

Marlborough, Massachusetts

Nan Gurley's Thanksgiving Sunday Antiques Show: Be Early or Weep

by Jeanne Schinto

How early is early? Try the night before. One dealer who sets up at this annual one-day show in the Royal Plaza Trade Center off Route I-495 in Marlborough, Massachusetts, does so only in order to buy, not caring much if he sells, he said. "I bought like a madman last night," he told us at the latest holiday season's event, on Sunday, November 26, 2006.

Out of shape for a show of this kind, having covered too many strictly retail venues in a row, we arrived merely in time to stand near the end of the line for early buying, scheduled to start at 8 a.m. Through the big front windows we could see all the last-minute activity going on inside. So could the 60 or 70 others waiting with us, one of whom complained that dealer-to-dealer trades were going on right before his eyes. Of course, the legitimate argument was made that the exhibitors had paid their setup fee for the privilege.

To avoid a stampede, promoter Nan Gurley's tradition is to sell tickets and distribute wrist bands to members of the lineup before the doors open. Soon enough, the banded ones were allowed to surge forward. In what seemed like no time, we learned that a local auctioneer had bought the only tall-case clock in the building, its 19th-century maker a member of the clockmaking Wingate family of Maine. We also heard that a woman claimed a good 9' x 12' wool braided rug. The news was conveyed by someone who has been selling braided rugs swiftly and successfully on eBay. "She stood on it until she owned it," he said. Later, a paintings dealer told us she had scored one small American picture that made her trip worthwhile.

The show's 90 exhibitors featured largely but not exclusively country Americana. The wares dovetailed with what auctioneer Willis Henry had on offer at the Best Western Royal Plaza Hotel on Saturday evening. The timing of the two events was not coincidental. Gurley said she had asked her friend Henry to hold the auction in conjunction with her show, "so the out-of-town dealers would have something to do the night before" — something more to do, that is.

As we moved from booth to booth, we saw plenty of shopping being done, with the best and best-priced items snapped up, some of them chased a second time in quick succession. ("Did you buy that here?" one shopping dealer asked another. Yes, he had. "Do you want to flip it?" He did not.) Exhibiting dealer Lynn Morin of West Townsend, Massachusetts, brought a large uncut bolt of 42-star parade flags made to commemorate the addition of the state of Washington on November 11, 1889. The bolt contained over 50 flags in original condition. As Morin explained, the 42-star flag was never issued as the official United States flag. On July 3, 1890, the day before its intended release, Idaho was added as the 43rd state. The 42-star flag was rendered moot; the 43-star flag was issued instead. The flag fabric was sold by 9:15 a.m.

Forty-five minutes later, the people who had waited for the regular 10 a.m. entry time created a mini-surge. By then most of the early birds were gone.

We stayed another two hours and saw more items move before we left with our own purchase, a copper engraved 7½" diameter sundial signed and dated John Rowland 1790. We bought it as a decorative piece from dealers Pat Reese and John Rice of Portsmouth, New Hampshire, whose artful eye we admire. Its provenance was the William Guthman sale, Part II, October 12, 2006; its price was \$270.

For more information, contact Nan Gurley at (207) 625- 3577 or via the Web site (www.nangurley.com).