

Home

DO IT YOURSELF E2
Ridding your home of potential acci

Estate sales



STUART T. WAGNER/TIMES-DISPATCH

WHAT'S GOING ON? When people line up outside a house in the early morning, they may be waiting for the start of an estate sale.

Family sell-offs can be ideal way to find treasures at bargain prices

BY PATTY MARTINO ALSPAUGH
SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

It's 7 a.m. on a Saturday and people are lining up in front of your neighbor's house. Don't just sit there peeking out the window. Get in line. Chances are the group is queuing up for an estate sale, an adult treasure hunt for bargain shoppers.

Where else can you rummage through boxes, drawers and cabinets to your heart's content? Where else can you shop and find merchandise as varied as an 1878 dance card or a perfectly good vacuum cleaner?

Estate sales include the entire contents of someone's house, so virtually anything can turn up: antique and modern furniture, Oriental and woven rugs, original artwork, books, kitchenware, costume and real jewelry, tools, men's and women's clothing.

Dale Hutcherson of Chesterfield County has furnished her home through the years with items purchased from estate sales, and she has set up two children in apartments, as well.

"Sheets, towels, pots and pans. You name it. I rarely go to a regular store anymore. And when I do, I'm always shocked by the prices," she said.

According to estate sale veterans, prices are at least 50 percent less than what someone would pay for the same item if purchased new at a retail store.

The sales usually are held by a family member or organization to dispose of a deceased person's

personal property, with profits going into the person's estate. The sales are perennial, but in the East they seem to follow yard sale patterns, virtually disappearing in the winter and proliferating in the spring.

In the Richmond area, the sales are listed in the classified sections of local newspapers under the heading, "Home Sales." The words ESTATE SALE usually are capitalized to differentiate it from the multitude of yard sale listings.

Advertisements normally list any distinctive, abundant or valuable items. Most sales start on Friday or Saturday and last until Sunday. Some estate sale vendors have mailing lists, so it's a good idea to ask about a mailing list when you're at a sale.

Estate sales held by organizations are generally well-organized and carried out on a grander scale than sales held by family members. Plus items always have a price tag.

Organizations usually include their names in ads. After frequenting a few sales, you'll learn which company's sales you like best.

Ms. Hutcherson, who has been attending estate sales for five years, prefers those that include everything. "Some of the sales will weed out what they consider to be inferior and sell only the nice stuff. I prefer the sales that don't do that, that sell everything," she said.

Martha Rollins, owner of Martha's Mixture Ltd. in Carytown,

PLEASE SEE SALES, PAGE E6 ►

DOES IT WORK? Shopper Bright Yee checks out a golf umbrella. He eventually picked it up for \$5. Estate sales can include the entire contents of a house, so there's no way to predict what will turn up.



Events are treasure hunts

▼ SALES FROM PAGE E1

handles estate sales. She tries to make shoppers feel as if they were in their own homes.

"It's the little touches that make a difference. Like fresh flowers on the tables and making sure everything is clean and neat," she said.

Location is also important. If a sale is being held in one of Richmond's more expensive neighborhoods, such as Windsor Farms, it's logical to conclude that there will be a larger selection of better-quality items for sale.

"The lines are always down the block when we hold an estate sale in any of the richer sections of Richmond," said Ethel Alexander, proprietor of ETAL Sales Inc. "People figure the bigger the house, the better the merchandise."

Classified ads for estate and yard sales are listed in ascending ZIP code order, making it easier to figure out in which section of town a sale is being held.

As any aficionado will tell you, the secret of "estate saling" is to get to a sale an hour or so before it is to begin so that you can be one of the first inside — before things are picked over.

At many sales, there's a stack of numbers outside the front door. After getting a number, you can go home or out to breakfast until the sale starts. The numbers function as markers to keep your place in line.

When the sale begins, the vendor will call out the numbers in consecutive order, stopping at intervals depending on the size of the house and the number of people in line.

Don't expect to be let in early. Estate sale vendors are firm about starting times.

Estate items also are sold at auctions. At auctions, however, you can't just walk in, buy and walk out. Patrons must sign in, get a number, and wait. You're allowed to view items before the auction starts, but you can't begin bidding until the auctioneer gets to the item you want.

One reason prices are low at estate sales is because vendors have only a couple or so days to liquidate an estate.

Ms. Alexander of ETAL prices most things herself. She keeps abreast of going prices by checking them at antiques stores in and out of town. If she's unsure, she calls in an expert for an appraisal. Then she lowers prices from there, knowing from experience what people will pay.

"The problem arises," she said, "when family members insist I charge a higher price than what I think something will sell for. People don't always understand that most things sell for a lot less used than what they were bought for new."

Estate sale prices are pretty firm the first day; however, they're often lowered considerably the last day of a

sale. So the best bargains often are found on the last day, but the best selections on the first.

At most sales, there are bid boxes where people can place bids on higher-priced items. Most vendors won't accept a bid that is less than half of the original price.

If the bid item hasn't been sold by the last day, it is sold to the highest bidder. Ms. Alexander cautions: "Make sure you include the time and date on your bid in case someone else bids the same price. We always pick the first bid."

Collectors long have known that estate sales are great places to get bargains. Many avid collectors wind up as antiques dealers down the road.

Anne Shropshire, a collector who recently became a dealer, recalls: "I spent so much time and effort collecting over the years that I decided I might as well make it profitable. And selling some things allows me to keep others."

Ms. Shropshire recently opened a space called Circa Antiques at Second Time Around in Carytown.

Martha Patterson, owner of Antique Boutique and part-owner of Antique Exchange, also started out as a collector — of perfume bottles.

"Believe it or not," she said, "it all started out when an aunt left me her bedroom set, which included a collection of perfume bottles. I wasn't interested in the bedroom set, but I loved the perfume bottles."

Sales bring collecting fever

BY PATTY MARTINO ALSPAUGH

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

I admit it, I have the fever. The collecting fever. I've been going to estate sales for 10 years to scavenge things like kitchen gadgets and old plates and china.

I'm crazy about postcards, greeting cards or playing cards. In fact, one of my best estate sale finds was a dance card that dates to 1878. On the left side is a list of dances, including a ladies waltz. On the right side are lines where men could sign up for a dance.

Sometimes after attending an estate sale, I feel like a child with a box of Cracker Jacks. I don't find the surprise until after getting home and thoroughly going through an item. For instance, I once found a cardboard box full of jewelry and trinkets tucked away in the drawer of an antique desk.

One of the things that attracts me to estate sales, as opposed to yard sales, is having the run of the house. I love roaming from room to room knowing that everything I see is for sale.

Because things are in their natural setting — pictures

are on the walls, dishes are in the cupboards — the décors are a sight to behold. Some are right out of House Beautiful; others have gorgeous antiques from the 1800s.

Occasionally I'll arrive at a sale being organized by family members only to learn the sale has been canceled or postponed. Still, nothing prepared me for the scene I encountered at one particular sale. Someone had posted a dozen or more handwritten signs all along the white picket fence in the front yard: They said: THERE WILL BE NO SALE HERE TODAY. THERE WILL NEVER BE A SALE HERE. DON'T EVER PLAN ON COMING TO A SALE HERE.

Among the things I collect are old black-and-white photographs of people. My husband doesn't understand why I collect pictures of people I don't even know. It's the artistic value that draws me to them.

Every once in a while, I'll come across something I wished I hadn't, like that copy of "101 Famous Poems," with the notation: "To be read at my funeral" next to Tennyson's poem, "Crossing the Bar." I couldn't help but feel a little sad, thinking that, in all likelihood, no one knew of this person's desire.
