

Astronomical Timepiece Tops \$1.38 Million Clock Auction

by Jeanne Schinto

What has become the largest and most important clock sale in the country used to be held in Salem, New Hampshire, before the room got too small to accommodate the crowd. Lately, R.O. "Bob" Schmitt's auctions have been held in a worthier space, the convention hall at the Center of New Hampshire Holiday Inn in Manchester.

Over 400 bidder cards were issued to attendees on April 26 and 27. About 350 others bid by mail, phone, fax, and Internet before the live auction began. They spent \$1.38 million (hammer-price total) on 741 of the 762 lots offered.

Stephen Sanborn of Sunapee, New Hampshire, owner of Sanborn's Antique Clocks, who has known Schmitt since "sale number one" in 1979, found that prices were "very positive," a phrase he indicated was meant to be an understatement — "good if you have clocks to sell, not if you want to buy some."

Howard Frisch, a collector who has 450 clocks in his accounting office in Gloucester, Massachusetts, bid on 13 lots and got one. "They raced right through me like I was standing still," said Frisch.

The most remarkable lot of the weekend was the astronomical timepiece made by Aaron Dodd Crane, circa 1855, one of only half a dozen believed to be in existence. In outstanding original condition, it still had the same glass dome that was sold with it. It is a skeleton clock, and its visible works indicate sunrise, sunset, moonrise, moonset, high tide, the date, and, almost as an afterthought, the time. One yearly wind is all it takes. The clock was bought by dealer Joel Einhorn of Woodbury, Connecticut, who said he had come to the sale for it and it alone. He took the piece home for \$84,000 (includes buyer's premium) on an estimate of \$75,000/125,000.

An E. Howard & Company Regulator No. 22, nearly 9' tall, with a four-jar mercury pendulum was the other top lot of the sale, bringing \$88,480 (est. \$75,000/100,000). In excellent restored condition, it came to the sale from southern California with a provenance that could not be confirmed. The rumor was that it once had belonged to the Southern Pacific Railroad.

There's no telling if that made a difference to the successful left bidder, described by Schmitt as "a gentleman who is an oil magnate from Houston, Texas."

The lot on the catalog's front cover, a circa 1900 Gilbert Regulator No. 8 with a lyre pendulum, was as large as the Howard. In excellent restored condition and in a refinished case, it sold for \$13,664 (est. \$12,000/16,000) to a man who Schmitt said was renovating a hotel — "an important landmark in Providence, and he bought it for the lobby." While still a strong price for a standing regulator, it reflects the greater premium that buyers place on the Howard name.

A circa 1815 Aaron Willard shelf clock sold for \$29,120 (est. \$25,000/35,000). Norman Croan, owner of Fidelity Restoration Service, Bedford, New Hampshire, said the buyer was a new client of his, adding, "The man spent some money." He's apparently willing to spend more — Croan will make a new weight for it. "I'll find a period weight and take dimensions, or get someone to let me do an impression, and I'll cast one from that." The eight-day timepiece with the coveted Willard family name was in otherwise excellent original condition. "That's the straightest Aaron Willard I've seen in many, many years," Croan said. "If ever there was a textbook example of a museum-grade Willard, it was right there."

Croan was disappointed in attempts to make purchases of his own. "You're bidding against collectors. I was looking at the two French paperweight clocks. I couldn't even get my hand up."

Traditionally at Schmitt's auctions, lesser lots get sold on Saturday night and better items are saved for the Sunday matinee, but bidders remarked this time that even on Saturday there wasn't the usual fare of gingerbreads, black mantels, and tambours. Schmitt said he has worked hard to become more selective, gradually turning away most "beginner" clocks. "I'm not saying I have eliminated them, but I accept fewer and fewer, and it's because of costs. If I guessed we spend about fifty dollars an item, I wouldn't be far off. So unless an item sells for two hundred fifty or above, it doesn't pay its way."

