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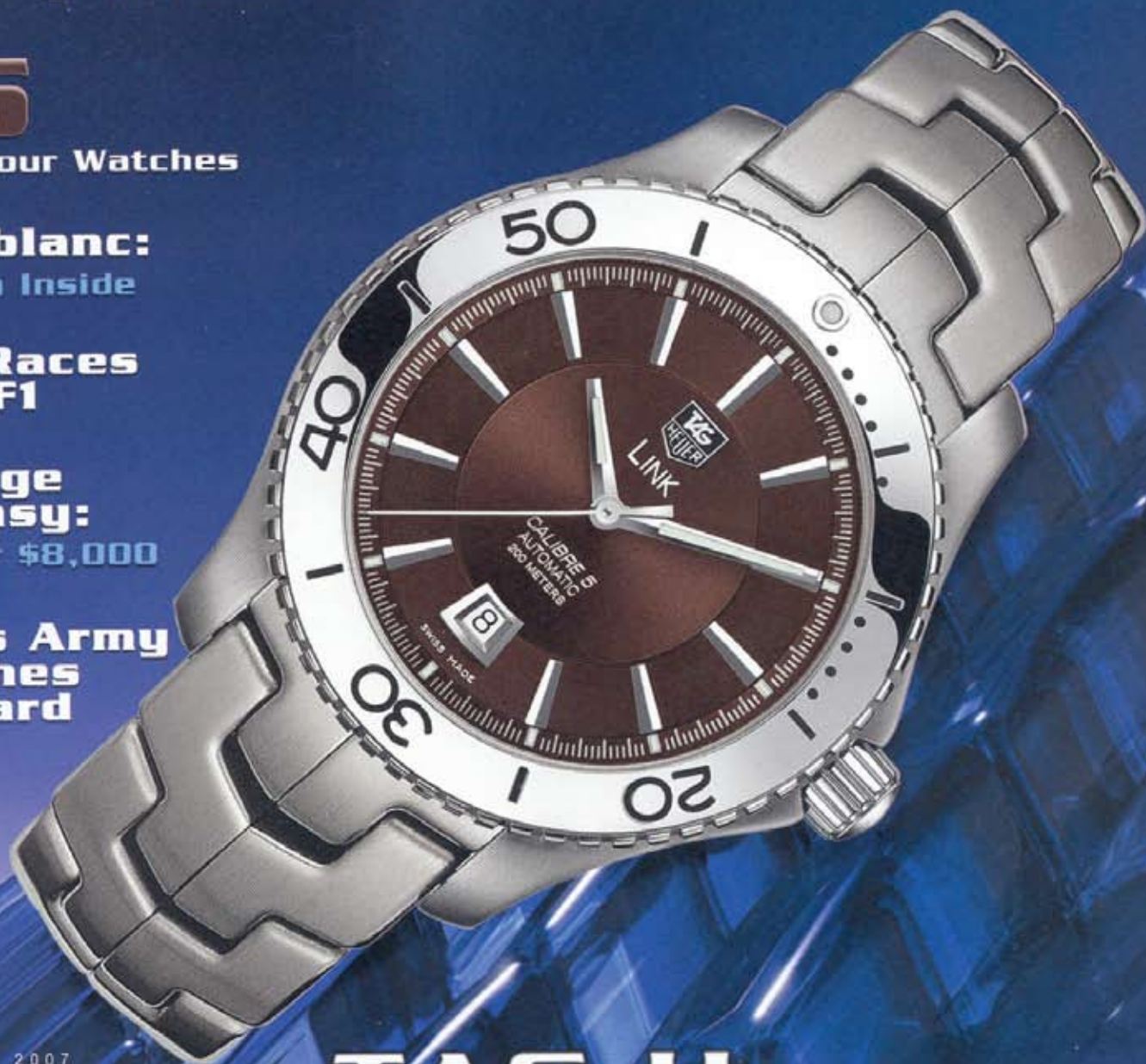
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Towson Watch Company
founders George Thomas and
Hartwig Balke



BY JONATHAN BUES

Chesapeake Bay Watch

With pieces designed, prototyped
and assembled in Towson, Maryland,
Towson Watch Company seeks to
regain America's watchmaking glory

Hartwig Balke is very clear when describing what sets his firm, Towson Watch Company, apart from many other American watch-making operations.

