

Brimfield, Massachusetts

# Brimfield: Yesterday & Today

by Jeanne Schinto

I sometimes play a trick on myself when I wake up too early and want more sleep. I imagine I'm lying in my sleeping bag in our old Volkswagen Vanagon at Brimfield and it's time to get up and get ready for the opening of the field where we're selling. My husband, Bob Frishman, and I haven't owned that VW for decades, nor have we set up at Brimfield, where we used to sell clocks in the J & J field, since before 9/11. But this suggestion that I have to rouse myself, make my way to the portable toilets, and prepare for a 16-hour day always makes me feel luxuriously sleepy. Invariably, I turn over and snooze for another hour at least.

Not that sleeping at Brimfield was always possible. Our van, parallel-parked just behind our tent, was in close proximity to the sprawling setup of dealer and auctioneer Robert "Bobby" Webber (1929-2005) of Hampton, New Hampshire. Getting ready for Friday's dawn opening, his crew hammered tent poles all night, or so it seemed. That clang, clang, clang could wake the dead. I remember once hearing someone, perhaps Harvey Webber, one of Bobby's twin sons, yelling, "Don't touch it! Don't touch it! Don't touch it!" It was a directive to someone helping, presumably ineptly, with one of the tents.

Say the name "Brimfield" and watch the reaction on the face of your interlocutor. Isn't it almost always a love-it-or-it-hate thing? "One and done" is a common theme. My hair stylist, accompanied by her interior-designer friend, found herself there on a scorching hot day; unable to abide the use of portable toilets, she was back on the highway headed home in what must be among the records for the shortest time spent at Brimfield. At the other extreme, there is "I never miss a Brimfield. Been coming here since [fill in the blank with a year]." I saw exemplars of the latter this past July. On the first morning of the six-day, three-times-a-year flea market founded by Gordon Reid in 1959, I ran into a woman from Boston who collects with her husband.

She and I have never been formally introduced but have a nodding



**Lots of kitsch at Brimfield. Among other things, it's a place to learn not to take yourself too seriously. Dealer to customer: "You gonna be here all week?" Customer: "No, just a couple of days, then back to real life." As Julia wrote me in an e-mail: "I like the kitsch, but don't often buy it. Dug and I do have a running friendly contest to see who can find the most Blue Boy and Pinkie paintings and in the weirdest formats" (i.e., *The Blue Boy* by Thomas Gainsborough and *Pinkie* by Thomas Lawrence).**

acquaintance because, for the last two decades, I have seen them at auctions, antiques shows, and whenever they visit the antiques shop across the alley from our house in one of the business districts of Andover, Massachusetts. (They park their car on the street side for lengthy periods. While the husband is in the shop, the wife stays in the car and reads a book; sometimes she goes to the pond across the street to watch the birds



Mannequin, with Dug in the background digging into a promising box of something.



Husband Bob made a couple of his own Brimfield purchases, including this cabinet card of a woman wearing a watch on a chain, \$10.

**Say the name "Brimfield" and watch the reaction on the face of your interlocutor.**

through binoculars.) When the wife and I greeted each other on that recent morning at Brimfield, she told me that she and her husband would be there all week, because that's what they always do. Interestingly, on Saturday afternoon, when the week was over, I looked out my front windows and noticed their parked car, wife reading, husband in the shop no doubt. Now that's devotion—she to him, and he to his collecting.

Shortly after Bob and I moved to Massachusetts in 1984, we went to see what this place called Brimfield was all about. Like all newbie shoppers who venture to this place, we were overwhelmed by the acreage needing to be covered, the hordes of humanity, and the trash mixed in with the treasures. Little did we know that in 1994 we'd be selling out of our own tent, Bob's clock hobby, taken up in 1980 when he was 28, having become his full-time profession. But the outdoor weather was too hard on the merch, and sales, initially robust, steadily declined. It was the end of an era. He limited himself to indoor shows in the late 1990s. We had not been back to Brimfield, as either sellers or buyers, since 2003. So what had prompted our return visit this past July? When I heard that two younger friends of ours had discovered Brimfield, I thought it might be interesting as well as fun to tag along with them, seeing the place through the eyes of a couple who are relatively new to antiquing but who have, nonetheless, quickly and thoroughly embraced it,



Julia Gavin and Bob Frishman in the rain.

albeit at the very bottom of the market.

