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THE WALKER AND THE WHEELCHAIR

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In my life I have attended dozens of estate sales, as many of you have. Some estates really do have spectacular things. Other sales reveal the unusual interests of the people who lived there, and often I discover once-admired collections now priced at a fraction of what they originally cost. Estate sales can be an exciting experience, and a profitable one.

I remember the Kroell estate sale. I was too young to buy anything then, but I recall as a child how the adults were astonished by the heavy Victorian furniture in the house. Many people in town only wanted a look inside, because stories circulated that one room actually had leather wallpaper that required oiling to keep it from cracking. My aunt bought some books with the sisters' names inside the front cover. Did you know someone photographed the entire interior of the house before it was destroyed? Many reading this have much greater knowledge than I do about the Kroells.

I also remember Dr. and Mrs. Napier's estate sale. I was young then but the story was the Napiers had intended for a sale to be held at their house so that friends could come in and buy a memento if they wanted one.

I attended Kate Cook's sale on Selma street, and found a lot of things that had belonged to her beloved uncle, a physician. On the 1940 Federal Census of Montevallo, she is listed as a 51 year old niece living in the home of Dr. Charles T. Acker. Dr. Mahan writes in his book that he was at that sale, and purchased Dr. Acker's copy of Grey's Anatomy.

My grandfather's cousins Miss Mary and Miss Ella Peters' estate sale was in the 1970's, and much of their furniture had been inherited from the estate of their grandfather, Dr. John Baker Wilson, whose uncle Jesse Wilson is the father of our town. I remember seeing their aunt Augusta Allen Wilson's coin silver tea spoons, still in the green felt holder, with her initials engraved on them. Her brother married one of the Perry daughters, and her husband Henry Wilson was a law partner at one time of Rufus Cobb (later Governor of Alabama), but I guess her most tragic inclusion in local lore was the use of her front yard on Main Street as the site of Montevallo's 1889 lynching.

Miss Mary and Miss Ella's mother died in 1891. She knew she was dying and promptly burned all of her worldly possessions, except for her father's 1864 leather trunk made in New Orleans. She told her family that her things were only hers, and no one else was going to own them after her death. Miss Ella continued the tradition in part when, much to my horror, she burned her photograph album filled with hundreds of Kodak pictures of Montevallo and the College taken before 1920. I inherited the trunk.

Most of my estate sale experiences today are no longer in the town. Montevallo's true pre-Great Depression estates have just about played out. EstateSales.Net allows one to branch out to the entire county, or state, or country. Birmingham and all of Jefferson County offer a plethora of such sales, if you

have a GPS and can stand the traffic. I usually limit myself to a twenty mile search, unless an unpicked estate with a barn full of treasures appears, or a specific old town (such as Wetumpka) offers enough pre-1900 artifacts to make the trip worthwhile.

Montevallo has had many estate sales in the last twenty years, some of them quite fantastic, but it would not be appropriate to name any of them or make comments so soon. I want to turn my attention to the many estate sales that have occurred outside of our city and the excitement one feels as the line to enter the home forms about an hour before the door opens, and the anticipation mounts as one wonders what might be inside someone else's home waiting to be discovered.

Yet, I can't stop the feeling of irritation or frustration that distracts me, because, once inside, I find so many useless things filling the house in closets and drawers, just plain clutter that should have been discarded or given away years ago. I really shouldn't let that bother me. After all, it was not my house; it was not my life; and therefore, it is not any of my business.

But it seems that each time, as I enter the kitchen, there are the cabinets full of too many glasses; there are the stacks of mismatched dishes; and, there are the pots and pans, more than anyone could possibly have needed. I always find twenty or more empty butter tubs filling the bottom of the stove, and wads of plastic bags saved from the grocery store. Sometimes the twist ties from bread loaves fill a kitchen drawer. One man saved the clear wrap from his daily Wall Street Journal.

In hall closets, I discover dozens of towels in various faded colors, dozens of sheets, and dozens of pillow cases. I walk in their bedrooms and there are the clothes with the store tags on them, and the top shelves stacked with Christmas or birthday presents never used, still in the box, put away for some future day that never came. Often an entire room is filled with tables (set up by the estate sale people) crammed with Christmas decorations that lost their luster a long time ago.

After I work my way through the kitchen, the den, the living room, and the bedrooms, I usually end with a quick walk through the basement or the garage. Those are the places that I save for last, because, without fail, four out of five times, I already know what I will find. There they sit as expected: the walker and the wheelchair.

My mixed feelings of excitement and irritation then turn to what I guess is some form of compassion for someone I did not know. I now see their last Medicare benefit, the final stage of a real life before they left their house, either for assisted living, a nursing home, or a funeral home.

I don't buy the glasses; I don't buy the 1980's collectibles, and I don't buy the towels, the sheets, or the pillow cases. But, as I sense myself growing older, I wonder when the time will come when strangers will wander through my own house, and will find the walker and the wheelchair.

My sister is having a new home built, and, while packing, she did what most people should do. She kept only six towels, two sets of sheets for each bed, and one set of dishes. The others were donated or discarded. I am doing the same thing now. I won't allow clutter to embarrass me in the end.

I will always go to estate sales, because I love the rush I experience when entering someone else's house and purchasing anything I want to take home with me. But, there is an emotional as well as a monetary price to pay. I have bought some beautiful things, but the hunt always ends with the walker and the wheelchair, and that's when the excitement of the day fades, and the reality of the situation reveals itself, and the utter sadness of it all can't be ignored.