

TRADITIONS & Transitions

By Kathleen Cardwell

It is common practice in professional and social circles to ask: "So, what do you do for a living?" Yet, Ralph Waldo Emerson's words, "Life is a journey, not a destination," invite us to look deeper. The destinations—the places we call "work" and the job titles we hold—are worthy of sharing. But the journeys are far more intriguing and reveal the best stories.

This series, Traditions & Transitions, explores the stories of watchmakers, clockmakers, technicians, designers, educators, industry leaders, and shop owners—but with a twist. Some will share traditions—tales of strong family heritages, of businesses that have been passed down through generations, or learning the trade from a beloved parent. Others will recount transitions—linear or circuitous paths that led them from a career as a teacher or engineer to a career as a clockmaker or watchmaker, or how they turned a treasured hobby into a livelihood.

Making Horology Mainstream

Visitors to British Columbia, Canada, are said to frequent Gastown, touted as one of Vancouver's most unique and vibrant neighborhoods, brimming with an eclectic mix of shops, historic architecture, dining options, and cobblestone streets.

On West Cordova Street in Gastown is where more and more visitors are discovering Roldorf & Co., Independent Watchmakers. The interior design of the shop includes exposed brick walls (a rarity in Canada) the original floors, and a charming, cozy seating area. Even more striking, and ahead of its time, is the layout of the shop. Upon entering, customers and visitors are invited to make a choice. Go to the front desk, (which, as an aside, is made from the base of an industrial lathe), or go to a workbench, which is just as close to the front door, and where you're certain to find one of the shop's three watchmakers. In fact, all of the workbenches at Roldorf & Co., are in the center of the shop.

This setup is more than remarkable. It's intentional. It's also exactly what founder Jason Gallop envisions as the best way to redefine watchmaking—for visitors, customers, and yes, even watchmakers.

Jason explains, "It's very purpose-built, but it has a nice feel to it. When somebody comes in for the first time, it's a unique environment. But when they come the second or third time, it's comfortable. They can sit on the couch and read one of our books...like a library or a coffee shop,



Jason Gallop, MBA (BHI, WOSTEP)

but with cool watches. More often than not, people do go to one of the workbenches, and they're instantly fascinated, especially when the watchmaker strikes up a conversation. That's what makes it fun."

The evident excitement and success at Roldorf & Co. is due largely to Jason and his team being approachable and accommodating. They are thrilled when people come in to hang out, get a watch fixed, ask questions about watchmaking, or all of the above. A G-Sharp Timex being repaired, a new customer bringing in their Dan Roth watch, the complexity of a new project—customers are invited in... to all of it. According to Jason, another reason this approach works is because they're brand agnostic. "Sure, we have our brands, but we're truly independent in the sense that our brands do not tell us what to do, because they know what's going on here is working."

Just a Bit about Jason Gallop

"This story isn't about me...it's really about the state of the industry," is what Jason chided halfway through our Zoom conversation. Instead, he wanted to focus on the education of future watchmakers and making horology more mainstream for everyone. For Jason, these issues are inextricably linked and directly impact his work and the future of horology as an industry.

While growing up, Jason was surrounded by family members in the watchmaking and jewelry business. He later attended BHI through Hackney College in London, worked for Rolex, and attended WOSTEP in Neuchâtel, Switzerland. He describes his time in Switzerland as both incredible and powerful. He explained, "I was just 19. All of us were quite young, completely enthralled with the instruction and engrossed in the environment. There's a kinship that develops in that type of intense learning. I'm still great friends with many of my classmates." Jason also attended Royal Roads University, earning his MBA in 2012.

In 1989, Jason emigrated to Vancouver, Canada, and after some time in Toronto, returned to Vancouver as an in-house Rolex watchmaker at Henry Birks and Sons. When Rolex ceased business with Birks he set out to establish himself as an independent



Class I-Advanced Watchmaking at WOSTEP, Neuchâtel, Switzerland, 1988 (spot the famous watchmakers).

watchmaker. It didn't turn out to be what he expected. "I became disenchanted with the industry here; it was so siloed, mostly from a lack of community," he said.

It was during this time that Jason stepped away from the industry and began working for an engineering company, and it was there that he ultimately developed many of the innovative ideas he is now putting into practice at Roldorf & Co. Jason said, "The company I worked for was on the cutting edge of processes and the workplace environment. Taking a 'leap' out of watchmaking and into high tech ended up giving me some amazing insight. A lot of what's important to our company now, like our work environment and how we treat people, stems from my time working elsewhere, away from watchmaking," he said.

