

F. E. OLDS & SON CORNETS OF THE LOS ANGELES ERA

INTRODUCTION



Herbert L. Clarke (1867 - 1945)

In 1921, a young Eldon Benge wrote a letter to premier North American cornetist Herbert L. Clarke, asking if he should switch from cornet to trumpet. Mr. Clarke advised against it, because

the [trumpet] is only a foreign fad for the time present, and is only used properly in large orchestras of 60 or more, for dynamic effects, and was never intended as a solo instrument.

The letter quoted above is reproduced in full on page 189 of Ron Berndt's *A Timeline of Trumpets*, copyright 2017 by Ron Berndt.

Sadly for Mr. Clarke, history has chosen otherwise. The heyday of the cornet in the USA was the last half of the 19th century and the first two decades of the 20th, and in the twenties the cornet's star began to fade. The cornet would never again attain the popularity it enjoyed in the early part of the century.

By the time Olds began making trumpets, trumpet design had standardized worldwide on the basic layout introduced by Besson in France in the late 19th century^a. All Olds trumpet designs were more-or-less based on the Besson layout, and while they differ greatly in detail, the body plan (wrap) is in almost every case derived from this archetype.

Cornets, on the other hand, exhibited a much wider range of design, and there were some truly wild and wonderful cornet designs produced before the Great War. By the 1930s, though, mainstream cornet production had settled into two basic designs: the Shepherd's Crook model, a short horn favored by British brass bands, and the American model, a longer horn more closely resembling a trumpet. Of course, there was still a myriad of individual variations within each camp. During the LA period, all Olds cornets were variations of the long cornet design^b.

- a. At least, it's fair to make this statement regarding trumpets built around the Périnet piston valve system. Rotary valve trumpets and cornets were and are widely used in Germany and Austria but are quite scarce in the US. Those have a very different body plan and, since Olds never made any, do not enter this discussion.
- b. Shortly after the move to Fullerton, Olds introduced the Mendez model cornet. This was an example of the long model carried to the extreme. The Mendez cornet was visually identical to the Mendez Model trumpet, and early in production Olds found it necessary to engrave "CORNET" or "TRUMPET" on the bell of each horn so one could tell them apart. Even later, in the 1970s, Olds produced a short Shepherd's Crook model for the British market. These later patterns, though, are not discussed here.

OLDS ENTERS THE MARKET

Well known trombone manufacturer F.E. Olds & Son began producing trumpets in 1929. The manufacture of cornets followed soon after, although exactly when cornet production began is not known. At first, Olds trumpet production was what we would today call a “boutique” affair, making and selling trumpets and (presumably) cornets to order, but by 1932 Olds catalogued a line of instruments – trumpet, cornet, and trombone – advertised as “The Olds.” This first model was followed by quite a few cornet designs over the twenty plus years that Olds production was based in Los Angeles, and while the number of cornets Olds made never equaled their trumpet production, the number of different models produced in that period is impressive.

Cornet Types in the Los Angeles Era (1929-1954)

1. First Pattern (The Olds, 1932-1933)^c
2. Second Pattern (The Standard, 1933-1939/40?)
3. Third Pattern (The Military Model, 1934-1938)
4. Fourth Pattern (The Super, 1937-1968)
 - a. The “Vulcan Cornet” – A Prototype of The Super Cornet? (1936)
5. Fifth Pattern (The Radio Model, 1938?-1939?)
6. Sixth Pattern (The Standard, 1940/41-1947?)
7. Seventh Pattern (The Special, Pre-war & the WWII Military version, 1939-1944)
8. Eighth Pattern (The Radio Model, 1939)
9. Ninth Pattern (The Olds Recording Model Super Cornet – aka The Super Recording, 1940-1950)
10. Tenth Pattern (The Special, Post war, 1948-1979)
11. Eleventh Pattern (The Ambassador, 1947/48-1979)
12. Twelfth Pattern (The Studio, 1947-1971)
13. Thirteenth Pattern (The Recording, 1950-1968)
 - c. Listed production dates are approximate and include Fullerton production.

“THE OLDS” and “THE STANDARD”: In this article, I refer to the first pattern cornet as “The Olds,” and the second pattern as “The Standard.” This convention is generally supported by existing sales literature, but the situation is slightly complicated by the fact that bell engraving on early examples of the second pattern reads only “The Olds.” Later second pattern horns do add “Standard” after “The Olds.” I don’t know exactly when the bell engraving caught up to the sales literature, but it was somewhere between serial nos. 2648 and 7913. You should take my designations for the first two patterns as a convenience rather than established fact.

