

## Stoddard's of Boston

by Jeanne Schinto

Stoddard's of Boston, one of the oldest cutlery shops in the country, sold its early 20th-century building and auctioned its contents on February 29. The sale took place in the ballroom of the Hyatt Regency Hotel, around the corner from Stoddard's location in one of the city's downtown shopping districts. Besides selling knives of all kinds, to chefs as well as to hunters, Stoddard's also sold gear to anglers, claiming to be one of the oldest fishing tackle stores in the country too.

Jay Beard, president of Simond Hill & Associates, Shrewsbury, Massachusetts, was the auctioneer for the sale. His company's specialty is commercial liquidations, but Beard is willing to take on other large-scale projects with marketable stories like this one.

"Did you call me because I'm an antique?" 87-year-old Albert Marks, former Stoddard's owner, asked this reporter when he came to the phone several days before the auction previews began. He spoke to us from the store at 48-50 Temple Place. "I have sort of semiretired," he said. "But I come in, in the morning, because that's my nature. I generally go home at twelve o'clock." Loath to pay downtown parking rates, he rides public transportation to and from the assisted-living facility where he moved some months ago.

Albert Marks's son, 53-year-old David Marks, owns Stoddard's now. David is the third-generation Marks family member to run the company. Albert's late father, Bernard "Bernie" Marks, bought it from "three elderly gentlemen" (Albert's sheepish characterization). The business was already well established by the time Bernie Marks took it over. Founded in 1800, Stoddard's is almost as old as one of Charles Bulfinch's most recognizable designs, the 1798 gold-domed Massachusetts State House on nearby Beacon Hill. The Boston Tea Party, the Boston Massacre, and the Siege of Boston were still within memory of many of Stoddard's earliest customers.

Stoddard's struggled like all businesses during the Depression. "The Beacon Hill crowd went away," said the elder Marks, who began to work at the store when he was 16, just after graduation from high school in 1933. At the time, Stoddard's was located at 374 Washington Street, next door to the original Filene's department store, another Boston institution.

There was one advantage to poor sales: it left time for fishing. "I'm an ardent fisherman," said Albert. "I still do fish. I've been a fisherman since I was eight years old. Used to fly-cast. And when business was slow, my father, who also loved to fish, at the drop of the hat would take us up to Canada, and we'd fish for salmon in the famous rivers."

Simond Hill name-dropped famous Stoddard's customers in its press releases. Ted Williams was one, Albert said. "I remember as a young person, when I first was here, having Ted Williams come in." The Red Sox's "Splendid Splinter" bought fishing tackle at Stoddard's, the first U.S. retailers of split bamboo fly-casting rods. "He loved fly-fishing best. I remember very well. My mouth opened when he came in."

Julia Child is associated with Stoddard's cutlery. When she lived in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and her first cooking shows were being televised by Boston's public TV station, she often shopped at Stoddard's. "Julia Child, over a period of years, came in many times," Albert Marks said.

A Marks family story about Winston Churchill and his connection to Stoddard's was told to us by David Marks at the auction preview. "Stoddard's used to supply Boston's better hotels with their cutlery," he said, "and when the Wyman family owned the Ritz-Carlton Hotel and Churchill was visiting Boston, Mister Wyman called my father, saying, 'Can you help us? We have Churchill here, and we'd very much like to set his table with the kind of utensils he's most comfortable with.' And so we sent them Sheffield stag-handled steak sets that Stoddard's has carried for many years. It's a very traditional pattern. Wyman said Churchill actually commented on them, saying they were just like his. To this day, we refer to the 'Churchill' pattern when we're reordering them."

Over the years, Stoddard's took on other lines of merchandise related to the outdoor life—compasses and binoculars with floating neck straps, Thermos brand thermoses and stainless steel hip flasks. In 1935 Stoddard's became one of the country's first importers of Raleigh bikes. Stoddard's also sold many other "manly" items: razors and bristle shaving brushes, gold cigar cutters, silver cigarette cases, and Dunhill lighters.

In the 1960's, during urban renewal, Stoddard's moved from its Washington Street location to what had been a women's corset shop at the Temple Place address. "If you dig a hole in that park next to Filene's," said David Marks, "you'll come to the old Stoddard's vault. It's still in that ground. If this were the original building, I would feel very differently. I wouldn't be letting it go."

The younger Marks stressed that Stoddard's isn't going out of business. In fact, in the last couple of decades, it has opened a successful branch in suburban Newton, Massachusetts, and another at Boston's Copley Place. The downtown location is being closed, he said, because the one-way street is too narrow for delivery trucks. Stoddard's has simply outgrown it.

Understandably, the Marks family held back its best pieces. "We have Sheffield dating from the 1800's," said David. "We have a collection of very old handmade pocket knives. And we have some very old fishing rods and reels. None of that is going anywhere near the auction. As an ongoing company, you really don't want to sell your history, so to speak."

Albert Marks gave a different reason for the dearth of stellar vintage items in the sale: "It's my own fault. I never was a saver. During the thirties, we wanted to sell things; we never thought of keeping anything for the future. Had I done that, there would be lots of merchandise here that would be unusual."

The public didn't seem to mind. They knew there was a little bit of history being made—or unmade. A crowd of 120 or 130 at its peak gathered at the hotel to bid on the items projected by a digital broadcast system with a 20" screen. Many more people participated by phone and by absentee bidding, and on eBay Live Auctions and Live Auctioneers.

"You've been to antiques auctions? That's not us," said Jay Beard by way of introducing himself to his audience. "We're quick." To M.A.D., he had boasted 150 lots an hour for commercial sales; this one, he said, would be closer to 100. It did move along.

There was little crossover among the contingents for ephemera and advertising, for the "basement finds," for discontinued cutlery, for demo fishing rods, and for a huge number of collectible Omas pens. When the real estate went up at noon, it was easy to pick out those who had come to bid on it. Their bidder cards were different—bigger. Most of them lined the back wall. All of them looked worried. Four stories plus basement, the building sold to a local investment group for \$1,365,000. Berman Auctioneers & Appraisers of Worcester, Massachusetts, handled the sale of the building.

All prices for items pictured include the buyer's premium.

For more information, call Simond Hill & Associates at (508) 845-2400 or see the Web site ([www.simondhillauctions.com](http://www.simondhillauctions.com)).