

A Story About a “Rare” Omega Pre-market Seamaster De Ville

To me, collecting vintage Omegas over the years has been a rewarding experience, as much for the people and stories I have encountered along the way as for the quest for and discovery of long sought-after models. It's a heart-stopping moment when one chances upon a rarity, but it's the social history surrounding particular watches that adds richness to their unearthing or acquisition. And while some purists may turn up their nose at uncovering the history behind cryptic case back inscriptions or eschew the sometimes laborious search for provenance of particular watches, I believe that at least half of the fun of collecting is discovering the human stories surrounding the pieces I collect.

Recently, I received an email from an Omega owner called Richard. He had a great tale to tell about a very unusual watch that was part of a family of uncommon Omega Seamaster DeVille calibre 560 models. The story starts with Richard's father, Gene, who took a shine to a watch that was on the wrist of a Norman Morris salesman in the early 1960s.

“My father was in purchasing for Pan American Airways, and PAA had a contract to supply food and Base Exchange merchandise for the military tracking stations for the original US space program (pre NASA). This was in the 1950s to the late 1970s. The operation was based in Port Canaveral, Florida. (My brother still has one of the original Pan Am Rolex watches that my father wore)”, Richard wrote.



Gene's Pan Am staff ID card from the 1970s – surname has been obscured to protect anonymity

The Pan Am contract with the military included the food service, medical and Base exchange (PX or BX). Richard speculated that the Military was the largest single purchaser of Omega Watches in the 1960s, particularly as there were no truly national chain stores in that era. “Every one I know came back from Viet Nam with a nice watch and a nice stereo system, all bought at a large discount at the PX. The Pan Am contract specified a 5% mark-up, and no sales tax or duty - a tremendous bargain over the typical 100% mark-up at a retail jewellery store. Rolex would not sell to the Military bases because they would not allow the discounted pricing”, he added.

The Norman Morris Corporation was the sole US and Canadian wholesale agent for finished Omega watches from the early 1930s until 1980 when the agency was sold back to the Swiss. Morris maintained a small mobile force of salesmen whose job it was to ply Omega and associated wares throughout their designated territories. One day in early 1963, a Morris salesman secured an appointment with Richard's father, Gene, either at Patrick Air Force Base in Florida or Gene's offices at Port Canaveral. During the course of their business they discussed the new Omega calibre 560 Seamaster De Ville range, a series that the Norman Morris Corporation was planning to assemble locally. Gene must have been quite taken with the sample because when the watch was no longer needed by the salesman he sold his sample to Gene, who, in turn, gave it to Richard as a present when his birthday came around in June 1963.

In the first instance, Richard's story mirrors that of many a lad who was given a good mechanical watch on a special occasion by his dad. The gift, shown overleaf, looks (almost) like any other Seamaster dress watch of the period. The one exception is the unusual substitution of the standard multiple baguette markers on the quarter hours with applied numerals. But as you will discover, this is no ordinary monocoque Seamaster De Ville.



Those familiar with the 'KL' series of three Seamaster De Villes and one generic Omega model will know that they are powered by 17-jewel calibre 560 movements especially produced by the Omega factory for case assembly in the US by the Norman Morris Corporation. The calibre 560 was made only for the US market to avoid the high duty imposed by the US tax office on movements above 17 jewels.

Omega records show that a total of 3000 calibre 560 movements were produced for the Norman Morris Corporation and were distributed over the entire range. So, this watch is becoming a little more interesting from a collecting standpoint because the numbers produced for each of the three De Ville examples in the range were less than a thousand per model. But wait, there's more.

In 1963, Omega monocoque cases were quite the novelty. They were produced to improve the water-resistant qualities of the Seamaster range. The logic was that creating a one-piece case - doing away with a removable case back and accessing the movement from the dial side - would eliminate a significant source of potential moisture incursion and thus provide market differentiation and a unique selling proposition at the retail end. The De Ville monocoques were positioned in the Omega range as smart, improved water-resistant and affordable dress watches for the blue collar market, and, priced at around US \$95.00, sat below the higher jewelled imported Seamaster models.

In order to get at the movement, a special tool was required to remove the pressure-fitted armoured hesalite crystal. This made the salespersons' normal practice of opening up the case back and showing potential retailers the power plant of the very first Seamaster De Ville monocoque models an extremely difficult proposition. It's one thing to unscrew a case back, but entirely another to remove crystal, stem and movement from the case.



