

At the Old Auction Block

The chance of finding a bargain keeps people bidding aplenty.

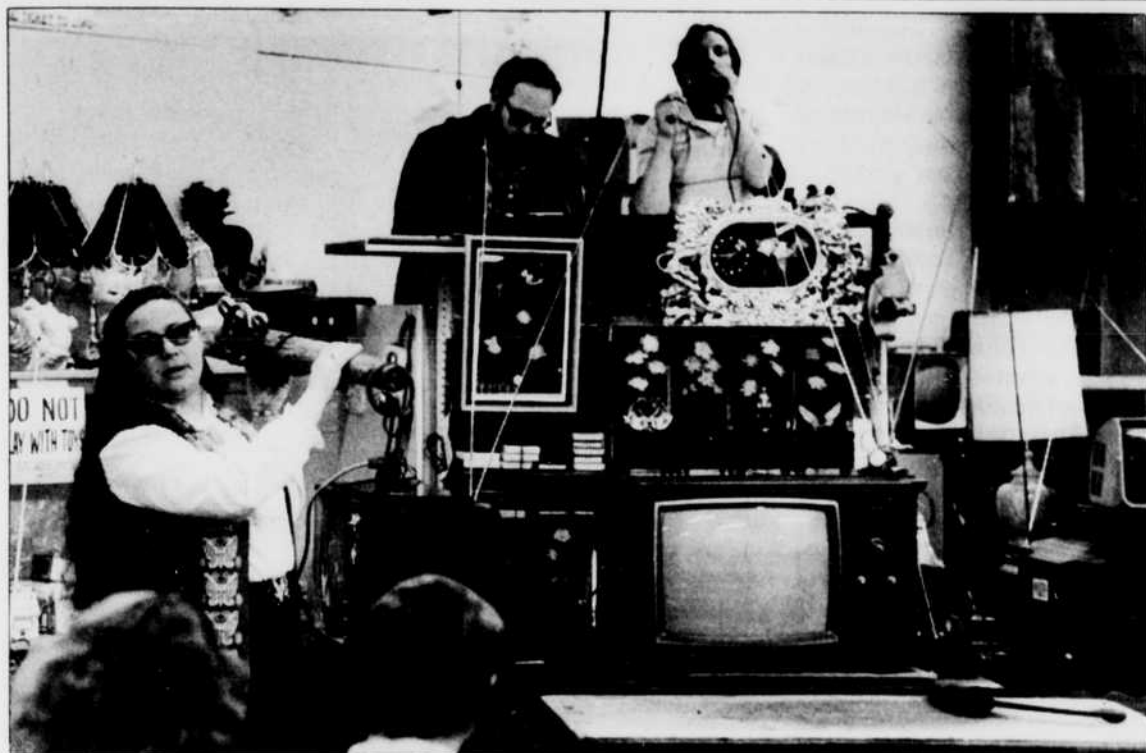


Photo by Dan Wheeler

As the 10 o'clock on the wall draw closer to 1 p.m., the spectators start to arrive, browsing through the bins of miscellaneous merchandise.

Butch Riley sits back and watches the crowd assemble. "Give them a few more minutes to get settled down," he says at 1:05, chewing on red licorice and drinking black coffee at a table while many others smoke cigarettes. "You have to wait for church to get out too," he says.

Riley, an auctioneer from Salem, is in Eugene with his wife Becky for the Sunday auction.

"Who'll give me a dollar, a dollar and a half... Whose going to give me a dollar and now five — now six. Sold!" A dictaphone is sold for a meager \$1, a high fidelity record player \$2, as buyers bid by raising wooden cards with numbers on them into the air.

"I decided to try it (calling) out, and I've been there ever since. It's the last thing I thought I'd ever get into. It's a fun profession though," Riley says.

Some young, some old, the 50 to 60 people at the Bargain Barn

and Auction Center are there Sunday afternoon buying for a bargain or for resale at many secondhand stores in the area, says Pete Rife, who has been coming to the weekly auctions for about a year buying for himself and for resale.

"I don't know if it's the variety of the items for sale or the possibility of the bargains people can get," he says. "For the general populous there is some excitement in bidding."

