

CLEANING ENAMEL WATCH DIALS

By Dave Coatsworth

It is inevitable that most enamel pocket watch dials will develop hairline cracks. This exposes a rougher surface that dirt, smoke and other contaminants will adhere to over time. The result is visible hairline cracks on what might otherwise be a very attractive pocket watch dial. Fortunately there are safe techniques for cleaning enamel dials that will, in most cases, make these hairlines virtually disappear.

First, a few words of caution. Do not use either of these techniques on painted or metal dials. The Comet Bathroom Cleaner is actually a very good paint remover when used undiluted. (Yes, I learned this the hard way!) Also, make sure everything on the dial is fired into the enamel. You may have seen pocket watch dials that have had photos or other decoration applied by the jeweler who sold the watch. These cleaning methods will most likely remove these decorations so dials like this are best left as-is. Finally, use these methods with great caution on early American dials that use shellac instead of solder to hold the seconds bit as you could very easily end up loosening the shellac.

In order to clean enamel pocket watch dials, you do not need to buy an expensive 'dial cleaner' from an online source. The two most commonly used, as well as best, cleaners are available at your local Walmart! The first cleaner, and the one that I prefer, is Comet Bathroom Cleaner. Note that this is the liquid cleaner. It is not a cleanser, nor does it contain any abrasives. I have only been able to find this at Walmart. The second cleaning substance is Polident which is, of course, available at any drug store. I have only used the overnight variety and can not comment on the 'fast acting' varieties. (No, if you use the mint flavored Polident you can not later claim that your dial is in 'mint' condition!)

Regardless of which cleaner you use, you will need a glass jar or plastic food storage container, a piece of brass wire and a stick or rod of some sort.



Bend the brass wire into the shape shown in fig 1.



Figure 1

You are going to suspend the dial from the hook end so the length of your hook needs to be long enough to completely submerge the dial in the cleaner but short enough to keep the dial suspended in the liquid. Figure 2 shows how the hook is threaded through the dial holes. The hook end is run through the hole in the seconds bit and back up through the center hole. The dial should

be suspended face-down so dirt that is loosened will fall to the bottom of the container. Once you have verified the length of your hook, remove it from the container.

Fill the container about 3/4 full of the undiluted Comet Bathroom Cleaner if that is what you have chosen to use. Place your dial face-down on the hook and suspend it from the top of the container using a stick or rod. (As shown in fig 3)

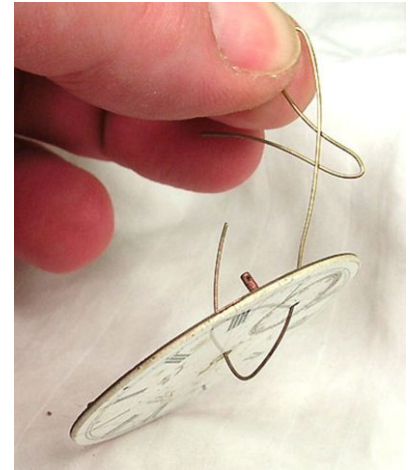


Figure 2



Figure 3

Let it sit for 10 to 15 minutes. At the end of this time, remove the dial. If you still see surface dirt, rub the dial gently with your thumb to loosen this dirt further, then rinse under room-temperature water. (Using water that is very hot or very cold

could cause additional cracks to develop.) Most dials will look very nice at this point. However, severely stained dials may need to go back for a second, much longer, soak.

You may also want to try the Polident method if the Comet Bathroom Cleaner is not producing the desired result. The Comet cleaner may be capped and re-used until it becomes too dirty.

If you are using Polident, fill the container 3/4 full with water. (If you live in a hard water area, you may want to use bottled water.) Next, suspend the dial on the hook and suspend the hook from the top of the container so that the dial is completely submerged. Again, the dial should be face-down. Drop in the Polident tablet and leave it overnight to do its work. Some people who use this method place the container on top of their refrigerator as the vibration from the refrigerator motor will

provide some agitation. The next morning, remove the dial and rinse in room temperature water.

Below you will see before and after photos of two dials. The first dial is a rather extreme example. This dial was soaked in the Comet cleaner for about one hour. The hairlines were still visible after this, so I also soaked it overnight in Polident. While the dial looks much better, some of the hairlines are still visible. Further soaking may improve this. The second example is a more 'normal' example. This dial was simple soaked in the Comet cleaner for a couple of hours which produced very nice results. ■

