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A Folkloric Perspective on Traditional Auctioneering

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1977

A FOLKLORIC PERSPECTIVE ON
TRADITIONAL AUCTIONEERING

A Thesis

Presented to

the Center for Intercultural and Folk Studies

Western Kentucky University

Bowling Green, Kentucky

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Daniel W. Steed, Jr.

May 1977

A FOLKLORIC PERSPECTIVE ON
TRADITIONAL AUCTIONEERING

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Finally, I reserve my final thanks for my wife Linda K. True. Her enthusiasm and support of my work made the preparation of this thesis a most enjoyable experience.

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59 pages

Directed by: Kenneth Clarke, Lynwood Montell, and Burt
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To date, the auction as a type of folklore performance has not been adequately researched. In order to place auctions in perspective as folklore, chapter one of this thesis reviews the history of auctions in the United States. Chapter one further presents the idea of the auctioneer as a folk occupational specialist. The second chapter is concerned with the skills of an active Kentucky auctioneer, who offers, during a series of interviews, insights concerning his performance skills. The third, and final, chapter attempts to construct a theoretical base for researching auctions as folklore performance. The criteria by which any given performance is called folklore are applied to the study of auctions. This thesis concludes with the writer's firm belief that a variety of techniques and scholarly orientations can be applied to the study of auctions.

INTRODUCTION

Auctioneering has had a long and colorful history in this country, yet it has been long neglected by scholars, including folklorists. A survey of the literature available on auctioneering demonstrates the lack of interest in this widely used art form. Art in this thesis is used in accordance with the definition espoused by Michael Owen Jones. He defines art as, "skill in the making or doing of that which functions as (among other things) a stimulus to aesthetic experience; the output of that skill; and the activity involving the use of that skill."¹

Most of the articles published concerning auctions have focused on it as a quaint and picturesque form of entertainment found in the rural regions of the United States. These publications deal mainly with people who come to the auctions, usually from the city, looking for bargains or antiques. These articles call auctions "history on parade," but they never mention any of this history themselves.²

¹Michael Owen Jones, "The Well Wrought Pot: Folk Art and Folklore as Art," Folklore Forum 12 (1974): 85.

²For examples of this type of publication refer to J. W. Galbournth, "Auctions--Going, Going, Gone!" See Illinois, August 1976; and Marilyn Lithgou, "Country Auctions," Woman's World, June 1974.

Historical studies have also been lackadaisical in studying the auction in America. There are no books that survey the history of the auction in this country. Most references to the auction center around its use in the South during slavery times, but even these works fail to show the true importance of the auction system in our culture. Except for the state of Pennsylvania, studies of auctioneers in a specific region are totally lacking. Most knowledge of auctioneers from our past must be gleaned from diaries and letters rather than from any notable scholarly works.

Even disciplines such as sociology, psychology, and anthropology have never studied the auction from their own scholarly outlook. One can find references to the fact that auctions are a semi-formal social institution and as such they reflect cultural patterns of the region where they are held; to date, however, no one has even researched auctions to study how they reflect these patterns.

The only discipline that has researched auctions on a sophisticated level is economics. This field has attempted to understand the role of auctions in the development of our capitalistic system. One book in particular has surveyed the auction system from this vantage point. Ralph Cassady's book, Auctions and Auctioneering³, tries to study the auction as

³Ralph Cassady, Jr., Auctions and Auctioneering (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967).

an integral part of economics worthy of better understanding. This book is of limited use to other fields, however, because it deals with auctions on a grand scale; hence it does not present the features of the auction that have actually caused it to endure--its traditional elements.

Study of these elements should be the concern of the folklorists. Folklorists have not used their particular orientation to shed light on this type of folk performance.

A survey of the contents of the various folklore journals and books illuminates the fact that auctioneering studies have been at the fringe of folklore research. Only five articles available to folklore scholars have dealt with auctioneering. Two of these in a British periodical, Folklore, were short pieces dealing with unique aspects of early auctions in England. Two articles in Keystone Folklore Quarterly are the only ones that deal in any length with traditional auctioneering in America. One of these articles, "Harold E. Leightley: Portrait of an Auctioneer and His Craft," is a call for further investigations of a field that is being decimated by the growth of formal auctioneering schools, increasing urbanization, and the breaking away from many of the traditional patterns found in the areas where auctions are held. The second article, "The Folklore Repertory of a Pennsylvania Auctioneer," focuses on the folklore genres utilized by one auctioneer. My own short piece in Kentucky Folklore Record entitled "To Be an Auctioneer--You've Got to Get It in Your Blood," is based on research of traditional auctioneering in

Kentucky, and I have included a portion of that research in this thesis. The Center for Southern Folklore has located four films which deal with auctioneering as occupational lore, but visual folklore has not been used to any great extent in the study of auctioneers.⁴

Major works dealing with traditional auctioneering from a folkloristic point of view have never been published. In dealing with other forms of verbal art, the folklorists have discussed features that in many ways compare to the art of the auctioneer. Rosenberg's work with American folk preachers and Lord's work with formulaic qualities of some folk performances have never been applied to the study of the folk auctioneer.⁵ Even folklorists who are noted for the study of folk occupations in this country consistently leave the traditional auctioneer out of their studies.

Although there have been no notable, lengthy works on auctioneering, a major shift in folklore research towards communication studies and folklore as performance will hope-

⁴Mac E. Barrick, "The Folklore Repertory of a Pennsylvania Auctioneer," Keystone Folklore Quarterly 19 (Fall 1974); Anne March and William Aspinall, "Harold Leightley: Portrait of an Auctioneer and His Craft," Keystone Folklore Quarterly 16 (Fall 1971); R. W. Patten, "Chedzoy Candle Auction," Folklore 82 (Spring 1971), and "Tatworth Candle Auction," Folklore 81 (Summer 1970); Daniel W. Steed, Jr., "To Be an Auctioneer--You've Got to Get it in Your Blood," Kentucky Folklore Record 20 (April 1974); Bill Ferris and Judy Peiser, eds., American Folklore Films and Videotapes: An Index (Memphis: Center for Southern Folklore, 1976).

⁵Albert B. Lord, The Singer of Tales (New York: Atheneum Press, 1965); Bruce A. Rosenberg, The Art of the American Folk Preacher (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970).

fully change this situation. In recent years, many folklorists have turned their attention to studies of performance as the crux of research in folklore. Dan Ben-Amos was one of the first folklorists to urge studies based on the concept that, above all, folklore is a communicative process. Ben-Amos writes:

. . . Hymes' 'ethnography of speaking,' enables us not only to study but to define folklore in its context. And in this framework, which is the real habitat of all folklore forms, there is no dichotomy between processes and products. The telling is the tale; therefore the narrator, his story, and his audience are all related to each other as components of a single continuum, which is the communicative event . . . In other words, the definition of folklore is not merely an analytical construct, depending upon arbitrary exclusion and inclusion of items; on the contrary, it has a cultural and social base. Folklore is not 'pretty much what one wants to make out of it;' it is a definite realistic, artistic, and communicative process.⁶

Michael Owen Jones' studies of folk art call for more emphasis on studies of communication. His definition of folklore is a valuable aid in researching performance as a central part of folk studies:

FOLK refers to a process of learning and utilizing certain modes of behavior and codes of communication in a situation of face-to-face interchange involving members of a small interactional network. LORE is not song texts or old objects but the units of expressive behavior or the styles, designs, and techniques of a particular TRADITION, the general category of behavior to which we tend to give an identifying label such as storytelling, chairmaking, dancing, or singing, and in which the process has been sustained sufficiently long for several individuals to have learned and utilized the behavior.⁷

⁶Dan Ben-Amos, "Toward a Definition of Folklore in Context," Journal of American Folklore 84 (1971): 10.

⁷Jones, p. 86.

Another folklorist, Charles Joyner, shares the idea that a communications orientation to folkloristics is desirable. Joyner, however, goes one step further and states that it is of paramount importance to stress the historical context of folklore performance. He writes, "Events, such as folklore performance, if studied apart from their historical context, will remain only partially comprehended." To properly study folklore performance, Joyner believes there are six variables one has to take into consideration. These are the performer's individual characteristics; the community structure; family and significant others; performer's individual perceptions; immediate context of the performance; and tradition. Joyner is of the opinion that "historical context is no mere ornament to folkloristic inquiry, it is of its essence."⁸ His definition of tradition is useful in making this point clear:

Tradition, then, may be understood as 'the rules by means of which a given context is made sensible, by means of which further contexts are made possible. Tradition should be seen neither as environment nor as something people have, but as something people participate in, willy-nilly, because they are social beings. The influence of tradition on the performance of folklore is thus felt all the more strongly because every variable affecting folklore performance is directly affected by participation in tradition.'⁹

Richard Bauman's article "Verbal Art as Performance" is perhaps the most useful in showing how auctions and auc-

⁸Charles W. Joyner, "A Model for the Analysis of Folklore Performance in Historical Context," Journal of American Folklore 88 (1975): 264.