Dug North and Julia Gavin, both of whom live and work in Lowell, have begun to spend most weekends driving all over Massachusetts, southern New Hampshire, coastal Maine, Rhode Island, and eastern Connecticut visiting antiques stores, flea markets, yard sales, and estate sales. They stay within about a two-hour drive of Lowell, but they have also been to Las Vegas twice on vacation and enjoyed antiquing there. And they do use that old-fashioned word "antiquing," I have noticed.

Now Dug and Julia are well on their way to becoming Brimfield regulars. Having made their inaugural visit in September 2016, they haven't missed a Brimfield since. They went for three days the first time, spending one night at a local hotel, otherwise driving back and forth from Lowell. In May 2017 they went for two days and did another overnight. In July, because of Julia's work schedule, they had to schedule two nonconsecutive days,



Painted wood animals, with puddles. Noah's ark, anyone?



Dug, examining a fly-tying tool. The dealer was selling the tool and a box filled with fly-tying materials for one money. He would not sell the tool separately. "I get it, but I'm no fly fisherman. There is money to be made with lures and flies, but you have to know the stuff well. I do not."

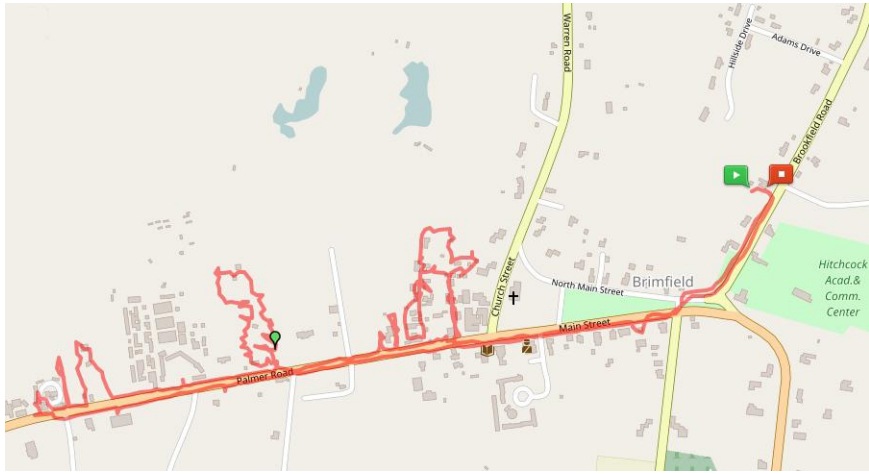


Once a common sight on the fields, walkie-talkie sets have been relegated to antiques status now that cell phones are universal.



Luckily the rain stopped, and canoeing wasn't necessary. But it was a fairly wet July Brimfield. Dealer: "Dive in, folks. I'm giving deals. I'm in a good mood. You should have seen me when it was raining. I was cranky as hell." Dug observed: "By Saturday, the dealers seemed relieved to finally have a day without rain, but you could sense that they were exhausted, and some were totally fed up. I heard several making plans to leave early."





This was our route, according to the app MapMyRun ([www.mapmyrun.com](http://www.mapmyrun.com)). We covered 3.58 miles in seven hours, took more than 30,000 steps, and sat only for the briefest of lunch breaks.



**Shopper:** “Do you have any mah-jongg sets?” Dealer says no. “Do you know any dealers who specialize in them?” He doesn’t. Later, though, I see a set. I also see jewelry made out of mah-jongg pieces. The shopper could have used the Brimfield Flea Finder app to locate what she wanted.

Tuesday and Saturday. To be sure, the first day and the last day of Brimfield are not considered by aficionados to be the best days for shopping. “It takes years to figure out Brimfield,” the pseudonymous dealer-collector Curt Avery observed in Maureen Stanton’s *Killer Stuff and Tons of Money: Seeking History and Hidden Gems in Flea-Market America*, published in 2011. “You have to know where to go on what day.” But Stanton’s book is told from the point of view of someone looking for deals. This couple’s trips to Brimfield aren’t about making a killing.