1. FIRST PATTERN – THE OLDS CORNET (1932-1933)

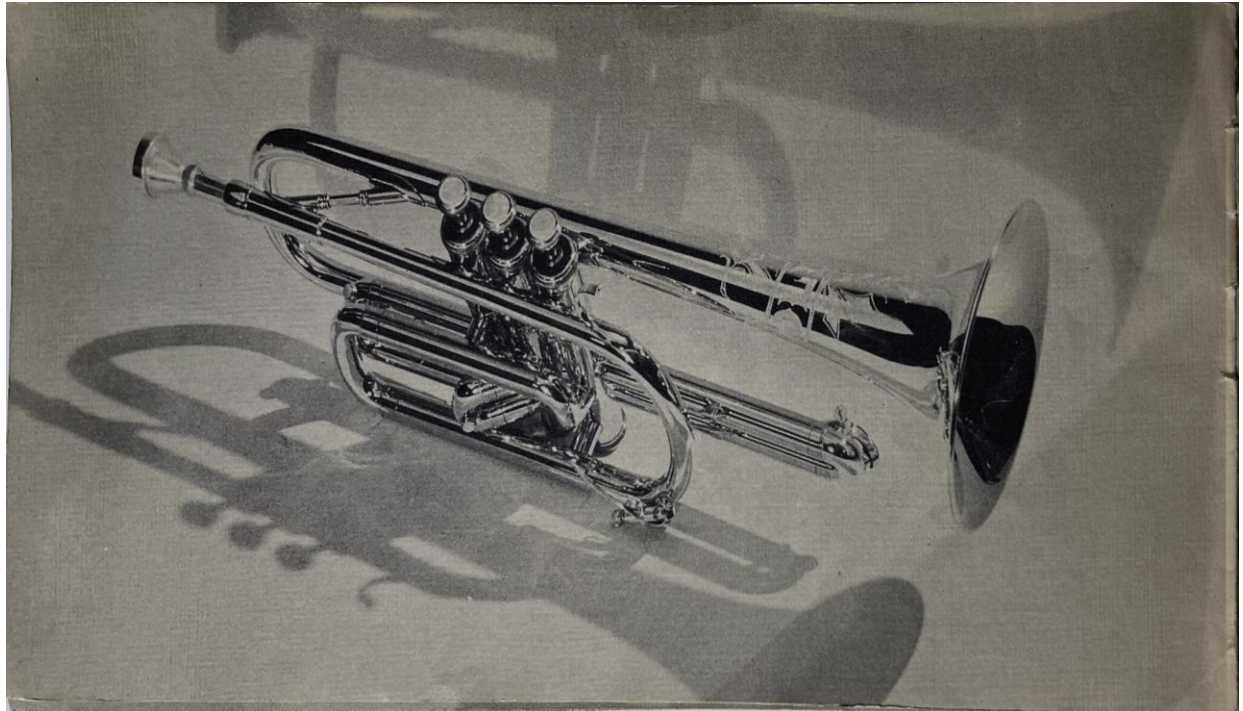


First pattern, first variation The Olds cornet, serial no. 746. This example is the oldest cornet in the Olds Central Register. Photos above from Robb Stewart.

Note that there is no way to adjust the valve slides on the fly. This “feature,” or lack of one, is shared with the first Olds trumpets. In their earliest known trumpet brochure, c. 1932, Olds claimed:

The instrument is built with a perfect scale, thus eliminating the necessity of equipping it with the bothersome extra slide for favoring the low C sharpe.

We can judge how well this worked out in practice by looking at the other three first pattern cornets I have examined in person or in photographs. All three – 7XX, 811, and 939 – sport that bothersome extra slide. Since adding this feature required a change to the third valve slide tubing, I have designated these later examples as the second variation.



THE F. E. OLDS Cornet . . .

A TRUE LEADER with supreme breadth and flexibility of tone. A cornet with a full singing range and a tremendous power that places it immediately in the solo chair of the concert bands. For modern interpretations in popular and symphonic orchestrations the Olds Cornet adds new life to the brass section and a thrill to the effect obtained.

The mathematically proportioned, conical taper of this cornet adds an unparalleled flexibility of tone to its correct scale.

THE FOLLOWING ARE THE POPULAR CHOICE OF SIZE, BORE AND FINISH

MEDIUM BORE
A particularly brilliant instrument with light playing qualities.

MEDIUM LARGE BORE
A cornet with colorful flexibility of tone. The popular choice, most suitable for all around work.

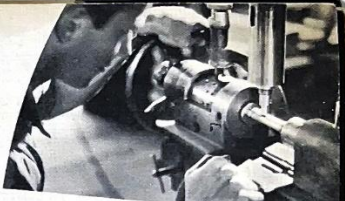
LARGE BORE
A large instrument with tremendous weight and breadth of tone.

FINISH 1—Polished brass—Nickel Silver Trimming—Tuning slide, braces and trimming of the finest and hardest nickel silver. Neatly engraved by hand. Supplied complete in artcraft case.....**\$125.00**

FINISH 2—Heavily silver plated, satin finish, points highly burnished by hand. Bell gold lined and hand burnished. Supplied complete in artcraft case.**\$150.00**

FINISH 3—De Luxe Burnished Gold—Quadruple gold plated—handsomely engraved and hand burnished. A striking instrument of exquisite beauty for the connoisseur. Supplied complete in artcraft case**\$250.00**

Hand Hammered Bell on special order on any of the above instruments—Extra**\$15.00**



Extreme precision and delicacy from the initial tool making to the artistic engraving.



The two pictures shown above are from a recently discovered Olds sales brochure. This document, dated circa 1933, is the earliest known that mentions the Olds cornet, and the only one found so far that illustrates the first pattern. The photos in this brochure are from a group of photos taken by Will Connell in 1932. Those photographs are archived in the UCLA Digital Library Collection.

I find it suggestive that this brochure refers to the cornet as “The F. E. Olds Cornet,” while labeling the trumpet as “The Standard.” I don’t think we should read too much into this, since Olds was just beginning to brand their trumpets and cornets with model names, but it does support the idea that calling this first variation “The Olds” and the second as “The Standard” is reasonable.



