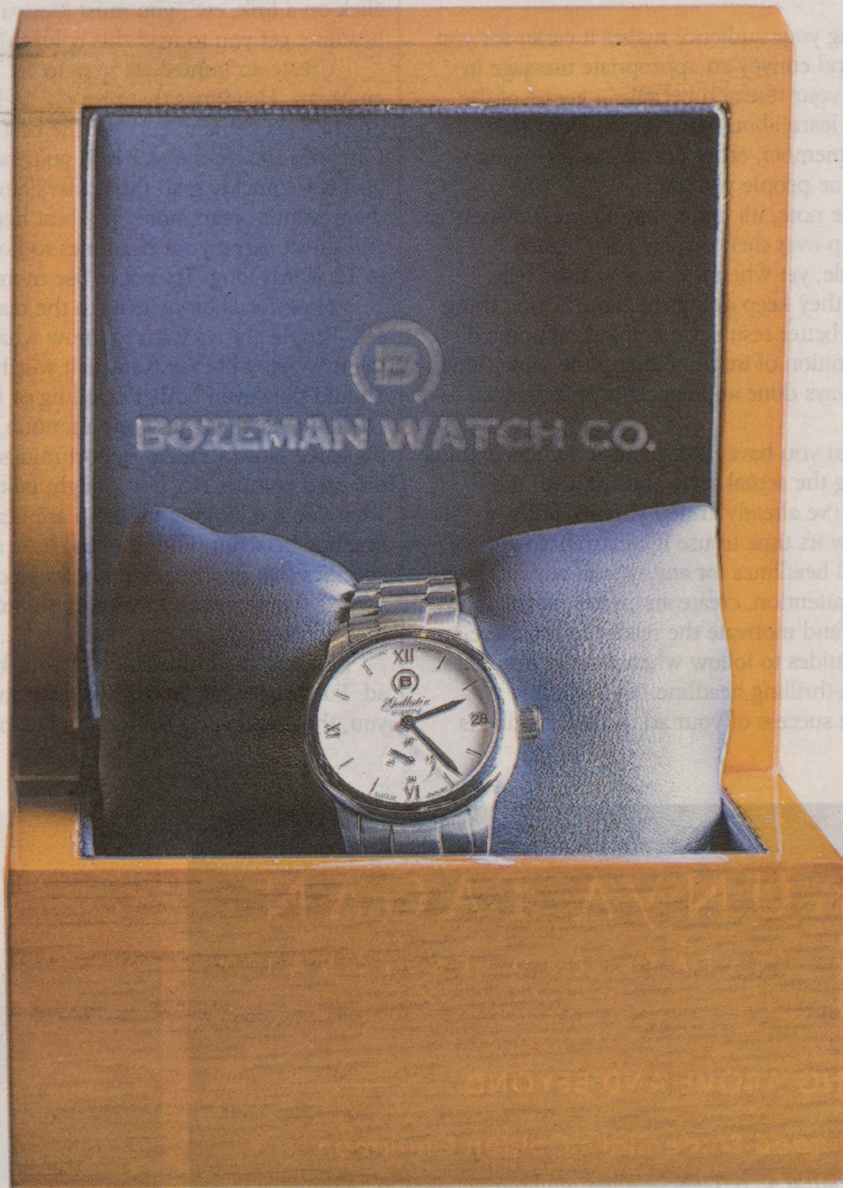
Bozeman Watch Company's line of American-designed, precision-crafted timepieces. "And they want something a little different."

A little different would be an understatement about the decision of Wardle and BWC co-founder and designer Patrick Ayoub to headquarter a luxury watch manufacturer in the United States, much less in Montana. After all, when people think of high-end timepieces, they

might think of mountains, but mountains in Switzerland — not in the western United States.

"It struck me that it was really unfortunate that a lot of the watch manufacturing in the United States was really wiped out between the 1950s and 1970s," Wardle explains. "We in America had created something — the American System of Watch Manufacturing (which brought all phases of watch making under the same roof and subject to standardization and interchangeability) — that really helped us capture the competitive advantage in the market between 1850 and 1950."

But the depression and World War II spelled the end of the great American era of watch making. U.S. companies turned their attention to building martial timers such as bomb fuses even



as the lack of disposable income decimated the market for wrist watches. Swiss companies benefited from their country's neutrality in the war and were ready and able to supply their watches to booming post-war America at its end. It was to be the final blow for most of America's great watch companies.

The Bozeman Watch Company is out to change that. "We hope someday that people will say that BWC is the watch of choice, that if you're going to buy an automatic watch, you have to buy that one," Wardle asserts. "We hope to make it the American watch to own."

FROM OBSESSION TO PROFESSION

Dreaming big is nothing new for Chris Wardle — and neither are beautiful watches. He's been collecting fine timepieces since his late teens. When his friends were pinching their pennies to buy stereos, he saved up for a TAG Heuer. He bought it at 17.