The Essence of Education

Jason knows how fortunate he is to be doing what he loves, and his passion for watchmaking centers around educating customers, future watchmakers, and really, everyone, about horology. "I don't want watchmaking and horology to be seen as stodgy, as a trade of older generations. I want it to be viewed as open and inviting," Jason shared. He believes it starts with a conversation, including one in his shop.

"I think that the cool thing about this is people discovering they can come in here and see what we're doing up close, and ask questions. When a customer comes in and says their watch is running slow, I say 'Oh, come on over, we'll put it on the timing machine,' and I share with them what I'm seeing,"

Jason said. For him, everyone is involved in learning. The customer is invited to the workbench, to engage with the watchmaker. The watchmaker, in turn, learns how to interact with the customer and be on their toes when it comes to a variety of watches and repairs. He's certain this open, casual exchange is a big reason people return to his shop.

Jason's passion for education stems partly from his past experiences, but also from dealing directly with the challenges of finding and training watchmakers for his company. He feels that in some cases, formal watchmaking schools aren't addressing key aspects of a watchmaker's education. He believes apprenticeships are important, but learning from a variety of instructors and other watchmaking professionals is also essential. He explained, "The old adage, 'it takes a village to raise a child' applies here, because it takes an industry to create a watchmaker." Jason is currently putting this model of education into practice with Brodi G., one of the newest watchmakers working at Roldorf & Co. Jason hopes Brody is able to fast-track some courses at AWCI. "Paired with his experience as a mechanical engineer, the experience Brody is gaining from working here is incredible, because he's learning how to solve real-world problems, with every kind of watch brand you can imagine. But formal training from other instructors is also important, because what I'm teaching him is based on my experience, and what he needs to learn is much broader than that," Jason said.

A Quantum Leap

So many watchmakers have transitioned to watchmaking from other careers, including teaching, public service, healthcare, and many others. For some, the transition is a quantum leap into the unknown. Ultimately, the rewards are high, but the risks are high too. "Many who have become watchmakers struggled with the decision, which makes sense, because it really is such a different type of work. But so many of the successful watchmakers have also said they knew, or they felt, that



Classroom at WOSTEP, Neuchâtel, Switzerland (Jason in foreground).



Brodi G., apprentice at Roldorf & Co.

watchmaking was what they needed to pursue, including me," Jason said.

From Jason's perspective, the current infrastructure for educating watchmakers faces some of the same challenges that education, as a system, has faced, including schools not being able to keep up with technologies, best practices, and the current industry demand. He believes some of the other challenges are education being cost prohibitive, and 'doing things the way they've always been done' including apprenticeships. "It's important to consider if there's too much emphasis on the traditional watchmaking school and its standard education, versus the practicality of a blended approach. All of these impact our ability to be sustainable and meet industry demands, so, it's critical that steps are taken to drive it forward," Jason said.

Driving education forward is where Jason wants to give back in any way he can. His passion for education extends to his shop's visitors and customers, but also a larger audience, such as those who are just a bit curious about watches, and those who have an interest in/propensity for watchmaking but may not know about the education options or career paths. Jason shared, "There needs to be more efforts put toward going into schools and sharing the information about horology. And there needs to be more methods for 'showing' people the industry."

He also believes strongly in the powers of sharing stories and building mainstream awareness. "We get a lot of people coming in and seeing what we're doing and they say, 'How did you ever become a watchmaker?'...it's like they can't comprehend the beginning of the journey. I grew up in it. My father was a goldsmith and his partner was a watchmaker. But for someone who just like watches to realize that they can actually have a career in this, is entirely different. I think we need to build those bridges and make those connections so that there is a path, and so much of that has to happen mainstream," Jason explained.



Jason describing the winding mechanism to a customer.

Building Bridges

Jason knows firsthand how social media plays a pivotal role in building bridges to all that horology has to offer. He credits *The Grey Nato* podcast as being one place that has been instrumental in Roldorf's exposure, along with Instagram. Roldorf & Co. began its own podcast in 2018, but its ongoing production was impacted by the pandemic and by an unexpected upheaval of the business in 2022. Jason hopes to bring the podcast back soon, and his vision includes possibly hosting and recording it live in the shop, with interviews of people in the industry, and then sharing the events as podcasts.

