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"The Old Stone Bank"

HALEY & SYKES CO., PROVIDENCE

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**THE COUNTRY
AUCTION**



Presented by

"The Old Stone Bank"

Providence, R. I.

April 27, 1931



The Country Auction

A COUNTRY auction! What is there about the mere name that is so alluring? What makes it seem such an entirely different affair from its city relative? Does the spirit of commercialism soften or lose itself in the quiet atmosphere of a farmyard, in the droop of the elms or the breath of lilacs about an old farmhouse? Certainly, it seems to withdraw to the background. And yet where will a sharper bargain be drawn? Where will shrewder tongues spar for the last bit of value?

Everyone likes an auction, but perhaps country folk like one best. In the sparsely settled districts where no two farms are less than a good half mile apart an auction takes on the importance of a feature entertainment. Weeks ahead the first bills appear in the crossroads stores, in the grange halls, in the most conspicuous places possible, and a ripple of excitement, like the insinuous beat of war drums in Africa, washes over the hills and valleys, stirring the spirit of barter and adventurous curiosity in the heart of every Yankee. Then comes the appointed day itself, and strings of cars or slow-moving horse teams wind over country roads, coming to the scene from every quarter, their drivers filled with the deep

hope that the day will uncover some article of treasure, that out of the varied stock of an ancient household there will be some long-sought chest, some sturdy old rocker, some bit of pewter that will be good for a new period of service in a new home.

Nowadays there would be only a string of cars parked around a farmyard where an auction was taking place, the old battered and unwashed cars of the farming countryside, an occasional shiny sedan belonging to some wealthy seeker of antiques. But in the old days the string would be one of open teams, buggies, and carry-alls, vehicles in which whole families had come from a distance bringing lunches and children as though for a picnic. Nor would these conveyances have the stillness, the deadness of a line of parked automobiles. Constantly moving, a little ahead, a little back, as the horses which had drawn them munched nearby clumps of grass or grew restless in their harness, they would add their own spark of life to the scene.

Rhode Islanders of more than two score years can remember all this. Auctions have been common enough through the countryside of this state. If a farmer in Chepachet was preparing for an auction, he would advertise by distributing handbills around through Foster, Scituate, Cranston, Johnston, Gloucester, Smithfield, and Burrillville . . . a widespread area. They would read something like this:

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"Farming Tools and Household Furniture at Auction, Wednesday, May 6 at 10 o'clock A. M. If Stormy, the Next Fair Week Day."

Then would come a long list of the articles to be placed up for bidding, perhaps featuring some of the more choice items, and then the name and location of the owner. At the farmhouse everything would be well prepared for the prospective bidders. All the farm equipment would be gathered together in the barnyard, some of the furniture on the lawn outside the house, and the rest in the lower rooms inside. Sometimes a sort of platform was arranged for the auctioneer or vendue master, as he used to be called, but generally he could do his haranguing from any convenient wagon or chair.

The first arrivals would usually be the collectors of antiques, shrewd, calculating persons, hiding their excitement at discovering a choice article by immediately assuming a super-critical attitude. By the time the rest of the crowd arrived, these keen traders would have the things of value already marked and would be ready to bid on nothing else. At first the whole affair would have the appearance of a re-union. Friends who had not met for a long while would greet each other and exchange views on all the news that had become public property. There would be no hurry to get started. Folks would need the chance to amble

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around the grounds and through the rooms of the house, looking over the furniture and farm tools, deciding what they wanted if they could get it for a reasonable bid. And so the exact hour would be a little past when the red-faced auctioneer climbed upon a box or chair and began his speel. Gesturing dramatically, keenly observant of every mood of his audience, skillfully manipulating their enthusiasm, he would probably start something like this:

"Gentlemen, we will now proceed with the sale, and we will begin with this handsome cutter. How much am I offered for the cutter? Give me a bid, gentlemen. How much for the cutter? Fifty cents? Thank you. Half a dollar, I'm offered. Who'll make it 75? A half I'm offered. Do I hear 75? Sixty cents? Sixty, I'm offered. Give me 70? Sixty I have; who'll make it 70?" And so on. The bidding at the start would always be slow, the first articles bringing but little. Perhaps the cutter would finally bring a dollar, becoming the property of some farmer who needed one that was in good condition, not caring about its style. He would joke about his purchase to reassure himself that he had not spent too much, remarking, perhaps, that certain parts were worth a dollar in themselves.

Such joking was just what the auctioneer wanted. It was something to break the reserve of the crowd. If he could only get everyone bantering back and forth, he

could be confident of a good day. One old auctioneer by the name of Hudson was totally unable to warm up his audience on a particular occasion. He tried all the tricks of his trade without result until he hit upon the idea of having the owner of the farm tap a barrel of cider and provide mugs and glasses for the crowd. Once this was done, it was but a short while before the bidding became brisk enough to satisfy him thoroughly. Articles which ordinarily would not have brought a quarter soared to quadruple sums.

However, in general, the auctioneer was never so much indebted to refreshment passed among the crowd as he was to the half dozen or more local wits whose droll comments kept the people in a good humor. These sharp-tongued bystanders, seldom buyers themselves, at least encouraged others to buy, and were an invaluable asset. They could really be called clowns without much exaggeration. Idlers around town, they picked up all sorts of gossip and liked nothing better than a chance to display their wit at the expense of the more sober members of the community. Auctions, town meetings, and training days were their chances for glory and they made the most of them. To judge their importance at an auction would be difficult, yet those who wished to have a good day's sale frequently bribed these bumpkins to be present when the bidding was on.

Of course, like the sallies of all wits, the remarks of such rude clowns frequently rubbed tempers the wrong way, starting trouble. But at that point the village constable, another sure attendant at every auction, would step in and quiet the disturbance. This gentleman generally relied upon his own wit to answer that of the brawlers. If he could win in this manner without having to resort to any violence in quelling a disturbance, his own prestige was heightened, then and thereafter.

Other typical characters at a country auction were the deacons or local elders, the local politicians, and the justice of the peace. The first and last were the pompous individuals who provided the best possible targets for the wits. The politicians were attracted to the scene like flies to molasses, mixing intimately with families, shaking hands, bowing, patting children, solicitous to the last degree, loquacious, ingratiating. Little were they interested in the regular bidding; they were doing some tacit bidding of their own for future votes.

So a country auction would proceed, in theory a time for bidding and selling of goods, for business alone, but actually a time for the gathering of the whole countryside to exchange gossip, to laugh and joke, and to satisfy curiosities. At noon there would be a brief recess while lunches were spread and eaten. Shortly, the bidding

would commence again under the auctioneer's skillful direction.

After the larger pieces went, groups of odds and ends would be offered, of no use individually but of some value as a lot. For instance, combinations might include such items as a step-ladder, a broken-seated rocker, a few dishes, and a rag rug. Or for a half dollar one might secure such a miscellaneous assortment as a clam basket, some trace chains, a few pie pans, etc. By mid-afternoon the bidding would have become slow and listless, and it was then that the final choice articles, the real treasures of the whole sale, would be opened to bids. Such a procedure was the last trump of the auctioneer in holding his crowd. Invariably it worked like a stimulant. People who had waited all day to bid on these things lost their caution in their eagerness and bids rose high.

This surge of enthusiasm was enough to clean out the last items. If they did not go then, they had to be counted out. When the bidding died down this time, the affair was over; the auctioneer dismounted from his stand, wiping his face and brow; the people began packing their new possessions into their teams, gathering up their children, untethering their horses. The auction was concluded.