

## LEISURE

# City scholars film 'A Country Auction'

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*Inquirer Antiques Writer*

*A Country Auction*, a film produced and directed by four Philadelphia-area scholars, is a small masterpiece of Americana.

The film records the estate sale of Paul V. Leitzel, who for 50 years ran the general store in Richfield, Pa., a hamlet of 325 residents in Juniata County, about 45 miles northwest of Harrisburg. Remarkably accurate as a documentary of a country sale, the film also makes clear that the presale viewing and the sale itself are social events. It brings a family back together six months after the funeral for a last goodbye and for the opportunity to collect something symbolic of the deceased and thereby carry on the memory.

The community joins in the remembrance, which is sweet rather than sad. The children play, adults hunt for bargains, the church women sell hot food and homemade pies. The family and friends enjoy memories; some go home with souvenirs.

The characters in the film are country folk but they have their counterparts at city sales, even at blockbuster sales at Sotheby's and Christie's in New York, although the city auctioneers do not take up the tuneful cry: "I-hava-seven, I-hava-seven-do-I-hava-eight, an-eight-and-a-nine, a-nine-and-a-10. . ."

There are many things in the film customary to all estate sales: The head of the family makes the arrangements; the auctioneer gives some idea of what things should bring, and arranges the presale exhibition; the members of the family go over the items and choose to keep some of the best and bid competitively for others.

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The bidders are archetypal as well. There is an antiquarian who bids \$410 for a handwritten ledger of the justice of the peace that goes back to the 1850s, in which many names in the community are mentioned, because "it is one of those things you can't put a price on."

There is the antiques dealer who will buy anything he can make a dollar on; the auctioneer knows the sale is made when he comes in. "I know right away what I want to pay for it," says dealer Joe Herman in the film. "I sold a total of one million two hundred thousand last year and one million four hundred the year before," Herman brags, and goes on to bid on anything good.

The film traces a number of items Herman bought at the auction. They change hands several times, the price increasing with each transaction. For instance, the "loafing benches" from the store, where the men used to sit and tell stories of hunting and fishing, were bought by Herman for \$30 apiece, sold for \$40, and end up in the hands of a decorator who has them refinished and placed in a Sigma Nu fraternity house at the University of Kansas. She got \$500 for the pair.

The idea for the film came to a group of scholars who were doing research in Juniata County.

"There was little to do out there, so we began going to auctions for entertainment," recalled Robert Aibel, who teaches communication and film at Drexel University.

"I was researching visual communication, the role of art in Juniata County," Aibel said. His colleague Chris Musello, a doctoral candidate at the University of Pennsylvania, was doing research on house decoration, and Jay Ruby, who teaches anthropology at Temple University, was studying photography. Ben Levin,

who teaches film at Temple, was enlisted to edit and help produce the film.

"We waited almost a year for the right auction to come along, hired a film crew, in fact two film crews, and shot the film in 1983. Before we were through we had traveled to Rhode Island and to Kansas to track down some of the things that were sold at the auction," Aibel added.

The 16mm film, made with the help of grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Pennsylvania Humanities Council, runs 58 minutes. It has been shown at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and at a number of film festivals as well as on public television in western Pennsylvania, and has won a number of awards.

It can be rented or purchased from PCF Films and Video in the Behavioral Sciences, Pennsylvania State University, Audio Visual Services, University Park, Pa. 16802 (telephone 814-865-6314). Film rental is \$32. It is also available on ¾-inch U-matic or ½-inch VHS and Beta videocassette; videocassette rental is \$20.