A later first pattern, second variation, serial no. 881. This variation has a finger loop adjustable third valve slide with a stop rod, as well as the optional hand hammered bell mentioned in the brochure. Also notice the original early Model “B” Olds mouthpiece. Photos from vintagecornets.com.



First pattern, second variation, serial no. 939, also with the finger loop adjustable third valve slide and stop rod, but this time with a lacquered brass bell. Note the sleeve between the receiver and the lead pipe. The receiver has been replaced with one that accepts standard cornet mouthpieces instead of the Olds large shank versions. This horn has also been buffed and relacquered, which has resulted in some loss of definition on the bell engraving. That engraving reads "OLDS" in a scroll surrounded by floral decoration. Based on photos, the engraving looks to be the same as the one on serial no. 746 shown above. It is also identical to the engraving on the bell of The Olds trumpet serial no. 764. From our collection.

This pattern, with or without the adjustable third slide, must have been very short lived. The examples shown above are all dated to 1932-33, but in the earliest CMI catalog reproduced on Olds Central c.1933 the second pattern (The Standard) was the model on offer.

2. SECOND PATTERN – THE STANDARD CORNET (1933-1939/40?)



Second pattern cornet serial no. 2648. This is the pattern shown in the 1933 CMI catalog. The bell engraving reads “The Olds” but all known catalogs refer to it as “The Standard.” The wrap has completely changed from the earlier version. The third slide is no longer adjustable but there is now a thumb saddle to adjust the first slide. One unusual feature of this horn is that there are two tuning slides in the leadpipe. One of these slides is accessible from the right side of the horn and one from the left. Olds would incorporate a version of this design element into The Military Model. From our collection.

A side note on the bell engraving: The change from the earlier scroll and ribbon engraving to block text “THE OLDS” occurred between serial no. 939 and (trumpet) serial no. 2116.



A comparison of cornets 2648 (The Standard) and 939 (The Olds).

3. THIRD PATTERN – THE MILITARY MODEL CORNET (1934-1938)

The Military Model cornet first appeared in the 1933 CMI catalog with this description:

DESIGNED especially for those who prefer the voice of a cornet with the appearance and balance of a trumpet, this long, racy model instrument appeals to all classes of players. The hand hammered bell adds brilliancy of tone with dazzling beauty and the surprisingly light response and extreme flexibility of this model make it almost as easy playing as a trumpet, yet retaining the full beauty of the richer and less penetrating cornet tones.

CMI's catalog writers were at the top of their form here! I am not even going to try to comment on that bit of inspired sales puffery. Olds must have liked it, too, since they reused that text word-for-word in the 1935 and 1937 Olds catalogs.



Military Model cornet serial no. 1611, complete with the iconic hand hammered bell. This early example is in as-found condition. The oldest Military Model cornet listed in the Olds Central Register is serial no. 1506, dated to 1934, while the last Military cornet listed is serial no. 5657, dated to 1938, giving the Military cornet a relatively short lifetime.

Like The Standard, The Military Model has two tuning slides in the leadpipe. In this model, the left slide is adjustable by a finger loop. I personally find the finger loop below the slide a bit awkward to use, but it does allow the player to adjust the pitch of all notes on the fly. It also makes the first valve slide thumb saddle redundant.



A late production Military Model cornet, serial no. 4902. The Military trumpet and cornet were the only Olds models with hand hammered bells as standard. This feature was an option for the other pre-war models except for The Super, where the bell metal was too thin. For the Military models, smooth bells were an option at a slightly reduced price. This is an example of a Military cornet with a smooth lacquered brass bell. From our collection.

The early to mid-1930s was the tail-end of the peashooter design era, but the DNA of that trend is evident in this “long, racy” cornet. My hands are average sized, but holding this horn requires me to use the split finger peashooter grip – two fingers above and two below the tubing at the third valve. The underslung finger loop, another common peashooter feature, operates the secondary tuning slide rather than the third valve slide.



At first glance, the Military Model cornet looks very different from The Standard, but there is an underlying similarity in the two designs. The Military is longer and lower, of course, but the valve block and valve tubing arrangement are almost identical to the Standard, with only slight dimensional changes. The leadpipe wraps are different, but they both have the unusual feature of two tuning slides.

4. FOURTH PATTERN – THE SUPER CORNET (1937-1968)



This ad originally appeared in the February 25, 1948, issue of *Down Beat*.

Olds introduced The Super model trombone in about 1935, and in 1937 expanded the Super name into a line of instruments – trombone, trumpet and cornet. The Supers were extremely popular and became the company's longest lived models – the cornet remained in production until about 1968, while the trumpet soldiered on until the company folded in 1979. There were no major design changes to this cornet during its lifetime, but detail developments occurred regularly over the years. This model is discussed in detail in Clay Collins' [Olds Super Model article on Olds Central](#), and there is nothing to be gained by repeating that information here. Instead, I have shown photos of three Los Angeles made Super cornets from our collection. These horns were made between 1938 and 1948 and provide a reasonable timeline of the evolution of The Super cornet, demonstrating most of the changes that Olds made to this model over its lifetime.





Super cornet serial number 5568. Early features on this horn include the side-mounted thumb saddle on the first valve slide, the Bb-A quick change stop rod on the main tuning slide, and the hand engraved tone ring^d. Super cornets, like Super trumpets, got slightly heavier over time: this example, dated to 1938, weighs 2 lbs. 2.2 oz.

