

Going Once, Going Twice, Sold

Written by **Dan Whetzel** Photography by **Lance C. Bell**

Bob Mallow in action
with his rapid chant.



June and Bob Mallow of
Mallow Auction Service.

AUCTIONS HAVE PROVEN TO BE A POPULAR METHOD OF SELLING LARGE QUANTITIES OF MERCHANDISE IN A SHORT PERIOD OF TIME.

The selling process can be traced back to the ancient Babylonians and Romans who used it to liquidate the spoils of war. In more recent centuries, auctions have

become popular venues for selling everything from expensive antiques to garage sale items. In fact, auctions have become highly publicized events that draw large crowds for bidding and socializing. Dealers, collectors, and general curiosity seekers are drawn to the rapid fire chants that make auctions both a business event and entertainment.



**Ernie Ellifritz, Assistant Auctioneer
at Mallow Auction Service.**

Auctions can be divided into several general types. One common type is referred to as the “English” auction where bidders openly compete by raising a low starting bid until no participant is willing to raise it further. A “Dutch” auction works in the reverse manner because the auctioneer starts with a high asking price which is lowered until a participant accepts the last announced dollar amount. Other types, like a silent auction, sealed-bid first auction, and all pay-auction, are less common but can be expected to yield the same expected revenue for a seller.

One commonality among all open-cry auctions is the auctioneer’s chant, a rhythmic form of communication. Each auctioneer develops his own style that is complete with “filler” words that can make the rapid-fire sale a form of entertainment. Until the audience becomes familiar with the auctioneer’s chant, it can be difficult to determine what is being stated. It is useful to know that filler words are never numbers but instead are favorite terms frequently used in combination by an auctioneer as he develops a unique style. A typical auction chant goes as follows:

**“Who’ll give me a one dollar bid,
now two,
Now two, who’s gonna give me
three?
Three dollar bid, who’s gonna
give me four?”
Or: “Who’ll give me an eight
dollar bill,
An eight dollar bill?
I got an eight dollar bill!
Now, who’ll give me a nine dollar
bill,
A nine dollar bill?”**

Chants are sometimes supplemented by light hearted comments: **“What you see is what you get,
And you’ll get what you can’t see,
too!”**

And when a piece is being hoisted for display at bidding, and then dropped and broken:

“All right, and we’ll even include the pieces!”

And when the bidding seems too slow:

“Hey, wake up out there!”

And when the auctioneer wants to stress the cleanliness of property:

**“This house is so clean, she even put newspapers under
the cuckoo clock.”**

And in between numbers and bidding shouts:

**“Always listen to the auctioneer, he’ll never steer you
wrong.”**

And, of course, the signature cry:

“Sold to buyer number 223 for eight dollars!”

**Mallow Auctions are held at the Baltimore Pike
Firehall, 5 miles east of Cumberland, MD, on the
National Pike, Rt. 144, just off I-68, Exit 46. For a
listing of their auctions, go to Auctionzip.com.**

**Ball Auctions are held every Saturday, starting
at 4 pm, located on Rt. 39, Terra Alta, WV (within 10
miles of Oakland, MD). www.ballauctioninc.com.**

Mark Ball leads his audience like the conductor of a symphony.



RHYTHMIC HAND MOVEMENTS are generally used to signify bids, thus making prices more apparent to the audience. Sometimes auctioneers sound like singers because they have developed a rhythm and a beat to their chants. Despite the variety of chant styles, they all serve two common purposes—to move the auction along at a faster pace than permitted by conventional speech and to enable the audience to listen more intently for longer periods of time. Auctioneers are able to attend schools that provide information and training on different aspects of the business. In particular, they provide instruction on number calling, filler words, and voice control.

Auctioneers become interested and trained in the business in various ways. Well-known Western Maryland auctioneer, Bob Mallow, started with an interest in antiques and collectibles. The general knowledge acquired in that field helped him to become successful in a number of other related areas. Mr. Mallow believes a major draw for auctions is the belief that people are able to set prices rather than have them established by someone else. “There is an element of control in that belief,” according to Mr. Mallow.

