

Going Once, Going Twice, Still Going After 58 Years



Tom Henline, at a recent Estate Sale.

He's sold pizza ovens in Michigan and fine art in Florida. He's sold stoneware jars in Pennsylvania and mountainsides in Maryland. Except for a brief stint as a plumber with his older brother Ed, Tom Henline has spent his life in the auction business.

As a 12-year-old in Crellin, Maryland, a lumber and mining community near Oakland, Tom began working for a local auctioneer, Delmas Sanders. Tom began by moving stock and eventually moved up to doing paperwork. Even as a youngster, he was fascinated by the art of the sale.

When Delmas moved out of the area, Morgan Copeman took over as auctioneer. Tom delights in pointing out that with the change in employer, he convinced the other boys to go along with him in asking for \$3 a day instead of the \$2 they had been paid.

Some of the auctions were held at the automotive shop of local businessman Zack Gibson. Tom worked for Zack both during auctions and in Gibson's store and gas station. Once, when Tom was a junior at Southern High School in Oakland, he was working to prepare for an auction on a very snowy day. Auctioneer Morgan Copeman decided no one would come because of the inclement weather and left.

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Unless otherwise noted

As it happened, people did show up expecting the sale to go ahead, and Zack pressed Tom into acting as auctioneer.

After this first experience as an auctioneer, Tom continued to do auctions all over the region. Sometimes he picked up Zack Gibson's daughter Shirley, who would help out as clerk. Within a few years, Shirley and Tom were married. Together they have raised four children and developed a robust business, running auctions in various locations east of the Mississippi, from Michigan to Florida.

Tom has had many memorable auctions. In the largest sale of his career, he sold a large section of Marsh Mountain near the Wisp Ski Resort in



Vintage tin toy airplanes found at a recent auction.

Garrett County, Maryland, for 2.5 million dollars to Gene Frazee. In contrast, Tom was hired by owner Louis Stemple to sell the contents of a two-room house in Aurora, West Virginia, that had formerly been the Red Horse Inn and was listed on the Historic Register. Despite the small size of the house, it was chock full of authentic country antiques, which were very popular at that time. People came from around the country to purchase items from this sale.

Almost everything finds a buyer, and Tom has sold an amazing variety of items. He was hired to auction off pizza ovens being replaced by the man who owns Little Caesar's and the Detroit Red Wings hockey team. He auctioned off the display racks and other equipment of all the Montgomery Ward stores being closed in West Virginia and nearby states. He sold a black stoneware pitcher with a missing handle that turned out to be a rare piece from a Somerset maker and brought \$1000.

He sold the buildings and collection of the Americana Museum in Terra Alta, West Virginia, a privately owned museum containing structures such as a church, and a post office from Accident that had formerly been a two story chicken coop. The museum had exhibited such items as covered and buckboard wagons, a horse-drawn hearse, fixtures from old buildings, and antique signs. One sign advertising a Philadelphia beer brought \$16,000. From the contents of a former country doctor's office that had been part of the museum's collection, Tom sold two "iron lungs," remnants of the era when some of the many people who contracted polio had to have regular sessions in these breathing machines.

Estate sales, in particular, have led to some unusual discoveries. One man who died left a house that was meticulously clean but completely unchanged from the time of his parents. The house had never been electrified and still displayed calendars from the 1940s. In another case, when Tom and his crew went in to empty the house of someone who had died, they uncovered thousands of dollars worth of old silver coins in random places.

Tom has sold things he knows very little about, such as fine art and Oriental rugs. He learns what he can and relies on experts for advice, but ultimately, the people who bid determine the value, and Tom says a good auctioneer can sense the degree of genuine interest that a bidder has. One of his customers was reluctant to hire him for the sale of his parents' estate, and it turned out that there were some very valuable items that went for tens of thousands of dollars. The man admitted he would have accepted much less for these things; the auction convinced him that it had been worthwhile to have Tom do the selling.

For seventeen years, Tom and Shirley ran a weekly auction at the Terra Alta Stock Yard Auction Barn. During that time, it was possible to find ample stock to sell every week because small farms and their equipment and furniture were always changing hands. Today, there are very few small farms remaining in the area, and agricultural auctions depend more on farm products and livestock.



Top: Americana Museum Auction – Tom is selling one of the vehicles that had been moved outside for the auction. To the left, a large piece of farm equipment awaits its turn on the block.

Bottom: Americana Museum Auction – The cage behind Tom was originally used to hold people in the Terra Alta Town Hall until the sheriff's department could pick them up to go to jail. When the town sold the Terra Alta Town Hall and built a new one, this cage was bought and exhibited at the Americana Museum for several years.

PHOTOS PROVIDED BY TOM HENLINE

Though small farm sales are rare, the need for auctions remains strong. Since the 1960s, Tom has operated out of Crellin's former coal company store, originally built for a lumber business in 1892. With the closing of the mines, it had been sold in hopes that it would continue to be a community store, but when that didn't work, Tom decided to purchase it. He has kept or re-purchased some of the original fixtures. Today, the building is crammed with every imaginable type of merchandise, and there is a covered back porch where he stands to call for bids at his outdoor auctions.

Many sales are held at sites not designed for the purpose, but diehard fans of auctions are undeterred by rough conditions. Once when Tom was running an auction, the weight of the crowd caused the bleachers to collapse. People scrambled out of the mess, and the auction kept going. At a barn auction during a heavy rain storm, the pond above the barn overflowed, flooding the barn. People stood in a foot of water and continued to bid.

The recent pandemic restrictions have curtailed the number of people who can attend indoor auctions. At one time, the maximum gathering allowed was 12, a number that was almost reached by Tom and his crew. The auction business slowed for a while but has begun to pick up its

pace. It has been helpful that many auctions can be held outdoors, and that restrictions are loosening as the virus becomes less of a threat.

The only training Tom ever had was on-the-job. He has always operated on a payment at the time of sale basis. He doesn't bother with credit cards and rarely takes checks. He doesn't accept online bids, or use the internet for selling. He does no advertising except to run notices of his upcoming sales in the local papers and with auction services.

Despite many health challenges, Tom keeps working at the job that he loves. His entire family has been involved, and his adult children still help out regularly at auctions. He has no regrets about pursuing the only career that ever interested him. "It's been a great life, a great business. If I die selling, I'll go happy."




Former company store in Crellin that Tom has used as his headquarters since the 1960s.

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