

Dick Withington Collection of Mechanical Banks
WITHINGTON AUCTION, Inc. - August 14, 2008

Among the greatest collectors of all time was Richard W. Withington, throughout his long life he had countless opportunities to acquire many wonderful things, not the least of which is his Collection of Mechanical Banks. Born to a Boston Mayflower family – Dick’s roots are deep in Colonial America. The Boston Withingtons were merchants and lawyers but the local history tells the tale of the most notorious Withington, nick-named “Straddlebug”, a recluse who lived in a shack in the dump near Boston Harbor. The legend tells of Ol’ Straddlebug who found a box of English tea that had washed ashore after the infamous Tea Party, in protest of over taxing by the mother country. Finding such a precious commodity on the beach proved irresistible, even though he was thrown in jail for his dastardly deed. His actions were neither unpatriotic, nor in support of the Queen, but perhaps the act of any speculator, seeing opportunity and taking a chance. The pioneer spirit has been a strong force within all the Withington’s – the name Straddlebug lives on. No one knows what happened to the tea box, but wouldn’t it be the crown jewel of any collection of Americana?

From Boston to New Hampshire, the Withington’s joined the Nelson / Barns clan, (Reverend Barns was the first Colonial minister in Hillsborough Center, NH, in the 1700’s) Edith Nelson married Frank Withington in the early 20th century and the union produced three sons; the youngest, named Richard (call me Dick), W. (Whittier after the poet), Withington. Dick was exceptional from an early age; ambitious, energetic and by today’s standards, probably would be on Ritalin! Dick’s boyhood had its ups and downs. He jokes that he was thrown out of nearly every school he ever attended – “School is boring! Too slow”, he cried! But, in the school of life, he more than made up for his lack of scholarly prowess. The family lived in West Roxbury, Mass. and spent most of their off time and summers at the maternal grandmothers in Hillsborough Center, NH. Dick’s love for New Hampshire has been a strong force throughout his 90 years, called the place “As close to heaven as you’ll ever find on earth.” The family outgrew grandmother’s guest quarters and when the house next door became available, Frank and Edith Nelson Withington purchased their summer place. Edith joked that this was the 10 Cent House, as most of the furnishings were acquired second-hand .. for 10 cents! As the family spent more time in Hillsborough, the make-do furnishings were replaced by better antiques, easily found at the many country auctions throughout the area. What to do with the unwanted things became the impetus for the “Well Sweep Antiques” and the beginning of the Withington legacy in the antique business. In 1928, Edith started the antique shop in the 19th C. barn and it was open seasonally for 50 years. Dick’s summers in “The Center”, afforded many opportunities to make money – mowing lawns, digging privies, he even had an ice house in the days when electricity was a luxury. Much of his time, though, was spent helping his mother in the antique business, accompanying her to the many country auctions. Seeing opportunity, he would often buy a few things as well, and found it easy to turn a profit. He brought the entrepreneurial spirit back to Boston and at eleven years old, he started an egg route. The eggs were shipped from New Hampshire by American Express on the Friday train. He would carry 60 dozen eggs, in

two hands, walking around the darkly lit streets selling door-to-door. Every week he would bank a \$3.00 profit – a tidy sum during the Depression. At age 12, the president of the 1st National Bank of Boston gave Dick his own checking account – the youngest person in bank history to have one.

Dick, in reflecting back on his past, proudly states, “I always had money in my pocket” and recalled with glee how older, more important men borrowed money from him, as they ran short on occasion. For Dick, making money was like a hobby and his fascination with Mechanical Banks was a natural extension.

From his association with mother Edith and the antique business – the ambitious young Dick was getting some notoriety on the country auction circuit. He often would work as a helper at the local auctions and when he turned 16, with license in hand, he was hired by the best country auctioneer in the area, James A. Hall of Keene, NH. Dick became Jim Hall’s right-hand man and learned the subtleties of the business from the master. So many of Dick’s auction anecdotes have been gleaned from his predecessor, (That box is just the right size to bury a cat; Look at the legs, I always do, Yada, yada)

In 1949, Dick took over Jim Hall’s auction business and the rest is history. He truly loved his life’s work, stating, “I never worked a day in my life, I’ve always been an auctioneer.” But those early years must have been grueling. It was not uncommon to have two or three, on-site, country auctions a week: Inspect the house, write the ads, set up the tents and have the auction on Monday, only to do it all over again on Wednesday!! It was an amazing time in the world of antiques, when the country auctions brought forth some of the finest American antiques from the “untouched farmhouses” all around New England.

For most of his career, Dick was the premier auctioneer of Americana. His auctions were peppered with “antique” celebrities such as Israel Sack, Hymie Grossman, Ima Hog, Mabel Brady Garvin, all vying for the best for their collections. And Dick sold the best! Looking back at the old auction catalogues, it was common to have two or three New Hampshire case pieces – (now confirmed to be from the Dunlap school,) in the same auction. Withington Auctions were unsurpassed, for both the buyers and the sellers – he would get top dollar for the estate and the dealers and collectors had ample opportunity acquire some of the choicest antiques. .