Equally important are the in-person, immersive tactics for building bridges. For Jason and his team, these run the gamut, from conversations, to meet-ups, lunchtime seminars, and more. He envisions the lunchtime seminars simply being a chance for people to do something different with 30 minutes of their time, to bring their lunch to the shop and enjoy a conversation about a specific watchmaking topic.

Jason also discussed reinstituting their in-shop bench experiences. He explains, "People come in on a Sunday morning and sit at the bench and start taking a watch apart, and putting it back together again. So if nothing else, they see the challenges of it all. But, maybe it sparks an interest, or a deeper passion they never thought they had."

New Beginnings

In a 2020 interview with *Hodinkee*, Jason was quoted as saying, “We are first and foremost independent. We are watchmakers, educators, and most importantly watch lovers. We are brand agnostic, but are most certainly focused on independent and micro brands. We are able to walk the customer through the repair we have completed, as whomever did the repair typically will help the customer through the entire job workflow. I believe people feel comfortable around us because we are authentic. Most importantly, though, clients see that we have fun, so most certainly we specialize in that.”

Early in my conversation with Jason, it was easy to sense that he not only appreciates the work he does, he has fun doing it. This appreciation and fun is especially important to him now, given the trials he has experienced.

In 2021, Roldorf & Co. was located just 1-1/2 blocks away from its current location. It was three times larger than their previous location, and Jason saw it as the place where his dreams of expansion were set to come true. The pandemic had different plans, and Roldorf & Co. struggled, as many businesses did. To further compound this, Roldorf & Co. experienced several issues with the new location, many of which were out of his control. Jason and his team were doing their best to build the business while dealing with water leaks, unpredictable social housing, and the struggles of a downtown location, including homelessness.

In April 2022, the building where Roldorf & Co. was located caught fire and was declared a total loss. In addition to Jason’s company, seven other businesses in the building were destroyed, including an apparel store and a cafe. Many of these businesses were start-ups or family businesses that had their roots in Gastown. Jason was able to save a collection of hand tools, but everything else was tragically lost in the fire.



Service work, out in the open at Roldorf & Co.

Jason shared, “There was an outpouring of well wishes from so many people. And not just from our local customers, it was a global thing. I had no idea of the scope and the reach that we actually had, due largely to the coverage by *The Grey Nato* podcast team and others. It was really incredible.”

He’s thrilled with the current location and the strides the company has made to return to normal operations. He gives much credit to his wife, Mary. “She’s not with the shop full time, but if it wasn’t for her, I don’t think we would have the business that we have today. She is an amazing communicator, and she managed to get this train back on the tracks. That was amazing to watch,” Jason said.

Today, Roldorf & Co. is a destination place for walk-ins, tourists, customers, and visitors alike and everyone has fun, which, Jason believes, is what it’s all about. “Everything happens for a reason, and sometimes you really don’t know what you need until something like that [the fire] happens. And then, it all unfolds, and it’s about keeping your head on your shoulders during those times, and just knowing in your heart what the end goal is and chasing it.”

A Bus, an Anniversary, and a Slogan

Every story has its intriguing coincidences. This one has three.

First: The former location of Roldorf & Co. was 207 West Cordova Street. The school bus Jason rode to high school was Bus #207.

Second: The unplanned timing of Jason's story being published in April of 2023 aligns, almost to the date, with the one-year anniversary of the fire and Roldorf & Co.'s new beginnings.

Third: In researching Jason and his company, I discovered the Gastown Business Improvement Society, which released an Urban Design Study in 2019. The goal of the study was to "provide insight into how public realm changes may affect Gastown business members, workers, residents, and visitors." The theme of this initiative is "old soul, new spirit", which is, in part, how Jason described Antoine Simonin, the co-founder of WOSTEP, who was also Jason's instructor.

"Old soul, new spirit" also aptly fits the past, present, and future journey of Roldorf & Co., as well as Jason's vision for the horology industry.



Turning on a Boley F1 lathe.



Turning on a Boley F1 lathe.

Sources

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Photo courtesy of Jason Gallop.

If you have a story to tell or you want to recommend a friend, colleague, or family member for the Traditions & Transitions series, email us at editor@awci.com.

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