

SOLD ON AUCTIONS



PHOTOGRAPH BY SCOTT SCHILD

IN CENTRAL
NEW YORK,
SUMMER
MARKS THE
HIGH SEASON
FOR BIDDING
AND BARGAINS

BY OLIVIA M. HALL

Looking for an antique china cabinet, a set of vintage Pyrex dishes, or a pair of human skulls that have been sitting in a doctor's office for a few decades? An auction might just be your next shopping destination.

Summer marks the high season for auctions and estate sales across Central New York, where almost every day of the week auctioneers somewhere nearby sell off everything from household items to real estate to the highest bidder.

Whether or not you plan to jump into the fray, grab a hot dog from the concession stand, sit back in your folding chair, and listen to the auctioneer's mellifluous chant work its magic.

Auctioneer Bernie Brzostek works the crowd at a recent auction at Brzostek's Auction Service in Phoenix. Brzostek has been in the auction business for more than 40 years.



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Propective bidders wait for items to come onto the auction block at Brzostek's Auction Service.

Take a recent Wednesday night auction at Brzostek's Auction Service in Phoenix, for example. The long hall was packed with people of all ages, including young kids brought along on a family outing.

Standing before the crowd — his dark blue tie covered in little gavels, tables behind him crammed with all manner of furniture, paintings, and glassware — auctioneer Bernie Brzostek intones his rhythmic sales pitch: "Hey, how much on that stand? How about ten, ten on good quality there, twelve-and-a-half, good thing there, fifteen, twenty there, twenty-two-and-a-half, twenty-five? Twenty-five dollars? Sold at twenty-two-and-a-half, number 32 is the bidder."

In less than 20 seconds, the metal plant stand had found a new owner, and Brzostek barely took a breath before moving on to the next lot, a rocking chair. After 40 years and some 6,500 auctions, the auctioneer typically whips through 100 items an hour.



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Still, he finds time to inject jokes seamlessly into the flow — "The more you pay, the better you'll like it later" — to keep things light and his audience entertained.

After all, he says, "Everyone comes to the auction to have fun."

That is certainly true for Mike Garlick, a retired UPS driver, who considers these free events a hobby. On his weekly excursions, Garlick is frequently on the lookout for old signs and automobile memorabilia. "You see a lot of people you know and get to talk to them," he says at a Hessney estate auction in Geneva. "Plus, I like the educational aspect, especially about antiques."

Nowadays, he might get a very good deal on items such as Victorian furniture. ►

AUCTION PRIMER

New to the auction scene? Here's what you need to know to get you started:

BIDDER NUMBER

Buyers register for a personal number — written on their bidder card — when they arrive at the auction and before placing bids.

BIDDER'S CHOICE

The highest bidder chooses one or more pieces from a group of similar items, such as glassware or books. Each round, bidding starts from the beginning until everything has been sold.

BOX LOT

A box or tray full of mixed or similar items, such as small toys or housewares.

BUYER'S PREMIUM

Buyers often pay a percentage of the winning bid to the auction house, typically 10 percent (cash) to 13 percent (credit card) or a flat fee.

FAIR MARKET VALUE

The price an item will achieve at a fair auction without undue pressure on either the buyer or seller.

LOT

An item or grouping of items, each with an assigned lot number.

PREVIEW

Auction houses offer set times, often a day or a few hours before the auction, to inspect items, which are usually sold in "as is" condition.

TIMES THE MONEY

The winning bidder pays the bid price for each item in a lot, not the entire set (such as four times the high bid of \$10, or \$40, for a set of four dining chairs).

WITHOUT RESERVE

In this type of auction, items are sold to the highest qualified bidder without a set minimum (or "reserve"), and the seller is not allowed to bid on his own item.

FOR A DETAILED GLOSSARY OF AUCTION TERMS, CHECK THE NEW YORK STATE AUCTIONEERS ASSOCIATION WEBSITE, NYAUCTIONEERS.ORG.

CNY AUCTION HOUSES

Here is a sampling of auction houses around Central New York:

THE AUCTION SOLUTION

Liverpool
auction-solution.com
(315) 382-1170

BRZOSTEK'S AUCTION SERVICE

Phoenix
brzostek.com
(315) 678-2542

CHERRY VALLEY AUCTION BARN

Bouckville
cherryvalleyauctionbarnny.com
(315) 893-7501

DEAN CUMMINS - AUCTIONEER

Cato
auctionzip.com/NY-Auctioneers/7582.html
(315) 626-2277

HESSNEY AUCTION COMPANY

Geneva
hessney.com
(315) 789-9349

MADISON AUCTION SERVICE

Madison
madisonauctionny.com
(315) 893-1883

MESSIER'S AUCTION SERVICES & REALTY

Verona
messiersauction.com
(315) 225-3565

VILLAGE AUCTION COMPANY

Sodus
villageauctioneer.com
(315) 483-1900

FOR A COMPLETE LISTING OF UPCOMING AUCTIONS NEARBY, VISIT AUCTIONZIP.COM.