On both days, John Delaney of Delaney Antique Clocks, West Townsend, Massachusetts, sat in the front row, as usual, with members of his family. Although underbidders may imagine the Delaneys bought dozens of clocks, they actually bought only a single dozen (with two bidder cards) and were underbidders on some 40 others. As expected, most Delaney purchases were American clocks. For example, they bought a circa 1850 Howard & Davis banjo No. 4 in need of restoration for \$2352 (est. \$1500/2000). They also bought an unusual circa 1820 Swedish timepiece, an elaborately carved giltwood cartel clock in very good original condition made by Andrés Carlsson of Stockholm. The price was \$5264 (est. \$2000/3000).

Judging from this sale, you could erroneously conclude that calendar clocks are plentiful — there were 55 American and five foreign-made. Peter Janson, a collector and dealer from Springfield, Massachusetts, had consigned, among others, a full set of nine Fashion calendar clocks. The one that brought the most, \$9072 against an estimate of \$3250/4250, was the No. 7.

Besides the Janson clocks, there were two other major consignments in the sale: the lifetime collection of Gregory Gibson (1930-2002) of Bay Head, New Jersey, and the American factory clocks of Steve Petrucelli of Cranbury, New Jersey.

Petrucelli's included the mid-19th-century ripple steeples and beehives that did well at the William J. Jenack sale in Chester, New York, in March. The Delaneys bought a mini ripple beehive by J.C. Brown of Forestville, Connecticut, for \$5040 (est. \$3000/4000). A mini ripple steeple by Brown in better condition went much higher to a left bidder, \$7616 (est. \$2500/3500), after the Delaneys dropped out.

Old-time clock dealer and auctioneer Robert S. "Bobby" Webber of Hampton, New Hampshire, alternated with Schmitt at the podium. Telling jokes and engaging the audience in repartee, the wide-girthed Webber could not be in any greater contrast to the lean, buttoned-down, mild-mannered Schmitt. At one point, Webber himself bid on what Schmitt described as "the nicest pillar and scroll in the sale." Made by Seth Thomas, circa 1822, it was rare, collectors said, because of its off-center pendulum design. A left bid took it for \$5936 (est. \$3250/4250).

Another shelf clock, a big, impressive striker with carved columns, went at \$3472 (est. \$1200/1500). Rarity once again drove the bidding. Made by Hotchkiss & Benedict of Auburn, New York, circa 1835, it was less common than the Connecticut version available in several other lots.

Buyers of Chelsea clocks vied for 20 made by the esteemed Massachusetts company. Oversized Chelseas always bring in the dollars, and the Commodore ship's bell with an 8 1/2 inches dial went to a left bid at \$3248 (est. \$1500/2000).

During the preview, Chelsea expert Andrew Demeter of Topsfield, Massachusetts, had admired what he called a "pre-Chelsea" by Chelsea's precursor, the Boston Clock Company. The office regulator that was sold by H.N. Lockwood, circa 1896, went at \$1904 (est. \$1250/1750), but Demeter was not a contender. Author of the forthcoming *Chelsea Clocks: The First One Hundred Years* (i.e., 1897-1997), he said the self-published book has drained his finances.

George Collord of Portland, Maine, a collector and dealer in mechanical antiques (his station wagon's license plate reads "STEAM"), bought a lot described in the catalog as circa 1900 English, but Collord gambled that Schmitt's description was wrong. A brass-cased timepiece with an Anglo-Saxon warrior on top, it has a unique layout, with seconds showing on the main 7 inches dial and the minutes and hours on a smaller dial within it. No maker mark was obvious. Collord bought it for \$1176 (est. \$300/400), hoping he would find a mark that would confirm his guess that it was actually made by Victor Giraud of New York, circa 1860. "Then wool! wool!" said Collord. "Even if it's not by Giraud, it was a great buy — very heavy and beautifully made."

Collord also was high bidder on a 6 1/2' tall mahogany wall regulator with carved crest and definite railroad connection. Bought for a client, it was made by Blunt & Nichols of New York, circa 1880. Documentation shows it once hung on the wall of the Pennsylvania Railroad station at 35th and Market Streets in Philadelphia. Against an estimate of \$17,500/22,500, Collord paid \$25,760.

