

Antique Tool Auction:

The Granddad of all Sales



An antique-tool historian looks for a great deal

BY GARRETT HACK



Twenty-five years ago, I didn't know a Bedrock from a Bailey, a Sargent from a Stanley or a Collins from a Keen Kutter, but older tools were cheap, and I bought plenty. I was a carpenter, I needed tools, and these used tools were far better than anything I could buy new. Every detail, from shapely rosewood handles to sturdy parts, spoke of quality, of tools designed to work day in and day out. I was hooked. These days, when I'm not making furniture, I scour flea markets and auctions and write books on antique tools.

I recently headed off to the granddad of tool auctions, the 15th International Tool Auction in Harrisburg, Pa., where you can find the rare, the unusual, the pristine—sometimes in the original box. In short, the best of the best are on the block at this two-day sale in late October. But it's not just a place for studied collectors. It's a

good place for the beginning hand-tooler to find reliable and complete tools. You'd do well to mark your calendar for the 1999 auction, scheduled for Oct. 22 and 23.

Imagine a huge hotel ballroom filled with dealer tables. Some are piled high with usable tools of every sort—planes, handsaws, braces, sets of chisels—with more filling shelves and boxes on the floor. Spread over other tables are levels and boxwood rules, old tool catalogs, rare Stanley planes, British tools including many gleaming Nor-rises and Spiers, hammers and axes. Four 50-ft.-long tables are spread with more than 1,000 tools to be auctioned off, with the most valuable and smallest guarded in glass cases. Add in buyers two or three deep filling every aisle. Such was the scene for Friday's dealer show and preview of Saturday's auction, but the action continued late into the night—over dinner, in ho-



Five, gimme 10. The hotel ballroom fills with more than 500 bidders, waiting for a tool they just can't live without.

tool might look like a whysit until you read in the catalog where it was made, by whom, what trades used it, its condition and value estimate. Many bidders don't even appear at the auction; instead, they bid via telephone based on the catalog alone. What convinced me to attend were the catalog photos and descriptions of Spiers and Norrises with value estimates that seemed like bargains.

In the tool world, this is certainly a Big Boy auction, drawing collectors from all over the world. You have little idea who has the deep pockets to pay for tools they want and who, like myself, is there for the education. And it is an education. The auction is a good excuse for tool guys (and gals) to get together and swap stories about their particular tool expertise. There are no better sources to learn about the subtleties and history of tools than these long-time dealers and collectors who have handled, owned or in some cases spent a lifetime working these tools. And to educate newcomers and veterans alike, four experts spoke Friday morning about their years researching shaves, Vermont tools, levels and Stanley tools.

Just being among all of those tools was a chance to learn. A few museums have tools, but none will let you handle and take apart its tools, to see the details of how they were made and how they work. I doubt I'll ever see another Falconer plow, but I'll remember the way this one felt in my hands as I imagined cutting a groove along the sinuous curve of a coach. I might think back to the details of the cutters

someday, when I need to make a tool for inlaying along a curve. The auction offers an abundance of tool ideas to file away for a future need—or just to appreciate.

The event was well choreographed. Beginning with the preview, bidders planned their strategies, trying not to look too interested in tools they desired. The Scottish planes I had my eye on had a constant knot of admirers, and I thought they wouldn't be so cheap after all. Fortunately, my favorite was to be auctioned later, in the natural lull following the excitement of the Falconer plane. Hidden in the plane's dovetailed construction were a full and proper iron and a tight throat. The plane was also coated with a century of grime—a discouragement to others, I'd hoped.

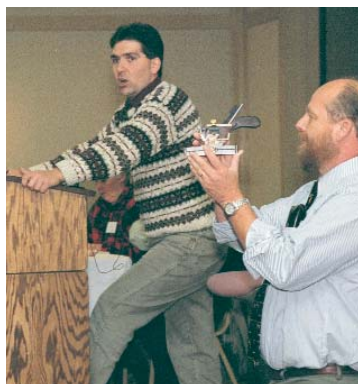
Everyone anticipated the opening lot, sensing the mood, wondering how the prices would fall. Not one of the 500 chairs in the room was empty. Twenty common Stanley planes started things off, with hesitant bids and bargain prices. Slowly, things built to a \$500 sale on an ancient bronze knife, a \$1,600 plow plane, a Stanley No. 1 in good condition for \$1,000, and things were off and running at an average of \$422 per lot. Prices followed estimates until an O.R. Chaplin Pat. No. 3 smoothing plane was offered. All it took was two competing buyers, and the price jumped rapid-fire by hundred-dollar bills to \$3,500—more than four times the estimate. The following lots seemed like bargains.

Let me dispel any assumption that all of these tools sell for unreal prices. Yes, some do, but not all. Most are heading for collections, so you're competing against a high-end market. But there are plenty of user tools. Because many attendees fly in, heavy or large items can

tel rooms transformed into tool shops, anywhere two tool lovers chanced to meet.

Bud Brown started this auction 15 years ago. Clarence Blanchard, a down-home Mainer with a long history of Stanley collecting, has run it for the past two years. It takes an entire year to put the auction together. Among 1998's gems was a Thomas Falconer coach maker's plow plane, which sold for \$22,500. Also up for sale were almost three dozen Scottish planes—unusual and beautiful examples of a plane maker's highest art—from Ken Roberts, an early collector. Among the 762 lots—a tool or batch of tools up for bid—were plow planes, Stanley tools, molding planes and unique tools from many trades.