PHOTOGRAPH BY DENNIS NETT



PHOTOGRAPH BY SCOTT SCHILD

"Beautiful sideboards that 10 years ago brought \$2,000, today we're lucky if we get \$500," says Carrie Hessney, an auctioneer in her family's business, Hessney Auction Co. "I think that it's just a new generation coming up. People don't have dining rooms anymore. Even china doesn't sell like it used to, because people don't want things that aren't microwaveable."

Gold, silver, jewelry and guns tend to draw bigger crowds at the moment, and specialty items, such as a first edition Book of Mormon at a 2007 Hessney sale, may bring in record bids — \$105,600, in this case.

But hunting for that hidden treasure, the unexpected deal is always part of the fun. Eric Chapman from Weedsport, for one, was thrilled with his \$2,400 winning bid on a

Bidders at a recent outdoor auction in Manlius conducted by Messier's Auction Service of Verona.

1976 Camaro at the Brzostek auction. "That was a steal for that thing," he says. "Normally, cleaned up, it's probably worth \$7,000 to \$8,000."

To make sure supposed bargains don't turn out to be fakes, auction aficionados frequent trusted auction houses. Novices can look for businesses that are members of the New York State Auctioneers Association.

Most importantly, says NYSAA president Laurie Bostwick, "Visit the auction and mingle. You'll find out a lot from the people who are there. See how long the auctioneer has been around. You're not going to be in business long if you rip people off."

Many of the auction houses that are regional staples are family businesses that have been in existence for a couple of generations — or will be, now that a son or daughter is stepping up to the auction dais.

At Hessney's in Geneva and Messier's Auction Services in Verona, for example, a new generation of young women is showing its auctioneering chops.

Twenty-six-year-old Stephanie Messier



PHOTOGRAPH BY DENNIS NETT

Stephanie Messier is among a handful of female auctioneers in what is traditionally a field dominated by men.

started the family business last year with her father, Vick, who gathered experience in the auction field a couple of decades ago.

"I didn't like working for 'the man,'" Stephanie Messier laughs. "I wanted to be my own boss. And now, as head auctioneer, I pretty much run the show on auction day."

At Saturday morning events at the Verona firehouse, she regularly works crowds of 150 to 200 people — more at the popular firearms auction. But she enjoys her day-to-day tasks just as much. "I love meeting new people, finding new things every day, just being there on the road," she explains. "It's kind of like being on 'American Pickers,' that TV show. We never know what we're going to come across."

Messier is self-taught and picked up most of her skills from her father and by watching videos of champion auctioneers on YouTube. That was enough to win her runner-up rookie of the year in the NYSAA's 2014 bid calling contest — second only to Carrie Hessney, who's also 26.



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"It's memorization," says Hessney, explaining her technique. "I run numbers constantly, in the shower, in the car. You'd think you know what comes after five — ten — but sometimes you just don't."

After Hessney returned home from the Missouri Auction School, one of the oldest and most popular in the country, in 2012, her first real auction was a trial by fire. At that Saturday's gun auction, her father clipped a microphone on her and walked out of the room. "I didn't have a choice, even though I was shaking," she says. "In a way, it's a blessing that he just did that. Now I don't even think twice anymore, because I ▶



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TOP, the number of auctions in Central New York increase in the summer and fall when they can be held outdoors.

ABOVE, Bernie Brzostek auctions two baskets in a far-ranging auction of household items and antiques.

ABOVE RIGHT, prospective bidders take a closer look at items during the preview held before an auction.

get all that practice.”

Having to take control of a throng of people can be intimidating, Bostwick of the NYSAA acknowledges. And it may be one reason that few women consider auctioneering as a profession. Thus, out of Hessney’s auctioneering school class of 215, only 15 students were women.

Nevertheless, Bostwick believes that women can have advantages over men in the business. “A lot of older people connect better with a woman than a man, and people trust women better and will buy from you,” she says, adding that she has never felt excluded by her male colleagues.

Only consignors of guns and equipment can be a bit difficult sometimes, the women agree. “I catalog all of the guns, so I know my way around them, but sometimes no matter what I tell a customer, they don’t want accept it from a younger woman,” says Hessney. “My dad can come out and say the exact same thing, and they’ll listen.”

But come auction day, such issues are forgotten. “I like being here early, seeing everybody come in,” Hessney says. “At the gun auctions especially, the guys are so excited. It’s so much work ahead of time, so much preparation. But auction day is a fun day, and it makes it worth it all.” ❖