- d. "Tone ring" was Olds' term of art for what is more usually referred to as a "garland." These were quite common on brass instruments, particularly in Europe, in the 19th and early 20th centuries. They were less common in the USA, although a few Reynolds models, more-or-less contemporary with The Super, also had bell garlands.





Super cornet serial number 7324. The thumb saddle on the first valve slide has moved to the top of the slide, but this horn still has the Bb-A quick change stop rod on the main tuning slide and the hand engraved tone ring. This example, dating to 1940, is a bit heavier than the earlier horn: 2 lbs. 2.9 oz.



Super cornet serial number 27861. On this post-war example, the Bb-A quick change stop rod is gone, and the tone ring is now machine-engraved. Post war Supers are noticeably heavier than the pre-war ones. This 1948 horn weighs in at 2 lbs. 4.1 oz., even with the third valve stop rod now deleted.

4.a. THE VULCAN CORNET – A PROTOTYPE OF THE SUPER? (1936)



*prototype, n.: (1) an original example on which something is patterned;
(2) an original that exhibits the essential features of a later type*

Only recently discovered, this exciting and (so far as is known) unique cornet, serial number 3756, exhibits a mix of features from both The Standard and The Super. The wrap is very similar to The Super, although not quite identical in detail. The side mounted thumb saddle matches the early Supers, and the location of the water keys is again almost the same as on the Super cornet. It has an “aircraft strut” bell brace, a feature it shares with both The Standard and the earliest variation of The Super. This cornet lacks The Super’s tone ring, though, featuring a bell engraving instead. That engraving proclaims it as the “VULCAN CORNET.” The knurling on the finger buttons and the top and bottom valve caps is in the same style as The Standard and other Olds horns of the period, and differs from the type used on The Super. Photos by Centex Brass.

Is The Vulcan a “prototype” of The Super? The earliest Super trumpet recorded so far is serial number 3699, and the earliest Super cornet 4095. The Vulcan, at serial number 3756, slots

conveniently in between, so the timing feels right. However, Robb has taken measurements of The Vulcan that demonstrate that it is not a prototype in the sense of definition (1) above: while the wrap and the overall physical appearance very much resemble The Super, every part making up the bore of The Vulcan differs in critical dimensions from The Super, not to mention the lack of a tone ring and a lightweight bell. This cornet was not a precise archetype from which production Super cornets were copied.

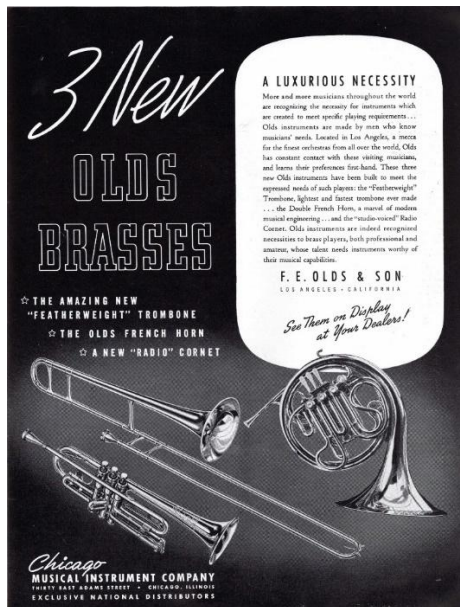
That having been said, I believe that I can reasonably argue that The Vulcan does qualify as a prototype (or at least a clear predecessor) to The Super in terms of definition (2). The “essential feature” that the Vulcan and The Super share is, of course, the wrap, which is unique to these two patterns when compared to all other Olds cornet designs. What made The Super trumpet stand out from earlier Olds designs? Two features brought over from the recently introduced Super trombone: the tone ring and the lightweight bell section. I believe that Olds, right from the start, felt that they had a winner with The Super trumpet and made a marketing decision to add a cornet to the new “line.” At that time, The Vulcan was a brand-new model. It had not yet been established with Olds’ customers as a distinct model and was readily available to modify and fit into The Super lineup. This simplified startup since they didn’t have to start from scratch with a new design.

There is no documentation to support this claim, of course, nor is there ever likely to be. However, I think it is at least plausible, and to me at least makes sense in both engineering economy of design and marketing strategy, while it also provides The Vulcan with a reasonable slot in the development of Olds cornets, instead of leaving it as a one-off outlier.



Almost but not quite the same, Super cornet 6547 and 3756. Note that the receiver on 6547 has been replaced, apparently with one from an Ambassador. Photos by Clay Collins of Centex Brass. Clay noted that the bell diameter of 3756 is slightly smaller than that of pre-war Super 6547, but slightly larger than early post-war Super cornet 17985.

5. FIFTH PATTERN – THE RADIO MODEL CORNET (1938?-1939?)



The advertisement at left, from the October 1939 issue of *Metronome Magazine*, introduces three new Olds models, including the Radio cornet. The illustrated Radio cornet is obviously derived from the Military Model. Robb's comparison between the Radio and Military Models he examined found only the few differences mentioned above.

Actual production numbers for The Radio cornet are not known, of course, but it was only made for a short time and there are very few surviving examples listed in the Olds Central Register. This may be because Olds advertised The Radio cornet as “studio voiced” and marketed it for recording work. Olds introduced The Recording Model Super Cornet (aka

The Super Recording) shortly after The Radio, aimed at the same market. Perhaps this made the Radio Model seem redundant.