"We make our own prototypes with a CNC machine we have in-house," he says, referring to TWC's ability to machine its own case designs before contracting a competent European production team. "We then take all the European-made components of the watch—case, dial, hands, strap and, of course, the movement—and assemble them in Maryland."

The distinction Balke alludes to is one of simple merchandising versus actual manufacturing, and goes to the core what is (by today's standards) a seldom-pondered question: What exactly defines an American watch?

It's a difficult question, complicated by the fact that there is no such thing as a contemporary American-made mechanical watch movement.

Balke and his business partner, George Thomas, accept this fact; they have little choice. But they aim to create watches that recall the glory days of nineteenth-century American horology by making as few compromises as possible when it comes to their U.S.-based manufacturing process.

America's watch industry can be divided basically into three segments: firms that found their way

into competent Swiss hands and moved across the Atlantic (Hamilton and Ball Watch, which sell well in the American market, come to mind), firms that lost their American associations altogether (Waltham, for example, which is not currently marketed in the United States), and firms that carry out fine assembly and finishing here in America (TWC, Montana Watch and Pennsylvania-based RGM are well-known examples).

This last segment comprises a handful of firms that sprang up in the last twenty years as a uniquely

American contribution to the ongoing renaissance of the mechanical watch. Other brands that simply went out of business live on through extant caches of old-stock movements and through modern production watches inspired by classic American designs. →



The Choptank





The Bay Pilot

New pieces

One such piece recently developed by TWC is the Bay Pilot, a 42 mm manual-wind tribute to Elgin Watch Company, a famous Midwestern firm with roots in postbellum Illinois. Though Elgin no longer exists, its strong position in the annals of American watchmaking was sufficient impetus for Balke, who also serves as the brand's chief designer, to create a piece with aesthetic roots in the tradition of the American watch manufacturer. The Bay Pilot's numerals and chapter ring bear the strongest similarity to an Elgin watch; other characteristics, such as the crown, case and bracelet, are modern touches that unite the present with the past. The watch's luminous white hands and numerals contrast well with

the black dial, providing optimal legibility day or night. Inside the stainless steel case beats a 17-jewel manual-wind movement, which is visible through an exhibition caseback. Both versions (alligator strap and stainless steel bracelet) are secured with a TWC-engraved folding clasp. A large crown enables easy winding.

Many of TWC's latest models allude to icons of the Chesapeake Bay region, the company's home. One such new release, the Choptank, takes its name from the Choptank River, which empties into the Chesapeake. Balke says that he has especially high hopes for this model because he is particularly pleased with the execution of the watch's case and dial. A tonneau-shaped chronograph



with moon phase, day, date and month, the Choptank is embellished with Breguet-style blued hands for hours, minutes and seconds, and is secured to the wrist with an elegant blue lizard leather, black ostrich leather or black alligator strap. Two dial colors are available: copper or silver. The Choptank's stainless steel case, with a Soprod-modified ETA Valjoux 7751 chronograph move-



The Potomac

ment beating inside, measures 40 mm x 44 mm. It is water resistant to 50 meters with sapphire crystals found on the front and the back.

The Potomac (\$1,845), released over a year ago with a silver-colored dial and named for one of America's most famous rivers, is this year joined with a black-dial version. The watch's "innards" and 42 mm case are essentially the same as the Bay Pilot's, but the dial is different, more classical, more subdued, less sporty. Rather than photoluminescent hands and numerals, this piece has gold-plated cathedral hands and gold-plated numerals. A see-through caseback shows off the decorated Unitas 6498 movement, wound easily via an onion crown.



Both pieces come on crocodile leather straps, black for the black-dialed version and brown for the silver-dialed version. They are secured with deployant clasps.

All three models feature a signature flourish—the TWC crest in red, white and blue. It is intended to convey more than just

patriotic hues. Viewed in the vertical position, the letters TW and C (Towson Watch Company) are clearly visible in blue. The T also signifies George Thomas, the last name of the brand's cofounder. Rotating the watch on its side, the letter B becomes visible, for Hartwig Balke. ©