Earliest and Rarest Featherweight Variation Yet? You are probably skeptical based on a quick look at the photo above. I would be too.

Discovered after 83 years, this machine wears the second allocated model 221 serial number and will reveal some very interesting characteristics that I expect will surprise you as much as they did me.

Read on for a guided tour of this early machine.

Section 1 – Introduction

In November of 2015 I purchased what I knew was an early Singer Featherweight 221 from a general antiques dealer at a local show that I attend regularly. Initially I was a bit hesitant about the transaction since the bottom line price was higher than I usually like to pay for a Featherweight. In spite of the price, the machine was in better condition than I usually find and I do like to buy nice early machines.

Little did I know that this machine held secrets I would not even notice until I had a chance to make observations and do some Featherweight research. When I left the show and got to my car, the first thing I did was remove the bottom cover plate to check the serial number. This is where the fun really began as I found the number to be AD541547, considered to be the second lowest serial number allocated by Singer for the initial 221 model allocation in 1933.

Upon closer examination over the next few days I noticed differences between this machine and all other Featherweights I have owned or seen photos of. Reference books and internet research have not turned up any information or similar examples at this point.

I also found that specific unique features of the machine I had bought matched illustrations in the earliest Featherweight manual I have access to, dated 1935. I now believe that this Featherweight is a pre-mass production variation, probably one of a few produced for a special purpose. I don't believe that this specific machine was used to illustrate the earliest owner's manuals because screw slot and connector wire positions don't match, but it seems logical that a pre-production machine would be needed in order to produce manuals in time for the initial 1933 production run.

In this article I have described machine characteristics and provided photos of this unusual Featherweight variation. I hope you'll find the description and comparison photos interesting and invite you to compare the photos to your own Featherweights.

Hopefully I'm not being overly enthusiastic about this discovery, but at any rate I'm confident that not too many collectors own a machine that has a lower serial number!

Section 2 - Obvious external characteristics

You may have already noticed that this machine includes some characteristics of the earliest featherweights and other characteristics not usually associated with the earliest machines.

We will examine and describe some of these obvious items before moving along to the most interesting areas.

Expected:

- Staggered leg scroll face plate
- Decal on back of arm
- Solid bobbin winding wheel
- Split casting base

Not Expected:

- Numbered tension assembly
- Second type front mounted bobbin winding tensioner with black mounting screw instead of school bell tensioner with plated screw