The Radio Model is listed in the 1939 catalog using phrases that immediately recall the wording previously used for The Military Model.

Designed especially for those who prefer the voice of the cornet with the appearance and balance of the trumpet—particularly fine for dance, radio and recording studio players. The medium weight, specially tempered bell gives excellent carrying power with surprisingly quick response. The extreme flexibility, lightness of attack and easy blowing qualities of this model permit it to handle with ease the most difficult cornet passages; and to replace satisfactorily the most desirable characteristics of the trumpet.

The Radio Model trombone is well known, and examples still exist in various collections. There doesn't seem to have been a Radio Model trumpet. Olds produced two early trumpets, the Symphony and the French Model, that were cataloged as trumpets only, without a cornet counterpart. The Radio Model name is unique in being applied to cornets and trombones but not trumpets.



Military Model cornet serial no. 1853 (above) and Radio cornet serial no. 5946 (below), both in unrestored condition. Photo from Robb Stewart. The visual similarities are obvious. The Military cornet shown in this photo is missing its pinkie hook, first valve thumb saddle, third valve ring, and lyre holder, but the two horns are otherwise visually identical. In his article, though, Robb mentions several small dimensional differences.



These are photos of the same Radio cornet shown above, serial number 5946, after Robb's splendid restoration. Photos from Robb Stewart.

6. SIXTH PATTERN – THE STANDARD CORNET (1940/41-1947?)

Between 1939 and 1941 Olds made a major revision to their cornet lineup. Before this time, all Olds cornets were “short valve” patterns. In those designs, cornets and trumpets in the same model line had pistons that were the same length. That doesn’t mean that they were necessarily interchangeable, because the tubing in and out of the valve casings was arranged differently, but the casings and pistons were approximately the same length in both trumpets and cornets. After 1941, all new cornet patterns were “long valve” types. In these designs, cornet pistons were substantially longer than those of their corresponding trumpets. With the notable exception of The Super, all cornet patterns were either revised to long valve designs or replaced by new long valve models.

The Olds Lineup of Cornets in the 1939 catalog:

- The Standard (Second Pattern)
- The Super (Fourth Pattern)
- The Radio (Fifth Pattern)

All of these are short valve patterns, as were the first (The Olds) and third (The Military) Patterns, which are no longer listed.

The Olds Lineup of Cornets in the 1941 catalog:

- The Special (Seventh Pattern)
- The Standard (Sixth Pattern)
- The Super (Fourth Pattern)
- The Recording Model Super (Ninth Pattern)

All cornet patterns are now long valve types except for The Super. The Standard design is still being made, but it is now a long valve design. This change is significant enough that I have designated it as a new Sixth Pattern. Two new long valve patterns, The Special and the Recording Model Super, have been introduced. All new Olds cornets going forward will be long valve instruments.



The sixth pattern Standard cornet. This example is serial number 8974, dated to 1941. At first glance, this cornet looks identical to 2648, except that the bell engraving has caught up with the literature and now reads “THE OLDS | STANDARD.” Also, above “THE | OLDS,” engraving, the words “TEMPERED | BELL” have been added. The catalog blurb claims, “[t]he tempered bell has an increased diameter, giving greater power with no loss of tonal richness.” From our collection.

The catalog text further states that “the valves have been lengthened to allow a more comfortable hand-grip,” and 8974’s valve cases are almost one inch longer than those on the earlier Standard. The Standard was the only Olds cornet that was made in both short valve and long valve versions.



The Standard (Second Pattern), serial no. 2648 (above) and The Standard (Sixth Pattern), serial no. 8974 (below).



Third valve pistons - serial no. 2648 (left) and serial no. 8974 (right).

7. SEVENTH PATTERN - THE SPECIAL CORNET, PRE-WAR & THE WWII MILITARY VERSION (1939-1944)

The Special was the first new pattern to be introduced after Olds made the change to long valve designs. The earliest Special cornet in the Olds Central Register is serial number 6598, dated to 1939. It is not listed in the 1939 catalog though. The Special's first catalog appearance is in the 1941 catalog, which says "[t]he valves are long, producing the design so desirable in a cornet, plus a large, comfortable hand-grip." There is, of course, no explanation as to exactly why long valves are "so desirable," but like a lot of advertising you are not supposed to examine this too closely.

Olds produced two significantly different patterns of The Special during the Los Angeles era. The wrap of the first version Special is similar but not identical to The Military Model, with a double crook in the leadpipe and entry into the third valve on the left side. Unlike The Military Model, though, there is only one tuning slide. Like The Super, this cornet has a thumb saddle on the first slide and no adjustment on the third.



Much as was the case with The Standard, the first examples of The Special cornet carried only “The Olds” on the bell engraving. This early horn is serial number 6805, now in Ron Berndt’s collection. The visible stop rod is a Bb–A quick change on the tuning slide, which on this horn is tucked away on the left side of the valves. The connector on the top of the third valve slide is for a lyre holder, not a finger ring – the tuning slide is not adjustable on the fly. All examples of the first pattern Special that I have examined are dated to 1943 or earlier. Photos by Ron Berndt.



Another example of the first pattern Special cornet, this one serial no. 9791. The bell engraving now carries the “SPECIAL” model name. Photos from eBay.