Blanchard gathers a cross section of tools that appeals to a wide variety of collectors and users and then writes a catalog that entices these collectors and users to bid. A



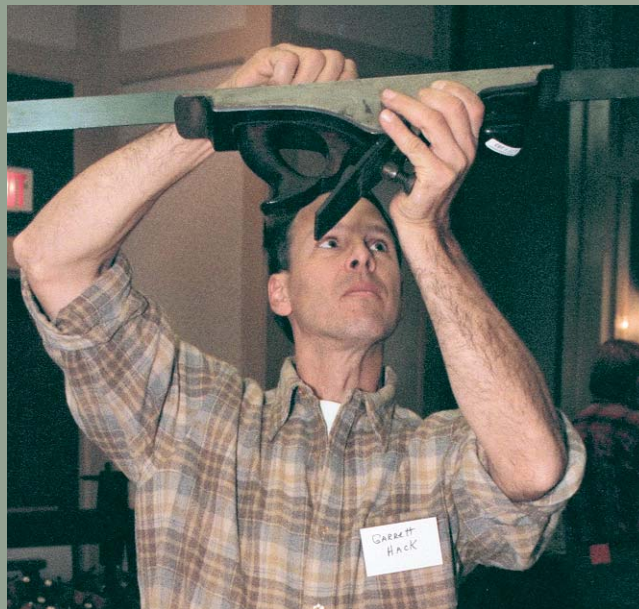
One of a kind. Auction coordinator Clarence Blanchard displays the esteemed Falconer plane while the auctioneer calls bids that quickly climb to \$22,500.



What to look for in a “new” old tool

The most useful woodworking hand tools were manufactured, so they're common and affordable. Condition and rarity establish the selling price—chipped Japan finish, dings, surface rust or any similar minor defects can turn off a collector and make a perfectly usable tool more affordable. Bear in mind, if you buy a tool in top condition, you will pay more, but you can also get a better price if you decide to sell it.

Broken tools aren't a bargain unless you can fix them. Take things apart and look for hidden cracks (tap on the body and hope for a nice, high ring). Is it complete? Empty tapped holes might mean a missing part. Mismatched parts are harder to spot but don't necessarily affect how the tool functions. Some cleaning and tuning is inevitable with used tools, but rust can kill them. You can sand off surface rust, but deep rust



welds parts tight and can pit cutters so badly as to render them useless.

Stanley, Sargent and Miller's Falls all made high-quality tools, any of which will be an asset to your shop. If you're just getting started, a No. 4 or No. 5 bench plane is common and very useful for general planing. Bedrocks, top of the Stanley line, are worth the extra price if you can find them. Disston makes the best saws;

Irwin or Jennings makes the best auger bits. Chisels, gouges or any edge tool marked cast steel is likely to be top quality. Makers stamped their names on tools they were proud to sell.

In general, education is the best guide to buying secondhand tools. Talk with dealers, visit tool sales and ask plenty of questions. Be patient, and buy tools as you need and find them.—G.H.

high dollar—the rare or unusual even more so. Common tools sell in cycles, way up one year and leveling off or dropping the next. Braces are way down from a few years ago—as much as a third—and Bedrocks and Norrises are way up. It's a quirk of the auction scene that British tools can sell for considerably less here than in England and Stanley items for as much or more there. Such wasn't the case this day: The first Scottish planes came and went too high, and I never even got off a bid.

Everyone had been waiting for the Falconer plow plane. The auction had built to the proper mood for such a sale, through a series of smaller crests: a wooden thread-cutting engine for \$8,000, a Tidey double beveling plane for \$11,000 (below the estimate and the ebony Tidey that sold for \$27,000 two years ago) and a Stanley No. 164 for \$4,700. Until Don Rich's recent death, the Falconer plane was the premier piece in his collection of coach maker's plows, a tool he had desired for years but sadly owned only for a short time. The plane is one of three known and the only complete example, but a starting bid of \$18,000 quickly squashed any bids from me. A minute later the plane was sold to an absentee bidder, heading to another collection, surely to be admired but never used again.

With the room all atwitter with speculation about the mystery bidder, the grimy Spiers panel plane came up. I wanted it, so I pulled the classic Statue of Liberty, with my bid card firmly planted in the air until the gavel fell: It was mine for only \$450. My energy waned, as it did for others. Only the hardy remained to pick up late bargains.

The end of one auction is the beginning of the next, as high prices bring out more tools from collections for the next auction. Sure, there is a bit of greediness in all this accumulating of things, chasing the high dollar. But then there are friends like Craig and Larry who come every year for other reasons. They spread cloths on their hotel beds and place tools for sale everywhere. The tools are only a come-on to swapping stories and enjoying themselves. My fortune cookie at dinner one night told me what I already knew: “You are surrounded by fortune hunters.” Yes, but it's the best kind of fortune. □

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be bargains, such as two workbenches that sold for \$120 and \$125. If auctions make you nervous, enjoy the show but shop among the dealers where you can find complete No. 78s for \$25, No. 4s and No. 5s for as much, saws, chisels, scrapers—enough to equip a shop and still come out ahead over new tools. Jump into the auction for unusual items you can't find anywhere else.

Tools in top-notch condition, with clearly marked makers' names, always bring

Room 163 is open. Throughout the show and late into the night, dealers display and sell their wares in hotel rooms converted into showrooms.