

*Going once,  
Going twice,*

**SOLD!**

By Fran Severn  
Photography By Vince Lupo

*Bidding Wars at Dixon's  
Auction in Crumpton*

*Twenty-five, thirty, thirty-five,  
forty, fifty, anybodygotseventy?  
Seventy? Seventyonthebench.*

It's Wednesday at nine o'clock on a sweltering August morning at Dixon's Auction in Crumpton, Maryland. Men wearing faded jeans and T-shirts accompanied by women sporting shorts and heat-wrinkled blouses mill around artifacts of Americana blanketing a large field. They peek inside old furniture drawers, poke through boxes of tarnished silverware, and test the hinges of cabinet doors, never straying far from the singsong litany emanating from an oversized golf cart that slowly nudges them along rows upon rows of stuff like a motorized sheepdog.

*Gonنالookatthismantelpiece. Nicesolidwood. Forty, fifty, seventy, seventy-seven. Anybodygotninety? Ninety, hunnerd, hunnerd, hunnerd. Ninetyonthemantelpiece. You're in.*

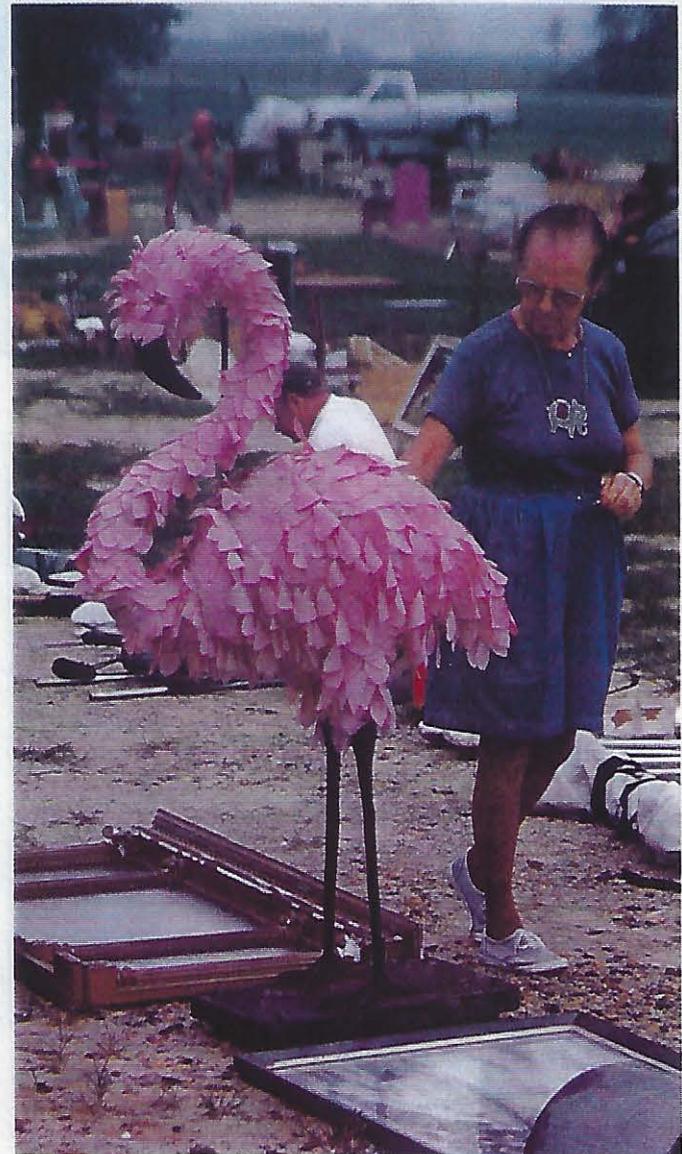
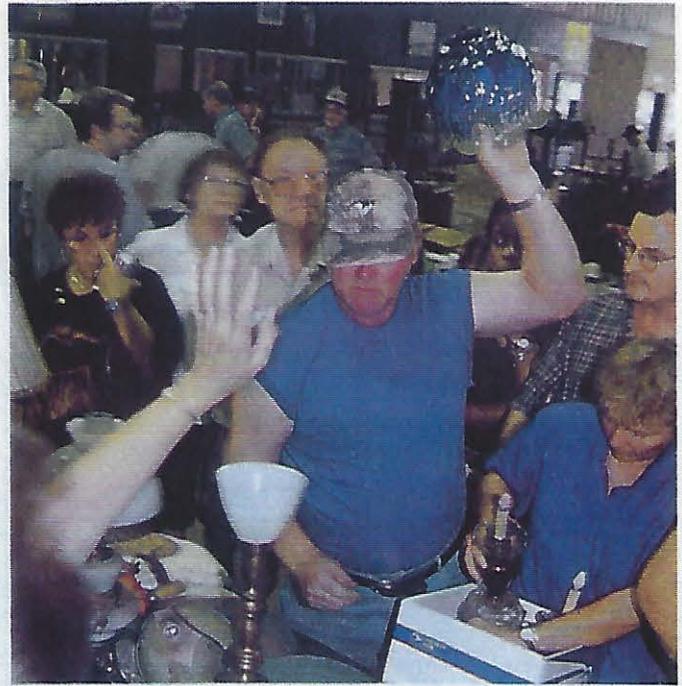
Dixon's Auction is as much a part of Eastern Shore tradition as a speedtrap on Rt. 50. Each Wednesday a hoard of dealers, sellers, sight-seers, and bargain-seeking buyers gathers here for the day-long auction. Most of the buyers are regulars, dealers who pick up their inventory at this and similar other auctions along the East Coast. Dixon's is one of the largest. The weekly sale starts at 9:00 a.m. and continues until everything has been offered. It's not unusual for the dedicated to stay until sunset, rain or shine, snow or sweat. The only time the auction isn't held is if Christmas falls on a Wednesday.