A U.S. Army contract version of the first pattern Special cornet, serial no. 12394. I compared this horn to “civilian” version serial no. 7396, and except for the pinkie ring, omission of the first slide saddle, and the bell engraving, the two are almost identical. From our collection.

8. EIGHTH PATTERN – THE RADIO MODEL CORNET (1939)

On the verso of the title page of his *Vincent Bach and his Trumpets* (2022-23), Ron Berndt quotes Roy Hemply:

Just when you think you have it figured out, a horn comes along to prove you wrong.

All too true! I have never had the opportunity to personally examine a Radio Model cornet, but I confidently wrote the section on the fifth pattern Radio cornet based on the photos and description published in Robb Stewart's Radio Model article. In brief, I wrote that the Radio cornet was a successor to the Military Model, using the same unique wrap, with the only reported differences being some changes in tubing diameter, omission of the hammered bell, and the striking bell engraving. And it now appears that all those things are true – except when they aren't. It turns out that two very different patterns were built as Radio cornets.

Robb recently added photos of this newly discovered horn to his website.



This horn, serial no. 6570, is clearly marked as a Radio Model. At the same time, though, it is equally clearly derived from the first version Special and differs significantly from the earlier example shown. What does this mean? Perhaps the answer lies in the timing. The cornets in the 1939 catalog are all short valve models, but by 1941 they are all long valve types. The fifth pattern Radio cornet was a short valve design. The eighth pattern Radio is a long valve cornet that does not appear in any known catalog. Who has a 1940 Olds catalog? Is this mystery model listed in it? Maybe, but I suspect not. This may simply be an ultimately unsuccessful attempt to make a long valve version of the Radio.

One suggestion for the change is that the Radio Model looked too much like the Military Model, which was perceived as old-fashioned and was declining in popularity. Another possibility is that this horn is a one-off that started life as a first pattern Special but has had its bell replaced. Olds is known to have done similar replacements in other cases. When, in future, someone finally writes a definite history of F.E. Olds and Son, this is one of the many mysteries they will somehow have to address. Photos are by the owner, reproduced here from Robb Stewart's website.

NINTH PATTERN - THE OLDS RECORDING MODEL SUPER CORNET (THE SUPER RECORDING)
(1940-1950)



Olds formally designated this pattern as the Super Olds Recording Model, but today it is universally known as the Super Recording. I will follow common parlance and call it The Super Recording, while acknowledging that this is technically incorrect. Shown above is an early example of the Super Recording cornet, serial no. 8622. This is a lovely cornet, but it must be noted that the finish is a very fine bead-blast replating done by Mark Metzler. The Super Recording cornet, like the Super, underwent changes in detail during its model lifespan. None of these are significant enough to class as variations. I have broken down this model into three major types, based on the bell engravings. This early horn, for example, has a side mounted thumb saddle. It's interesting to note that this feature persisted on early examples of the Super Recording cornet even though the Super cornet had switched to a top-mounted saddle by serial no. 7324. Another characteristic of the early Super Recording is that it, like The Super, carries no engraving on the bell other than on the tone ring. Photos from Centex Brass.





Another early example of the Super Recording cornet, serial no. 9039, this time in lacquered brass. Super Recording horns, both the trumpet and the cornet, share one unusual feature – the second valve is offset to the left. In his article on The Super Recording, Robb Stewart mentions that Olds had made individual horns with this feature before the Super Recording was introduced, but this was the first Olds model to have an offset second valve as standard. The 1941 catalog is the first to list the Olds Recording Model Super Cornet. The catalog description states *the middle valve is recessed to make for a “natural” and comfortable hand-grip*. Today, we would describe this as an ergonomic feature, but in 1941 “ergonomic” had not yet taken on the meaning it has now. From our collection.



There is still no bell engraving on this later example of the Super Recording cornet, serial no. 14549, but there are a few minor changes. The thumb saddle has migrated to the top of the third slide, where it would remain for the rest of production. Most interestingly, on this example the tone ring is brass. Brass tone rings seem to have been a war era expedient – tone rings on

both Super and Super Recording models reverted to nickel-silver shortly after the war. Note also that the tone ring is no longer entirely hand engraved. Instead, this example is primarily photo engraved with “RECORDING” added by hand. Photos from Centex Brass.



A “middle period” Super Recording cornet serial no 16966. The tone ring is nickel-silver once again, but “RECORDING” is now engraved vertically on the bell flare. Photos from Centex Brass.



An example of a late production Super Recording cornet, serial no 24219. The bell engraving now reads "SUPER | RECORDING" with a floral border. Photos from Centex Brass.



Olds marketed The Super Recording Model trumpet as an up-market spin-off of The Super and advertised it as intended for recording studio use. In his article [Olds Super Recording Models](#), Robb Stewart traces the derivation of The Super Recording trumpet from its predecessor, The Super. The design of The Super Recording cornet, though, does not show any real influence from The Super cornet other than the tone ring on the bell. As can be seen from the photo above, The Super Recording's wrap is completely different from its predecessor. The Super Recording was the first Olds cornet to have a 1-2-3 flow path, where the lead pipe enters the first valve and the bell connects to valve no. 3. It is also a "tall-valve" design, unlike The Super.

9. TENTH PATTERN – THE SPECIAL CORNET, POST WAR (1948-1979)



Second pattern Special cornet, serial number 21406. Olds produced two slightly different variations of post-war Special cornets. Both types exhibit the same distinctly different wrap from the pre-war first pattern Special cornet. The first variation, shown here, has a receiver integral with the lead pipe, a feature it shares with its trumpet counterpart. From our collection.