⁹Ibid., pp. 261-262.

tioneering should be studied by folklorists. His definition of performance allows for a complete analysis of each unique performance that one might encounter in the field:

Fundamentally, performance as a mode of spoken verbal communication consists in the assumption of responsibility to an audience for a display of communicative competence. This competence rests on the knowledge and ability to speak in socially appropriate ways. Performance involves on the part of the performer an assumption of accountability to an audience for the way in which communication is carried out, above and beyond its referential content. From the point of view of the audience, the act of expression on the part of the performer is thus marked as subject to evaluation for the way it is done, for the relative skill and effectiveness of the performer's display of competence.¹⁰

The above definition is what Bauman calls the nature of performance. His article further divides performance characteristics into three focal points that must be considered before a satisfactory explanation of a given performance can take place. The first of these is the keying of performance. Among the more commonly found communicative means to key performance are: special codes; special formulae; figurative language; formal stylistic devices; special prosodic patterns of tempo, stress, pitch; special patterns of voice quality and vocalization; and appeal to tradition. These devices allow for "the power of formal patterns to elicit the participation of an audience through the arousal of an attitude of collaborative expectancy. . . . Once you grasp the trend of the form it invites participation."¹¹

¹⁰Richard Bauman, "Verbal Art as Performance," American Anthropologist 77 (June 1975): 293.

¹¹Ibid., p. 295.

The patterning of performance is the second characteristic that must be accounted for. These patterning factors are event, act, role, and genre. About this list Bauman states:

Any of the above factors may be used as a point of departure or point of entry into the description and analysis of the performance system of a community, but the ultimate ethnographic statement one makes about performance as part of social life must incorporate them all in some degree.¹²

Lastly, Bauman writes of the emergent quality of performance. Bauman feels that without studying the emergent quality of performance it will be impossible to comprehend the uniqueness of each particular performance that one might encounter. Bauman's comments on the emergent quality of performance are quite useful in the study of auctions and auctioneering:

The emergent quality of performance resides in the interplay between communicative resources, individual competence, and the goals of the participants, within the context of particular situations. We consider as resources all those aspects of the communication system available to the members of a community for the conduct of performance. Relevant here are the keys to performance, genres, acts, events, and ground rules for the conduct of performance that make up the structured system of conventionalized performance for the community. The goals of the participants include those that are intrinsic to performance--the display of competence, the focusing of attention on oneself as performer, the enhancement of experience--as well as the other desired ends toward which performance is brought to bear; these latter will be highly culture and situation specific. Relative competence, finally, has to do with relative degrees of proficiency in the conduct of performance.¹³

¹²Ibid., p. 300.

¹³Ibid., p. 302.

This thesis, then, is an attempt to prove that the auction system in this country is part of folklore, and it can best be studied as performance. In order to study the significance of the auction system as a communicative event, it will be necessary to place auctions within a historical context. In this way, the importance of the traditional aspects of the auction can be understood. Thus, a history of how the auction was introduced into America, and its impact on the groups who settled here will be a major concern of the first chapter. Early auctioneering is not well understood by most people, and this chapter will help the reader to understand why auctioneering is both a folk occupation and a communicative process.

The auctioneer is a folk performer who relies on a variety of tradition-bound techniques to conduct the auction. The parts that make up the whole of the auction can best be understood through a study of the auction as a form of folk communication.

The second chapter will be based on my fieldwork experiences in the Bowling Green, Kentucky, area. By highlighting the comments of one successful auctioneer, this thesis will demonstrate how the working auctioneer prospers with his traditional skills in the local community.

The third and final chapter of this thesis will explain why the auctioneer qualifies as a folk performer. Also this chapter will show that by researching the auction through its communicative aspects, one can see how the auction is indeed a part of folk studies.

CHAPTER I

THE HISTORY OF THE AMERICAN AUCTION

In order to study the auction phenomenon from a folkloristic point of view, it is necessary to establish the auction as a part of folk tradition in the United States. Auctioneering is a true folk occupation as described by Coffin and Cohen in their book Folklore from the Working Folk of America. Coffin and Cohen point out that in the United States' early settlement there was the emergence of a new folklore based on the fact that many Americans became occupational specialists. This new folklore, the traditional artistic expression of those who find their identity in the way they earn their living, is called by Coffin and Cohen the "arts of the crafts."¹⁴

Auctioneering lends itself readily to the guidelines set up by Coffin and Cohen for determining whether an occupation is truly folk in nature. As they state:

An occupation is, of course, a person's vocation. At the folk level a man's occupation is paramount, setting his life style, affecting his outlook on the world, permeating every aspect of his own and his family's existence.¹⁵

¹⁴Tristram Potter Coffin and Henning Cohen, eds., Folklore from the Working Folk of America (New York: Anchor Press, 1974), p. 28.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 25.

Coffin and Cohen believe that most of the occupations that one time were folk are now semi-folk. That is, the lore is more or less confined to the working premises and the working day.¹⁶ The auctioneer, however, is not confined to a specific place, but rather he is an integral part of the region where he lives. His job is completely intertwined with both the economic world and the social world of his area. The lore of the area which shapes the attitudes of the people is his lore. Tradition has shaped the role of the auctioneer, and it is this tradition which has kept the auction in the realm of folklore. The traditional auctioneer does not leave his job at the office, for his job involves dealing directly with the members of his community at all hours. The community's belief in his abilities as an auctioneer is based on his involvement with the community as a whole. The auctioneer must personify the folk attitudes of the region if he is to be successful in his work. Coffin and Cohen state that the lore of most traditional occupational specialists was British because the original thirteen colonies were under British cultural and political influences for almost two centuries.¹⁷ The art of auctioneering in America likewise came from this British background.

The auction system most common in this country is the "English Ascending-Bid type." The earliest reference to

¹⁶Ibid., p. 35.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 30.

this term is mentioned in the Oxford English Dictionary and dated 1595.¹⁸ The same entry mentions it as a system used in America beginning around 1676.¹⁹ Because so many of the original colonists in America were from England, the people were comfortable using a familiar system. England did, however, use other types of auction systems besides straight-out ascending bids. For example the candle auction was in use in England during this time period. At this type auction a candle which cannot be seen is lit; only its illumination is visible. Bids are taken while the candle is burning, and whoever gets in the last bid before the candle burns out wins the bidding competition. Also a sandglass was sometimes used-- the bidding continued until the sand ran out. Often the bidding time was determined by a boy's race over a fixed distance. The boys set off when the first bid is made and the last bid before the first returning runner wins.²⁰ Samuel Pepys reported an auction similar to the ones discussed above:

After dinner by water to the office, and there we met and sold the Weymouth, Successe, and Fellowship hulkes, where pleasant to see how backward men are at first to bid; and yet when the candle is going out, how they bawl and dispute afterwards who bid the most first.²¹

¹⁸Cassady, p. 29.

¹⁹Ray Westerfield, Early History of American Auctions (East Orange, New Jersey: Thoman Kelley, 1937), p. 164.

²⁰Patten, "Tatworth Candle Auction," p. 134.

²¹Diary and Correspondence of Samuel Pepys, Esq., F.R.S., with a Life and Notes by Richard Lord Braybrooke, (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1887), p. 327.

Probably the main reason that the English Ascending-Bid system became prevalent in America is due to the fact that the first auctions were held on the East Coast where entire warehouses of goods were often auctioned off. At such auctions there were large quantities of goods, and this type of auction was the only practical one to use.²² This type of auction begins with the auctioneer seeking a bid from one of the members of the crowd. After the auctioneer gets the initial bid, his job is to get all interested buyers to bid against one another until only the high bidder remains. Often after the goods were sold, they were given to jobbers who made up assortments for country stores inland, and it was not uncommon for these goods to be again sold at auction in smaller quantities.²³ As Ray Westerfield notes in his Early History of American Auctions, "The spirit of gambling was supposed to be excited by bidding at public sales, and resulted in over-buying."²⁴

With the use of this system, importers and small domestic manufacturers could relieve themselves rapidly of stored goods which consequently entered the open market.²⁵

The auction system of barter was not quite as popular in early America as it is today. Many townships frowned upon auctions being held in their limits. One law in a New York town went into effect in 1830:

²²Westerfield, p. 164.

²³Sydney Norman Buck, Anglo-American Trade 1800-1850 (New York: Greenwood Press, 1968), p. 135.

²⁴Westerfield, p. 198.

²⁵Ibid., p. 165.

. . . unlawful for any person or persons to cry, or give notice by ringing a bell, blowing a horn, or in any other way or manner, of any sale or any auction.²⁶

In early America the "mock sale" was a common form of illegal auctioneering. In this type of sale, a group of people organize a fake sale, the real purpose being to cause articles to sell for more than their real value.²⁷

Night auctions were also a problem to the authorities. Some questionable auctioneers were known to have their sales at night when the qualities of their goods could not be accurately assessed.²⁸ Probably the biggest reason for the unpopularity of the auction had to do with international economics. In colonial times prices were lower in Britain than in America. The British began exporting goods to America on a large scale and these were auctioned off at the ports. Cassady states, "This created serious public resentment and culminated in a strong campaign against auction sales generally."²⁹ Auctions survived the various laws and campaigns against them mainly because the general populace refused to stop attending them. Inland areas especially did not have restrictive laws concerning auctions, and they continued to thrive.

²⁶Webster V. B. Slack, "Auctioneering in the Otsego County Area," (M.A. Thesis, State University of New York College, 1967), p. 10.

²⁷N. S. Dodge, "Auctions and Auctioneers," Overland Monthly, August 1871, p. 117.

²⁸Slack, p. 11.

²⁹Cassady, p. 34.