Many of the dealers come every week, arriving with panel trucks and helpers at the ready with hand trucks and brute strength to load the purchases and transport them to Virginia, the Carolinas, and beyond. "A lot of dealers come up from the south," says Jim Tarleton, who has worked as an auctioneer at Dixon's for almost fifteen years. "There's one dealer who comes up from Florida once a month, and a man from Texas comes twice a year."

A great deal of the merchandise found at Dixon's comes from estates or families cleaning out houses. Some of it is in excellent condition, sorts of things antique dealers covet: ornately carved headboards, decorative

**Left:** Auctioneers call the tune and set the energetic tempo of the bidding wars.

**Right:** Dixon's patrons embody the philosophy that one man's trash is another man's treasure.



**Left: Rows of merchandise await a new home.**

**Bottom Left: Something for everyone.**

**Right: Dixons is a regular haunt for browsers and serious buyers alike.**

brackets, stone birdbaths from a Victorian garden. Then there are the curiosities, like the large suitcase overflowing with ballpoint pens. And the obscenities, like the solid oak hutch painted a bilious yellow with a blue interior.

The hodgepodge of furniture has definite roots: Colonial pieces from the north and east head south. The Victorian and period pieces, meanwhile, and things from the west and southwest move through the mid-Atlantic to New York and New England. But make no mistake, this isn't Sotheby's, where the lineage of each piece is known and the auctioneers coax bids from a well-heeled audience with polished grace.

With hundreds of things to move and only a few hours to move them, each sale is made quickly and efficiently. Knowing where to start a bid is a matter of training and experience. Explains Tarleton, "You pick it up with experience. You get an idea of what something is worth. If I see a \$500 corner cupboard, I'm not going to start it at \$20."

The bidding is done subtly by the pros—eye contact between the auctioneer and the bidder, a slight nod or shake of the head. Tarleton, like all of the auctioneers, senses when he's gotten the highest price he can expect, and closes the deal quickly, never letting his cart stop, never letting the action lag. It's early yet, and he has several acres of goods to sell.

***Let's movetheserockers. Setofrockingchairsrighthere. Startat sixty, sixty-eight, eighty, hunnerd, one twenty, one-twenty. Goneforahunnerd.***

Mary Selles is a regular. She scours Dixon's for home furnishings made from 1840-1940 for her nearby store, Amaryllis. She knows most of the other dealers and what they look for. It's often the same thing she is. At the moment, she is hovering over a half dozen ornate metal rods she just purchased. She's not sure, but thinks she is going to use them to do something with curtains. This might not be the place to find the meaning of life, but she regards the auction with a philosophical eye. "It's really a study of personalities. You see selfish and generous people. But it's very democratic. We try to accommodate each other when we are all looking at the same pieces. Nobody gets everything he wants."

As she talks, she keeps one eye on the moving cart. Democracy and accommodation go only so far once she spots something she knows can be resold quickly at her store. "If you are a buyer, the computer is always working. You want to remember where you saw something and when it is going to come up for sale."



At Dixon's, that's almost impossible to do solo. The landscape is always shifting. As one row of goods is sold, the crews move in to carry them away. Once the space is cleared, the vans and panel trucks move closer to the next row.

"It is very disorienting", says Selles. "I try to number the rows, but it's hard. You plan to bid on something, but when you turn away or load something, you miscalculate and find you missed it."