In the auction business, occasionally a family wanted to sell the contents of an estate, rather than gamble on the potentially higher return of an auction sale, Dick would buy out the contents of a house. Customarily, most of the goods were sold to realize a profit on the investment. However, Dick, would stash a few special antiques away in his house, to study, to treasure and enjoy, perhaps, to be sold one day, at auction. A tour of the Withington Homestead is a retrospective of Dick’s many years in the world of antiques – Staffordshire, Sandwich Glass, Early lighting, Mocha ware, Stoddard bottles, Treenware, Shaker boxes and baskets, paintings like Antique Eye-Candy! Among the many early things, are the remnants of the over 400 Children’s mugs that Dick’s

mother had collected during her long life. Dick's favorites were the "Franklin's Maxims" – most having to do with hard work and thrift: "Not to watch over workman is to leave one's purse strings unattended", "Now that I have a sheep and a cow, everyone bids me good morrow", "Keep thy shop and thy shop will keep thee" or "A penny saved is a penny earned". A hard worker, a shrewd business man, Dick's life was shaped by his industry and frugality. The Withington Mechanical Bank Collection is a direct product of all of his life experiences, combined.

As you tour the lovely colonial home, the side door leads out to the "Sun Room" flanked by glass sliders, a stark contrast to the rest of the post-revolutionary homestead. The contemporary environment is a perfect stage for Dick's collection of Mechanical Banks. Circumventing the room is a ledge above the windows, setting the stage for the mechanical banks, still banks, cast iron toys and games. This vantage point makes you feel like a child, standing on tippy-toe to get a better look. It seems that mother Edith gave the Uncle Sam Bank to Dick for his birthday, when he was a boy. He was fascinated by the toy, and how in a subtle way, encouraged the act of saving. What would happen to the precious coin - engaged in the charger mechanism, press the release lever and watch it disappear into a waiting suitcase or smiling mouth. These agents of practical whimsy as they encouraged saving. And save he did. (Did I mention the 500 pounds of pennies in the attic?) Dick would always save his pennies... literally!

To the first bank was added several choice banks from the estate of Judge Loomis - now Dick Withington was a Mechanical Bank collector in earnest. Over the past 30 years, the collection has steadily increased to the 300 or so today. There are 165 different banks, "as found" and unrestored. That's how Dick bought them – that's how he kept them and that's how he'll sell them. The "Ledge Gallery" displays not only Dinah, Punch & Judy, Tammany, Jonah & the Whale, Trick Pony, Mason's bank, but also an assortment of early toys in cast iron and tin, wood and bronze, and so much more. But these are the common banks and duplicates. The REAL BANK collection is on display at the Sovereign Bank, in downtown Hillsboro. For Dick Withington, the investor, business man and extraordinary collector, the Mechanical Bank Collection is the culmination of all these passions. Did I mention he started a REAL BANK?! This was perhaps the craziest, yet the single most important investment of his life. Over Saturday night cocktails, with his lawyer friend, they mapped out the plan to start a more personal, local bank to compete with the Bank of New Hampshire, (that wouldn't loan Dick \$5,000 dollars many years ago for some deal – and he never forgot it!) The Valley Bank Pipe Dream became reality, with several hundred thousand dollars of start-up capital and Dick single-handedly selling nearly all the bank stock at \$25.00 per share! Over the past few years, with the volatile state of the banking industry, the home-town Valley Bank was bought and sold several times until ironically; it was finally acquired by who else, but the Bank of New Hampshire. The stock shares split and split and the thousands of shares realized a phenomenal profit on the sale.

For over 20 years the Withington Bank Collection has been on display at the old Valley Bank Building, to be admired by the thousands of customers who bank there each

year. “Mechanical Bank Celebrities” include the Roller Skating Bank, Girl Skipping Rope, Merry-Go-Round, Chief Big Moon, Dark Town Battery, Calamity, Circus Bank totaling 165 different banks. Over the years, the banks have stood sentinel over the business of modern banking.

In January of 2007, Dick was diagnosed with brain cancer and given just a few months to live. In making his “Bucket List” of sorts, he decided to sell his collection of Mechanical Banks in August of 2008. Dick Withington has always been a country auctioneer and wanted his collection to be sold “Country Style”, under the tents, in Hillsborough Center. He wanted the lovely 18th C. barn to be the venue for the preview, with country flowers and rolling green lawns, with the smell of hot dogs and strong coffee, the sounds of laughing children and barking dogs and bumble bees. A hotel just wouldn’t do! During the past months, overcoming all odds, he was able to see the Bahamas one more time, and Florida, California and Las Vegas and made the pilgrimage to Peru and climbed up Machu Picchu! The same qualities which helped to shape Dick’s long life (he turned 90 on March 31st) - his strong will and determination - enabled him to live for 16 months, (not two as predicted). He made the most of what time he had left – always planning for the future. Dick passed away on April 29, 2008 – and the antiques world will never be the same without him.

The remarkable life of Richard Withington would fill volumes with his accomplishments. Dick is gone, but the treasures he so loved live on. With any collection, the objects of desire are sought after, acquired, studied and coveted – but only for a period of time. These precious things are never really owned, for they eventually are passed on to other collectors and then on to others and so on.

Withington Auction, Inc. was established in 2005 to carry on the auction traditions started by Dick over 60 years ago. We are thankful and fortunate to have been associated with Dick, not only learning the business from the master, but also getting to know him as a friend. We are honored to have had the opportunity to put together the auction of his outstanding collection. There are no telephone bids, no internet bidding, because Dick felt that the sale was worthy of attending in person. This is an opportunity to acquire some of the rarer banks for your collections, at an auction where you can see who your competition is. Dick’s enthusiasm for his collections and eagerness to share the knowledge gathered during his long lifetime, inspired many of the greatest collectors and his lasting impact on the world of antiques will be felt for many years to come
“We’ll Miss You Dick.”

Sincerely,

Marcia & Larry Leizure