The auction system did not firmly entrench itself in this country until the War of 1812. During the war, it became a widespread practice to sell damaged and secondhand goods for immediate cash through using an auctioneer. The auction was popular because of the elemental fact that it provided goods for the ordinary consumer more cheaply than importing merchants. At large auctions, the usual procedure was to show the goods for a couple of days prior to the auction. This gave the bidders time to appraise the items they might want and check them off in the catalog usually provided by the auctioneer.³⁰ After the war ended, the British sent goods into the United States, and they sold almost all of the goods through the auction system.³¹

The auction system became a standard business practice in America during and after the War of 1812, but it was in the South prior to the Civil War that the auction became a combination of both business and social practices and a firmly established traditional element of American life. The selling of slaves along with other items by auction became a common feature of the South. At the slave auctions, the crowd gathered in the marketplace, and the first slaves were displayed. If the first slave was a woman, the auctioneer usually put the audience in good humor by a few indecent jokes often accompanied by crude banter from the crowd. The auctioneer would suggest an opening

³⁰For an example of this see "Auction of Shaker Antiques at Darrow School, New Lebanon, New York, 1961," Western Kentucky University, Kentucky Building Library, pamphlet 10.

³¹Westerfield, p. 165.

bid, but sometimes he would lower it to obtain a firm offer so as to get the bidding started.³² Frederic Bancroft in his book Slave-Trading in the Old South, gives the reader a sense of the slave auction:

No two slave-auctioneers nor any two auctions were altogether alike, but some of their common features on important occasions may be represented as follows:

'If any of yo' gentlemen wants a body sahvant er a waiter er a stableboy, heah's yoah opperchunity.'
'Six-thirty,' someone called out. And the auctioneer again rattled out the figures and sputtered the short phrases, sweeping every face with his rapid glance, sure to detect the slightest nod or expression of assent, and all the while speaking, moving, gesticulating and occasionally clapping his hands with a rhythm that had a fascination. No longer getting large bids, he welcomed ten-dollar offers and then five. With ringing voice and nervously wavering hand, he cried: 'Six hundud an' ninety-five dollahs-Seven hundud, I have; say seven five.' And once more he juggled the phrases, then slackened and drawled his speech: 'Seven - hun - dud - an' five - is - bid; let me have ten; do I heah ten? Yo'll lose 'im! Ah you-all done? Seven - hundud - an' - five - dollahs! Once - twice - third - an' last - call; going' goin,' - and as his right hand struck the palm of his left, making a loud crack - 'Sold fo' seven hundud an' five dollahs to Mr. Jenks.'³³

During the decade and a half prior to the Civil War slaves brought better prices in Kentucky than anywhere else. Plantation owners competed fiercely for Kentucky slaves, and prices increased from one hundred to one hundred and fifty per cent for the ten years preceding the War.³⁴

³²Frederic Bancroft, Slave-Trading in the Old South (Baltimore: J. H. Furst Company, 1931), pp. 109-110.

³³Ibid., pp. 109-110.

³⁴J. Winston Coleman, Slavery Times in Kentucky (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1940), p. 122.

On the day of a slave sale, the crowd would gather at the auctioneer's stand in anticipation of the lively bidding that would take place. The crowd consisted of many types of people as is shown by the following account:

Around the auctioneer's stand near the courthouse door gathered a mixed crowd-prospective purchasers, Negro traders, slaveholders, planters, spectators and hangers-on. On the stand stood the crier of the sale, dressed in a long hammer-tailed coat, fancy vest, broad-rimmed hat, with a raucous voice and mallet in hand calling loudly for bids.³⁵

Of particular interest are the county court days held in Kentucky during slavery times. Court day in Kentucky became associated with auctions, and it is one of the reasons auctions continue to be so popular. On a set Monday in each month, while the justices of the peace conducted legal business in the courthouse, country people for miles around took the day off and poured into town for the court day sales and gatherings on the public square. Among the many items placed up for sale by the local auctioneer were animals of all varieties, stoves, beds, old furniture, clothing, tools, farm implements, jars of food, home-made baskets, sugar cane and molasses.³⁶

One author points out that a variety of people attended these sales and a social significance was placed on the auction that often overshadowed the business aspects of the event, "Everyone came to town on court day to see the sights and enjoy himself according to his own fancy, whether it was swapping horses, buying, selling, gossiping, attending slave

³⁵Ibid., p. 115.

³⁶Ibid., p. 116.

sales, or meeting friends and relatives."³⁷ The auctioneer's stand was surrounded by a mixed crowd of actual buyers and sellers as well as spectators and vendors of all sorts. Coleman's description of some of the crowd helps illustrate the social significance of the Southern auction:

Rich landowners and prosperous tobacco and hemp planters rubbed elbows with the nondescript class which the Negroes called 'pore white trash,' and men in all walks of life met here on terms of amiable equality. The public square on court day was the trading center and gossiping place for all rural Kentuckians and the talk was free and easy. Here they discussed the weather, Negroes, crops, politics, and horses, and every man had his say.³⁸

Once the auctioneer came upon the scene he took complete control of the situation. Bancroft gives an excellent description of an auctioneer during the 1850's:

Until the auctioneer mounted his platform and began to speak, one might have thought from his general appearance that he was a rough planter or gambler or saloonkeeper. In fact, he was intimately associated with all of them. His easy self-possession and almost careless mastery of the conditions were soon manifested. He commanded a few jests and trifling remarks, which he employed to enliven the company. The nimbleness of his tongue and the quickness of his glance increased as he warmed to his task. He rattled out figures, sputtered and repeated a small variety of phrases, ejaculations and questions; halted suddenly to crack some broad joke, then as suddenly hastened on, and thus with his ready store of tricks, quips, and droll exaggerations compelled close attention.³⁹

Auctions were not held in the towns and county seats only. As they became more established in the South, auctions

³⁷Ibid., p. 115.

³⁸Ibid., p. 116.

³⁹Bancroft, p. 109.

began to be held on farms where often the farm itself was auctioned off. Auctions have remained a basic part of rural life because of the types of items sold at them. Most items that are sold at auction are either raw materials, for example tobacco, or manmade goods previously used by others. Many of the products have no standard value; antiques, collectibles, and raw materials fluctuate in prices rapidly, and competitive bidding is the best way to assure maximum profit from them. Determining the price of second-hand equipment is also difficult, and the auction allows the seller to show his products to several people who may be in the market for such an item. At these public auctions, anyone may attend and bid on desired items, which encourages this competitive bidding.

During the Civil War the number of auctions decreased because of a lack of available goods to be sold. After the war the number of auctions began to rise rapidly, especially in the Southern states.⁴⁰ It is interesting to note that the title of "Colonel" used by so many auctioneers in the twentieth-century began with the end of the Civil War. Much of the confiscated goods used by the Confederate troops were eventually sold by auctioneers. These auctioneers were often called "Colonel" by those attending the sales, and many of them formally adopted the title.⁴¹ Once the tradition started, it was picked up by auctioneers in other parts of the country. Today

⁴⁰Cassady, p. 36.

⁴¹Ibid., pp. 104-105.

even auctioneers on the West Coast often use the title.

The auction has persisted as a part of traditional life in America throughout the twentieth-century. This historical survey of auctioneering in America has been an attempt to outline the manner in which the auction entered tradition. The auction system was used by many non-traditional groups in America, but the system was absorbed into many folk groups who settled in America during the seventeen hundreds and eighteen hundreds.

Through researching a still active auctioneer who continues to use traditional knowledge as a basis for conducting his auctions, one can begin to understand how the folk auction endures in modern America. The next chapter will focus on the training and knowledge of a successful traditional auctioneer in Kentucky. The intent of this chapter will be to let the auctioneer relate his own story through statements made to the author during a series of interviews.

CHAPTER II

PORTRAIT OF A KENTUCKY AUCTIONEER

Leon Tarter is a traditional auctioneer who works out of Bowling Green, Kentucky. Among the people who live in the area he is considered one of the best auctioneers in the county. Mr. Tarter owns and operates a real estate business in Bowling Green, and a major portion of his enterprises involves auctioning off farms in the rural areas surrounding Bowling Green. In terms of economics, the auction system is still an important part of buying and selling in Kentucky, and Mr. Tarter has a reputation for being able to get high prices at his auctions, the mark of a successful auctioneer. Tarter is fifty-two years old, and he has been an auctioneer for twenty-five years. All of his years in the auction business have been in the area around Bowling Green, and to the people who attend his sales on a steady basis they are an accustomed social event.

Leon Tarter cried his first sale at the age of twenty-eight, but he trained through informal channels for four straight years prior to his first sale. The training period actually began when he was a child growing up on a farm near Smiths Grove, Kentucky.

When I was a child coming up, I was very backward, and then I got to where I wasn't. Then some of the older boys, 'course being a child, and then I

would pretend that I was preaching. They'd give me five or ten cents to get on a stump, then preach like I was a preacher. I did all kinda of things like that just more or less for tryin' to be funny. I guess you call it. Anyhow it's always such as that has always really amused me, and I've always been interested. I think that if my morals hadn't been too low I mighta been a preacher.⁴²

When Mr. Tarter was twenty-four years old he decided that he wanted to become an auctioneer. His decision was based upon a familiarity with auctions in his county, and the realization that auctioneers seemed to be financially secure.

