

## Clock Auction in New Hampshire

by Jeanne Schinto

Why does R.O. "Bob" Schmitt get phenomenal prices for clocks at his auctions? New collector Christopher Marinello, a 42-year-old attorney from Rockville Centre, New York, has an answer. "He's got a very gentle, Mr. Rogers-type demeanor, and you feel comfortable buying from him."

The TV-character depiction could have come only from someone of Marinello's generation. In more general terms Marinello said of the mild-mannered Schmitt, "He's extremely honest. If there's a crack somewhere, and he knows about it, he's going to tell you. As a collector I would rather pay more at Schmitt's than find a bargain somewhere at some auction where the auctioneer is saying, 'I have no idea what this is. Found it in the basement.'"

Marinello, who attended Schmitt's sale in Manchester, New Hampshire, on May 8 and 9, can be seen at previews asking lots of questions. Not everybody is willing to answer them. "The front-row old-timers—that's what I call them—are not particularly helpful," he said. "If I ask them, 'How does this dial look?', they act like I'm taking food off their table. I'm glad they're retiring. It's an old-timer mentality. They should understand that they're much better off with an educated consumer."

Marinello does pro bono law work for people who "get stuck" with clocks, many of them eBay purchases. ("They have the wrong pendulum or whatever. Generally a nice letter will take care of it.") "And that's another reason why I like going and buying from somebody like Schmitt," he said. "I like buying from the good guys."

Schmitt, it was pointed out, is of the same generation as some of those guys in the front row. "But he has embraced the new technology," said Marinello, who attended the sale with his wife. "He has made it work for him. We can all see the photos and the great descriptions [on his Web site]. And he's great when you e-mail him a question about a specific lot. He'll respond."

Having said all that, Marinello, who has been known to spend \$15,000 at a Schmitt auction, spent only \$716.80 this time. Why? "The prices were just fantastic."

"Staggering" is the word Schmitt used after the sale of 763 lots (only 12 of which did not sell) at the Radisson Hotel. The auctioneer said he would have been pleased to gross \$850,000, but the actual total realized was \$1,064,551 (includes buyers' premiums). Schmitt's expectations were modest because he and his wife, Tricia, had noted just before the sale began that the number of registered bidders was down about a hundred in each category; that is, there were 250 bidders in the salesroom and another 230 who had left bids as absentees. (No phone bids are taken during Schmitt's sales.) In the end the numbers did not represent diminished participation, though. Schmitt invoiced about 250 sales, the same as always.

The number of serious bidders, then, remained steady, and many of them were willing to pay a premium for a prize. Longtime Schmitt customer John Tanner came to the sale from California for a single clock, a British standing astronomical regulator, and he got it, for \$23,520. Norbert Fencl of Chicago bagged his one-lot quarry, a British miniature astronomical regulator, for which he paid \$26,320, the top-dollar item of the sale. R. Bruce McAuliffe of northeastern Ohio went home with one big purchase only, paying \$9800 for an Eli Terry box clock. He said he has wanted one for the last 30 years.

Which is not to ignore the purchasers of multiple lots, John Delaney being the most obvious one. Delaney, owner of Delaney Antique Clocks, West Townsend, Massachusetts, usually attends Schmitt's sales with his business partners, wife, Barbara, and sons, Sean and John. Delaney is the name that often comes up when the words "antique clock" are uttered. But the idea that he is buying everything Schmitt offers is an illusion.

"People who watch him should take note," said the auctioneer. "He probably gets two thirds of what he bids on; as for the other third, once he goes past what he sees as his profitable limit, he stops."

Other observers are not so sanguine, nor so level-headed, when they speak about Delaney's seemingly Hooverish ways. "He's trying to make the market, almost control the market," one collector said. Another was upset because Delaney is no longer buying just early American clocks. "Nobody can compete with John Delaney when he wants something, but he very rarely ever chased Victorian stuff, and now he does." A third said, "He makes it very difficult for anybody else to buy anything." But the fact is, Delaney and his family bought only their usual quota, a couple of dozen items, which left about 97% for everybody else.

There were, for example, 29 banjo and lyre clocks in this sale, representing all price ranges, time periods, and styles. Two miniature (19 1/2 inches tall) clocks made by Waltham in the 1930's sold for \$308. A miniature (21 inches tall) clock made by Foster Campos of Pembroke, Massachusetts, circa 1978, sold for \$924. A "put-together" clock of standard size (34 inches tall) with a period (circa 1840) movement brought \$784. A standard Waltham with a poorly replaced throat glass and other "hurts" (as Bob Schmitt calls imperfections) went at \$1064. "Apparently clock fell off the wall at the repairman's around 1955 (repair note inside)," noted the catalog. Two "Willard model" Waltham banjos, 41 inches tall, from the 1920's sold for \$2520 and \$3304.

Then there was the E. Howard & Company No. 5, made in Boston circa 1890. A bidder in the salesroom, one of half a dozen vying for it, paid a record price of \$4928.

Schmitt's catalog description for the Howard No. 5 was unusual for its brevity: "Cannot see anything negative to say about it. If you are looking for a nice number five to keep for yourself, this is it. Has proper signed movement and dial, original graining, finish, tablets, and pendulum." Seeing the clock, one realized at once that the description was so short because there were no hurts to report on a perfect clock.

Schmitt's catalogs are legendary, keepers for one's horological library. In what amounts to a clock appraiser's handbook, he notes replaced glasses, repainted dials, regildings, extra holes, and redrilled ones. He also lists the highlights, along with a mini-history of the clock's manufacturer; restoration tips; sources and suppliers of clock parts, services, and repair; anecdotes about individual collecting styles of the consignors; not to mention delightful turns of phrase. "An oddity for the confident mechanic" is both a thumbnail description and a delicate way to recognize different skill levels in the clockmaking world.

We took this opportunity to ask Schmitt how the catalog is written. What's the process? In his introduction he credits Chris H. Bailey, curator of the American Clock & Watch Museum in Bristol, Connecticut, and Tom Manning, who is on the museum's board. Who writes what? How does it get put together? Who types?

"We all three contribute," said Schmitt. "I do all the European descriptions and a lot of the American factory-clock descriptions. Tom does all the wooden-works clocks and pre-1850 early American. Chris is the editor-in-chief. He checks all the dates and spellings of the makers' names and things like that." And whose work is represented in the writing style? That is all Schmitt. He added, "I type every word. I'm the typist."

There were three major consignors to the sale. One was the estate of Ned Howard. Howard lived in Poughkeepsie, New York, and loved clocks with wooden cases. Indeed, the sale was heavy with big shelf clocks, four of them triple-deckers. Most of the tall clocks in the sale had come from Howard too.

Clocks are almost exclusively a guy thing, but there were two women's collections in this sale. Cynthia Kratter of Forest Hills, New York, was the wife of a collector who died. Instead of selling the clocks, as most clock wives do, she bought more. She died in a scuba-diving accident in Florida in 2003; otherwise, she might still be collecting mainly French mantel clocks, with English skeleton clocks as a sideline.

The other woman, Peggy Robertson of Tulsa, Oklahoma, was one of the earliest women actively involved in the National Association of Watch & Clock Collectors. Her clocks were mostly the early American brass-works clocks, the odd Connecticut shelf clocks, the beehives, and pillar and scrolls. She had an Oriental rug repair shop in St. Louis for many years. At one time she owned 400 clocks, but pared down to the better ones when she moved to Tulsa. "The Lone Ranger of female clock collecting," said Schmitt to characterize her. "She was quite a gal and still is."

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