Julia’s antiquing is a respite from work. (She is director of programming for the Coalition for a Better Acre [[www.cbacre.org](http://www.cbacre.org)], a community development corporation in Lowell.) The 31-year-old native of Haverhill, Massachusetts, has also found that collecting is a way to express herself. She buys vintage jewelry, cat-themed art, and vinyl records, which she plays on a turntable housed in a 1966 console acquired at a used-record store outside of Manchester, New Hampshire. A graduate of the University of Massachusetts at Lowell, with a major in literature and a minor in science, technology, and human values, she also buys vintage fountain pens.



Dug brought his loupe to take a closer look when needed.



Dug North and Julia Gavin.

On the day of our visit to Brimfield, however, Julia wasn’t planning to buy much of anything, because she was about to move—her condo had become too small to accommodate all her stuff—and she didn’t want to add new purchases to the moving chore. Instead, she intended to help spy good prospects for Dug. As collectors they usually operate independently. Julia said she is definitely not interested in joint collections, and Dug agreed. But they are helpmeets in their antiquing endeavor, having already fairly well mastered the cooperative hunting-and-gathering basics that every collecting couple must. As Dug explained it, they split apart, join back up, split apart, join back, always taking care to keep each other in sight, keeping an average walking pace that is about the same as the other’s. When that system breaks down, Dug said, “We end up using our phones a bit.”

Dug’s main quarry is old tools, which he buys both for their resale value and for their “functionality,” i.e., for actual use. A former web designer, 47-year-old Dug is adept at drawing, woodworking, and carving, and when he discovered the existence of contemporary automata around 2002, he realized he could put his skills together in the service of making that kind of artwork himself. He has been remarkably successful. Some of his automata have sold for as much as \$5000. Beyond the marketplace, he has achieved recognition, too.

The producers of *Hugo*, the 2011 movie about a Parisian clockmaker’s son who becomes obsessed with restoring a life-size automaton, sent a crew from New York to film Dug in his Lowell studio. Dug’s short history of automata making can be viewed as an “Extra” on the *Hugo* Blu-ray edition.

Through his work with automata, Dug became interested in clockwork and then clock repair. He took courses at the



We were all trying to spot tools for Dug. This isn’t what he was after, but the word caught my eye.

National Association of Watch & Clock Collectors in Columbia, Pennsylvania, some jewelry-making courses, and several courses on machine tools. He also happened to meet Bob at an antiques show in January 2012, and Bob subsequently invited Dug to learn clock repair with him in his workshop, which is attached to our house. Over the years Bob has offered to let a few other guys come to the workshop and learn. Many are called, few are chosen. Half a dozen tried and gave up. Dug did not. In July 2013 Dug quit his web-designer job and opened his own clock repair business, and he hasn’t looked back.

“My fondness for history, tools, and diverse fabrication techniques makes clock repair an ideal pursuit,” Dug says on his website ([www.clockfix.com](http://www.clockfix.com)). “I love all things mechanical.” Dug’s great-grandfather owned North Hardware, a retail store in New York City in the early 20th century. “So there’s some hardware in my blood,” he told me. Perhaps from that progenitor, he also inherited his entrepreneurial spirit, evident in his eBay store, Tools of Old (<http://stores.ebay.com/toolsofold/>).

“The middle [in terms of both price range and quality] is gone for new tools,” Dug observed. New tools are either cheap and Chinese made or they are high end, high quality, Swiss made, and very expensive. That “pretty good,” affordable tool can be found at the flea-market level and sold at a profit.

As we four made plans for our Brimfield visit, we realized Dug and Julia were only just starting to become aware of the names of the different fields, which are operated by a conglomerate of some 20 or so owner/operators who collectively produce Brimfield. That growing awareness didn’t alter their course of action on this day. In fact, said Dug, they liked shopping the other fields when large crowds flooded over to the ones with an admission price. They were aware that some fields opened at daybreak but did not want or feel the need to get up that early. And so we picked them up in Lowell at 6 a.m., with an E.T.A. about 90 minutes later.