Really what influenced me to become an auctioneer was that I wanted to get into some type of profession, and auctioneering always kinda fascinated me. From the time I was a child and came to Bowling Green tobacco market, with my father when I was just three or four years old. And auctioneering always amused me, and I've always been interested and when I got up and decided to and really made up my mind, why then I began to practice for approximately four years before I started to try to get it, in other words, to try to get the auctioneer chant down good before I ever started because I didn't want to make a flop to start with, so I've always, all my life, since I was a child have been interested in auctioneering.⁴³

Tarter's decision to learn the art of auctioneering meant that he needed aid in learning how to perform the chant. His first course of action was to seek out the advice of a local preacher.

Right, a Baptist preacher; fact he wasn't my preacher; I went to the Methodist Church; but he was interested in what I was trying to do. He was real good in singin'. He had voice; and his name is R. B. Hooks, Jr.; and he had

⁴²Interview with Leon Tarter, Tarter Realty Company, Bowling Green, Kentucky, 10 May 1973.

⁴³Ibid.

a very, very good voice. And he would come down and give me, in our crude sort of way, give me voice lessons to try to get the idea of how to bring it out of my stomach, to try and auction like a singer would sing. Rather than, other words, I wanted to get the fundamentals of auctioneering right to start with. So he, he give me, in our crude sorta way, voice lessons, to tell me how it should come out, and it really did help me.⁴⁴

Tarter's training did not cease with instructions from the preacher. His desire to be good at auctioneering caused him to ask other auctioneers for advice, but they hesitated in helping any potential rivals to their territory.

I talked to other auctioneers, and 'course they didn't give me too much encouragement naturally, and they wasn't too many auctioneers that I want to listen at that I was interested in. There was only two or three that I was really interested in that I really liked the way they, the way, they operated. The thing that amused me really about halfway caused me maybe not to go into the auctioneers was that maybe I wasn't smart enough or could figure fast enough and quick enough, but that come to you eventually after three or four years practice. So I feel like that you can, anybody can do anything they want to.⁴⁵

One auctioneer in particular however did give Tarter some advice.

I went to a boy that I admired very much, and he was more or less, I would call him a natural born auctioneer. He had a voice. He didn't have to train his voice like I did, he had it already. His voice was coarse, and it come out, it seemed to come out just right, and he talked very, very fast in just regular conversation. And I went to ask him for some pointers in auctioneering, and he told me somewhere like four years to get my voice in shape before, to where

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵Ibid.

I could really start auctioneering to where it would sound right which was very, very discouraging. And I really didn't believe at the time, but I found out later that he was correct.⁴⁶

Once Mr. Tarter began to learn the chant, he spent hours each day attempting to perfect his own style of delivery. This period in his training helped him solidify his performance based upon traditional techniques.

When I first began to try and learn and began to practice, I practiced two or three months one way and I would get, seem to me like I never could get it to sound like I wanted it to. I'd practice one style for awhile, then I'd change to another style. And really the big problem was I just didn't have it down; in other words, I didn't have it, I just didn't have it good enough to start with or I wouldn't had to worry about all the different styles. It just takes so much practice to get it. If you've got this practice it automatically comes to you. I would practice, for instance, I would practice, I averaged I'd say from two hour to three hours a day, day and night for from anywhere from three to four years. Where people would sing and hum and so on I'd just auction. So I would average auction couple or three hours a day because when I got in it, I wanted to be an auctioneer worse than anything else. And I wanted to be good at it because my voice wasn't as good as a lot of people's voice because I just wasn't born with a good voice. But 'course as I got older, it's cultivated some and makes it better.⁴⁷

Tarter practiced at work, while traveling, and at home. He became totally involved with his new endeavor when he purchased a speaker system.

I finally got me a little speakin' system to where I could, loudspeaker, because I figured maybe I'd be a auctionin', so I tried to practice

⁴⁶Ibid.

⁴⁷Ibid.

over a loudspeaker, and sometimes I would alarm somebody or some of the neighbors, and they'd come see what was goin' on. 'Course I'd be practicin'. I'd be somewhat embarrassed, but nevertheless I didn't let it stop me. 'Course my wife and my family, I like to run all them crazy a-practicin' all the time. Fact is got where I had to get outa the house to practice because they got so sick a-hearin' me. They, I had to get out of the house to practice.⁴⁸

In order to become an auctioneer, Tarter had to rely on friends and relatives in the area to help him get started. He advertised in the local paper, but people did not respond to his ads.

I really thought, I thought when I first started that when people found out that I was an auctioneer they would call me, but it don't work thataway. They call people that has been in the business for several years and had experience. So when you start out, when you start out trying to get sales, and trying to get homes that auction and farms and so on, people don't have much confidence in you so you've got to, you've got to start out beggin' for'em. And you get one, 'course that helps you get another, and you get one sale, you do an extremely good job of selling. Then somebody likes ya and it helps you get another one, and it just works like a chain. And after a period of six, seven years you begin, then they begin to call you.⁴⁹

His first sale was a cattle auction.

I first started auctioning a cattle market in Glasgow for fifteen dollars a week. I went up on Saturday and auctioned the market for fifteen dollars. It was a small auction, take about an hour to auction it, but I was willin' to take anything in order to get the job. In fact, it was even hard to get that job as small as it was because I had had no auction experience, but I felt like that I knew cattle. So I carried some of my friends and some of my relatives that had some farms and cattle

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

and carried them with me and let them ask the man 'long with me that they would help support the market if they would hire me. And I tried every way in the world to get in, and I finally got in. And course then after I got in I begin to get, seen that I was going to get some business, then I went full time auction. But to be an auctioneer, you've got to get it in your blood, and you've got to think of nothin' else really but that you've got to give it everything you've got.⁵⁰

Tarter felt that the way he learned auctioneering is the only true way to perfect a particular style. Going outside the area for training is to Tarter not a good idea, and his views on the auction schools are quite illuminating.

I see boys go to auction school, lots of 'em, and never have an auction. They never get the courage. They think you go to auction school for a couple of weeks and get the fundamentals of being an auctioneer and that's as far as it ever goes. And they go to some auction and somebody says, 'Here's John Doe, he's been to auction school; I'm gonna let him auction.' Well, he gets up there, and he makes a terrible mess because you can't learn it in two weeks. And then he gets disgusted, and he never gets off the ground. That's why I think it's so important to study and practice the chant, and you've got to sound good. People's got to think you know what you're doin' before you can ever get off a your feet.⁵¹

A major portion of Tarter's success comes from his knowledge of the things he sells at auction. His childhood experiences in rural Kentucky helped him because he became knowledgeable in livestock, produce, and farm items. His knowledge is coupled with his own views on honesty, which keeps the crowds coming back to sale after sale. He often talks to potential bidders to give them his opinion on the item up for sale.

⁵⁰Ibid.

⁵¹Ibid.

A lotta times I'll say, look, if you don't believe what I'm tellin' you, I'll buy one-half interest in it if you'd like for me to be halfers with you. I'll tell that a lotta times. I, that's real convincing, cause they know then I'm not shootin' them some kind of a bull story because I don't. I try not to do that. I try to be firm in what I say, and I think you can do that. I think for an auctioneer to try to be some kind of a slicker, I think he's just working against himself. And I feel like the people in this community and country when I tell'um. Now I go on lots of foolishness. Course they know when I'm goin' on foolishness, and they know when I'm serious.⁵²

Tarter feels secure in selling farm items as practical things to be used by the buyer. His interest and knowledge of antiques is not keen, but he has no problem selling them to those who desire them.

I am not antique minded. And I don't know antiques like a lotta people. 'Course now they're getting a lot of glassware and stuff on the markets that look like antiques. It's not and they're foolin' a lot of people. So the antiques, they're goin', they goin' to degrade the antiques with a bunch of junk that's nine-tenths the people cain't tell the difference. Now when I'm sellin' antiques, I try to, I try to make it that I am not an expert on antiques which I'm not. I'm gonna let the buyer make up his mind. I try to, instead of tryin' to persuade him and tell him some fantastic story, I try to more or less go at an angle like this is a scarce item. I'm not gonna say it's worth five hundred dollars or what it's worth. I'm gonna let him make up his mind. I go more on the idea that now if you don't think its worth the money, don't you buy it. But everybody else thinks its worth more money, you see, so I don't wanna leave myself liable to tellin' a big fantastic story 'bout usin' my judgment of what its worth. I'd rather they use their judgment.⁵³

⁵²Ibid.

⁵³Ibid.

Tarter realizes he has an obligation to the people who attend his auctions, and he always attempts to deal with them as honestly as possible. Honesty, to Tarter, is the major requirement for a successful auction.

We try to get all we can get. Now you understand? But we treat like we like to be treated. If we can make you pay more than it's worth, we'll do it, no doubt about that now. But we won't lie to you to get you to get it, you understand? And there's ways of doin' it, there's ways of doin' it. You got to try to make a man see it rather than, you know, because if you ever lie to a man once, he'll never believe you no more. That's the end, you've lost him. You won't ever get a second chance 'cause he won't believe you a second time if you ever lie to him once. So it takes a long time to educate the people.⁵⁴

Tarter's feelings concerning honesty also include the crowd who attend. Tarter is acutely aware that cooperation from the crowd is another basic requirement for a successful auction.

