

“The Otay Watch Company”

Otay commenced yesterday the work of making time . . . machinery and tools for the Otay Watch Factory were completed on Wednesday, and yesterday the wheels went round, the operators were in place, and watch making began in earnest, it is hoped for many years to come.

---San Diego Union, February 7, 1890.

Watch making is seldom regarded as an “American” industry but more than a century ago U.S. innovation in manufacturing was producing quality pocket watches that competed well against the handmade products of the English and Swiss. In towns like Elgin and Rockford, Illinois, watch making became a profitable industry. In the 1880s, investors from the Midwest and San Diego decided to bring the “Elgin experience” to the new town of Otay, where they hoped a successful watch making plant would engineer growth in the South Bay community.

Groundbreaking for the first watch making factory west of the Mississippi, was announced on February 26, 1889. The weekly *Otay Press* heralded the plans for a three-story plant at the corner of Tremont Street and Fresno Avenue. Twenty-five carloads of lumber and 270,000 red bricks were en route to the site by railcar. Once operational, the *Press* reported, the plant would employ 600 men and produce 250 watches a day. Prosperity seemed assured.

In the next several weeks, local newspapers chronicled the progress of the watch factory. Every step of construction, from the foundation and brick walls to the installation of machinery, was followed with breathless optimism. The benefits to the community were emphasized in the San Diego *Union*:

Houses are being built on every hand. Concrete sidewalks are being paved. Lawns and fences are being rapidly pushed to the front. Families are arriving from the East almost daily. Thus it can be seen that Otay is doing her share towards improving Southern California.

In May, articles of incorporation were filed in Sacramento for the Otay Watch Company. The next month the factory building was proclaimed completed. Workers mounted the finishing touch on the roof: a sign eighty feet long and five feet tall bearing the words, “Otay Watch Works.”

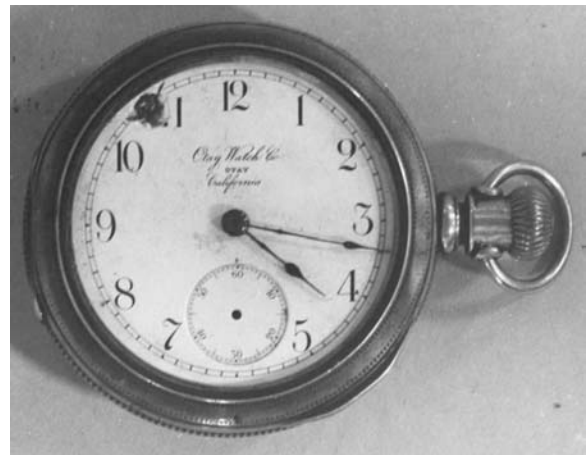


But despite the official optimism there were signs of trouble. The completed building was not producing watches. Newspaper coverage quieted down as the company’s managers struggled with cash flow.

On Christmas Day, 1889, the *Union* announced that “the Otay Watch Company, which has been in a quiescent condition for some time, is on the eve of beginning active operations.” Frank A. Kimball, the pioneer founder of National City and the region’s most prominent investor, had taken a controlling interest in the struggling company. Kimball, along with San Diegan Ephraim W. Morse and other wealthy investors, brought new capital into the venture. The factory superintendent, P. H. Wheeler, promised new watches in ninety days.

Wheeler’s forecast fell short by a couple of months but on May 17, 1890, the first watch appeared, “the Frank A. Kimball” model, named after the company’s chief benefactor. To celebrate the inaugural timepiece a party of 200 excursionists from San Diego, National City, and Chula Vista, visited the factory and “inspected the works” while the City Guard String Band played a celebratory, open air concert at the factory entrance.

In August, a workforce of 100 men was making twenty watches a day in various grades, ranging in wholesale price from \$5 to \$50. The more expensive models were named after company executives, such as “the Frank A. Kimball” and the “P. H. Wheeler” grades. Commercial models were simply called the “Otay.” All models were large men’s pocket or pendant watches but the company promised “in time the ladies’ size will come.”



By early October, the Watch Works claimed a production of thirty watches a day “with a contemplated increase, as it [was] impossible to fill all orders.” But like earlier forecasts, this prediction was less than honest. Sales were slow and expenses stubbornly high. The month ended with the factory closed and facing yet another reorganization.

A committee of investors attempted a bond sale to raise cash but the effort failed. While the *Union* bravely predicted the “wheels will whirl again on January 1st,” the factory owners prepared to liquidate the company. At a sheriff’s sale on February 2, 1891, the personal property of the Otay Watch Company—watches, materials, and tools--was sold at auction. For the laid-off workers, the factory’s failure was a disaster; many were left in “utterly destitute circumstances because of the failure of the company to pay them wages due.”

In May 1891, the owners of the Watch Works managed to sell the machinery and remaining stock to investors in San Jose who planned a new factory in Alviso. The fresh venture was short-lived and sold again, this time to Osaka, Japan, where the factory supervisor turned out to be P. H. Wheeler, the old manager at Otay. In February 1895, Wheeler would report to the *Otay Press*, “we are now making Otay watches in the land of the ‘rising sun.’”

The Otay Watch Works stood abandoned for years. For a time, a roller rink and a dance studio used its wide, expansive floors. It was finally demolished in 1934.

One of the last witnesses to the Otay factory was a young fireman for the National City & Otay Railway named Christian Brown. Once, on a layover in Otay, Brown discovered the derelict watch making plant:

I had the opportunity to go through the old Otay watch factory, which was abandoned. They had left quite a lot of papers, records of wages paid and merchandise shipped out, and I read quite a bit of that. I'm sorry I didn't keep some of those old, discarded papers.

Photographs from San Diego Public Library.

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