"It's impossible to determine what will be here from week to week," which adds to the excitement of the auction, he says.

Junction City resident Robert Pugh sat in attendance at the Bargain Barn, waiting for for some items he brought to the barn to be sold. "I don't like to listen to the auctioneer holler," he confesses, noting this is the first time he has been to the Auction Barn.

But for Linda Garrett, owner and operator of the Bargain Barn and Auction Center, auctions have been a way of life.

Brought into the business by her husband Lou, a veteran auction man of 45 years who is since deceased, Linda has con-

tinued the business, buying merchandise either outright or at estate sales. The Bargain Barn also sells other's items on consignment, she says.

"It's a full-time job, and you have to work hard... It's the hardest way to make a living. You need a good attitude with customers and a strong back," she says. A good auction person constantly must be looking for merchandise to sell too, she says.

"One man's trash is another man's treasure... it's an interesting business. You meet new people every day," she says. The Bargain Barn sells just about anything that people are willing to buy, which sets it apart from the two other large auction houses in Eugene.

Although Garrett has been in the business for 17 years now, she says there is something new to be learned in the auction business — even if it goes on for another 100 years. Auctions are addicting, too, Garrett says. "It's kind of like drinking too much beer or too much coffee. Once you start you are there."

"Auction sales are not just furniture sales," she says. The

most common items sold are miscellaneous items. And because many of the items sold in lots can't be opened until they are taken outside of the auction barn, it's almost like a grab bag or the lottery, she says.

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"We have to buy the junk if no one else will buy it," which often is hauled off to the dump, she says.

Garrett recalls the time an auction patron bought an old crate for \$52 on speculation, outbidding the house by \$2 for the right to the unknown contents. When the crate was opened outside, underneath some moldy clothing were 40 little green balls. "They were old \$100 bills. He got more than \$4,000 in \$100 bills, and he bid \$52 for it," she says.

But unfortunately there are more tricks than treasures. "You might spend \$100 and get a box of dirty laundry," she adds. Customers have purchased two-shot derringers, 16th-century muzzleloaders and other nice items through the blind bidding process, she says.

There also is the heartbreak of the auction. Because auctions are often used to liquidate assets, it often deals with death, bankruptcy and divorce courts as well as finance companies. Often the most difficult part of the job is seeing a widow part with her deceased husband's belongings, she says.

Not all auction houses in Eugene are alike. Community Auction co-owner Dennis Babb says he sells mainly furniture, and as much of the furniture is new as it is used.

While the Community Auction will take some items on consignment, the establishment tends to be pretty picky about what it accepts, Babb says. "We're not a pawn shop," he says, and the Community Auction tries to deal mainly with base furniture and wholesale items.

Babb, who has been operating auctions for 10 years, graduated

into the auction business in the mid '70s when sales began to taper off in his chain of three retail stores. "Sales are not as good, and it is a small-scale operation, but it helps," he says.

"The day and age of the auction house is almost extinct," he says, noting that while the overhead has increased substantially in the last 20 to 30 years, the commission rate has remained stable. Twenty-five percent commission is a pretty standard rate. With an overhead of \$5,500 a month, his auction house has to sell a lot even to break even.

Still there are the devoted auction attendants who attend every weekly auction. Babb estimates he has 75 regular buyers who frequent his auctions, coming from as far away as Eureka, Calif., for the event. "Most of the people who come are like a family — a close-knit family," he says.

Rife says he comes from the old school of the barter system and can't see the days of auctions ending. "It will be one of the last things to go. I think the general citizen would rather take a chance and get something used than something more higher priced and new."

Most auction-sold furniture sells for about half the price of what it would cost new.

Both Babb and Garrett agree that in the auction business some pretty unusual items turn up. Garrett says she once sold a buffalo stool — made of a real buffalo right down to the hooves and horns.

Babb imagines his most unusual item was the time he bought 10 tons of cheese and had to sell it all before it went sour. Despite the size of the purchase, Babb says only 200 pounds went bad.

"Once in (the auction business), it's not something you can get out of. It gets in your blood," Garrett says. You may move to a new city or state, "but you will always go back into the business. It's addicting."

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