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A Bleecker Street Antiques Shop  
Turns Out Its Lights

by Jeanne Schinto

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*Grogan & Company, Dedham, Massachusetts*

by Jeanne Schinto

In a Bleecker Street café  
I found someone to love  
today.

—“Tin Angel,” Joni  
Mitchell, *Clouds* (1969)

Auctioneer Michael B. Grogan recognized the cinematic qualities too late. He now regrets that he didn’t ask a student film crew to do a YouTube video of the final hours of Treasures & Trifles in New York City’s West Village. “It could have been done in just short, little clips,” he said a few days before his April 26 auction in Dedham, Massachusetts, of the now-closed shop’s contents, which totaled \$215,000 (includes buyers’ premiums).

Grogan described some of the footage as he pictured it. The auction house’s truck arrives on a Sunday morning at 2 a.m. It’s early because it’s the only way to insure a good parking spot, right in front of the place. The guys doze, then watch people stumble home from the Greenwich Village bars. Daybreak comes, commencing hours and hours of boxing up the hundreds of items jammed into the storefront. There are curios, bronze figurals, candlesticks, porcelains, urns, mirrors, vases, wall brackets and sconces, walking sticks, pedestals, chandeliers, and lamps, lamps, and more lamps.

“And then I imagine a shot of the two of them,” said Grogan, meaning the shop’s co-owners, 77-year-old C. Ned Kell and 83-year-old Robert Xavier “Buddy” McCarthy, who ran the business for almost 44 years. “They’re sweeping up for the last time, and people from the neighborhood are stopping by to shake their hands and say farewell.”

Treasures & Trifles’s address for the past 26 years was 409 Bleecker Street. From 1977-84, it was 315 Bleecker, where a Mailboxes Etc. is today. From 1967-77, it was 321 Bleecker. That’s where their business began.

“That’s occupied by a Coach handbags store now,” said Kell of the last address mentioned. He was speaking by phone from the Upper West Side apartment that he and McCarthy have shared for 50 years. “When we opened up, we were part of a whole block of antiques stores, one right after another. Decorators came down and shopped-all the decorators. I sold to Mrs. [Sister] Parish,” i.e., Mrs. Henry Parish II (1910-1994), the legendary interior designer. “All that changed when the street changed.”

Actually, the street has changed many times over the decades. Kell estimated that the buildings on his block date from the mid-19th century. Originally, he said, the common arrangement was a storefront on the ground floor and living quarters for the shopkeeper and his family on the floors above. In later decades, the living quarters were broken up into individual apartments. Later still, the storefronts were converted into apartments, since building owners began to find residential rentals were more lucrative than shops.

But then another wave of change occurred, driven once again by real-estate values. “The corporations moved in and turned the first floors back into shops,” Kell said.

Even as recently as 1995, however, the antiques trade was still a relatively big presence. “I’d say it was thirty to forty percent antiques when I got here fifteen years ago,” said Kimo Jung, owner of Leo Design, who sells “a blend of vintage and contemporary things” at 413 Bleecker Street.

Now that Treasures & Trifles is gone, the count is down to just Jung and Les Pierre Antiques at 369 Bleecker. But soon it will be only Les Pierre, said Jung, since he too has planned a move around the corner, to 543 Hudson Street.

“Hudson is more like what Bleecker was like when I first started—unique, mom-and-pop stores,” said Jung, who at 47 is young by industry standards. “Now here it’s more internationally owned, luxury-fashion boutiques—Ralph Lauren, Marc Jacobs, Tommy Hilfiger.”

The decision by Kell and McCarthy to retire was motivated by more than the forces of real estate. “We didn’t quit because the lease ran out; we quit because of age and health,” said Kell. “We paid what we considered a high rent, but we had a very good landlady.” She is Abigail Westlake, widow of the mystery writer Donald Westlake, an Academy Award nominee (for the screenplay for *The Grifters*), who died in 2008. “Now she will get market value, which means our store will rent for twenty to thirty thousand dollars a month.”

The imagined makers of Grogan’s video might well have chosen to insert a bit of a Simon & Garfunkel song to follow that comment, i.e., “Thirty dollars pays your rent/ On Bleecker Street,” from “Bleecker Street,” which is on the *Sounds of Silence* album, released in 1966. That duo and uncountable other musical acts of the 1960’s got their start a couple of blocks away from Treasures & Trifles at The Bitter End, The Village Gate, and Café Au Go Go.

Kell said his and McCarthy’s customers were “mostly decorators.” He himself trained to become one at Parsons School of Design. After graduation in 1959, he worked for some famed New York City firms (David Barrett, Dorothy Draper, and Charlotte Brown) while McCarthy managed an automotive warehouse. The two spent their spare time collecting and before long had filled their apartment. At that point, it seemed logical to become dealers. Besides, they didn’t want to work for anybody other than themselves any longer.

The decorator connection, great while it lasted, was “what killed us in the end,” said Kell. “When the street changed from antiques stores to corporations, the decorators quit coming.” It was easier and more efficient for them to visit the big showrooms uptown.

“If I were younger and healthier, I would have moved uptown,” Kell mused. “I should have done that ten years ago, when Niall Smith did it.” Niall Smith Antiques, formerly of 344 Bleecker Street, is now in what is known as the Interior Design Building at 306 East 61st Street.

Then, too, there was a change in fashion and style. “The look now is mid-century modern,” said Kell. “There’s a whole group of decorators now who think furniture younger than I am is antique.”

Maybe the Bleecker Street antiques dealers could have banded together and found strength in numbers. Was that ever tried? “Off and on, we tried to have an association,” said Kell. “But there was always too much disagreement.” He laughed. “We were all friends, but it just didn’t work when we tried to organize.”

This inquiry reminded him of a dealer on the street named Ruth Burke or Burk (he wasn’t sure of the spelling). “She was there forever. She was an older woman when we began-in her eighties-and she was more interested in having a kaffee klatsch in the back of her store than in selling an antique. So everybody congregated at Ruth’s. It was a fun street.”

Buying was fun for them too, back in the day, said Kell. He and McCarthy bought their merchandise, just as they had as collectors, at auctions, estates sales, and of course Brimfield. “We spent the whole week at Brimfield, from Sunday to Sunday. We loved it, if you want to know the truth—the carnival atmosphere, all of it.”

For more information, phone Grogan & Company at (781) 461-9500 or visit ([www.groganco.com](http://www.groganco.com)).

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**One of the sale’s top lots, a pair of 29½” tall Chinese Famille Verte with black ground vases, fetched \$3540 on the Internet (est. \$1500/2000). Grogan photo.**



**Three Chinese porcelain gilt-decorated powder blue vases sold to another Internet bidder for \$2950 (est. \$300/500). A phone bidder bought a Chinese oxblood vase-form lamp along with a similar lamp base (neither shown) for \$2587.50 (est. \$300/500). Grogan photo.**



**This 27” tall bronze figural wall sconce brought \$1840 (est. \$800/1200).**

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