Section 3 - Bobbin Area

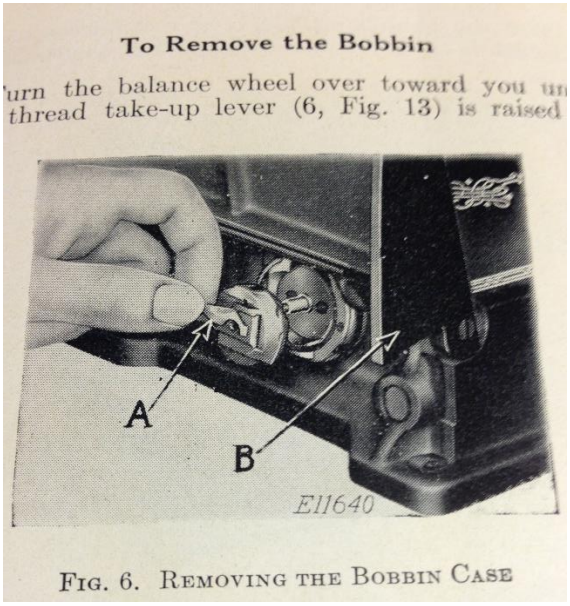
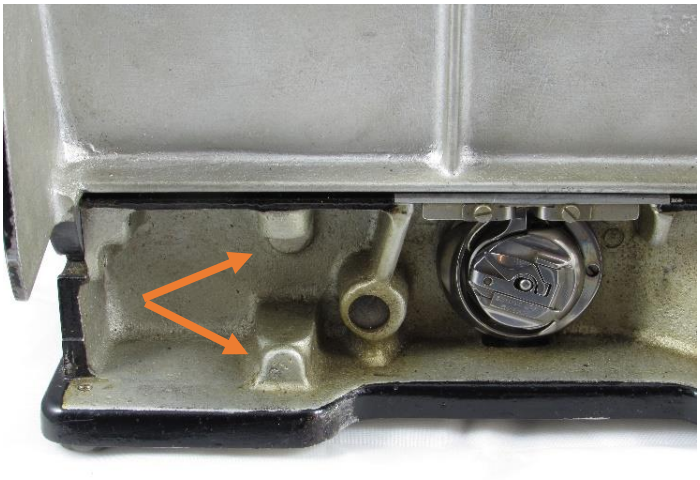
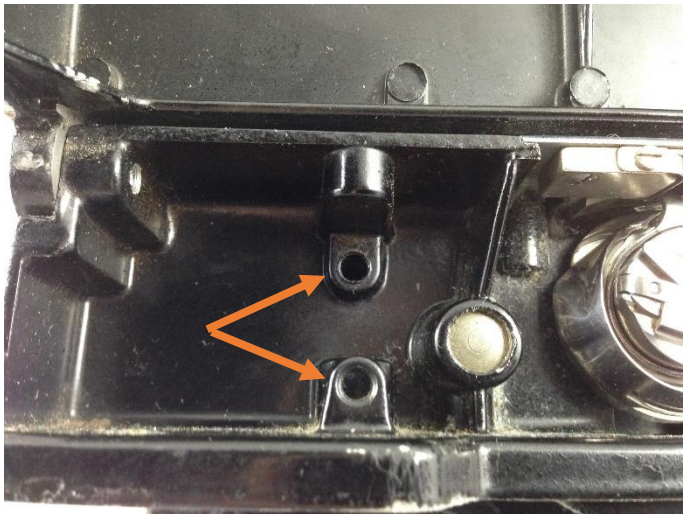


Fig. 6. Removing the Bobbin Case

The photo above left allows a comparison of this machine to the early manual illustration shown on the right. In particular, notice the unusual folding bed ribs, unpainted silver areas, hook assembly gib screw area (not the earliest type hook assembly), and the clip mounted above the bed cushion on the right side.





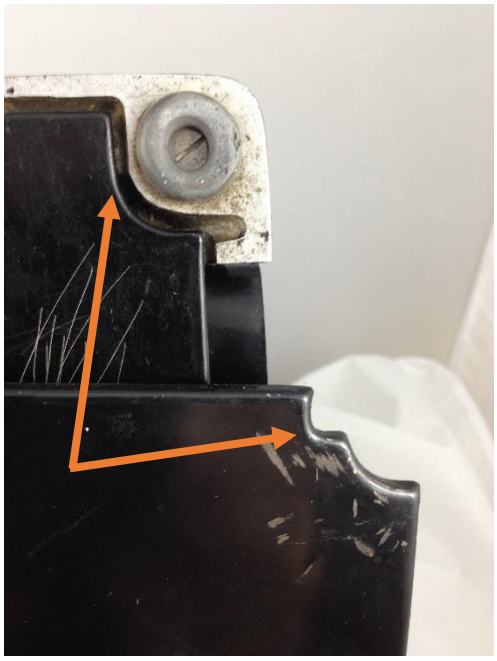
The two photos above illustrate a difference between this machine (left photo) and other early production Featherweights I have observed, represented here by another AD series machine shown in the right hand photo.

Note the undrilled casting areas in the left photo. Early machines, particularly those with serial numbers located beneath the bottom cover plate, seem to have holes located in these areas. An early manual illustration included in Section 5 below does not show holes in these locations. Also of interest are casting thickness differences in some areas.