"It seemed like a lot of money back then (in the late 1980s), but it just kind of blossomed into wanting different types of watches and designs," he remembers. "I researched what I wanted to buy and learned about them and started collecting. I couldn't have enough watches."

Around the same time, a fascination with the West was growing as well. A native of Michigan, Wardle began coming to Colorado and Montana shortly after graduating from high school. "I fell in love with the mountains," he explains.

He first came to Bozeman in the late 1980s, well before the recent expansion, but says that the potential of the place was clear. "I swear I wasn't even past the county building when I said to myself, 'Holy cow, this is the coolest place. It is going to boom,'" Wardle recalls.

He and his mom went in on a piece of property up Trail Creek with the intention of moving to the area permanently from Michigan. Before the plans could be fulfilled, however, his mother passed away. He bought the land from his mother's estate and started, very slowly, to develop it. For years, his Montana "vacation home" was a tent.

In the meantime, Wardle founded a management services company and continued to work from his base in Michigan. He still traveled to Montana as much as possible, and when he sold the company not long ago, it allowed him the financial flexibility to realize a decade-long dream: building an American watch company.

WINE AND DESIGN

Designer Ayoub followed a much different path before being recruited as BWC's designer and Wardle's partner. A graduate of the Art Centre College of Design in California, Ayoub had used his expertise primarily to design luxury cars. He



Above, the Schofield, number one of 10 in the world. Below, the USS Montana, number one of 50 in the world. At left, the Ladies' Gallatin, one of 50.

did design work for BMW and Daimler-Chrysler, among others, and even taught design in Switzerland. His passion for watches brought him together with Wardle in 2002, and that

forementioned experience in Switzerland proved to be very important.

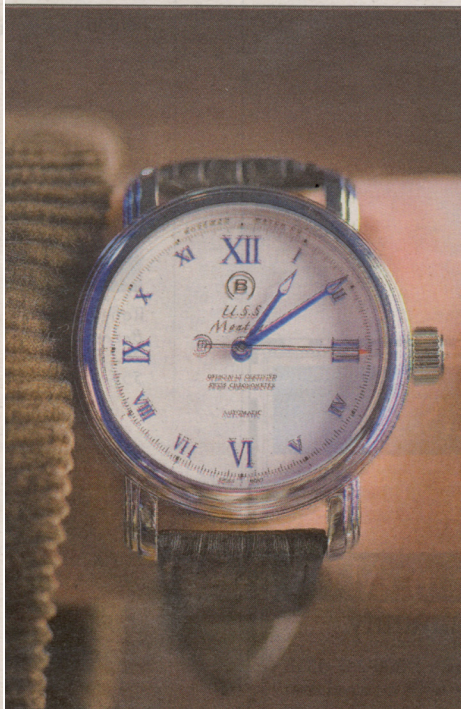
After hashing out preliminary designs over many months — and, Wardle notes, a fair amount of good red wine — they took their portfolio to Switzerland and Germany to line up suppliers for key parts. But the storied manufacturers of Continental Europe did not welcome the two American watch "cowboys" with open arms, at least at first.

"They are very conservative about what clients they take on," Wardle says of their European suppliers. "They want to make sure they're not going to get fly-by-nighters, because it's just too much for them to invest for a hundred watches."

By knocking on factory doors, they were able to demonstrate their commitment and create relationships with some of the world's top luxury watch part suppliers — at a time when the demand for fine timepieces is so high that manufacturers can't keep up. Today, all of the company's dials and hands are made in Europe, especially for BWC.

In fact, nearly every part that goes into a BWC watch — with the exception of the movement and occasionally the bracelet — comes from tooling and dies and jigs that are proprietary to BWC. Where many watch makers buy out of catalogs, BWC uses tiny parts that are made for their company exclusively.

"It tends to be expensive, but it makes the watches unique to us," Wardle explains. *continued*



Not Just a Matter of Time continued

FINDING A NICHE

Unique, too, is BWC's commitment to marry watch designs with charitable giving. The company's first released watch, the Smokejumper Chronograph, was named the official watch of the National Smokejumper Association, and the company has donated more than \$5,000 to date to the association. One of its newest watches, the USS Montana, honors World War II veterans, with a portion of proceeds going to the National Pearl Harbor Survivors Association. The Predator Conservation Alliance will benefit from a sales of the company's Sidewinder model.

"It's important to us to give back to the community by supporting local and national charities," Wardle says.

Initial indications are that BWC should be able to keep on supporting chosen causes for some time. In its first year, the company did almost \$400,000 in sales, an amount that, according to Wardle's research, is more than respectable for a startup watchmaker.

"It's not about the money, but it's a comfort to know that we're going up," Wardle indicates. More than that, however, Wardle says he is encouraged by clients returning to buy another BWC timepiece.

"One man who bought a Smokejumper loved it so much that he came back and bought three more, one for each of his sons, numbered to correspond with their respective birth years," he recalls. "When people come back, that's the biggest compliment we could have."

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