

## Live Bidding Only at Clock Auction

by Jeanne Schinto

New Hampshire clock auctioneer R.O. "Bob" Schmitt was talking about broken fingers. He was talking about other damaged extremities too. "Something like an arm or a leg or a neck can break very easily," he said.

The fragile nature of one major consignment, what may have been the largest single collection of Ansonia figural clocks in the country, and their vulnerability during shipping is one reason why Schmitt decided to run his October 18 and 19, 2003, auction in Manchester, New Hampshire, in an unusual way. He allowed only live bidders. It was his way of avoiding that onerous shipping responsibility.

Schmitt said that he went into the sale knowing it was an experiment not to be repeated. At his next sale, on Mother's Day weekend, May 8 and 9, he'll return to the regular system, which accommodates absentee bidders who want to place bids by phone, fax, mail, or the Internet before the live auction begins. Despite a dollar total that Schmitt believes was affected by the restriction, he considers the auction a personal success for himself and his wife, Tricia.

"It was certainly less stressful. This time we brought home only four or five clocks that people who flew in for the sale hadn't made proper arrangements to leave with," he said. "Whereas normally, we carry home four hundred items to be shipped or picked up from us, and that process continues for six to eight weeks after the sale and sometimes much longer than that."

The strategy opened a business opportunity for agents. Working independently, they not only bid but arranged for removal and delivery of merchandise. "Some of them are holding it at their house, and the buyer will travel to fetch it from them, just as they would have from me," said Schmitt. "Others are having a trucker stop by their place and pick it up and deliver it to the owners. Still others are packing it up and shipping it themselves, the same way we would have done."

Schmitt recommended five agents on his Web site, but many others were in evidence at the auction, all of them with their several bidding cards fanned out like playing cards, ready for choosing at the right moment.

Besides the fragile nature of figurals, particularly these, which were made of white metal by the Ansonia Clock Company from the late 1890's through the early 1900's, there was another reason Schmitt decided to run the auction exclusively live. More than half of the 710 lots were Ansonia clocks. Nonetheless, said Schmitt, not everyone is as exclusively enthralled by Ansonia's products as was collector Michael D. Semegran (1944-2002) of San Antonio, Texas.

"Most people [who are clock enthusiasts] are general collectors. They want to have one Ansonia swinger and a couple of Ansonia wall clocks, and then they want some Seth Thomas, some Gilbert, some Waterbury, some Terry stuff, and so on. They want a little bit of everything. The number of people who want solely Ansonia material is very limited."

Known for the variety and quality of its clock cases, Ansonia, whose last factory building still stands in Brooklyn, New York, was one of the giants of American clock making.

Schmitt's decision to take only live bids led to a different layout for his catalog. Usually it is designed for absentee bidders who will never handle the clocks until they own them. For that reason, the pictures are big, full-color ones, and the descriptions are lengthy. As a result, many subscribers keep Schmitt's catalogs for years as a reference and price guide. This time, instead of color shots there were only black-and-white thumbnails. The color ones were, as always, on the auctioneer's Web site, along with the descriptions, but even live bidders complained loudly that they missed the hard copy.

Under the circumstances, attendance was off, Schmitt said, by "a good twenty-five to thirty percent." In the convention hall of the Center of New Hampshire Holiday Inn he counted only 285 registrants over two days, with another 242 people participating through agents.

One of those agents, Doc LeVarn of Claremont, New Hampshire, said he bid on 50 lots for five people and won 15 of them. The owner of S.A.M.S. (Specialized Antique Moving Service), LeVarn agreed with the assessment of many who attended the sale. Lack of absentee bidders did not affect prices at the upper end. Those lots went for what you would expect them to go for. The people who usually spend the so-called crazy money on large weight-driven wall clocks, for example, either showed up in person or had someone bid for them. In Schmitt's words, "The nice things, things that were really rare, things in especially nice condition, I think we could agree, still sold well, in some cases double my estimate."

Other prices, however, were down. "Some things just didn't have that extra interest," said Schmitt, who reported total sales of \$639,822.40 (including buyers' premiums). Still, he emphasized, "you have to balance everything. Mrs. Semegran [the collector's widow] was happy with the results, and we were happy with the reduced amount of work."

Semegran's Ansonia Regal, one of the fanciest Ansonias in the sale and the company's most elegant crystal regulator, sold for \$6720 (est. \$3000/4000). It was perhaps the best example from the Semegran collection, and Schmitt featured it on the catalog front cover. The model is also on the cover of *Iran Duy Ly's* price guide *Ansonia Clocks & Watches* (Arlington Book Company, Inc., 1998). It was bought by an anonymous collector from the Chicago area who attended the sale himself and was described by Schmitt as "a prominent investment advisor who believes in buying quality and originality."

Other top sellers in the sale were not from the Semegran collection. A circa 1820 three-weight Austrian Laterndlhr grand sonnerie that made \$17,360 (est. \$14,000/18,000) was consigned by Herbert Bednarik. "He's been sending me things on consignment for about six years now," Schmitt said of Bednarik, who lives in Vienna and who sent Schmitt a dozen other Viennese clocks from their birthplace for this sale. The Laterndlhr, a predecessor to the Vienna regulator, was bought by an agent.

A circa 1884 oak-cased Seth Thomas office calendar clock No. 5 sold near the top of its estimate for \$14,560. "For the last two years, wall regulators in general have been enjoying a good appreciation in value, and good wall-hanging double-dial calendar clocks are enjoying extra interest right now," said Schmitt.