***What's that there? That sink. Put that box of glasses and folding table with it. I see ten dollar. Ten dollar. Do I get fifteen? Fifteen? Sold. Ten dollar. Money coming. Money money.***

There are actually three auctions going on simultaneously. The main field, with the fine furniture and other quality goods, has a \$20 minimum bid. The \$5 field holds the sort of leftovers and sundries that might be used to furnish a hunting camp or a kid's tree house. This field is littered with stuff—a box of hubcaps, a quasi-assembled filing cabinet, a pile of Kennedy-era pillbox hats, cloches, and once-stylish "somethings" deco-

rated with faded, broken feathers. There are rolls of chicken wire, an ancient gas stove, and an older Mixmaster. The action in the \$5 field is a chaotic ballet choreographed by green-shirted auction staff calling instructions and descriptions to the auctioneer as they shove lots together, insuring that the bidder who has indicated interest in something will get what they bargained for—and more. Scavengers will pick up what the winning bidder doesn't want and leaves behind. Whatever is still in the field in the morning is hauled off to the local dump.

Jesse Dixon, the 43-year-old son of owner Norman Dixon, hustles down the line of lots, his face and shirt covered with a thin sheen of August sweat and dust.

"You having fun yet?" someone calls to him. "I'm always having fun!" he calls back with a grin. "I get ten percent of everything they sell. I can do this all day!"

Jesse's father bought the auction in 1963. He was raised in the business, he explains as he heads back to the main building, passing a woman who is celebrating her purchase of two Mr. Peanut banks. He's never considered doing anything else. Neither have a lot of his relatives. By his reck-

oning, there are seven or eight grandsons, nephews, cousins, and aunts all working there.

He usually operates the third auction which happens in the relative comfort of a large, concrete-floored building that the Dixons built when they took over. This is where the smaller items are sold. Stacked on long, low tables are cast iron banks, a Baltimore Colts umbrella stand, fake Hummel figurines, real Hummel figurines, fine china patterns (some complete sets and some in pieces), an entire crate of empty 1 pint Coke bottles, and a Samsung laser printer (a Finale 8000 model). One table is covered with empty beer cans—Busch, Goebel, St. Pauli Girl, Coors, Old Milwaukee. Another features a display of Zippo lighters commemorating the U.S. Navy mission to Peru, RCA, the Furman Drilling Company, and the Beatles Abbey Road album.

***Split this lot. We've got the china and the books. Do I see ten dollars for the books? Ten dollars? LL Bean Guide to the Outdoors. That's a best seller. Ten dollars for the box of books. Fifteen, fifteen, fifteen, fifteen, twenty, twenty. Sold for fifteen.***

This is nonstop action. There really isn't a lunch break. The lunchroom and counter service stay busy all day, as buyers time their meal to coincide with when the things of interest are gone or haven't come up for sale yet. The concessions are run by Amish who arrive from Lancaster in the pre-dawn hours. It's an incongruous sight—modestly-clad women scurrying through the kitchen and dining room wearing their traditional aprons and caps—and Reeboks. The food stall gets almost as much business as the auction. Cured hams, cheeses, jams, homemade breads, shoofly pies, and jars of chow-chow occupy one section of the indoor auction building. In the morning, hot soft pretzels and fresh donuts are in demand. As the day warms up, the ice cream concession has a line as long as parrotheads waiting for tickets to a Jimmy Buffet concert. If a much-coveted hutch leaves the grounds in someone else's van, at least the losing bidder has the consolation of a double-dip butter-pecan ice cream cone.

***Nice china pattern. There's cups and saucers and plates. Fifty, fifty, fifty, sixty, eighty. Do I hear eighty? Ninety, ninety, hundred, hundred-one, twenty-five, one-thirty, one-thirty, one thirty. Gone for one twenty-five.***

By late afternoon, it's down to a handful of bidders, mostly people waiting for a piece they've eyed all day. Outside, vans filled with furniture and collectibles are ready to jostle their way across the field to the highway en route to antique stores, interior decorators' showrooms, or private homes. Scavengers make a final pass through the \$5 field. Inside the main building, auction employees begin straightening the tables and sweeping

the floors. Suddenly, it's almost quiet. In the morning, the first trucks will show up with goods for the following week, when the whole performance begins again.

***See what we've got here. Got a nice set of chair here. Real nice set of dining room chairs. Ninety. Can we start at ninety, ninety, ninety, hundred, hundred-ten, one-twenty, one-thirty, one-thirty, one-fifty, fifty, one-fifty. One-fifty. Sold! ■***

*Fran Severn wrote the article on Havre de Grace in the Hometowns section of the September & October 1999 issue.*



Left: Scavengers pick through the remains of the day.

Bottom Left: A proud purchaser loads a flatbed of bargains.

Right: A man's new best friend.