Two photos above allow for a comparison of the folding bed extension casting between this machine and all standard production machines I have observed in photos and in person. The subject of this article is shown in the left photo, a representative AD series production machine is shown on the right. Notice that the machine on the left does not have circular pads cast close to the edges and on the bed ribs. In addition, there is no Simanco part number on the casting but there is an identification number of some kind (X6725, circled) that does not show well in the photo.

A difference in the rear folding bed hinge shape is illustrated above. This machine also has a small hole located in the hinge area that doesn't seem to appear on standard production machines, represented in the right hand photo by an early production AD series machine.

Section 4 - Bottom cover plate



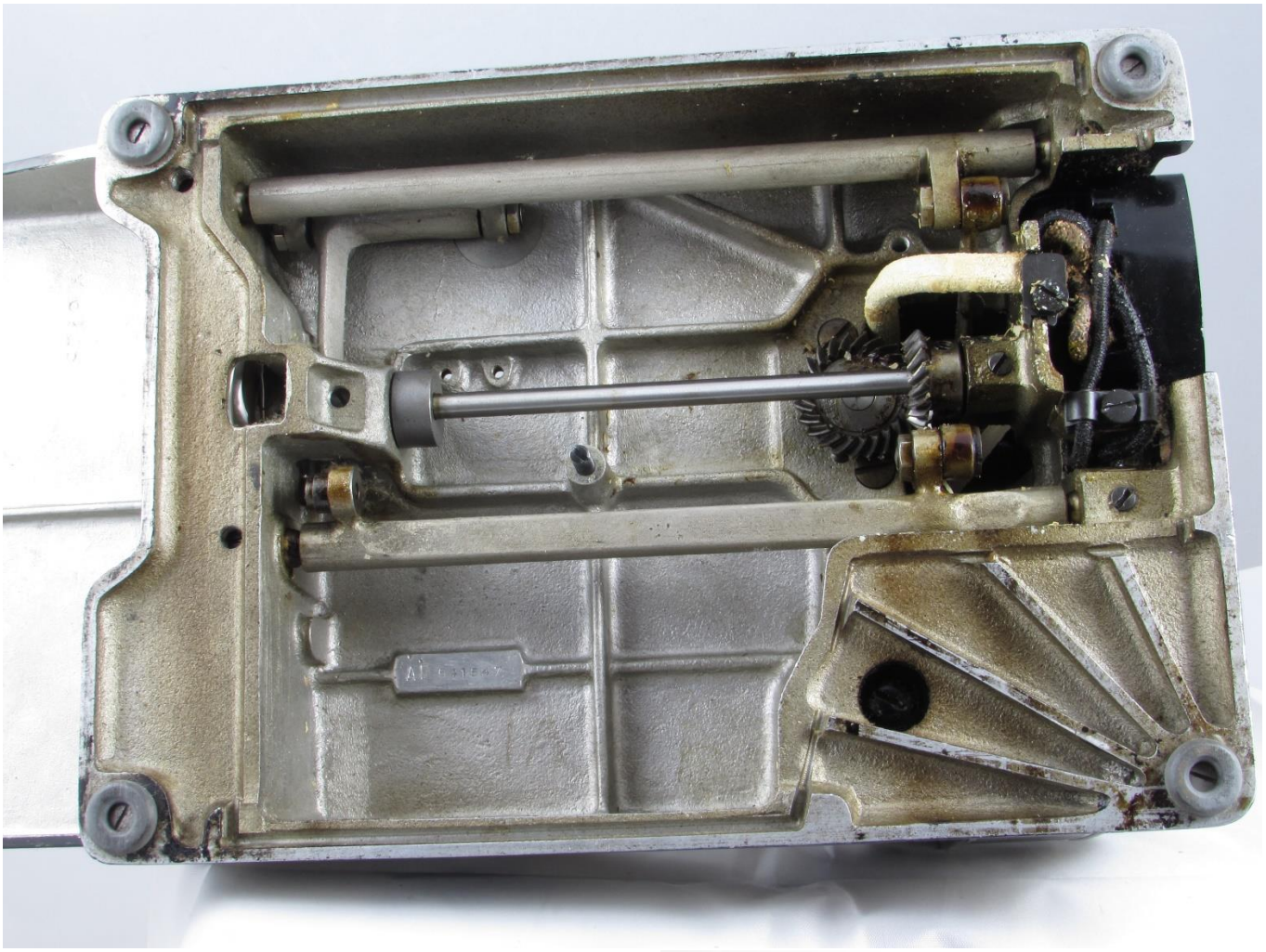
The first thing I noticed about the bottom cover is that it is black. I had been under the impression that the earliest Featherweights had silver covers and thought this one must be a later replacement.