The size of crowd’s attending Mallow’s Auction depends on what is being offered. “I have my trustworthy



Sean Ball, Mark’s son, leads an outdoor auction at the Terra Alta location. Sean has been auctioneering for the past six months. Although new at auctioneering, he has grown up with the auction experience.

crowd that comes most of the time, but it really depends on what is listed. There might be a coin auction that would not interest antique dealers and vice-versa. Antique and collectibles auctions usually draw a lot of people. People check it out for an adventure, hoping to find that one item they may want. It’s a form of entertainment.”

Mark Ball of Terra Alta, West Virginia, also learned the business through experience, working for two auctioneers before establishing his own business in 1982. After a start in Aurora, West Virginia, the auction house was moved to Terra Alta (just a few miles west of Oakland, MD on Rt. 39), where crowds gather every Saturday of the year to hear the auctioneer’s cry. And according to Mr. Ball, “Auctions should be entertaining. The crowd expects a fast paced auction and the entertaining part of it keeps the bidding going. If the auction pace is too slow or not



Mark Ball with son, Sean and wife, Sherri.

Mark Ball presiding over one of his weekly auctions where a wide variety of items, from household and garden to electronics and antiques cross the auction block.

entertaining, you will lose the crowd.” Bob Mallow and Mark Ball’s views on the showmanship aspect of auctions is supported by research that shows a major reason people attend the events is the entertainment value they hold.

One of Ball Auction’s most entertaining and well-attended events occurred in unusual circumstances. A Franklin, West Virginia, estate auction featured coffin maker’s equipment, including old wooden caskets and tools of the trade. Mr. Ball sold the items from a chicken coop to a crowd estimated at 2,000-3,000 people. Regularly scheduled Saturday auctions in Terra Alta draw regular customers and vacationers. Ball Auctions is the largest weekly auction in the area and it features scratch and dent items as well as new goods.

The bidding process is interesting to watch. “Sometimes people are willing to pay more for an item at an auction than at an antique store because of a ‘comfort zone.’ A person may walk into an antique store and see an item they like. Not being an expert on it, they may feel unsure about making the purchase. But at an auction, there is someone bidding against them who is willing to pay just a dollar less, so the bidder knows the item has value, and a comfort zone is created,” stated Mr. Mallow.

Also of interest is why people bid. Auction-goers recognize dealers and closely watch them because they know that dealers need to make a profit on goods purchased at an auction. According to Mr. Mallow, “A collector knows that if he outbids a dealer by one bid, it’s a good deal.” Another reason to bid includes a competitive spirit that

may develop over time. Collectors attending local auctions sometimes end up bidding against each other, thereby creating a possible bidding conflict at some point in the future. When collectors meet in head-to-head competition for an item they both want, the one may continue to run up the bid insuring that his competitor will have to pay a premium price. Mr. Ball agrees with the competitive spirit of bidding, “Competition between bidders happens a lot. One bidder will make sure another one has to pay a higher price.”

A major influence on traditional auctions in recent years is the internet, especially eBay. “What was once uncommon became common,” stated Mr. Mallow. “There may be ten of one item listed on eBay that we wouldn’t normally see locally in ten years.” On the other hand, “smalls,” that is, little goods that can be quickly packed and sent through the mail, have risen in price at local auctions due to eBay.

Mark Ball has noticed other changes in auctions over the years. “Now days, people want a place to sit, food services, and a nice building. Its part of the entertainment value and you need a place for that. Also, younger people don’t care as much about accessories for the home, so the prices on those items have fallen.”

Despite fluctuations in the price of goods caused by on-line auctions and aesthetic trends, the live event will always remain a popular source of entertainment and an opportunity for good values. Nothing beats the live show.

So, when you hear the auctioneer’s cry, “wake up out there,” the next bidding opportunity could be yours.