Second pattern Special cornet, serial number 90932. This is the second variation of the post-war Special. As can be seen from the pictures, this version has a conventional separate mouthpiece receiver attached to the lead pipe, again a feature it shares with its trumpet counterpart. From our collection.



Twenty years and not quite 90,000 serial numbers apart; the wraps of the second pattern Special and The Olds are surprisingly similar. The Olds cornet serial number 939, from 1933, is shown below second pattern Special cornet serial number 90932, made in 1953. The longer valves of the Special contribute to the taller wrap and shorter length overall.

10. ELEVENTH PATTERN – THE AMBASSADOR CORNET (1947/48-1979)



Ambassador cornet serial no. 30154. This may not be the prettiest horn in our collection, but it is the oldest Ambassador we have, and it has all the features that made The Ambassador stand out – note the distinctive underslung water keys and the pinkie ring. Olds used that style of finger ring on a few of the WWII Army contract horns, but The Ambassador was the first (and only) regular production model to replace the finger hook with a ring. Introduced in 1948, The Ambassador was to become the model with the highest production of any Olds horn, but as always trumpets outnumbered cornets. Olds marketed The Ambassador as an inexpensive student model, inserted into the bottom of the lineup below The Special. The lower price, though, did not mean lower quality. Olds was a “one tolerance” shop in the 40s and 50s, and The Ambassador was a fine horn. Even now, almost 50 years after production ended, many trumpeters still regard Ambassadors as excellent student instruments. In fact, my eleven-year-old nephew plays an Ambassador in his school band, although the current prejudice against cornets means that his horn is a trumpet rather than a cornet.

TWELFTH PATTERN – THE OLDS STUDIO CORNET (1947-1971)



Olds Studio cornet serial no. 35934. Although it's hard to see in these photos, The Studio cornet has a bell section with a distinctive nickel-silver flare. Olds referred to this as a "Brilliant Bell," claiming that it provides "unusual carrying power." The Studio also has an interesting lead pipe wrap. The lead pipe enters the third valve case on the right rather than the left, but otherwise its wrap resembles that of the Military model. This is an example of the first

variation, which has trombone style water keys on both lead pipe crooks, again like the Military Model. Photos from eBay.



This striking nickel-silver Studio cornet, serial no. 59277, is an example of the second variation, which has a single trombone style water key on the lower lead pipe crook only. I admire the color pattern, but the seller specifically mentioned that it has been restored, and it's probable that the silver / brass combination is not original. Photo from eBay.



Olds Studio cornet serial no. 133333. The nickel-silver bell is easily discernable in these photos. This is the third variation of this model. Like the second variations, this version has a single water key on the leadpipe, but now it is the top operated style. The bell engraving still reads Los Angeles, but in this serial number range the Olds Central serial number list shows a mix of Los Angeles and Fullerton addresses on the bell engravings, so this horn may actually be early Fullerton production. From our collection.

11. THIRTEENTH PATTERN – THE OLDS RECORDING CORNET (1950-1968)





Recording cornet serial no. 57357. The Recording model, introduced in 1950 as a successor to The Super Recording, was the new top-of-the-line for Olds. This pattern follows its predecessor in having a 1-2-3 flow path, although the wrap differs in detail. The spring loaded third valve trigger and the Rey-O-Loy bell made the new model stand out. Another feature the Recording cornet shares with its predecessor is the offset second valve. From the c. 1951 catalog:

The bell of Re-O-loy adds depth of tone and carrying power with even greater beauty. The valve position has been carried forward slightly allowing for greater comfort in the hand-grip around the characteristic recessed middle valve; and the OLDS effortless trigger tuning mechanism on the third valve slide provides for simple intonation changes on low tones.

A NOTE ON THE TRIGGER TUNING MECHANISM – Although this occurred after the move to Fullerton and is thus technically out-of-scope for this article, I think it's worthwhile to note that in the late 1950s Olds changed the Recording cornet's trigger from operating the third valve slide to operating the main tuning slide. The c. 1957 catalog on Olds Central repeats the text of the earlier catalog: *the OLDS effortless trigger tuning mechanism on the third valve slide provides for simple intonation changes on low tones*. In the c.1961 catalog, the Recording cornet's description has been revised: *the tuning slide trigger tuning mechanism – completely solves all intonation adjustments*. Based on this, Olds made this change between 1957 and 1961.



Recording cornet 57357 shown above Super Recording cornet 9039. The leadpipe is different and the later horn is more compact overall, but the relationship between the Recording and its ancestor is clear.

The Recording trumpet was an immediate success and is highly regarded as a professional instrument even today, although it has never enjoyed the fame of its legendary progenitor. The cornet version, though, had a secret problem. R. Dale Olson, in his *Zig Kanstul: Last of the Great Masters* (A.I. Press, Fullerton, CA., 2017), noted on page 146 that early testing of The Recording cornet discovered that it had intonation issues. He and Mr. Kanstul reported this to CMI, the company that owned Olds at the time, but nothing was done until several years later, when the band director of a “highly prominent university,” who had just purchased several Recording cornets, complained to CMI management about the intonation. At that point, the company finally took notice, and Mr. Kanstul rectified the problem by redesigning the lead pipe. The example shown here is an early model and presumably exhibits the intonation

problems. It will be interesting to set up a test and determine the severity of the issue. From our collection.

