

Thoreau Pencils and Other Rarities Sell at Royka's

by Jeanne Schinto

Two pencils, made by the family firm of Henry David Thoreau; a pen holder, fashioned from a bit of rail split by Abraham Lincoln; an early American military commission, signed by John Hancock; and a daguerreotype of a woman breast-feeding her baby—who could resist taking a look at these and other unusual items being offered by Royka's Auctioneers & Appraisers of Boston and Lunenburg, Massachusetts, on Sunday, May 28, at the picturesque Lexington Depot, a former railway station in the center of Lexington, Massachusetts?

All three of the rare writing implements had come to auctioneer Paul Royka from the family of Alexander Hamilton Bullock (1816-1882), governor of Massachusetts from January 1866 to January 1869. The sixth-plate breast-feeding image had come in as a single-item consignment from a collector in upstate New York. "I drove seven hours to get it," said Royka. "Otherwise, I wasn't going to get it at all."

Several additional lots of early photography in the sale had come from the Bullock family, including a pair of half-plate ambrotypes of railroad images in a single leather case. One side opened to reveal a view of a train called the Phantom; the other side, a likeness of the Nymph. Each train was built in Taunton, Massachusetts, by the Mason Machine Works and delivered to the Toledo & Illinois Railroad (later the Toledo & Wabash) in the mid-1850's. Royka thought these images may have come into the possession of the Bullocks because cousins of the Bay State governor were involved in the railroad and banking industries in the Midwest.

Many of the noteworthy Bullock items were found in an attic. "I went up there and started pulling these things out," Royka recalled with a laugh. "There's more to come. These are just some of the items. Pretty fun stuff."

A second major consignment to this sale came from one of the last descendants of Louis Prang (1824-1909), a German-born Boston-based lithographer, wood engraver, and educator. "The person just passed away two months ago up in Maine," Royka said. "I was given six hours to go through his estate and grab anything I could."

One of those items was a sterling silver tray with the following engraving: "To/ Mr. & Mrs. Prang/ from/ Mr. & Mrs. Ackermann/ Wishing them Health & Prosperity/ in Their New Home/ Xmas, 1875." Its significance lay in the fact that Mrs. Ackermann, wife of Prang's London agent, is credited with being the one who suggested to Prang in 1874 that he begin printing Christmas cards. He did so the following year. It was the start of the Christmas card tradition. For better or worse, Prang is considered the founder of the greeting card business in the United States.

The Prang name is also associated with many of the best-known figures in the 19th-century American art world. "A lot of people don't know that Stanford White and Louis Comfort Tiffany were judges for Prang's Christmas card competitions," Royka said. "The prize was four thousand dollars in 1875. The competitions were held in New York City. For Prang the cards were real pieces of art, ones to hold in your hand. He refused to make cheap ones, so when Germany started doing that, he didn't try to compete. He just got out of the business."

Other major lots included seven cow, rooster, and running horse weathervanes from a Massachusetts collection; a portrait of First World War era U.S. Army General Harry Taylor and related memorabilia; and a gilt wooden eagle that was said to have come from the White House.

Besides these and the highlights pictured in the captions, the rest of the 280 lots consisted of estate-type furniture and decorative arts, miscellaneous collectibles, and minor historical curiosities. Given the Lexington venue, Royka said he would have preferred "a smaller, tighter sale." More quality, less quantity. But he didn't know until it was too late that he would be able to get the depot. "I've been watching this building's renovation for years," he said, adding that he wanted his sale to be here rather than in a hotel ballroom, because of the depot's natural light.

The town is bathed in historical mood, especially on holidays. Lexington's statue of a Minuteman is just a couple of blocks away from the depot on Battle Green Square, where a tattoo was being played by a man in period dress as we drove past it on our way to the preview.

Royka had the depot only for one day. Previewers of one or two items had been accommodated in previous weeks by appointment in Lunenburg and Boston. Those who wanted to see everything had to wait until the three-hour period just prior to the sale.

Some curiosity seekers were attracted to the auction site by Royka's signage, but they didn't stay long. More than a few of them wore bike helmets and arrived via the 11-mile Minuteman Bikeway that runs behind the depot. Anyway, Royka wasn't relying on walk-ins. He was anticipating good Internet participation. Nearly 400 people had registered as Web bidders by that afternoon.

People who came to the sale included photography dealer Greg French of Early Photography, Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts, and photography collector Thurman F. "Jack" Naylor of Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts.

Naylor is the creator of the Naylor Museum of Photographic History, housed in the basement of his Chestnut Hill home, with storage in a facility in Natick, Massachusetts. The collection consists of about 31,000 items—early cameras, equipment, images of all kinds, ephemera, and books. It is the largest privately held photographic collection in the world. Naylor sold an earlier collection to the Japanese government in 1994 for \$9 million. This current one is now for sale, said Naylor, whose asking price is \$20 million. "Or more," he ventured. Still, 87-year-old Naylor continues to collect, and it was a fair assumption that he was there for the breast-feeding image.

That assumption proved correct.