Closer examination convinced me that this cover is original to the machine. Notice the cover corner shape at the upper right bed cushion, closest to the scratches visible in the left hand photo above. This corner has a different shape than other covers I have observed including those on early machines. You will also see that the bed casting at this corner has a different than normal shape and that the cover matches it. This provides a hint of things to come. I think you will find the upcoming main bed casting detail section very interesting.

Also notice the indented area where the retention screw seats. The cover on this machine has a dome shaped indent while others I have observed have a more angular transition to a flat bottom as shown on the right.

Section 5 –Main Bed Casting

I find the main bed casting to be very interesting. It is perhaps the most unique and important characteristic of this machine, especially when considered in combination with its low serial number. First, compare the large photo directly below to the smaller manual illustration below it lower left. You will see that the casting photo is an exact match to the manual illustration with the exception that the actual machine has been identified by the addition of a serial number. An early production AD series machine is shown lower right for comparison. Note the casting differences and the addition of a Simanco part number as it appears on standard production machines.



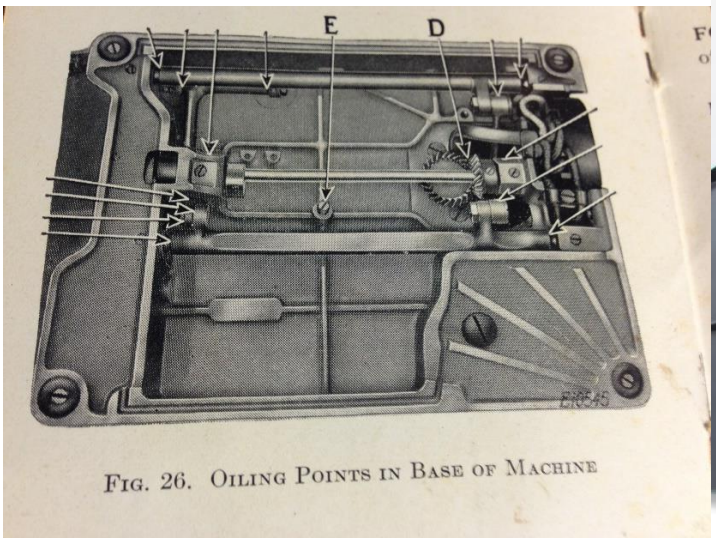
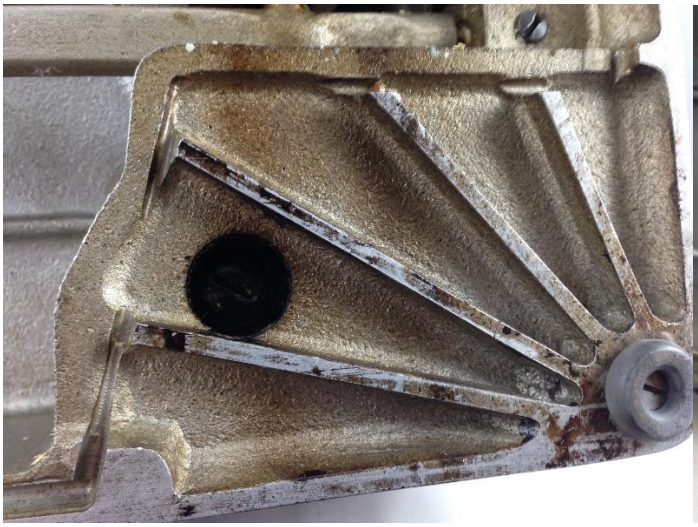
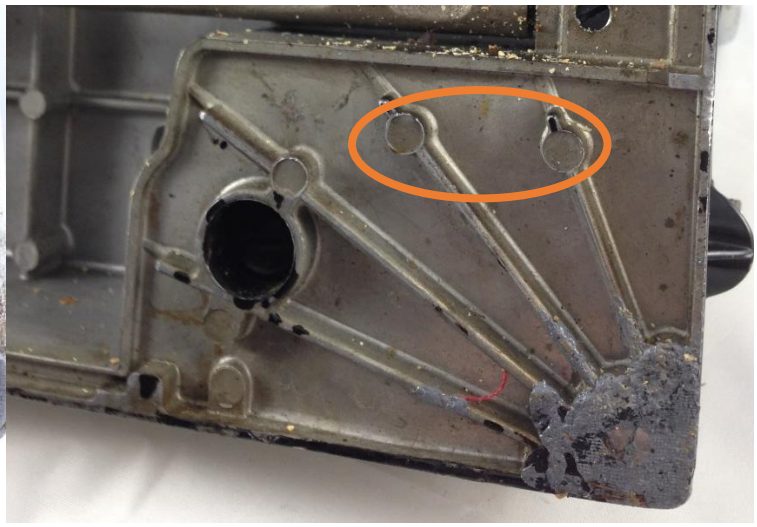