As mentioned earlier, there were no large national jewellery chains in the 1960s, save a few 'silvertail' establishments dotted around the U.S. Most watches were sold by neighbourhood and Main Street watchmaker-jewellers, and the word of these specialists was highly valued by customers when it came to seeking advice on purchases. Manufacturers and indeed their agents were acutely aware of the need to satisfy the technical and quality concerns of retail watchmakers because of their combined ability to affect the sales volumes of one watch over another. And so it was important that these watchmaking specialists got to see what was under the bonnet of the new De Ville range. The Norman Morris Corporation came up with what was a highly novel and generally unheard-of solution at the time – a display back case (shown opposite) that revealed the calibre 560 in all its glory!

A very small number of display-back cases were made up by the American case maker, Ross for the Norman Morris Corporation. Morris had a relatively small sales force and these cases were only given to members of their marketing team. They are clearly 'pre-market', because while they were used in late 1962 as samples for the marketing of the first full metal monocoque model, KL 6292, the case itself is not stamped with the model number (The only stamping on the case is "10K Gold Filled") The absence of the model number, a standardised Omega means of product identification, indicates that these display back examples were not meant to go to market.

Omega records also show that calibre 560s in the early 20 million serial number batch were designated for the KL 6292, which was launched in mid 1963.

The cases were created by using the case body of a KL 6292 and pressure fitting 'unbreakable' armoured-ring crystals on both back and front, surely one of the early attempts to produce a robust display back case. And robust this case is. It has been worn for more than 40 years and the movement is almost as pristine as the day it was installed.

Richard, the owner was unaware of the distinctiveness of his watch. "I was never aware that the exhibition back was unique. I had always assumed it was a standard model, until 30 years later. It was through the internet that I learned that a glass back was rare on early Omegas", he wrote.

Some dial degradation has occurred, probably owing to the failure of the hermetic sealing system at the crown, but in my opinion it is essential to maintain the originality of this piece, and it should be left exactly as it is.

Having viewed this essay when it was originally posted, Tim Mackrain emailed me and attached pictures of his pre-market Seamaster 560. In the pictures overleaf, you will notice the dial has the typical multiple baguette quarter hour markers and the movement has been adjusted to two positions. Some calibre 560s in KL 6292 and KL 6610 came with unadjusted movements while other did not.



The 21 million serial numbers indicates production in around early 1964 suggesting that Norman Morris commissioned the production of more display back cases probably for models KL 6292, 6610 and 6068. The case design for these three models is identical.



Tim also produced a copy of the original instruction handbook provided to salesmen on how these watches were to be presented to retailers, suggesting the display-back case De Ville in his possession was not offered to the retail market, but was used specifically for marketing and education purposes.

July 2013

In July 2013, some of the assumptions made about the early Seamaster exhibition cases were turned on their head. A contributor to Omega Forums, Zach, during his research on these calibre 560 models unearthed the following newspaper advertisement, published in the Westfield (New Jersey) Leader on December 3rd, 1964:

It clearly indicates that display-back Seamasters were offered to retail customers. The concoction "Kleerback" appears in the advertisement, which, to me, has a particularly American 1960s advertising flavour to it. The choice of the name supposes a desire for a certain exoticism to be associated with what was quite a novelty in the early nineteen sixties. The Swiss-German term for clear back is "Klar Rücken" which, in all probability, inferred slightly more exoticism than the American palate could handle at the time.

A further two advertisements were discovered by other contributors to the Omega Forums thread on these models

and they are shown overleaf. It is not clear in the advertisements, dating from 1965 and 1967 respectively, whether the advertised models were powered by calibre 560 movements, however as no non-calibre 560 movement "kleerback" has, as yet, surfaced, it's probably safe to assume that all versions were powered by this limited production calibre.

John Diethelm of the Omega Museum stated to me that these models were not for sale, as he stated to others who were in contact with him over this matter a number of years back. It's plausible that, given that these Seamaster models were housed in monocoque cases, the original function of the "Kleerbacks" was for purely for demonstration purposes, as recorded by Omega. There is enough evidence to show that, initially, they were not designated for sale, as the Tim Mackrain booklet and Omega Museum records indicate. However, as Evan Morgan suggested in the Omega Forum thread mentioned above, I think that they may have been of sufficient novelty to excite some of more influential Norman Morris Omega stockists to press NM into releasing them in limited quantities for retail sale.