Initially, the image, an example of an extremely rare but recognized genre, carried an estimate of \$10,000/15,000. In the weeks prior to the sale, however, that estimate was lowered to \$5000/7000. Those reduced numbers seemed more reasonable, considering the image's significant "wipes"-collectors' euphemistic term for scratches. The character of its aesthetics was important too. During the long minutes it took for the image to be made, the mother stared at the camera instead of gazing at her baby, whose demeanor was more lifeless than peaceful or blissful. In the end, Naylor paid \$4988 (including the buyer's premium), and it seemed the right price.

French did not compete for the breast-feeding image. Instead, he bid against the Internet for the cased train ambrotypes, winning the lot at \$3480. He also got an ambrotype of a Bullock family member with his dog for \$551 and a daguerreotype of a young female Bullock with a book for \$203. Each final bid was just a shade above the lot's low estimate.

Naylor competed for only one other lot, and it wasn't photographic. For the 18th-century work of a schoolgirl, a drawing identified by the notation "An Accurate Map of the World, Designed by Marcia Rice at Portland," he paid \$2436 against an estimate of \$1000/1500. It was "an emotional purchase," made on the spur of the moment, Naylor said.

Naylor's schoolgirl map had come from the same family source as the consignment of two early American military commissions that were offered in one lot. The first one appointed Thomas Thompson as captain of the storied frigate Raleigh, built at Portsmouth, New Hampshire, for the Continental Navy. The ship was launched on May 21, 1776; Thompson's commission was signed by John Hancock as president of the Congress on October 10, 1776. The second document was for Thompson's later commission, as colonel of the regiment of artillery of New Hampshire. It was signed on August 10, 1785, by John Langdon, New Hampshire's representative to the Constitutional Convention.

Two room bidders tussled for the Thompson material; one of them paid \$13,340 (est. \$5000/7000).

A third consignment from the same family, six 33½" x 17" cloth bags, five of them initialed "GR," for "George Rex," were described in a family note as having been captured by Captain Thompson from a British naval vessel in 1777 or 1778. The bag lot opened at \$2700, nearly double its high estimate, and sold to an Internet bidder for \$5800.

General Harry Taylor was a military personage unfamiliar to Royka when he took in a consignment that consisted of the general's oil portrait, an inscribed 14k gold pocket watch, and related items. He estimated them to sell in one lot at \$400 to \$600. After he started getting calls from museums about the material, he learned that Taylor (1862-1930) was appointed chief engineer officer of the American Expeditionary Force in France at the start of the First World War, and that, upon his return to the United States, he was awarded the Distinguished Service Medal and named major general, chief of engineers. Taylor's medals, slide rule, and drafting set began to take on more significance then, and Royka wasn't surprised when Internet and phone bidders took the Taylor lot to \$4988.

Civil War collectors vied for another lot that combined a portrait with related items. Its main components were a photographic portrait of a man in epaulets and a saddle. After heavy competition from a phone bidder, someone in the room prevailed to take the cardboard boxful at \$5220. He was later identified by Royka as a collector from the South. It's a good guess that the collector can name the subject of the portrait.

The top lot of the day, however, was not a historical item. It was one of the weathervanes. A full-bodied 20" x 34" cow in copper with a well-defined udder went to a phone bidder at \$17,400. His or her competition was a folk art dealer in the room, who went on to buy another cow and a rooster.

As for the two pencils made by "J. Thoreau & Son," they sold in one lot at \$2088 to James Dawson of Unicorn Book Shop, Trappe, Maryland, who bid via the Internet.

"They were purchased jointly by myself and Tim Clemmer for our respective Thoreau collections," Dawson said by phone. "I wasn't familiar with the auctioneer, but I do a weekly search for Thoreau items on eBay, and obviously, because he was using eBay Live, these came up. I have a fairly serious collection."

The pencils were made in Concord, Massachusetts, at the pencil factory established in the 1820's by John Thoreau, father of the man who would go on to publish Walden; or, Life in the Woods in 1854. "The whole family helped out in the pencil-making operation, including Henry," Dawson said. "Henry is known for grinding the graphite powder very finely. He also did research and found out how they made graded pencils in Europe, so the Thoreau family is credited with mixing various types of clay with the graphite to get the harder and softer grade pencils."

"At the time, lots of people were making pencils over here, and they were pretty poor quality. The Thoreau pencils were so superior that they won awards. It was said that Boston art teachers told their students to buy only Thoreau pencils. But they were expensive. A single Thoreau pencil cost twenty-five cents, while other brands cost fifty cents a dozen."

One of the Thoreau pencils sold by Royka was sharpened; the other wasn't. Dawson was asked which one he would choose for his own. "I suspect I will keep the unsharpened one," he said, "because you could make the argument that it was as made, complete, and has a couple more molecules of graphite in it and maybe a few millimeters of wood. Truly, I would be happy with either one. They don't come on the market very often; in fact, I don't even know the last time one was sold."

The Thoreau family stopped making pencils in 1853. They, like Louis Prang, faced underselling by cheaper imports from Germany. Besides, said Dawson, pencil making could be bad for one's health. "The pencil factory was in a building adjoining the Thoreaus' house, and graphite dust permeated everything. It probably led to the deaths by tuberculosis of several members of the family, including Henry at age forty-four."

For more information, contact Royka's at (978) 582-8207; Web site (www.roykas.com).