As usual people are, I'd say ninety-eight per cent of the people's honest. Over a period of fifteen years, we've sold several million dollars worth of property and I'll say that we have not lost over fifty dollars, a hundred at the most, in fifteen years of people buying items and goin' off and not payin' for em. People that we don't even know, so it's either ninety-eight per cent of the people's honest or just the honest ones comes to the auctions, one of the two.⁵⁵

Tarter feels that his responsibility to the people who use his services goes beyond the actual crying of a sale. He realizes that many of the people who hire him rely on his judgment and knowledge for their protection.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

I try to feel like if I've got a lady or somebody that's left, I try to feel like even if it's a small estate or whatever how small it is, I want, I try to remind myself every now and then that that's all that lady owns whether it's large or small. And I try to tell myself very, very often that if it is small it's just as important to her if it's large, and I try to give her every protection in the world. And I try to give her more attention than I would somebody that really didn't need it. I mean I take it all very seriously, but I would try to be more serious with someone that would have a small estate.⁵⁶

Tarter recalled one elderly couple in particular that needed his services prior to the auction so they could have the auction.

Now he wants to sell his farm. Okay, he's got forty-three cows, and just he and his wife, and they're old and in order to sell those cows on the farm, you've got to get them tested by a vet. And you've got to catch'em, and you've got to pull the blood in order to test'em, to make sure they're free and clear of bang and so on. They felt like that they couldn't do that so they said we'll have this farm auction and sell our farm and machinery, but our cattle is a problem. So we went down, and we bought their cattle. We bought fifty-five head for twenty-four thousand dollars. We give'em a check for 'em. We're goin' sell'em the day of the sale. They'll be our cattle. They may make money, they may lose money, but we're hoping to make a commission out of 'em. That's all we expect. . . . See, so I think I know approximately what they're worth. So I bought his cows yesterday. And I said I'll buy'em, and he asked me twenty-five thousand dollars I believe it was. I said I'm not goin' to give that, I sell'em everyday, I think I know what they're worth. I just want to make a commission, and I'm goin' to give twenty-four thousand if you want to sell-em. So his wife said I think we ought to sell'em to him, so he did. We bought'em right there so now the cows belong to us. We're goin' to have a crew go down there tomorrow, test'em, be sure they're clear of bangs, and we'll sell 'em. Now they'll be the same cows there, and no-

⁵⁶Ibid.

body else will know what they're his cows, but they're our cows. We're not goin' to do anything to anybody except they didn't want to handle the cows because they're afraid of 'em. And they're gettin' old, and they couldn't handle 'em. When you start test 'em, and you get to pulling that blood it makes 'em, it makes 'em wild and sometimes they'll try to hurt you. They didn't want to get into that so we'll take that responsibility so that's part of the game.⁵⁷

On the day of the sale, Tarter arrives several hours early to make sure that all the pre-sale activities are in order. The items to be sold must be placed properly for quick transitions from one to another. Once the sale begins, traditionally at ten o'clock, Tarter must be prepared for everything. As he says, "You've got every angle to watch, you've got to be on your toes every minute."⁵⁸ He likes to see his auctions draw large crowds.

The bigger the crowd the better you are. Big crowds, you like big crowds. Because people likes for other people to see 'em bid. People likes for other people to see 'em, say well they've got money. Everybody likes a little recognition. And when you knock off an item, recognize their name if you know 'em, and say a little somethin' about their name, and then as you go along call their name now and then, and they'll buy twice as much stuff.⁵⁹

Some of the people, especially dealers, do not like their names to be used when they are bidding on an item.

I've got one or two people that don't want the other people to know who they are when they buy 'em. So they tell me, they'll say, for instance, they'll come to me before the sale and they'll say anything I'll buy, knock it off to say number ten or number

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

eleven or number twelve or whatever number they want to use. Okay, when they buy something, I knock it off to that number because, reason they do that, they're traders and they don't want somebody to know what they give 'cause they might have this customer to come to their place to try to buy it, and the customer would know what they give if they call the name. Do you understand? So we have everything, see?⁶⁰

During the auction, Tarter does not like to see gaps occur because he might lose bidders.

We try not to stop, we don't let-up. We keep a goin'. We keep somethin' a happenin', either talkin' or auctionin'. One all the time. You don't stop between items, you understand? If we got a heavy item that they're bringing out on the wagon to sell, we get it sold before they get another one out we try to say something to keep their attention till the other item gets there. Because you cain't let 'em start visitin' with their aunts and uncles and friends and so on because they get their minds off what they're doin'. And that's one of the secrets of any auction is keepin' everybody's attention.⁶¹

Tarter realizes that many of the people who attend the auction do so in order to be entertained. He does not mind this because its just another aspect of the auction business.

Now one reason that I stop and try to talk to the people in between chants, in other words, if you just stand there, and you just auction all the time it kinda gets boresome. People likes to hear a little wisecrack now and then. You got to keep the people in a good mood. Most the times people's, is in the same mood the auctioneer is in, if, if he's really got their attention. If he's in a good jolly mood, and he's really got the people's attention, he gets them in a good jolly mood. And that's good. Whenever you have a crowd, and you see them begin to talk to one another and get on other subjects, then

⁶⁰Ibid.

⁶¹Ibid.

you're not holdin' your crowd. You're not doin' a good job--the auctioneer's not. You got to hold the attention of the people. Now I sold a little cattle market in Scottsville for two or three years and I'll say seventy-five per cent of the people that came to that auction, it was a small auction, and all farmers and real nice people. And we carried on a right smart of foolishness, and I'll say that seventy-five per cent of the people that come to that auction are more or less retired farmers in town that come because they like cattle, and it was kinda their life. They came to see the cattle and hear a joke or two just a laugh or two. But not out of hand, I don't tell vulgar jokes, just try, you know, to catch somethin' on somebody. For instance, if some city man walks in a cattle auction, you can tell quick as he walks in that he's out of his place. In other words, maybe I'll have a little calf or something come through, and I'll pretend that I sold it to him, you know, just for a laugh. And he'll say, oh no, he's right quick. He says no, he didn't bid on it, 'cause he didn't. Now you can tell'em as quick as they walk in that they're not farmers, you know. So such as that, you know, you can of course, he'll have a big time out of it too. When he knows you're just kiddin'. So stuff like that goes on all the time. Just something', not to hurt nobody, but just for a laugh, and people like that.⁶²

Tarter was quick to point out that his stall tactics work best when he's working in his own territory.

But we're not too much troubled, very little troubled especially in this county. Now if we get out of the county, sometimes where they don't know us, why we have a little problem of course. We don't know the, but nothing, nothing great. When I'm here, I'm comfortable, I'm among friends. See?⁶³

Tarter has become one of the best auctioneers in the Bowling Green area because of his ties with local tradition. However, he feels that the traditional auction is dying

⁶²Ibid.

⁶³Ibid.

out in his area because of increasing urbanization.

Where cities grow auctions die. Now this I'd have to explain to you. Small community like the town the size ours, you can advertise auctions in the paper, and you can have auctions. When a city gets the size of Indianapolis [Indiana], the paper gets so large you get fifty-seventy-five pages in a paper. It gets so expensive that an auctioneer can't advertise in it. See? So really the city outgrows the auction business, and I'll say in another ten years Bowling Green's goin' be might near too big. So if a man's goin' to get in the auction business like I am, he needs a town that he can grow with.⁶⁴

These auctions are an important part of community life in the Bowling Green area. Where family and friends are scattered throughout the county, the auction acts as a social institution similar to county fairs, camp meetings, or family reunions. Tarter is a performing artist who directs the auction in such a manner that it not only makes money for him and his client, but the auction also supplies the people the opportunity to get together for social interaction.

Mr. Tarter has done well with his traditional skills even though the area around Bowling Green has broken away from many of the other traditional patterns that once existed there.

⁶⁴Ibid.

CHAPTER III

AUCTIONS AS FOLK PERFORMANCE

Bearing in mind that the traditional auctioneer is a folk performer, one can break the communicative aspects of his craft down into four basic components and thus better understand the auction. These four parts are: auctioneer, message, channel, and audience. In order to actually see the importance of the auctioneer at the traditional auction, one must first understand the many activities that make up his profession.

Some of my criteria for determining whether an auctioneer is a folk auctioneer have to do with the manner in which he is trained. The traditional auctioneer is trained in a variety of ways, all of them informal in nature. In the early history of auctioneering, many auctioneers just started out on their own with no real concept of how they were going to sell. Since early auctioneering was often a part-time occupation, the auctioneer may never have perfected his spiel, especially the chant. With the rise of full-time auctioneering as a profession, the auctioneer had to have techniques he could call on at a moment's notice in order to handle the large crowds. The technique is the same one used by the preachers described by Rosenberg--formulaic.⁶⁵ Parry

⁶⁵Rosenberg, p. 47.

defines formulaic as ". . . a group of words which is regularly employed under the same metrical condition to express a given essential idea."⁶⁶ The auctioneer's chant is formulaic, and folk auctioneers learn this chant before they ever give their first sale.

How does the auctioneer learn the use of the chant? Instruction usually comes from within the community or county where the aspirant auctioneer lives. There are two main ways the auctioneer learns the chant; these are by informal training or by other established auctioneers or preachers in the area who practice the chant in their profession. Of five auctioneers studied, three sought the advice of a preacher. The other two auctioneers learned the profession from other auctioneers.⁶⁷ Printed sources seem to bear out these two ways of getting instruction. One auctioneer even liked to be called a "religious auctioneer."⁶⁸

One auctioneer took voice lessons from a local preacher who was noted for his singing:

This preacher told me not to holler and yell.
If you're going to auction, you got to learn
to sing. This way you can go on for hours and
not get tired.⁶⁹

⁶⁶Milman Parry, "Studies in the Epic Technique of Oral Verse-Making, I: Homer and Homeric Style," Harvard Studies in Classical Philology 41:80.

