

Area rich with country auctions

By Emily A. Sopensky

Except for the politicians and the seekers of free money, most Philadelphians think of Harrisburg as the 'between place'. It's between Philadelphia and Pittsburgh; it's between the Pennsylvania Dutch country and the Gettysburg Battlefield; it's between the Poconos and Washington.

For Harrisburgers, too, the city is only a place to work. During the summer, traffic in Downtown Harrisburg is noticeably lighter, as people ride their bikes to work, or, much more likely, escape to the nearby mountains, or to the shores. In the winter this is a family area where staying at home with the tube or entertaining friends at home with the tube are the major forms of recreation.

But there is another aspect of this area that is often overlooked and underappreciated. The countryside is simply beautiful. And part of the beauty comes from the tranquility of a stable population. The provincial towns and villages of mountainous Perry and upper Dauphin counties contrast with the sprawling and "worldly" Harrisburg suburbs.

While driving along the winding, narrow roads in this country setting, there is the feeling that this is the way it has always been. The old stone and brick farmhouses that dot the countryside are evidence that little has changed here.

The broad Susquehanna and its younger sister, the Juniata, sweep through this area and form a common focal point for the surrounding scattered communities.

It is in this nostalgic setting that I started going to country auctions on Saturdays. Every since that first auction, on a day that I didn't feel like doing Saturday errands, I have been intrigued by them. It is also a pleasant experience just to drive into the country on a sunny summer Saturday, mix with the local folk, and enjoy good home-cooking.

Country auctions are a piece of Americana. They are held on the rolling farms of Adams and Cumberland counties and the rockier soils of upper Dauphin and Perry counties. They are stylized by the clientele and populace of the area. The auctioneers personify the temperament of the locale: folksy and flaring Perry, down-to-earth upper Dauphin, urbane and brisk Cumberland, rustic Adams and Northern York.

In this country the general store is still a part of daily life and not just a tourist trap. Unlike Lancaster county, which attracts more out-of-towners, the country around the Susquehanna-Juniata river junction does not attract many tourists or much commerci-

reflect this provincialism. Most auction-goers are local residents. Consequently, bidding generally remains lower than in Lancaster.

Driving along the country roads, it is easy to spot a country auction. Pickup trucks, station wagons, sedans and even tiny sports cars line both sides of the highway. Traffic slows to a crawl as auction-goers crowd the roads walking to the farmhouse.

During the auction day, the farmhouse is transformed into a multi-function public house. Here the household items are lined up against the walls, stacked in boxes

houses. But she is convinced that Dean's ability as an auctioneer contributes heavily to the prices he gets for real estate.

Because the auctioneer takes a percentage of the gross sales, it is in his own self-interest to wheedle a higher price. To attest to Shull's abilities, I was surprised to learn that this seemingly unassuming family has a twin-engine private plane sitting behind the barn on the family's own private landing strip.

The auctioneer's podium, pioneered by the venerable Shull, is elbow-high and wide enough for

strictly cash-and-carry.

Country auctions are a quick and easy way of disposing of property. But more than being timely and efficient, country auctions are a social event. In an area that consists mostly of farms, neighbors and friends do not have much time to visit each other except on special occasions. An auction is often such an occasion. It is an excuse to socialize and to buy some much needed farm tools at bargain prices, or an extra comforter for a new baby granddaughter.

The difference in age and experience of the auction-goers is often noticeable. Little old ladies can be heard giggling at some young person's unfamiliarity with what is being auctioned off. On one such occasion the object in question was of very practical use late on a cold night in the days before indoor plumbing.

While entire families don't often attend, there are many couples and senior citizens who come to such events. If the auction is on an estate, there will always be at least one elderly expert who will freely discuss the details of the deceased's life.

I remember one auction in upper Dauphin, where there were boxes and boxes full of health magazines and yoga books. They had belonged to a septuagenarian bachelor. His niece confided in me that the health magazines were not his only obsession. "He was very active sexually, you know," she told me. "You should have seen the magazines we had to throw out before the sale!" (My bachelor companion, promptly bought all the remaining health and long-life books.)

These auctions are not really the best place for legitimate antique hunters. But if you are one of many people who are in any way fascinated by combing the local flea markets and junk shops for Americana, Kitsch, or anything that is distinctly interesting, then country auctions are for you.