The newspaper advertisements show that these models were available in both steel case back and display case back, with the "kleerbacks" demanding a \$40 premium over the normal retail price of these models. I don't believe they were all that popular, priced as they were at around 40% above the normal investment for a De Ville. It must also be remembered that the De Ville was a 'blue collar' model designed as an entry-level introduction to Omega in the US. A large percentage of the blue collar market in the early nineteen-sixties was more accustomed to paying under fifty dollars for an American-made automatic by Elgin or Benrus and under

**We've taken the back off our
finest watch so you can see
the "inside" precision story**

**Ω
OMEGA
Seamaster**

with "Kleerback" case (and/date-telling dial)

When you look inside you can appreciate the amazing superiority of Omega workmanship. The "Kleerback" Seamaster is specially designed to show you every part as well as the gravity-powered rotor that winds the Seamaster while you wear it.

NO EXTRA CHARGE FOR CREDIT
FREE GIFT WRAPPING AND DELIVERY!
OPEN EVERY EVENING UNTIL CHRISTMAS
ASK FOR OUR LATEST GIFT CATALOGUE

Marcus
JEWELERS
206 E. BROAD ST. ADAMS 3-0529
WESTFIELD • N. J.
ALSO RUTHERFORD
RIDGEWOOD • HACKENSACK



sixty dollars for a Bullova President or a blue collar Hamilton. Forty dollars extra for a see-through case back may well have appeared excessive to many, and there may also have been some suspicion about the robustness of a case with two armoured Hesalite crystals. Undoubtedly, there would have been novelty value in owning a "kleerback" De Ville, and just as today we have early adopters of new and innovative products, so there would have been in the nineteen sixties. The main argument that supports a lack of general popularity, and thus limited numbers however, is that no further Omega exhibition case backs appear to have been offered to the market after the retirement of the De Ville "Kleerback" until the mid nineteen-nineties. So, in all probability, Norman Morris gave the "Kleerbacks" a trial run and was not encouraged to continue production because of the limited support received at the retail end.

Some collectors have expressed scepticism over the 3000 figure, arguing that too many examples have surfaced for that figure to have any credibility, but it must be remembered that watches produced in the nineteen-sixties are now reaching the end of their first generation of ownership and, as owners expire, many of their time pieces find their way out of storage drawers and on to the vintage circuit.

The seventeen jewel calibre 560 was also spread over a number of models, adding to scepticism about collections of no more than two to three hundred pieces of certain models having been released in the U.S. I do not find it surprising at all that - in markets of the nineteen-sixties where there was intense competition from American manufacturers and other Swiss brands for the blue collar market - a premium brand such as Omega would produce locally cased seventeen jewel versions in quantities of around that number. It must be remembered that seventeen jewel versions sat alongside more expensive imported Omega collections, more than 40 different men's models, in fact. Thus, calibre 560 'cheapies' must be seen as part of the overall mix and volume of available Omega product. Consider, for example, the number

Another, more slightly controversial, element that supports limited production numbers is Omega's unequivocal statement on only 3,000 calibre 560s having been produced. I pressed museum staff on a number of occasions on this issue. Marco Richon, John Diethelm and Jean-Luc Miranda all stated categorically that production records show a total manufacture of 3,000 pieces, and even when I suggested that perhaps 3,000 of the unadjusted and 3000 of the "adjusted (2) two positions" could have been manufactured, they rejected such assertions out of hand.

of calibre 563 and 565 De Villes that circulate against the number of calibre 560 versions and you may gain some idea of where the seventeen jewel versions sat in the US catalogue of the time.

Given the available evidence and market conditions of the time, in what kind of quantities could “Kleerbacks” have been produced? I would assert there is a strong plausibility to the argument of a ‘trial run’, given the subsequent absence of see-through case backs thereafter. I would further argue that quantities would have matched approximately orders based on the showing of the original salesmen’s samples. Norman Morris was known as a particularly astute businessman and astute businessmen don’t carry excess inventory if they can help it, relying instead on a good supply chain (such as Star Watch Case Company and Jonnell). So, I would propose that the “Kleerback” is decidedly uncommon and possibly fits the category of ‘rare’. Numbers were limited, but as to a figure, probably a couple of hundred is about as accurate as one can get.