

In the Trade

# John Keith Russell, South Salem, New York

by Frank Donegan

For decades I've admired the impressive booths John Keith Russell has set up at shows and have asked myself, "Is this guy a high-end country dealer who has a sideline in Shaker stuff? or Is this guy a Shaker dealer who has a sideline in high-end country stuff?" The answer, it turns out, is that it depends upon when you ask the question.

For most of his career, Russell said, he has thought of himself as a dealer in country Americana who just happened to have a passion for Shaker material, which resulted in a nice secondary income stream.

"Shaker was about a third of my business," he said. In fact, he would contend that he never encouraged people to think of him as a Shaker dealer. "I did everything I could to advertise myself as *not* a Shaker dealer. All my ads were Americana. I'd show stoneware, redware, weathervanes. I had a whole wall of weathervanes here in the shop."

But starting in 2008—with the antiques trade tumbling toward the abyss—Russell reversed course. Since then, he has become almost exclusively a Shaker dealer. He said, "I elected to concentrate when everybody was saying 'diversify!'"

Today, he said, "Shaker is easily two-thirds of my business, and Shaker is keeping me semi-successful."

There may not be as many Shaker collectors around as there used to be, but neither are there many dealers left to cater to collectors who remain. This state of affairs is a far cry from what went on in this field two and three decades ago.

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Russell recalled, "In the 1980's, the first twenty or thirty people in line at shows were Shaker collectors. They were like nut cases." At the same time, there were a dozen or more dealers who regularly handled Shaker material. Now, he said, "There are three Shaker dealers, and two of them won't talk to the other." (Who the other two Shaker dealers are—and who won't talk to whom—is off the record, he said.)

He said that he used to have some 60 people a week at the shop and "Shop business used to be active." He added that nowadays, "I don't have off-the-street traffic." On the day we were there, John was shocked when a potential customer walked in after us.

Yet this drastically diminished market seems to work for Russell, who said, "I don't need a hundred Shaker collectors to make a living." Nevertheless, he noted that the extreme prices of yesteryear are mostly memories. "The commonality of six-figure sales is rarer than it used to be." Ultimately, this may be all to the good. Russell said, "This is a niche market with a small amount of material." As economists never tire of telling us, too many people chasing too few goods inevitably results in a bubble and a crash.

It would be a mistake to assume that Russell has abandoned other areas of the Americana trade entirely. When we visited his charming, small shop recently, the most expensive piece we photographed was a breathtaking Dunlap chest-on-chest in barely touched condition that was priced at \$165,000.

Russell has been in the same shop with its exposed chestnut beams since 1979 when he started in the business. The building belongs to the South Salem Presbyterian Church across the road and was moved from the church grounds to its present site at the turn into the 20th century. John has an unusual but clearly congenial relationship with his landlord. "We talk every five years," he said. The church can't sell the property easily since, in New York state, religious institutions, being tax exempt, must get government permission to deaccession excess real estate, lest they be tempted to speculate.

When Russell took over the building, it was essentially a wreck. "This was a disaster. There was a foot of water in the basement and the roof was caved in," he said. Although, technically, he leases the building, Russell paid for the restoration with a loan from his father, who was in the advertising business. And in tony South Salem—a well-off suburb of New York City—if one is going to restore an early building, one is expected to do it right. (Your town may have signs that warn you to watch out for pedestrians. The sign on South Salem's main street warns you to watch out for equestrians.)

He recalled, "We restored the building in three and a half weeks. It cost a hundred and eighty thousand dollars." And those are 1979 dollars—for a building that's about the size of a three-car garage.

Russell got into the antiques business by way of big-time auto racing. It's a convoluted but interesting story. John grew up in Pound Ridge, New York, about six miles down the road from where his shop is now. In the 1960's he had dropped out of college and, like many others of his generation, found himself in the Haight-Ashbury section of San Francisco.

"I was burning out quickly," he said. He came home "to get my bearings." His father asked him what he wanted to do. John liked motor sports. His father liked sports photography. "I said, 'There a race in Sebring, Florida.'" So father and son got on a plane and went down to see the Grand Prix action at the famed Sebring International Raceway, where John's father took race pictures, and John poked his head into every place



Russell in the revolving armchair. "It's the first time I've sat in it," he said.



New Lebanon revolving armchair—the only one known. It was made in the 1860's, and all the joints are carefully pinned. Russell thinks it may have been a concept chair with which the Shakers were working out ideas for their later commercial chair business. The tape seat was woven to match original scraps of thread caught in the seat joints. Russell hasn't set an exact price but said it would be in "the high twenties."



Right: John Keith Russell's shop in the hamlet of South Salem, New York. Above: An interior view of the shop.

that wouldn't kick him out.

That led to Russell's meeting a man "by accident" named Jack Reilly, who had just been appointed head of Porsche of America. Jack gave John a job. From the time he was 18 until he was 27, Russell worked for Porsche in Stuttgart, Germany. He traveled the world, sometimes as a race driver himself, he said, and other times working behind the scenes. "I managed a great portion of their racing," he explained. (He also has long had an attraction to motorcycles. "I was president of the Ducati club here in America," he said.)