⁶⁷Kentucky Association of Auctioneers, Louisville Kentucky, interviews with a selected list of members, July 1973.

⁶⁸J. P. Gutelius, High Lights on Auctioneering (Kansas City: Nazarene Publishing House, 1922), p. 9.

⁶⁹Interview with Ed Dressel, Dressel Trading Service, Trenton, Illinois, 14 July 1973.

Another informant claimed he never had to learn the chant. Further questioning, however, revealed that he had been a practicing Baptist minister before he became an auctioneer.⁷⁰

Much of the training process comes from attending auctions and absorbing the knowledge through observation. By attending the sales of an admired auctioneer, and watching all the activities, many budding auctioneers can pick up good points:

I noted what the auctioneer did throughout the day, and once in a while I'd ask him a question or two. The thing I 'member most from what he said was, 'Remember 'em, from this sale to the next remember 'em. Remember names, remember prices. You gotta remember everything.'⁷¹

None of the practicing traditional auctioneers interviewed seem to feel that the auctioneering schools are very worth-while. Most of them felt that techniques learned within the area of residence are the most beneficial. Part of the reason for this is that the better preachers and practicing auctioneers are sought out for advice.

Auctioneer Harold E. Leightley had some opinions about auction schools, "As far as I'm concerned, the only thing those schools can teach you is how to be crooked, now I never had to go to school for that."⁷² Since most of the auctioneers I

⁷⁰Interview with C. W. Borden, Borden Realty Company, Bowling Green, Kentucky, 10 July 1973.

⁷¹Interview with Ed Dressel, Dressel Trading Service, Trenton, Illinois, 14 July 1973.

⁷²March and Aspinall, p. 141.

studied felt close to the same way, it appears that being trained outside the area by strangers is frowned upon.

Before an auctioneer can ever begin to work, he has to get hired. In small communities or rural counties the auctioneer relies on his reputation, which is usually spread by word of mouth. Once an auctioneer is firmly established in a given area, he seldom leaves it. Most folk auctioneers recognize a specific territory in which they feel comfortable. Colonel J. P. Gutelius, a man who was a traditional auctioneer for over thirty years, writes in his 1922 autobiography:

Take it as a whole, it is a great life. Every sale with different crowds. But the thought I am trying to present here is that while the profession of an auctioneer is one of the best, without any capital invested, yet the auctioneer will have some dark days, and must assume an immense amount of responsibility, and he must make good in order to get and hold his territory. . . . So the auctioneer hammers away, remembering that the value of which things sell runs parallel with his reputation. . . . It is a good business if you are a live wire and prove your worthiness.⁷³

One of the best ways for an auctioneer to advertise his skill or even to get experience was to auction at box supper socials. Since many of the local people attended such functions, it was a convenient way for the auctioneer to show his style. Many auctioneers who were just starting out did box suppers in order to perfect their delivery. Colonel Gutelius notes that in 1922, ". . . box suppers have more significance attached to them than most people realize. The man who sells them gets the auctioneer's habit."⁷⁴

⁷³Gutelius, pp. 13-14.

⁷⁴Ibid., p. 23.

The box supper socials were at one time an important aspect of traditional life in the United States. Basically they were a yearly event which in many ways resembled a true auction. In fact, it was not uncommon for the local auctioneer to be in charge of the proceedings. Young women in the community prepared a supper in a box, and the auctioneer asked for bids from the men in the crowd, who attempted to buy the box of someone they wanted to eat with. All the men could bid as high as they wanted in order to assure their pick. So, in fact the auctioneer used his chant and other oral devices in much the same manner as at the regular auction. Usually the money made at the social was used for a specific purpose such as charity. The auctioneer was often expected by the community to conduct this type of auction. It was considered yet another aspect of his profession. If the auctioneer refused to auction at such a function, he would probably have faced chastisement from the community. Most auctioneers, however, jumped at the chance to work at these socials because they could get to know what type of auctioneering worked best.⁷⁵ Today these socials have faded from traditional life, but most of the traditional auctioneers still practicing probably at one time or another auctioned at one. All the traditional auctioneers researched, either in publications or interviews, had participated in such festivities.

In an area where more than one auctioneer is operating, competition for sales is stiff. The auctioneer who

⁷⁵Ibid., pp. 23-25.

reflects the norm of the area best is most likely to be successful. The community takes many things into consideration before utilizing a given auctioneer. Colonel Gutelius points out the importance of careful selection of an auctioneer:

Again, the future will require real clean, well posted, reliable men. Why not? When men spend a lifetime in accumulating their livestock, farm machinery, and the necessary equipment to run the farm successfully they will be very particular whom they employ to dispose of them.⁷⁶

The community will insist an auctioneer possess a variety of qualities. Most important is that he is an established resident of the community and is well and favorably known. Ralph Cassady isolated nine qualities the best auctioneers usually have, and these have been substantiated by many sale attenders. They include a good voice, a pleasing personality, good character, the ability to hold an interest in the audience, confidence, ability to judge values, honesty, poise, enthusiasm, and vitality.⁷⁷ Cassady states:

These qualities may be categorized as (I) physical and personal traits, including good voice, pleasing personality, vigor and vitality, honesty, good character, enthusiasm, good health, and imperturbability; and (II) skill in generating interest, seen in the ability to judge the mood of the gathering and hold its interest and confidence, an effective sales pitch before and during the sale of an item, good tempo, knowledge of values, and alertness in recognizing bids. Thus an effective auctioneer may induce some people to bid who might otherwise not have done so.⁷⁸

⁷⁶Ibid., p. 21.

⁷⁷Cassady, pp. 102-103.

⁷⁸Ibid.

By studying the auctioneer as folklore from the folk communicative and performance approach, the importance of these qualities becomes apparent. Roger Abrahams' comments on performance are useful here:

Performance, as I will use the term here, is a demonstration of culture, one of the products of men getting together with other men and working out expressive means of operating together. To do this, the group stylizes their interactions, often by introducing symbolic objects and movements into their encounters so they may more economically coordinate their activities. The more deeply they stylize, the more redundant their activity is and the greater the degree of possible coordination.⁷⁹

The folk auction involves interactions which are patterned and therefore describable in terms of redundancies [style], decorum [expectations], and rhetoric [the uses by the auctioneer of these patterns to entertain and persuade]. In viewing traditional auctioneering as folk art, one must emphasize performer-audience coordination. Abrahams points out that "underlying the activities of all groups is the constant potential of communicative ordering, and performer and performance depend upon this latent order."⁸⁰

For the auctioneer to be effective, he must not only communicate to the audience, but he must also excite its participation. Abrahams writes that both communication and participation are a matter of drawing upon the deep cultural matrix within the individuals in the audience.⁸¹ So the auc-

⁷⁹Roger D. Abrahams, "Folklore and Literature as Performance," Journal of the Folklore Institute 9:75.

⁸⁰Ibid., p. 76.

⁸¹Ibid., p. 78.

tioneer sets up rhythms and expectations which will permit a synchronized audience reaction. The auctioneer must establish the rhythms and expectancies by relying upon his traditions. The responses he desires from the crowd are elicited by using conventional themes, situations and patterns coupled with performance energies. The folk auctioneer performs by using as many stylistic devices as are appropriate. He must, in order to be successful, manipulate his audience and get them to participate. The auctioneer presents a cohesive set of ideas which is known to the group. At each auction, the auctioneer uses a variety of stage techniques to capture the attention of the crowd. Each auction is modified by the auctioneer to make it proper to the situation. Abrahams points out that creative performances call for some sense of a closure or climax, and it is at these points that the audience most fully draws together in their response.⁸² Some performances like auctioneering insist upon a series of climaxes. Each time the auctioneer sells another item, he must generate excitement to keep the bids rising. The bidders, if aroused, will be bidding against one another so rapidly that they often forget how much they are actually bidding.

The performance-oriented approach to the study of the folk auctioneer will require showing how the auctioneer employs a variety of strategies and techniques to communicate with his audience. On the day of the sale, the first order

⁸²Ibid., p. 80.

of business for the auctioneer is making sure the goods are in the proper place so that rapid changes can take place. Once the crowd has assembled, the auctioneer begins his opening talk. This talk is very important, for it sets the mood of the auction. One auctioneer states:

The image of the auctioneer hasn't changed in the last hundred years. Most of the people who attend my sales look up to me as their leader, and I must act accordingly.⁸³

Another auctioneer begins by tossing cigars and candy to the crowd. This is an attempt to create a cheerful feeling with fellow members of the community. Many auctioneers begin the sale by giving the circumstances for it such as a death in the family or the owner's departure. Such background information often makes it easier to get good prices for the goods. Colonel Gutelius includes an opening speech in his autobiography:

I consider it a pleasure to conduct this auction sale today, not that any one is glad that Mr. Jones is going away. No, no, we would much rather he would stay, for we need more men like him. He is a practical farmer, he was a homesteader, he was a real neighbor, and when you find a family that was more congenial and hospitable you will have to find them in some other county, they are not here. They came here when it tried men's souls, and stood the test, and helped to develop this country that today is a top notcher with advanced civilization. . . . No good has ever been accomplished without sacrifice and I would like to mention to you that there is a real old time sociability that exists in the early development of a new country, mixed with hardships and failures that never comes but once. The family that stands the test as this family has stood, are certainly desirable citizens,