CONCLUSION

How to sum up F.E. Olds cornet production in the Los Angeles era, 1929 to 1954? Thirteen different patterns (and many minor variations) in two dozen years seems like a significant effort from a smallish company like Olds. Until The Ambassador came along in the late 1940s, Olds specialized in high quality professional instruments, and their production numbers never approached those of the other major instrument manufacturers of the time. On the other hand, smaller production meant that Olds fabrication practice tended more toward a bench system rather than an assembly line. This, coupled with the superb designers Olds had at the time, gave the company the flexibility to experiment and respond quickly to the needs of their customers, and so to develop and market these many and varied horns.

APPENDICES:

I want to acknowledge the advice, suggestions, and corrections I received from Clay Collins, Robb Stewart, and Ron Berndt during the time I was writing this article. Their cumulative knowledge of Olds history is matched only by their generosity in sharing their expertise with me. Without their encouragement and support, this effort would be very different (and much less accurate). Thanks to you all.

A NOTE ON THE PHOTOGRAPHS: I took most of the photographs shown here. My photos illustrate horns that my son and I have collected. We have examples of most of the cornet patterns Olds produced in the Los Angeles era, but we don't have examples of all of the many variations. To fill these gaps, I've copied pictures from [Robb Stewart Brass Instruments](#), from [Centex Brass](#), and from Ron Berndt, and these are used with permission. A few were copied from the sadly extinct Vintage Cornets website, and a handful of others were shamelessly lifted from eBay.

PATTERN, MODEL, VARIATION, AND DETAIL: As far as I know, there is no generally recognized heirarchy of terms defining the physical differences between the many different "body plans" or "wraps" found in the various cornets Olds produced in this era. My original intention was to use "MODEL" as the highest level designator, since Olds conveniently assigned model names to their cornets. This doesn't quite work, though – pre-war Special cornets have a totally different wrap from the post-war Specials, and there needs to be some way to make that distinction. Organizing them by wrap only doesn't work either, thanks to the Radio Model.

There are two radically different types of this rare model. One is visually indistinguishable from the Military Model, although Robb Stewart has noted some subtle dimensional differences. The other type appears identical to the first version of the Special, although I don't have enough data to determine if there are dimensional differences between the two as well. For these reasons, I have rather arbitrarily chosen to define my different categories as "PATTERNS." This term includes one pattern for each named model except for the Special and the Radio Models, each of which is divided into two patterns.

For physical differences that involve changes in the actual body of the horn but are not significant enough to be classed as different patterns, I have used the term "VARIATION." An example would be the second pattern Special – all of them have the same wrap, but the earlier variant has an integral receiver, while the second variant has the more common separate receiver. Even less significant changes such as different types of bracing or engraving styles are (hopefully) noted but are not otherwise designated.

It's also important to note that Olds generally offered options for customizing their horns: various finishes, optional bore sizes, and sometimes other choices are commonly listed in catalogs. I have generally noted these in my descriptions, especially when the horn shown differs from the norm, but I don't consider these as variations.

ABOUT ME: I am a semi-retired engineer living in Houston, Texas. My son and I collect vintage trumpets, cornets, and flugelhorns, plus other interesting brass instruments as they come along. We tend to concentrate on Olds models, but we have examples from other makers as well. I experienced the tail end of the cornet era first hand.

When I started in 5th grade band in 1961, my first horn was a Conn Director cornet, a typical long American model of the period. In those days, kids always began on cornets because band educators assumed that the shorter instrument was easier for young arms to hold. By the time I started high school in 1965, everyone took for granted that cornets were only for beginners, and that I needed a trumpet if I was to continue with my musical career. By great good luck (or not!) my parents bought me an Olds Recording Model trumpet, beginning my life-long obsession with Olds. When I played the famous Clarke cornet solo "The Bride of the Waves" as my senior UIL contest piece, I played it on my Olds trumpet. No one, including me, even considered the fact that it was originally written for cornet. There were NO cornets in the bands at either of the two high schools I attended. That prejudice against the cornet is still in place today, especially, it seems, at the school level. When my son started his musical studies, he started directly on trumpet, and he has never played in a school band that had even a single cornet in their lineup.

For the last few decades, the last refugium for the cornet has been the British style brass band, where trumpets simply do not exist. In these bands the Bb cornet fills the high brass slot, along with (usually) one Eb soprano cornet in a “color” role. We even have a soprano cornet in our collection^e, although we’ve never had the opportunity to play it in an ensemble. The music industry’s lack of interest in the cornet does seem to be slowly changing, though. All three of today’s major high-end brass makers – Yamaha, Bach, and Schilke – market professional model cornets these days, as do some of the smaller boutique shops, and cornets are again appearing in jazz ensembles from time to time. I, for one, hope this trend continues and the cornet once again assumes its rightful place in the brass lineup.

e. It’s a Bach. Olds made a few Eb trumpets on occasion, but they never made a “sop.”

Today, I am much more a collector than I am a player. I still noodle a bit and my son nags me constantly to practice more, but at this point I prefer to do the oiling and polishing and leave the actual playing to him. And anyway, he is one of those annoying people with perfect pitch and the ability to bend a note a full step or more – how can a certified Olde Fart™ compete with that?

John Thorne, June 2026