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What should I bid for another's past?

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—On summer Saturdays, many of us gather to close out a household's past by selling its things into an unknown future.

Some owners may be moving and simply want to tote less. Others have departed—and are not expected to return. Their heirs have taken what they want. The residue is disgorged into the front yard, each item without friends in the bright sun.

The favorite Thanksgiving platter is now just a big plate. The TV couch for 30 years is nothing more than four legs and a couple of sags. The owner's emotional investment in each piece is placed in escrow, somewhere.

The seller's old will become the buyer's new.

We look for a steal, or, if not that, a good deal, or at least something that we half need.

Furniture is displayed close to the house. Tools are set out by the workshop. Cardboard boxes of miscellany are arrayed on the beds of hay wagons. Farm equipment is grouped in a field, off by itself. Most machinery is still usable, but some things will be put out to suburban pasture as yard ornaments.

The miscellany boxes contain things that lived on shelves and in drawers and cabinets. Linens, perfume, self-help books, kitchen wares, crayons and knickknacks from Niagara Falls. I considered buying the box with the bayonet and two brunette wigs, but saner heads prevailed.

Stuff ends up going to friends, enemies and strangers. The auctioneer never insists that a particular item -- an Underwood manual typewriter with only two dysfunctional keys, the family's Kodak Brownie Flash camera from the 50s -- will only be sold to a "good home." Best money takes it.

Auctions recycle and redistribute without sentiment. But I always feel a little funny when a locally made cradle leaves the county in the back of a 2011 Volvo V50 station wagon. Its new life—standing still, holding catalogs?

Auctions are community events in Blue Grass. You stand around with neighbors with whom you haven't stood around with for a while, which allows you to talk about things that you haven't talked about for a while. I had two conversations about bear-hunting violations, one about a local fight and another about the cherry pie that was being sold by the slice.

The women of a local Methodist church fixed bacon-cheeseburgers, pies and other trailer food. Local opinion is proportionately divided as to which denomination -- and which congregation in which denomination -- provides the best chow at these events. I buy from windows of all faiths and avoid doctrinal spats over who fixes the best chili-cheese dogs.

A final judgment is rendered on the deceased for the quality of their furnishings, workmanship in everything handmade (including the patchwork pincushion), stoutness of the hand tools and upkeep of the farm machinery.

The most private items are not auctioned. They're either kept in the family or bagged black and tossed in the county dumpster at night.

Certain staples always appear. A treadle sewing machine. Handmade barrels and kegs. Crocks. Ball canning jars. Veneered furniture from the 1940s. Christmas decorations. Firearms—a deer rifle or two, a beat-up shotgun. Homemade tomato knives. A tractor from the 50s. Old school books. An Elvis something—this time it was a three-canister kitchen Elvis. At least one buck-naked Barbie. And a framed picture of the Last Supper, which another local auctioneer once described as "Jesus and the boys under glass."

You can always tell the wealthy folks from D.C. and Richmond. They buy the metal kitchen tins and handmade baskets. They often come dressed for a safari.

One regular from out-of-state wore a .357 on his hip; he apparently thought that my neighbors and I fancied throwing him a pot and having him for supper.

Good auctioneers are fast and funny. The one on Saturday offered "two mailboxes for one money, his and hers, keep your mail separate."

No matter how worthless an item, an auctioneer must convey belief in its monetary value. Several items will just need one or two parts. Every dog is pretty good, though, admittedly, not perfect. An old item whose use has been collectively forgotten can always be hung on your wall.

I like that a person's stuff can be spread far and wide, turning up again and again.

Still, when you dismember the pile of someone's life, its coherence is lost, except in an occasional memory. A child -- now 65 -- might remember that '57 Ford 8N popping out of gear as it came down the hill with a loaded hay wagon behind it. Or Mom, making a cake with eggs from her hens and using the old, geared hand beater to mix them up. Auction bidders pay for objects, not family history.

Auctions lay a festive hope of getting something for cheap over the melancholy background of lives and households ended. They sometimes feel like a wake with good food and no mourning.

Who, I wonder, will get my favorite frying pan, a gift from an old girlfriend? What about the first bowl I turned on a lathe? And the books I've read repeatedly?

When my objects no longer have a home with me, they will either find others or they will be found in the trash. It's up to each one to make a good first impression.

I would bid on some stuff at my own auction, but I'd let the junk go.

Wait! Now that I think about it, I have no junk, because everything has a story. Others with whom I associate may have a different opinion.

Curtis Seltzer is a land consultant who works with buyers and helps sellers with marketing plans. He is author of How To Be a DIRT-SMART Buyer of Country Property at www.curtis-seltzer.com where his weekly columns are posted.

Contact: Curtis Seltzer, Ph.D.
Land Consultant
1467 Wimer Mountain Road
Blue Grass, VA 24413-2307
540-474-3297
curtisseltzer@htcnet.org
www.curtis-seltzer.com