The back-cover lot, a Gale drop calendar No. 3 with a very busy single dial, did well too, selling just above its high estimate for \$12,320. "The Gale has really enjoyed a resurgence in interest," Schmitt said, referring to one of the complicated clock movements invented by Daniel Jackson Gale (1830-1901) and produced by the E.N. Welch Manufacturing Company of Bristol, Connecticut. "If you go back just five years, the normal price was five thousand to six thousand dollars. Over the last two years, both Bill Jenack [William J. Jenack, auctioneers and appraisers, Chester, New York] and myself have seen it rise up into the ten-thousand- to twenty-thousand-dollar neighborhood."

An E. Howard & Company regulator No. 10 (that's the one in the shape of a figure eight) was sold at just above the high estimate for \$8288 to John Delaney of Delaney Antique Clocks, West Townsend, Massachusetts. Inside the door of the clock, which had its original tablets, was a paper label showing it had been sold for the first time in Boston on February 1, 1874. "Many of these clocks were made after 1900," said the Schmitt catalog copy, "and this label is excellent documentation that it is a nineteenth-century model."

Seated in their usual spot in the front row, the Delaneys—John, Barbara, and their older son—bought several of the other regulators in the sale, including a Howard No. 70 in oak for \$2128 (est. \$1400/1800) and a Seth Thomas No. 70 in mahogany for \$4144, not much above its lower estimate, perhaps due to the condition of its painted dial, which had begun to flake.

A 4 1/4 dwarf tall-case clock attracted a lot of attention at the preview. Made and signed on the dial by Joshua Wilder in Hingham, Massachusetts, circa 1815, it belonged to a consignor in that same town. "She doesn't want two hundred and forty-three dealers lined up on her front lawn. I'm selling it for her, as quietly as possible," said her friend, a clock dealer and repairer, who had brought it to Schmitt's attention. Perhaps he went about it too quietly; the dwarf was one of two significant buy-ins.

"We had interest in the Wilder up to eighteen thousand," said Schmitt. Why didn't it get just a couple of more bids, he was asked. (The estimate was \$20,000/30,000.) "Well, it's hard to say. I guess I just didn't have enough pre-1850 Americana in the sale to attract the buyer of interest for that kind of clock." He will not reoffer it in the spring. "The consignor wanted me to, but a specialized item like that, if offered again, I think, suffers. It needs to be offered by a different auction house to a different set of buyers. So she's going to put it someplace else."

The other major buy-in was a floor-standing jeweler's regulator, a magnificent monster at nearly 86 tall, with an 18 inches silvered brass astronomical dial (i.e., its single big hand shows the minutes, while a smaller dial within the larger one indicates the hour). The catalog said the clock was made circa 1845 by B.D. Bingham (1812-1878) in Nashua, New Hampshire, and the movement was stamped "BDB." But some auction attendees remained unconvinced that it was a Bingham (one said he suspected English origins), and the bidding went no higher than \$9000 on an estimate of \$10,000/20,000.

Ansonia liked to copy French figurals, and Semegran liked to collect the original French models on which the Ansonia knockoffs were based. One of the French figurals, called l'Amour, circa 1890, was bought for \$1680 (est. \$1000/1500) by collector Richard Simmons of Branford, Connecticut, who said he ordinarily buys Americana.

A Delaney customer since 1968 who was attending a Schmitt auction for the first time, Simmons came to Manchester as "a weekend thing," an outing, but also because the Delaneys had encouraged him to experience the scene for himself. He would not have been an absentee bidder, said Simmons, who was at a loss to explain why he had bought this unlikely addition to his collection—a winged archer on a clock-embedded red marble base, the whole of it nearly 36 tall. "There was something about it...It caught my eye...." He tried for others, but it was the only clock he took home with him.

Most seasoned figural buyers, by contrast, bought in multiples. Chuck Rambo, who drove a van 1200 miles from his home in Appleton, Wisconsin, bought at least 40 of the cheaper novelty models on Saturday night, when the lesser lots of all kinds were offered. Rambo (no resemblance to the action hero) said he was pleased by what he called "good, fair prices" as he packed those purchases himself in pages of M.A.D. on Sunday morning. They included three Ansonia mantel clocks; a circa 1883 alarm clock topped with a cupid (\$504); a circa 1904 eight-day striker, also topped by a cupid (\$140); and a circa 1894 mirror-clock, the Castle model, with its movement built into the castle's roof (\$168). The castle was missing its top piece, a rooster weathervane; otherwise, the price would probably have doubled, according to the Tran Duy Ly price guide.

A woman who stood in the back of the hall for most of both sessions bought nearly as many as Rambo. The headset she wore with her cell phone could lead an observer to assume she was acting as an agent, but Schmitt said no. She was neither agent nor dealer. "She's strictly a collector." There was never a time that seemed the right one to interrupt her intense participation in the auction. Even at the preview she was preoccupied with her inspection and the conversation with her advisor (financial or otherwise) on her cell phone. So M.A.D. was unable to get her name. Schmitt said, "I don't know that I'm allowed to give it, but she's from Las Vegas, and she likes Ansonia. She likes all figural clocks but especially Ansonia, and she has been collecting for about ten years."

Bidding aggressively, often exceeding the high estimate, she bought many of the pricier Ansonias, including Eros for \$1092 (est. \$300/400); Harvester for \$1456 (est. \$700/900); Florida with cherubs for \$4928 (est. \$2750/3750); and the garnitures for the Louis XV for \$1792 (est. \$400/600).

She also bought several of the sale's many swingers, including Ansonia's Gloria, circa 1905, for \$3920 (est. \$3000/3500). Swingers, or swing clocks, are figurals whose pendulum rocks mysteriously from the figure's outstretched arm—or its trunk in the instance of an elephant swinger. "She came to her first sale here, I believe, about five years ago, when I had a lot of small Ansonia novelties," said Schmitt, "and she flew to that sale and bought most of them, and God bless her for coming again this time."

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