FIG. 26. OILING POINTS IN BASE OF MACHINE

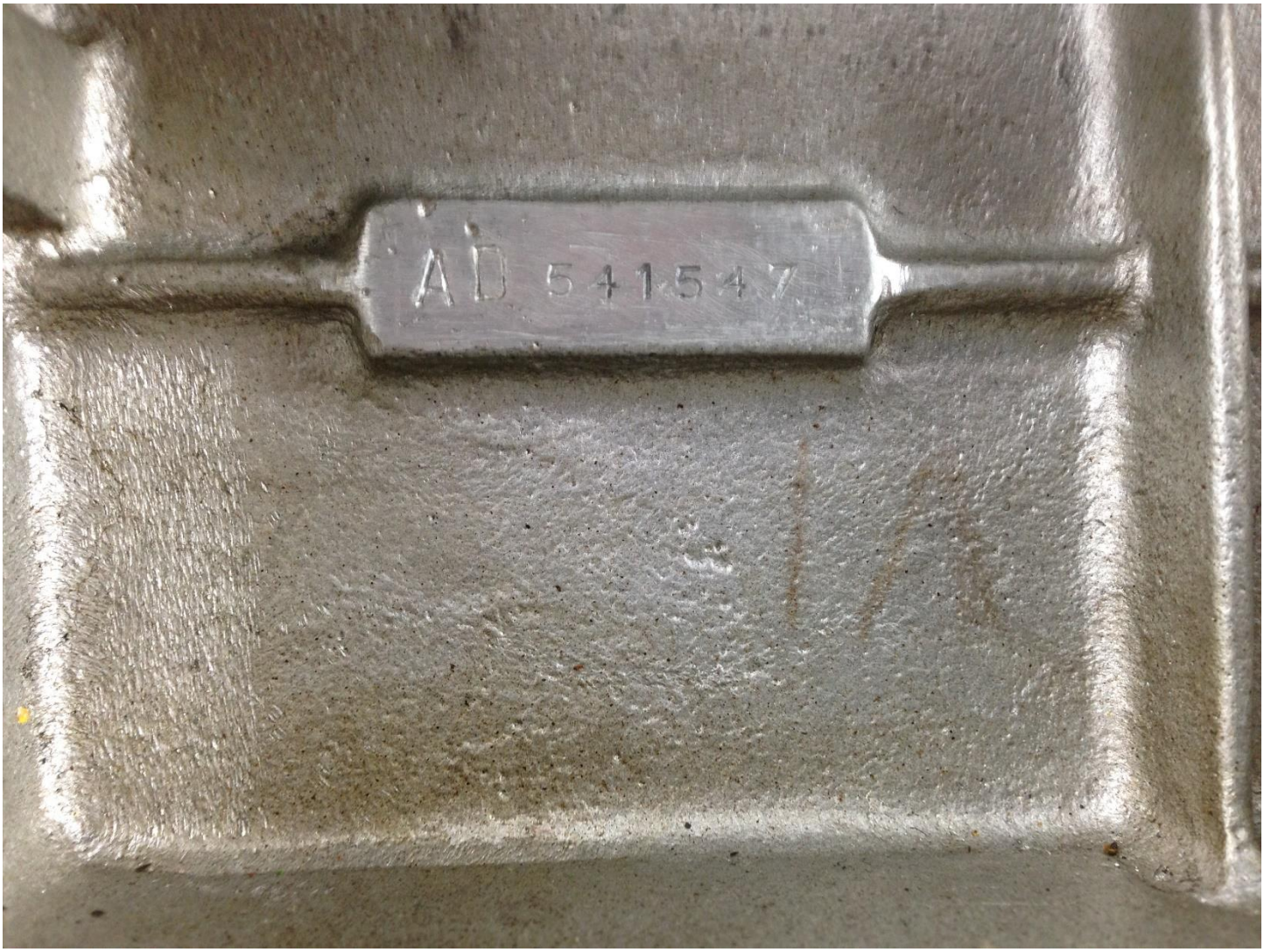
One last detail view of the bed casting area beneath the motor is shown below for comparison. As with the entire main bed casting and folding extension table, standard production Featherweights have circular casting features as highlighted in the right hand photo. The unique machine described in this article does not have them. You may have also noticed casting surface roughness throughout in comparison to the smoother finish on normal production Featherweights.