On the drive, Julia, in true millennial fashion, helped navigate with the app Waze ([www.waze.com](http://www.waze.com)). It analyzed the traffic and recommended Route 290 instead of going on the Mass Pike (a.k.a. the Massachusetts Turnpike). So that’s what we did. Also on the drive, Dug noted that his Facebook group, Automata/Automaton Group ([www.facebook.com/groups/automata](http://www.facebook.com/groups/automata)), had reached the milestone of 4000 members. Dug’s other website ([www.dugnorth.com](http://www.dugnorth.com)) has more information about his artwork, including his recently completed “Mekanikos vs. The Minotaur,” a mechanical, old-time carnival sideshow tableau, whose complex inner workings reveal the tug of war between the strongman and the monster to be a hoax. The strongman, whose name is derived from “mechanical,” and the minotaur are being



Bucolic sight: Maine blueberry boxes. There were scores more of them alongside these.

driven by mere mortals in a compartment down below. Incidentally, Dug’s given name is Douglas; Dug is a nickname he adopted in high school in Vermont.

Upon arrival in Brimfield, we parked in the driveway of a friend, third-generation clockmaker, restorer, and horological scholar Robert C. Cheney, who since 1982 has lived in an antique house about two-tenths of a mile from Route 20 (Main Street) and the start of what is officially known as the Brimfield Antique Flea Markets. We would spend some time with Cheney when we returned to the car about seven hours later. For the moment, as we began our journey, we were opening our umbrellas. This was no surprise. We had known the forecast, but Dug and Julia were undeterred by it. They have already experienced both the good weather and the bad at Brimfield. During a microburst on one of their first visits, they helped someone hold down her tent, and then Julia bought a ring from her.

The rain reminded me that someone who heard I was heading for Brimfield told me, “Rust is big there now.” He meant that dealers are successfully selling rusty items to steampunkers and others. And, indeed, I would soon see buckets of rusty gears on display and their contents offered at a price per ounce. I would also see buckets of better-looking locks, escutcheons, pulls, and knobs, calling up my memories of United House Wrecking, an architectural salvage place in Stamford, Connecticut, where I used to go with my parents when I was a kid growing up in Stamford’s neighboring town, Greenwich, in the early 1960s. It is a place that still exists and, to judge by its website ([www.unitedhousewrecking.com](http://www.unitedhousewrecking.com)), is thriving. People often blame the changes in history teaching for young people’s presumed lack of interest in antiques. But I question that logic. My interest in antiques had nothing to do with the quality of my history classes and everything to do with





The Major Abner Morgan house, on Brookfield Road, Brimfield, Massachusetts, has been owned by Robert C. Cheney since 1982. “I have lived a very active life in this house,” he reflected. “I ran my [clock-restoration] business here for many years prior to going to Skinner,” the auction house from which he resigned as head of its clock department earlier this year. “I like it out here in the country. But now that I’m in retirement and all the kiddos have gone in their own various directions, the house has become a little bit too much for us.” He and his wife, Denise Johnson, “don’t need this kind of place anymore,” he said. “We’re expecting to put it on the market in the spring,” Robert C. Cheney photo.



M. Anna Tarbell, librarian of the Brimfield Public Library, in front of the Major Abner Morgan house, circa 1900.

do with my parents, who exposed me to the world of secondhand. I bought my first antique—an old barometer—for an eighth-grade science fair project on weather. There are many doors that lead to the world of the past, but someone must lead you to one of them.

Our foursome went to Sturtevant’s first (located “next to the Town Library” and hosting dealers “since 1976,” says its website [www.sturtevantantiqueshows.com]). As we spread out, I heard a dealer say to the passing crowd: “He’ll give you a good deal, especially on a rainy day.” Another, holding up a pool noodle, said, “I’m waiting for the next downpour.” I noticed a third dealer using a shovel to dig a shallow trench, so a puddle would drain away from his tent. A fourth had laid down a path of wood shavings on the muddy floor of his tent. “I love the smell of wood shavings,” I told him as I walked in. The dealer laughed. “They really soak up the water, but don’t you feel like a gerbil?”

In a tent down the way from the wood

shavings, I was attracted by vintage stone lemons and other fruit. Price, \$40 each—too expensive for me, considering that I thought they would look best in a largish grouping. The option to haggle is always there, but I didn’t question the dealer. When Bob and I were selling his clocks, we could tell some people haggled simply because they felt it was a game, part of the “fun” of the day’s outing. I wasn’t serious enough about the fake fruit, and to my way of thinking, it would have been discourteous to ask for a discount without the intention of buying.

