



February 9, 2012

The Pedigrees of Acquisitions

By EVE M. KAHN

At a memorial service last month for the American furniture dealer Albert M. Sack, who died last year at 96, his son, Donald, gave a eulogy explaining how the family's Manhattan gallery relentlessly scrounged for stock. Albert Sack would spend his weekends calling countryside dealers and owners to see what underpriced treasures might be for sale, and then drive away on Monday mornings in his station wagon for scouting trips.

"If it was in Podunk, he'd head off to Podunk," Donald Sack told the mourners gathered under military murals at the Park Avenue Armory's Veterans Room.

Albert Sack filed away raw notes from his travels, as well as mounds of other paperwork dating back to the company's founding in 1905. He outlived two brothers who helped run the business that their father, Israel, had started, and after it closed in 2002, Albert moved to North Carolina and kept dealing. He set up a separate apartment to store 200 linear feet of correspondence, appraisals, invoices, auction catalogs, reference books and clippings albums.

In December the Yale University Art Gallery acquired the Sack archive from the estate. (The Americana collector Robert M. Bass financed the undisclosed purchase price.) Last month, Patricia E. Kane, the gallery's lead American decorative arts curator, used a pearly penknife to slice open the bruised and dented boxes. They had just arrived at a former Bayer aspirin factory in West Haven, Conn., where Yale has set up storage spaces, offices and labs.

"I haven't had time to actually look through all this stuff and see what I've got," she said, as she leafed through files labeled with shorthand like "Hepp" (Hepplewhite) and "Chip" (Chippendale).

The Sacks scrawled in the margins of auction catalogs and gallery ads, noting prices they paid over the years, past owners and any components that had been replaced and refinished. The brothers wrote "FAKE" across the images of numerous pieces they saw for sale.

They documented their repeated contacts with anyone who owned something they wanted and their disputes with other scholars over authenticity. The Sacks also wrote warnings to one another: "Lady is very peculiar — 'crazy,'" a note from around 1960 reports about a collector worth visiting in Connecticut.

"This is fantastic, truly," Ms. Kane said. In the boxes she kept finding images to add to one of her pet projects, Yale's online Rhode Island Furniture Archive, and discovering hints that works already in the database might be fake or heavily restored.

Yale will be digitizing parts of the Sack archive, including material in obsolete formats, like microfiche and glass lantern slides. Researchers will eventually be able to scroll the Web site or make an appointment to learn how a particular American antique fared on the market during the last century, and who squabbled over whether it was real.

RAIL DEPOT TREASURES

When train stations died along Texas rail lines, Roy Gay, an auditor for the Union Pacific Railroad, heard the news early and kept track of closings for 65 years. Upon arriving at obsolete stations, he would collect artifacts for display at a century-old depot that he had moved to his East Texas farm.

He took home railroad car linens, sugar tongs, spittoons, engine components, metal footstools and conductors' caps, among other items made between the 1880s and the 1950s. But Mr. Gay, who died in January at 86, did not share the contents of the depot with visitors to the farm.

"I had no idea that he had this, absolutely none," said Scott Franks, a longtime friend of Mr. Gay's, who owns [A&S Antique Auction Company](#) in Waco, Tex. On March 10 and 11 A&S will be auctioning the Gay collection, divided into about 1,000 lots.

Mr. Gay started planning the A&S sale late last year. He told the company how he helped clear out old railroad stations. "He got pick of the litter," Mr. Franks said.

But Mr. Gay died before he finished listing where everything came from. "We just run out of time," Mr. Franks said.

Mr. Gay's most valuable items are rail line advertisements on metal plaques a few feet wide, with estimates in the five figures.

HISTORY BY THE YARD

H. Richard Dietrich III grew up around his father's collection of early-19th-century flags, most of them originally flown from the U.S.S. Constitution. At the family home near Philadelphia, a dozen ragged textiles up to 37 feet long were either draped over a glass-topped table or kept tightly furled in storage.

"They were just things he'd show his friends and family and kind of cherish them," Mr. Dietrich said in a recent phone interview. His father, H. Richard Dietrich Jr., a cough drop and candy magnate, died in 2007, and the family has consigned the flags to an April 30 sale at Freeman's auction house in Philadelphia. The flags' previous owners were descendants of Virgil D. Parris, a Maine congressman who had acquired them at a government auction in the 1850s.

Parris took home the Constitution's American and foreign flags, including a French banner that had probably been seized in battle, and British and Brazilian flags meant for flying as respectful salutes during diplomatic visits and trips to foreign ports.

The fabrics are heavily patched with squares cut from other flags. "The Navy was frugal," said J. Craig Nannos, the Freeman's specialist for the sale.

The collection is expected to bring up to \$2 million. Setting estimates per flag has been dicey, Mr. Nannos said, since so few comparable groups have survived.

Four 1770s American flags, captured during the Revolutionary War by the British general Banastre Tarleton, brought a total of \$17.4 million at Sotheby's in 2006. But comparing those with the Dietrich lots is "apples and pears," Mr. Nannos said. He added, "The market is, how many people want a piece of nautical history?"