⁸³ March and Aspinall, p. 137.

and we regret to see them go. Now I will give you the terms of this sale and we are off. I trust we will be careful to see that he gets value received for his offerings, and we will make it so congenial for him that some day he will come back again. Listen to the terms: Twelve months time at ten per cent interest from date. Three per cent discount for cash. Everything must be settled for before removal from sale ground.⁸⁴

Once the opening remarks are concluded, the selling will immediately begin. Bid calling is by use of a chant. It should be noted here that bid calling is an ascending bid phenomenon, and is requisite to the operation of English-type auctions. The chant is defined as a singing or speaking in monotone often with strongly marked rhythmic stresses.⁸⁵ It is used for several reasons, but the most important ones are that it is a method used to cover up the quiet intervals between bids, and it is a device for keeping the crowd's attention. Cassady states that the chant is also a voice saver:

The chant is also considered a voice saver by those employing it, for as in singing, the sounds come largely from the diaphragm, thus easing the strain on the vocal chords. The inherent fascination of a rhythmic beat, combined with the personality of the auctioneer, may bring into the bidding listeners who lack a fundamental interest in the item up for sale.⁸⁶

The auctioneer must include a certain amount of information in his chant while at the same time maintaining a pleasing rhythm and a clear indication of prices bid and sought. Cassady states that there are five elements that the chant must

⁸⁴Gutelius, pp. 104-105.

⁸⁵Cassady, p. 117.

⁸⁶Ibid., p. 118.

have if the crowd is to know exactly how the auction is progressing. They are: the starting price the auctioneer wants to get; the actual bids received; the bid he is attempting to obtain; filler words and phrases; the announcement of the sale to the high bidder.⁸⁷

The rhythmic aspects of the auctioneer's chant are usually maintained by the filler words, many of which are unintelligible to the bidders. However, as Cassady points out, "In themselves filler words do not create a rhythmic pattern; they merely supply the basis for such a pattern."⁸⁸

Filler words are used in the chant to bridge silent gaps between bids and to give the auctioneer's spiel a rhythmic quality. There are two basic types: phrases designed to lead from the bid already received to the bid being sought, and phrases used simply as gap fillers.⁸⁹ The successful auctioneer does not repeat the same words and phrases over and over again in his chant. Variety in the words and phrases chanted while maintaining a rhythmical beat will hold the attention of the audience for many hours. One auctioneer, Colonel Gutelius, kept variety in his spiel by using foreign words, especially Polish ones. Here is an example of the Polish lingo he often included in his chant: "Du-pon-crep-sky pa-sa ah. Set er-etsky set-er itesky set-er ootsky, fron-osy-ka bullio."⁹⁰

⁸⁷Ibid., p. 119.

⁸⁸Ibid.

⁸⁹Ibid.

⁹⁰Gutelius, pp. 44-45.

The filler words are a part of the same system Rosenberg describes in his Art of the American Folk Preacher, "The system is a verbal mold into which a variety of words are poured but that remains consistent through similarities of diction, syntax, accent, and alliteration."⁹¹ The group of words used by the auctioneer are regularly employed, allowing the auctioneer to compose his spiel spontaneously without the aid of a manuscript or notes. Much of the chant is memorized and follows a set formulae, developed by the auctioneer.

The chant is one of the main reasons why auctions have continued to be popular, and it has changed little since its introduction into the United States. As Rosenberg points out in his work with folk preachers and the sermon chant:

The tradition of which we have been speaking is a subtle chemistry of the art and the individual talent. . . . The tradition is also kept alive in its verbal aspects by the repeated use of shared, universal language.⁹²

Rosenberg's statements concerning religious chants are also applicable to folk auctioneering. The folk auctioneer, like the folk preacher, uses a "specially ordered subgroup of southern American English." But as Rosenberg states of the preacher, "It is, however, contained within the bounds of the usage common to most of us."⁹³

The folk auctioneer uses the language common to the community at large. He is a part of a specific geographic

⁹¹Rosenberg, p. 99.

⁹²Ibid., p. 100.

⁹³Ibid., p. 101.

location, and his speech is the speech of that region. Yet only a few individuals have the ability to conduct a successful auction. Why? One reason is that the auctioneer has trained himself to utilize a particular style. As Roger Abrahams states in his book, Deep Down in the Jungle, style uses elements of balance and other features of conventional order. By that Abrahams means:

The utterances folklorists call folklore are non-casual. They are prepatterned pieces which, because of their traditional and ceremonial nature, are able to utilize the language of more restricted or elevated purpose.⁹⁴

The auctioneer uses these noncasual features too, and his purpose is to extract bids from people not bidding, and to get higher bids from those who have already bid. The skilled auctioneer must make use of all his oral ability to conduct an auction. As Cassady notes, "He has trained himself to open his mouth and speak rapidly, using a rhythmical delivery and the proper proportions of filler words and information in order to effectively woo bidders."⁹⁵

If, as Dr. Rosenberg states concerning the chanted sermon, the speech is contained within the bounds of usage common to most of us, why are there not more folk preachers or auctioneers? I agree with Rosenberg when he writes:

⁹⁴Roger D. Abrahams, Deep Down in the Jungle (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1970), p. 90.

⁹⁵Cassady, p. 121.

Yet most of us could not stand up in front of the congregations in question and deliver an oral sermon for twenty minutes or half an hour [The auctioneer sometimes has to auction all day]. Showmanship aside, most of us do not 'speak the language' though we know all the words and all the combination of words. We do not know, in other words, the special poetic grammar.⁹⁶

The ability to speak quickly is of paramount importance to the auctioneer. Colonel Gutelius writes:

The precedent was established early in the history of auctioneering to speak rapidly, and a great many auctioneers cultivate their vocabulary so they can spin out a conglomeration of words.⁹⁷

The auctioneer by maintaining a fast pace is encouraging the bidders to respond quickly. Hopefully, it will keep buyers alert, responsive to the efforts of the auctioneer, and induce vigorous bidding which brings higher prices. If an auctioneer fails to keep up a rapid pace he may have an adverse effect on the rhythm of the sale, which could result in the bidders losing interest.

Auctioneer Leightley's views on keeping the crowd interested in the proceedings are insightful:

Every trade has its tricks. I don't think there's any more weary job for the public than to stand at a public sale all day where you're pounding away on a lot of china, glassware, especially a lot of mediocre stuff. Every now and then you gotta throw in a good piece in order to perk them up a little bit, or they get too darn slow. I knock an important piece off real quick. This brightens them up in a hurry. They come back to life again. They don't want to miss the next one.⁹⁸

⁹⁶Rosenberg, p. 101.

⁹⁷Gutelius, p. 43.

⁹⁸March and Aspinall, p. 140.

Finally the auctioneer has to knock the goods down to the highest bidder. He will warn the other bidders, and then yell something like "Going once! Twice! Sold!" The auctioneer then must tell the crowd the price at which the item was sold before selling anything else.

No matter how good the auctioneer's chant is, dead spots will occur now and then. It is at such times that the use of anecdotes and stories is often quite successful in keeping the crowd attentive. The use of such devices is expected by the crowd; indeed, most people would be disappointed if the auctioneer did not stop now and then to tell a story or joke. The anecdotes used must be acceptable to the crowd, and the auctioneer must be careful not to offend anyone. The following example illustrates how the auctioneer advances the sale by telling a story:

A man bid \$1.75 on a item for which Max [the auctioneer] expected to get much more. Max said, 'Come on, you can go higher than that. You work for the Board of Education. They pay you out of our taxes. \$15,000, isn't that what they pay you?' The man said, 'They pay me what I'm worth.' 'O.K., \$1.75.' Max, of course, made his point. He got the crowd laughing at the rich but miserly civil servant - without however, offending anybody - and got his price for the item, well above \$1.75.⁹⁹

Colonel Gutelius thinks that telling a story could keep an auction from dragging:

. . . there are occasions where a good, clean story would lift everybody a little and put new

⁹⁹J. R. Rayfield, "Story-Telling and Social Structure or What's So Special About the Ancient Mariner?" Toronto, 1972 (Mimeographed), p. 43.

life into the sale, especially where there seems to be little interest on account of undesirable offerings.¹⁰⁰

Colonel Gutelius writes that he often likes to have a little action accompanying his talks to the crowd:

In the first place, it would be well to pick out all the cracked and damaged dishes, and few good lookers, pile them on a table close together, leaving the impression that they are there for sale. Just when the auctioneer has completed the above talk which winds up with, 'What shall I do with them?' Then turn loose with his cane and breaks every dish in sight, as quickly as possible. It would make it a little more interesting to have two or three old jugs on the table with the dishes and break them too, then make a dive for the good dishes, then stop and invite the people to come in, the water is fine. Then continue the sale.¹⁰¹

These stall tactics have to be used at the proper time. The auctioneer cannot use them at each break in the action, but he can use them when lengthy gaps appear, such as when a heavy item is being put into place. Most auctioneers like to get some sort of activity going at all times so that the crowd will always be ready to respond to each new item placed up for sale. To be most effective, the auctioneer must feel the crowd out and use the proper stimulation at the proper time. To do this, he must know his crowd.

The audience in attendance at the folk auction can best be divided into four categories. The first is the local crowd who come because of the atmosphere found at the

¹⁰⁰Gutelius, p. 26.