I have always admired the modus operandi of the tool guys who used to set up across from us at J & J. They had plenty of individually priced items, including vintage light bulbs, for which haggling was de rigueur. But they also had a blanket sale, a place of discovery, where esoteric knowledge could pay off and prices were fluid. That’s because even those two dealers, one of whose New Hampshire license plate was “TOOLS,” could not identify everything in their inventory and know its fair value. And so at daybreak, every item on the blanket was \$100. At 8 a.m., the price per item went down to \$50. At 10 a.m., it descended to \$25, and so on. In short, the dealers staged an auction in reverse, with the best and rarest pieces snatched up for good money and the rest finding their proper level. By the day’s end, only the chaff remained, at which point there were always some guys willing to sit down on the blanket and pick away at it. A perfect antiques food chain.

We hadn’t been long at Sturtevant’s when I heard Dug engage with a dealer about a small drill press. Dug: “What are you guys asking for this thing?” Dealer: “Good question.” He thought for a minute, noting that it had come from an optometrist’s estate, then said: “Twenty-five dollars.” Dug, tepidly: “Would you take twenty?” The dealer’s answer was no. Dug bought it anyway. “That’s the part I hate,” said Dug, as we walked away. “I have never felt comfortable haggling. Some days I do it, and some days I don’t. It is not a process I enjoy.” Later, Dug told me he wasn’t sure whether to believe the dealer’s detail about the optometrist’s estate. But when he sent a photo of it to a knowledgeable friend, watchmaker John Kovacic of Little Falls, New York, he told Dug he had one like it and volunteered without prompting that it was an optometrist’s drill press. “I believed them both at that point,” said Dug, so it was a good buy and certainly worth the extra \$5. “More and more, I am buying tools that are mysterious, if they aren’t too expensive. I know at the very least that I’ll learn something new in researching them.” And if you’re not spending much, there’s no such thing as a mistake.

There are, of course, pieces with prices that have many zeros at Brimfield. In the Sturtevant’s field, heavy hitters included silver dealer Robert Lloyd of New York City. Lloyd told me that he has been in the same spot for 22 years. And he stays all week, set up in a “tent” with wooden



Julia collects vinyl records and plays them on a turntable made in 1966, the year of the release of The Beatles’ *Yesterday and Today* album. She was born 20 years later.

walls that would not be out of place at a “glamour camping” camp site. The place truly was decked out in style, with a tiki bar in the middle of it and Guinness being served—already at 8:30 a.m. The beer is complementary to the original oil-on-canvas proofs for Guinness advertisements by the S.H. Benson advertising agency that Lloyd has been selling for several years now.

Lloyd’s tent was also equipped with a widescreen TV. At the time of my visit, it was showing a tennis match being played live at Wimbledon. In his younger years, Lloyd used to teach tennis and skiing professionally. Now a bit over 50, he still looks like an athlete.

By contrast, more than a few other dealers I saw throughout the day were wearing knee braces and back braces, and using canes. (“Get your meds, and get some for me,” I overheard a knee-braced dealer tell someone on the phone.) It’s not news to anybody that as a group the trade has aged.

The landscape, literally, has changed, too. As a dealer with old bottles said to a woman visiting his tent: “So many of my old digging places are gone.” The woman commiserated: “My digging place is kaputski. A power plant went up.” The dealer: “The things we did to get glass.” He shook his head. The woman: “It was so much fun.” The dealer: “Now if anyone saw us digging, they’d think it was a covert op.”

Equally true is that for a young person trying to break into this business today, the model may not be Brimfield. Consider the story and insights of William B. Spencer, otherwise known as The Ragman, of Portland, Michigan, purveyor of daguerreotypes and historical ephemera, among other things. His card says, “An Eye for the Obscure / A Taste for the Bazaar.” His Facebook page describes him as a “self-employed eccentric.” For decades his Brimfield setup has been right on Route 20, across from the entrance to J & J. You can’t miss it or him with his