Schmitt was pleased by the prices realized by a couple of wall regulators by Seth Thomas. "They're very Germanic looking, made by the German cabinetmakers that Seth Thomas hired after the Civil War to spice up the line," he said. Regulator No. 19, in oak, was in excellent condition with the original weight, mercury pendulum, pulley, hands, case hardware, and key. It sold to a collector on Long Island for \$28,000 (est. \$20,000/25,000). "That same clock, just six or seven years ago, was a ten-thousand-dollar clock," said Schmitt. "It's done very well in appreciating." The other, a mahogany Regulator No. 5, went at \$13,776 (est. \$8000/10,000).

Tall clocks were few and not a strong area of the sale. An unsigned circa 1805 New Jersey-made model with a flaking dial and other problems went at \$6440 (est. \$3000/5000). Another, made in New Hampshire circa 1810, had Simon Willard pretensions — that is, the face was signed with his name — but the case and movement were a marriage, and neither was made in the Willard shop. Previously sold in the 1980's for a price several times the Schmitt estimate (\$5000/7000), it rose only to \$3808.

The lot on the catalog's back cover, a circa 1875 French mantel clock by Farcot, with a conical pendulum and a matching ten-arm candelabra, went at only \$41,440 (est. \$50,000/75,000). The silver figure of a woman in draped robes was impressive, but the 4' tall set would have appealed more to a New York auction crowd. In fact, a similar clock without the garnitures sold at Sotheby's Meraux sale in June 1993 for \$43,000.

Several French and German swingers sold for well under their estimates. A circa 1795 French glass-plate skeleton clock sold for a modest \$21,280 (est. \$22,000/25,000). The Schmitt crowd seems to like big brown American clocks better.

A French clock that did please the bidders was a circa 1900 miniature lighthouse clock. A similar one sold at the Meraux sale for \$2300, and that was exactly the hammer price at Schmitt's (\$2576 with buyer's premium), against an estimate of \$1250/1750. It was bought by a dealer from Westchester County, New York.

There were many nice crystal regulators on both days (ovals, enamels, ones with visible escapements). Six were American-made, and 20 were French. There were 33 carriage clocks, including several repeaters. The most complicated, two grande sonneries, each sold for \$1232.

One of the three miniatures was a 3 1/2 inches tall circa 1900 Swiss-made repeater. It had a porcelain dial and silver case with engine-turned panels fired with emerald green enamel. The movement, in need of some repair, was a full clock mechanism, unlike the watch movements often found in these collectible miniatures. It sold for \$4480 (est. \$2500/3500) to a left bid.

The earliest clock offered by Schmitt was a circa 1760 bracket clock signed "Rich'd. Carrington, London." It had its problems, including a replaced minute hand, splits and repairs in its oak case, and a top handle that appeared to be a 20th-century replacement. But the silvered dial, double-fuse movement, and fully engraved back plate made this a good example from an important period in British horology. An absentee bidder took it for \$2464 (est. \$2000/3000).

The newer clocks were two reproductions by Foster S. Campos of Pembroke, Massachusetts. Forty years ago, Campos worked for Elmer O. Stennes of Weymouth, Massachusetts, until Stennes was murdered after a prison term for murdering his wife. Stennes had built a strong business in selling fine reproductions of early American clocks, and Campos has successfully carried on the trade. The circa 1993 Campos banjo sold for \$3584 (est. \$3000/3500) to someone in the room. His circa 1988 girandole in its original shipping box sold to another attendee for \$8400 (est. \$4000/6000).

Steve Sanborn said of his friend and colleague Campos, "Foster can't understand it. He's too far into the forest to see the trees. But I think he'll be in the time line of clock makers. His are among the last of the handcrafted American clocks. Sure, he uses table saws, but he orchestrates the whole assembly, much like Simon Willard did."

Campos's timepieces are signed on the movement, weights, and case. There will be no mistaking them for the real thing. Another girandole in the sale dated from the first half of the 20th century. Its anonymous maker put the name of the girandole originator, Lemuel Curtis, on the dial and installed a Howard movement. Somebody must have thought the Howard name was a liability in this instance; it had been obliterated. According to Schmitt's catalog, if it had been an actual Curtis it would be worth \$200,000. As it was, it made \$15,680 (est. \$7000/9000).

For more information, call (603) 893-5915 or visit the Web site (www.roschmittfinearts.com).