Truly fine pieces appear when personal possessions have been accumulated over several generations. But there is plenty to be found at these auctions that is not old. One of my favorite finds at an auction was an art deco black ceramic cat posed over a shallow black bowl. The cat and bowl merged into one form and appear to be the cat's answer to the RCA dog.

Another time one quarter purchased an art deco floor lamp with a milk-white half-globe shade. Another four quarters rewired the lamp. It now stands in my living room.

The current emphasis on casual and informal furniture has repopularized the late-victorian and pre-WWI taste for golden oak. Golden oak washstands, dressers,

cabinets are still in supply in the central Pa. country auctions although the prices are up from what they used to be.

A few years ago natives laughed as Southern dealers bought unwanted oak furniture from this area to sell back home. Now the natives clamor to get oak furniture to sell.

One antique dealing couple, Pearl and Ed Greenholt, insist that many Southern dealers are still invading this area to buy up stock and return home to sell their finds. Currently, the Greenholts note a trend in these dealers towards china and pottery.

Nevertheless, given the interest from out-of-staters and from the natives, there can only be a limited remaining supply of antiques and other goods. In Bucks county it is almost impossible to find any antiques left for sale. Everything is in private collections, according to Mrs. Greenholt. She is convinced that this trend is edging westward.

But you can still go to auctions to find old books, kitchen equipment, bedding and linens, a variety of furniture, and of course, plenty of glasses and dishes. Prices are good and the variety endless.

Even after the goods are handed to the winning bidder, informal barterers persist. One woman wanted to buy a basket from me which was sold along with an old wooden box I had wanted. Since I was just regretting having paid too much for the box, we quickly found that our desires met.

On another occasion I had my eye on a box of baby jars for homemade jam. An old, wiry man outbid me. I found that he bought the dozens of bottles and jars for whitening his carvings. He freely relinquished the baby jars when I



drawing by auctioneer

on the floor and loaded onto tables. The auction clerks are busy registering bidders, collecting money and directing people to the foodstand and the john. Families and friends are busy catching up on new gossip while inspecting the merchandise prior to sale.

The center of attraction is, of course, the auctioneer. It is his voice, his gestures, and insinuations that ultimately capture the attention of the crowd—not whatever he is auctioning off. He must know when the crowd is getting bored and how to revive interest.

"A good auctioneer not only has to know what he is auctioning off; he also must know prices," said Vera Shull, wife of Dean Shull, one of the areas most loved and best established auctioneers. "Instead of drawing the bidding out to get higher prices, Dean thinks that forcing the bidding gets the better prices. People don't get a chance to think about what's up for bid." Instead, they rely on impulse.

A country auctioneer's skill and art are revealed when auctioning off real estate. A good auctioneer knows how to create the tension that brings a good price. Mrs. Shull said that auctioned real estate is going for a good price in Perry county because outsiders are

two people to stand behind. The front of the stand facing the crowd is emblazoned in bold letters with the auctioneer's name and phone number. The top is just deep enough for the auctioneer's clerk to rest a clipboard on which each item sold is recorded.

Gavels are unheard of here. Instead, a wave of a hand or a hand slapping the top of the podium indicates the end of the bidding. Most auctioneers now use microphones (although Shull insists he uses his mike only to "talk above the moo'ah" of the cows" at a cattle sale).

Goods being auctioned off are sold off the house porch or passed through the living room window. Furniture and other large items are spread out on the lawn. The crowd hovers closely to the auctioneer and follows him from the porch on a trip around the yard as each item is sold.

From late morning until the end of the day people scurry back and forth from the auction to their cars, carry boxes filled with their purchases, dump the contents and return with the empty box for another load. Trucks back up to the yard and strangers help each other load furniture and other heavy objects on to the truck. At these auctions there is no delivery



asked to buy them from him. After some conversation he extended an invitation to my friend and me to visit him and see his carvings within bottles.

If nothing else amuses you, at least the good country food will never fail to tantalize. Lunchstands are usually reserved by various social organizations trying to raise money to support their activities. The array is dominated by delicious homemade soups and pies.

One friend from Philadelphia, who normally has a very controlled appetite, spent almost the entire morning hanging around the lunchstand. By the time we left early in the afternoon he had sampled three pieces of pie, two kinds of soup, a piece of fudge and a beef barbecue. All of which he