Dug North has lived in Lowell, Massachusetts, since 2008. His shop is in the Gates Block Studios, built in 1881 and originally used to make the leather belts that powered Lowell’s textile machines. It houses all kinds of artists now. Pictured is his condo building, built between 1890 and 1895. It is called the Ayer Lofts, because it was once home to the J.C. Ayer Company, makers of patent medicines, including Ayer’s Cherry Pectoral, Ayer’s Hair Vigor, and Ayer’s Cathartic Pills. J.C. Ayer also published a popular yearly almanac, *Ayer’s American Almanac*. Dug has collected some of the company’s old advertisements. Dug’s condo is on the second floor, which has the building’s highest ceilings, 14½’ tall. It also has elaborate woodwork. While the building is said to have been a laboratory for Ayer, Dug imagines that his floor housed offices. His condo has a big vault. There is no other in the building and only a few others in Lowell, said Dug. He doesn’t know its original purpose; he uses it as a studio for his automata-making. Dug North photo.

long fluffy white beard and smile crinkles around his eyes.

“For me the business has always been a matter of trying to stay afloat and surf the ups and downs in the interest in antiques,” Spencer told me in an e-mail. “My business has always been one driven by my own interests and not by the taste of the market. I feel with the Internet it may actually be easier for a young person to break in now than it was forty years ago. The secret of selling antiques is putting the goods in front of someone who is interested in buying, qualified financially, and has the knowledge to tell which of two objects that look similar to an untrained eye is more desirable. The Internet allows a young person with no inventory to go out and sell to a wide crowd without having to sit in a tent in the middle of a field with a bunch of other optimists. I have a ‘taste for the bazaar,’ as my business card says, so the tent is my path. When I started in the old days my *lack* of knowledge was an obstacle in the business. Now my *wealth* of knowledge is an obstacle because I find great value in things I know about but that no one cares about anymore.”

As we moved along down Route 20, visiting other fields, Julia bought a fountain pen. It would be her only purchase that day. But she would buy several other items on Saturday when



Dug’s July 2017 purchases. Pictured here, besides the items mentioned in the text, bought by Dug on Tuesday, are his Saturday purchases, too. They are an antique glass-cutter made in France, \$3; an unknown tool, perhaps for flaring lead pipe, \$5; a clockmaker’s screw plate, \$20; an unknown blade, possibly a very old straight razor, \$4; and a pair of watchmaker’s tongs, \$7. Dug North photo.



Squirrel derrières under glass domes. The full-size squirrel was displaying the middle finger on one of its paws.





Garden Buddhas for meditative types.

she and Dug returned without us. Those purchases, she would write me in an e-mail, were three more fountain pens, for \$10, \$6, and \$2; a white peacock wall pocket, \$6; a ceramic bird planter, \$6; a “lonely half of a dog salt-and-pepper shaker set that matches several planters I have at home,” \$2; and a Le Creuset enamel cast-iron griddle, \$25. Dug, meanwhile, had been steadily hunting with focus and determination and was occasionally being rewarded with a successful buy. Besides the optometrist’s drill press, he was now carrying in his knapsack the following: a machine shop “catechism,” \$8; a vintage Japanese lighter, \$10; a leather-working tool, \$3; a screwdriver, \$2; and a time-recorder movement with dial and pendulum by Seth Thomas, \$40.

“Now that I have one, I know I’ll never need it,” Dug said of the Seth Thomas item. Seriously, he added, they are strong movements, found in large clocks. “I may keep it for a repair. I may find a case for it. I may put it on eBay.”

He bargained a bit on the machine-shop book, a primer in question-and-answer format, published in 1913. Marked \$10, it went to Dug for \$8. “I am becoming fascinated by the era from 1900 to 1930, especially that period’s machines,” said Dug, who has an undergraduate degree from the University of Vermont in anthropology and a master’s degree from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in science and technology studies, an interdisciplinary field that explores the relationship between science, technology, and society.

Dug spent another \$50 on a mallet made of brass, wood, and, perhaps, gutta-percha—it was a soft material that had become somewhat hard. He didn’t know the mallet’s purpose. Later, John Kovacik, the same knowledgeable friend who identified the optometrist’s drill press, guessed that this piece could be a cooper’s mallet. “We know that it’s handmade and someone took a lot of time to make it,” said Dug. “It may have been made by a cabinetmaker as a type of dead-blow mallet for assembly and disassembly of wooden things. John points out that making fancy tools was a way to subtly advertise your skill at your craft.”