¹⁰¹Ibid., p. 97.

country auction. To them the social aspects of the auction are as important as the sale itself. Many of the people in this category come to the auction to visit friends and relatives, to gossip, and to be entertained by the auctioneer. Many traditional auctions once had music before and after the sale, and even today food is still served on the grounds. Although the auctioneer realizes that people in this category probably will not buy a thing, he considers them important because they are a viable part of the crowd. If they are displeased with an auctioneer, they can ruin his reputation so he must be constantly aware of their presence. Because this group usually does not buy, the auctioneer must keep them interested or they could begin activities which would cause others to lose interest in the sale too.

The next category is the sale attenders. This group comes looking for bargains, and they are prepared to bid. The auctioneer is aware that this group can make or break a sale; they buy items simply because they want to get a bargain. Many people in this category go to an auction planning to buy one or two things, but they get so involved in the sale they end up buying far more. The auctioneer spends a lot of time coaxing bids from this group because they tend to be the most excitable when it comes to bidding. If the auctioneer can keep a couple of people from this group intrigued with an item, it will invariably sell for a much higher price. The auctioneer relies on the knowledge that if an item looks like a bargain one cannot resist the temptation to bid on it. One auctioneer feels that this group is the most dedicated in

attending the sales:

See when public sale gets into your blood,
it's hard to crack, its hard to get it out.
And I don't care who he or she is, once it
gets in their blood and they hear of a public
sale, at least not too much distance from
their hometown, if they have time, they'll
go to it, if only for an hour. Its a fas-
cinating thing.¹⁰²

The last two categories are the collectors and antique dealers. The collector is usually searching for a particular type of item, and he will pay whatever price necessary to obtain it. The dealer buys for resale purposes, so he has to buy it right in order to make a profit later. Both of these groups tend to be outsiders in the community where the auction is being held. The auctioneer, who is a member of the community, is friendly with collectors and dealers, but he always has to be careful when dealing with them not to offend the local population. Community members often see things sell at the auction for high prices. Often these are similar to items they once owned but gave away or sold cheaply. This can lead to a feeling that they are being exploited by outsiders. The auctioneer deals with this tension by letting the community know that he is selling for members of the community, and they should be glad that neighbors are getting good prices.

During the sale the auctioneer has to be quick in recognizing bids. To aid him in doing this the auctioneer often employs bid spotters who stand in the crowd. The spotters

¹⁰²March and Aspinall, p. 138.

are members of the community too, and they often talk to members of the crowd while the auctioneer is selling in an attempt to get people to enter or "up" the bidding. Since many bids are not given orally, the spotters and the auctioneer have to be aware of the many different bidding mannerisms. The most common form of signal bidding is a raising of the hand or a shout. Often, however, a person either wants his bid to be confidential, or he wants to avoid the noise and confusion resulting from audible bids. This type bidder will use a signal bid which may or may not have been worked out in advance with the auctioneer. Some of the more common types of signal bids are blink of the eye, a rub of the nose, pull of the ear, or a simple shake of the head. Bidding can be more elaborate though. For instance, a person might button then unbutton a coat when he wants to bid, or take a pipe in and out of the mouth. The use of a bid such as this usually requires a prior arrangement with the auctioneer. During the bidding the auctioneer must be careful not to concentrate on the actual bids received, and thus forget the crowd. If one or more of the bidders drops out of the bidding, the auctioneer is often left without buyer competition. Ralph Cassady states why the auctioneer has to keep everything in perspective:

Ideally, an auctioneer knows many buyers personally and literally looks to those who he expects will bid on certain items. He may even - as an auctioneer with whom I am acquainted occasionally does - drop a bargain into the lap of a likely prospect in order to get him started. Instead of paying

attention to only 2 bidders, then, an auctioneer is simultaneously selling to one person, attempting to interest 3 or 4 others, and entertaining an audience of hundreds.¹⁰³

The bidders must respect the auctioneer, and they must feel the auctioneer is worthy of their trust, or they will not bid. The auctioneer is expected to know the difference between antiques and collectables; he must be able to detect buyer rings or other questionable activities; and he must always tell the truth when discussing an item coming up for sale. This point is illustrated by Colonel Gutelius while selling a quality quilt:

The auctioneer holds the spread up, so that every one in the audience can see the design, especially if it is an elegant design. If the design is not so good, show it just the same. Sometimes when the auction room is crowded it is necessary to throw the spread out into the crowd, let them get their hands on it, brings them in closer touch with the auctioneer, and they know he is not trying to cover up. The same is true in handling many other articles. It's a battle to win the confidence of the people, and there's a premium for the men who will always come clean and keep it.¹⁰⁴

There is a simple method for dealing with auctioneers who do not live up to the expectations of the crowd. They refuse to attend his sales, which causes customers to turn to another auctioneer. An auctioneer who can get no sales in the region where he lives in very effectively put out of business. All the auctioneers I studied were well aware of their ethical obligations to both seller and buyer:

¹⁰³Cassady, p. 103.

¹⁰⁴Gutelius, p. 85.

The auction business today is a profession. Every man who employs an auctioneer wants the best. What is the matter with you being the best? How can we be efficient and worthwhile? Please get this. There is a premium today on real clean live wires. There are not many on the market. No profession needs them more than the auction business. If you expect to be an auctioneer, make it a life study. Be an authority on values. Familiarize yourself with everything that is likely to come into the sale ring. Know the value of everything you see daily, and it won't be long until it will surprise you how soon you can familiarize himself with the real values of furniture, farm machinery, real estate, livestock, etc. Know your part well. Win the confidence of the people and never do anything to destroy it. Then jump into the whirlwind of speed and money and you will get your reward.¹⁰⁵

This chapter has concentrated on the auction system as it exists today. Contemporary auctioneers are trained in a variety of ways, but their essential sameness in regard to their function in the community allows for detailed analysis of their performance level.

¹⁰⁵Ibid., p. 30.

CONCLUSION

It has been my intent to analyze the American auction as a type of folklore performance. In so doing, I have drawn on the recent writings of folklorists who believe the field of folklore should be studied as a communicative process. The auctioneer is not only a performer however; he is also a folk occupational specialist. Keeping both factors in mind will allow for a more complete understanding of any given auction or auctioneer. Michael J. Bell while writing about folk occupations states:

. . . certain occupational roles are best understood as extended artistic performances and their fulfillment as artistic action by highly conscious actors.¹⁰⁶

These new theoretical bases and guidelines for the study of folklore have been used extensively in this thesis. The auctioneer is a folk performer who can be found in all fifty states, yet our knowledge of his artful practice is almost nonexistent. As Bell so aptly writes:

. . . to leave occupations [such as auctioneering] to sociologists and anthropologists alone, is ultimately to reduce our own contributions to the better understanding of human beings and to reduce the unique contributions of those human beings themselves.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁶Michael J. Bell, "Tending Bar at Brown's: Occupational Role as Artistic Performance," Western Folklore 35:107.

¹⁰⁷Ibid., p. 107.

In conjunction with studies of auctions and auctioneers as performance, there are other approaches one might take. For example, no women auctioneers have been researched although it is not uncommon to see a woman auctioneer functioning in this profession. A regional approach to the study of auctioneers might lead to insightful studies of similarities and differences between one area versus another. With the rise of formal auctioneering schools, one might study their impact on the traditional aspects of auctioneering. As Scott Pittullo, Director of the Auctioneering Program at Lamar Community College in Colorado, wrote to me, "In answer to some of your questions, we teach people to do the auctioneer chant, to count, to think on their feet, and to become a super salesman in all the ways; not just auctioneering."¹⁰⁸ Folklore in literature exponents could survey certain writings to see how auctioneers are incorporated into the story. There is at least one novel published that deals with an auctioneer in detail, describing several performance situations and their impact on the crowd. This novel, The Auctioneer by Joan Samson, utilizes a variety of techniques to illustrate the auctioneer's ability to influence and manipulate a crowd through verbal art.¹⁰⁹ For field researchers, the auction is an excellent place to study many genres of folklore. Mac E. Barrick in his article, "The

¹⁰⁸ Scott Pittullo, Head of Auctioneering Program, Lamar Community College, Lamar, Colorado, 22 January 1974, personal letter.

¹⁰⁹ Joan Samson, The Auctioneer (New York: Simon and Schuster Publishing Company, 1975).

Folklore Repertory of a Pennsylvania Auctioneer," reports on five genres of folklore he collected. These are: proverbs and sayings, superstitions, rhymes, tales and jokes.¹¹⁰ The auction is also a productive setting for making contacts while doing fieldwork because of their social significance to the local people. As stated earlier in this thesis, diaries and works by regional writers often contain descriptions of auctions or auctioneers. For example, Tate C. Page's The Voices of Moccasin Creek includes several pages on an Ozark auction which could be useful in comparing one region with another.¹¹¹ Another book, The Country Auction Antiques Book, offers glimpses into eight auctions held in eight different states.¹¹²

It is hoped that this thesis will help to stimulate more studies of one of the most dynamic and enduring forms of folklore performance--the American auction.

¹¹⁰Barrick, pp. 31-42.

¹¹¹Tate C. Page, The Voices of Moccasin Creek (Point Lookout, Missouri: School of the Ozarks Press, 1972), pp. 138-139.

¹¹²Cynthia Rockmore and Julian Rockmore, The Country Auction Antiques Book (New York: Hawthorn Books, Incorporated, 1974).

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