A detailed view of the serial number is shown below. The serial number does not appear to have been applied using standard production methods. While the AD characters seem to match standard characters used at the time, numeric characters are much smaller than those used in production. The serial number is also inverted (upside down) when compared to early production machines on which the serial number is hidden under the bottom cover. This photo seems to reveal the characters “1A” written by hand close to the serial number pad.

Most important is that this machine is marked with serial number AD541547. All serial number references I have located indicate that AD541547 is the second lowest overall serial number allocated for Featherweights and is associated with the very first production run of the Featherweight 221 in 1933.



Section 6 - Summary and Speculation

I won't pretend to be a Featherweight expert, but I enjoy the hunt for unusual variations and research about machine characteristics and history.

Hopefully you have enjoyed seeing this machine and its unusual characteristics. Based on resources available to me, I believe that this machine variation is at minimum quite unusual and rare.

My own speculation is that it was produced by Singer prior to an official production run for some special purpose. I would not be sure that the machine left the factory immediately, it may have been retained for prototype use or to develop some production processes.

As the tensioners, hook assembly, and needle plate are not the earliest known variations, I may even speculate that full assembly did not take place immediately. Even if these items could have been retrofitted at a later time, I expect to keep the machine as found in order to retain all possible aspects of its history.

I believe logical speculation is all there is to go by at this point. Unless documentation already exists somewhere for this machine variation, we will probably never know the true details of its manufacture and use.

Based on a combination of the machine's unique physical characteristics, match to early manual illustrations, and ultra low serial number I believe it deserves an important place in the Featherweight story much like blacksides, crinkles, and specially badged machines.

Is this machine really a new discovery after all these years? Is this one of the earliest and rarest Featherweight variations uncovered to date? Time will tell.

Perhaps I will find out that knowledgeable Featherweight collectors or historians have more information to share than I have been able to uncover since my lucky find.