A whole box of hammer heads for \$40 did not tempt Dug. (“Too heavy, too hard to sell.”) But he did buy one of them, the oldest and oddest, for \$3, used by a trade he could not yet identify. He had come too late for the ax heads. The dealer said he had already sold the 15 he had brought. I asked Dug if he would have been interested in them. He said yes but has learned that an ax needs to have a nice, desirable logo on it. “Otherwise, it’s just an ax.”

Keeping track of Dug wasn’t difficult. We listened for the sound of clanging metal as he rooted around in boxes and other containers. “Not enough tools [for him], not enough jewelry [for Julia],” said Dug, bypassing tents. “We dislike fake primitives, country crafts, new cast iron being sold at antique prices, Hummels, Snowbabies, Willow Tree figurines, heavily religious stuff, good wood furniture that has been painted white and distressed, and people selling kittens and other baby animals,” he said. They’re not keen on giant golf balls, votive candles slightly melted, or birdhouses made out of old license plates, either. They also avoid the blatantly “decorator” stuff. “I’m not currently decorating,” quipped Dug. New sets of sheets. New sunglasses. New Dewalt or Sawzall blades. It’s a waste of eye effort. As for the truly crass junk, e.g., the stuffed squirrel butts under glass, Dug said diplomatically, “I am put off by things that are not antiques, but mostly I just ignore it.”

It was getting to be lunchtime. I used to bring my own food to Brimfield. When we set up at J & J, I boiled water for drip-coffee or tea on a little gas burner when it was cold in May and September. Staples were hard-boiled eggs and peanut butter and honey sandwiches on my homemade bread. On Friday night, we always looked forward to the supper at Brimfield’s First Congregational Church. Nothing being sold by the food vendors even

The wooden item on the left stumped Dug and the dealer who had it for sale. Together they wondered what it was. Dealer: “I’ve had it for a month, and I can usually come up with some crazy story but not for that one.” The price was \$45. Dug was intrigued but passed it up. Later, in an e-mail, he told me: “It is a lever-assisted gouge of some sort. The shaft in the center has a gouge bit on the end. A piece was placed in a jig at the bottom where it could be positioned with some accuracy. The lever was pressed down and the part shaved with a semicircular cut. What part? I don’t know. Whatever it was, there were a lot of them because they took the time to make this tool. The tool is old and farm made and almost entirely wood. It is not factory made or blacksmith made. I am inclined to think that it shaved the end or edge of something, otherwise you would simply use a drill. The bit looked like those used for carving wood. I wanted it, but didn’t want to carry it or to come back for it. It is also rather big for my condo or for shipping.”



The mystery mallet. Dug North photo.

remotely appealed to me. On this return trip, I was happy to observe how much the food and drink options have improved. Baristas are on site, disseminating cappuccino, macchiato, doppio, and everything in between. There is even a “food court,” where Bob had a lobster roll, Dug a Cobb salad, and Julia a Mexican rice bowl, prepared for her without the rice. She and Dug are both following a ketogenic diet. I had brought my own energy bar and trail mix. Later, in a nod to the past and to lethal diets everywhere, I noted a place where you could still buy a deep-fried Oreo.

I had been recording our walking route on an app, MapMyRun ([www.mapmyrun.com](http://www.mapmyrun.com)). By early afternoon, we were up around three miles, surprisingly few, considering how our legs and feet felt. The sun was out now, and the day had turned muggy. We were thinking of beating the traffic home. We decided to retrace our steps back to Robert Cheney’s house.

Brimfield is the proverbial land of contrasts. Accordingly, after shopping for items costing \$50 and under, we were treated to a tour of some of Cheney’s most jaw-dropping clocks—part of the decor of his 18th-century house. Cheney bought it in 1982 when he was 30. “It didn’t look like it does now,” he said. “One of my hobbies back then was old-house restoration.” Built for Abner Morgan in 1783, the house has 12 rooms, nine fireplaces, and most of its original paneling, floors, walls, and ceilings. “What appealed to me was that it was so authentic,” said Cheney, who was also attracted by the house’s “provenance.” Morgan (1746-1837), who served as a major in the American Revolutionary War, was a Harvard-educated lawyer and legislator. Brimfield’s tax assessor and selectman for 22 years, he was chairman of the board of selectmen for 21 of those years, and his forebears were among the founders of Brimfield, which was settled in 1706, incorporated in 1731.

For more than two decades, Cheney ran his clock-restoration business out of this most impressive house, one of the finest in Brimfield then and now. Just as Major Morgan did, he also got involved in town government, serving as town moderator and selectman for 25 years, from 1983 through 2008. “I never wanted to hold any public office,” Cheney said, “but I was approached by several people in town whom I respected, and they told me that Brimfield was desperately in need of a town moderator and asked me if I would be willing to run for the position. My initial reply was, ‘What the heck’s a town moderator?’ I learned that a moderator is a powerful person. They run the town meeting, they can throw people out of the town meeting, they appoint people to boards, and since they run the town meeting with Robert’s Rules, and since my name is Robert, it seemed to make sense to me.”

Most of the work entailed the usual town issues, such as police and fire protection. Naturally, there were also the issues surrounding the town’s unique feature, its flea market. Even though it happens only 18 days out of every year, it totally transforms this little New England country oasis, whose population otherwise is approximately 3600. Bob Wyss’s *Brimfield Rush*, an excellent history published in 2005, cites the figures of 2350 dealers and 50,000 shoppers in town for the flea market in 1981,

during the years of growth. He doesn’t say whether those figures were for May, July, or September. Nor does he say where the figures came from. In any case, May is always the best-attended Brimfield; September comes in second; July, third. This July, the dealer count was 1072, according to figures supplied by the town to Cheney on my behalf. They were derived from the number of dealer permits the town issued.

I asked Cheney if, at the town meetings he had presided over, there had ever been debates about putting in public bathrooms or other facilities for the flea market. He replied, “You know, the people who live here, they kind of like the town the way it is. And the problem with these grandiose ideas about putting in bathrooms and showers and lighting and walkways is that, while it’s not hard to put these things into place initially, the expense of maintenance, liability, et cetera, is forever.” He went on, “When the flea market is over, Brimfield goes back to what it is, a beautiful little country town” where few residents rely on that local “industry” as a source of income—only the owner/operators of the 20 or so fields who collectively are the organizers of the event. “People work in Worcester or Springfield. Some diehards work in Boston,” Cheney said. “And a number of people work at home.”

Cheney himself was certainly once a Brimfield regular. “I had my own routine. I had a certain order in which I hit the fields. Some I skipped because they weren’t particularly fruitful. Through the others I would walk fast, looking at both sides of the aisle. I would take no more than two hours to cover May’s. I don’t think I missed much of what I was looking for, which were clocks. I still sometimes go to look, but not with the same intensity.”

Cheney’s house was something of a gathering spot in those years that he shopped the fields, from 1982 through the early 2000s. “We had curators here, some of the best-known dealers in the country, major collectors, restorers, appraisers, writers, you name it. If it was someone related to the antiques world, they were right here in my backyard. We had a legendary Thursday night meal and a Thursday afternoon happy hour that would sometimes last into Friday.”

Those varying dignitaries of the antiques world aren’t much on the scene anymore, he said. “Some of it is just age.” He named Charles S. Parsons, author of *New Hampshire Clocks and Clockmakers*, as a regular who had passed away. But the other reason is that, of course, Brimfield itself has changed. “When I first got this house and started the backyard soirees, the flea market was a place for learning about antiques,” he said. “And if you were a scholar and not just a buyer you could learn a lot on those fields. I learned about all kinds of antiques there.”

For example, he once spotted a pair of Renaissance period brass candlesticks priced at \$2200. “And I thought, ‘These are wonderful. But the price.’ It’s a real bargain for a pair, which is unlikely to begin with. So automatically, my antennae went up. I was thinking, ‘I don’t trust this. I’m going to pass.’ And by the end of the day I had seen eight or ten more pairs just like it. That was my introduction to brass fakes coming through Thailand and India. They were introduced to the United States at Brimfield, and years later they were coming up at Sotheby’s and a number of other major auction houses. So Brimfield was a real classroom.” As it has become and will continue to be for Dug and Julia.

And so it goes. On Saturday, when they returned, two friends went with them—“both younger than me,” Julia wrote me in an e-mail. “It was their first Brimfield!” One of them bought two pens—“one very nice, unused, and they’re both new favorites.”