We now get to the antiques part of the story. John was in the U.S. with the racing team on the way to Daytona. He was 23 years old. The group was invited to a party in Connecticut. "I expected a night of drinking and debauchery as any twenty-three-year-old would," he said. But the host had a large Shaker collection. John was immediately smitten. He spent the night talking to the collector, who at the end of the evening sold him a Shaker tilting chair. "I'm going to guess it was eighty-five or ninety-five dollars," John recalled. "It was my first antique." He dropped it at his parents' house and went off to Daytona.

During the ensuing years, Russell would buy more Shaker material during the four or five times annually that he found himself in the United States with the racing team. Almost by accident, he was assembling a collection. Eventually the traveling with Porsche got to him. "I got burned out traveling eleven and a half months a year," Russell said.

So he came home. "My intention was to settle down," he said, and that's what he did. For about nine months he worked for a dealer who imported English antiques. That led him to conclude that he could be a dealer too. He had amassed enough material to serve as inventory. He said, "I collected my way into the business. I loved the stuff and I like people."

Besides, he noted, it was hard to fail as a dealer during the hot years of the 1980's. "You didn't have to be supremely competent to succeed. The worst you could do was pay too much for something. Then you just put it away and waited until the market caught up to it."

It might be viewed as a karmic coincidence that Russell, as one of the country's leading Shaker dealers, should set up shop in South Salem. In 1935 the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York City, mounted a pioneering show of Shaker handcrafts that, for the first time, brought the material to the attention of a broader public. The Whitney's director (its first) was Juliana Force. Her country house was in South Salem; she had filled it with Shaker stuff and called it Shaker Hollow. Russell said, "She lived at 188 Spring Street. I'm at 110 Spring Street."



This tall-case clock with eight-day brass works by Jacob Jones of Pittsfield, New Hampshire, retains its original surface and descended in the Bachelor family of Loudon, New Hampshire. It's \$30,000.



In addition, Charles Sheeler—one of the best-known modern artists who admired the austerity and simplicity of Shaker design—also worked in South Salem. Russell said he didn't know where Sheeler's space was, so a while back, when he gave a talk to the local historical society, John challenged the audience to track down Sheeler's address. "He rented so there was no record of where he lived," Russell said. The local history folks went to work and found out that Sheeler worked at 126 Spring Street, a few doors down from Russell's shop. "Inside, it hadn't changed since Sheeler painted there," Russell said.

Of all of this early history, John said, "I was blissfully unaware."

Collecting Shaker material in the 1930's was very different from what it became during the frenzied 1980's. Shakers were dying off; communities were closing. The question faced by the Shakers was, "What should we do with all the stuff we made over the course of more than a century?" And there was a lot of it.

Russell noted, for example, that Hancock Shaker Village today has 16 buildings. "They had a hundred-and-twenty-something back then," he said. All those buildings were filled with Shaker-made objects. To reinforce the point, he gestured to a stunning little Church Family candlestand from New Lebanon. "I've had four in thirty-five years," he said, "But there would have been several hundred candlestands there."

So where did all that stuff go? Some was in buildings that burned down. Some disappeared. Lots of it was simply destroyed. Russell said, "How much did Connecticut destroy when it turned Enfield [the Shaker community in Connecticut] into a prison?"

Also, lots of Shaker stuff was simply sold off by the Shakers themselves. Russell said, "It was the cheapest furniture you could buy. That's why you often find it in Adirondack camps and beach cottages on Long Island."

He recounted an example. In 1953, a young academic went to dinner with an older colleague in upstate New York. The young man lamented that he and his wife needed furniture but had no money. The professor said, "Why don't you go down to the Shakers at Hancock." They did. The Hancock Sisters interviewed them, approved of them, and sold the couple a truckload of furniture for the pittance they could afford to pay.

The young couple in question was Daniel Patrick Moynihan and his wife. Russell said, "The Shaker stuff went with them wherever they moved: to India [where Moynihan was U.S. ambassador], to New York, to Washington."

Russell also pointed out that in the 1950's and '60's you could buy things from the Shakers at the little shop they maintained at the old Highway Motel in Concord, New Hampshire. "They'd even refinish it for you," he said.

The antiques business today is obviously not as informal as it was in these earlier decades. "I no longer have the luxury of whimsically conducting my business," Russell said. "I really appreciate the people who are still involved in the industry." He thinks lean times have encouraged more cooperation among dealers, auctioneers, museums, and collectors, citing his membership on the board of trustees at Hancock Shaker Village as an example. "I'm a dealer sitting on the board of a Shaker museum. That didn't happen in the past. Many institutions spent generations building moats around themselves."

Since joining the Hancock board, he said the institution "is doing programs to re-involve collectors." There are weekend-long invitation-only seminars for collectors that have featured curators and restorers. An auction of Shaker material is held as well.

Russell also pointed out that an auction house such as Skinner now sponsors antiques shows. "That never happened before. There's much more interchange in the business today."

This suits John because, as he said, "I've always been a let's-work-together kind of guy." That goes a long way to explaining why he was president of the Antiques Dealers' Association of America from 1993 to 2002 and again from 2006 to 2010 as well as vice-president from 1988 to 1992.

But he doesn't fool himself about the nature of the industry, in which capitalism is often practiced in its rawest form. He said, "Too many dealers think, 'Your failure is my success.' They will hurt you."

In 2013 Russell participated in only two shows—Antiques in Manchester: The Collector's Fair and the ADA show in Deerfield, Massachusetts—but in earlier days he did ten or 12 shows a year. He suggested that dealers are too quick to write off shows. Show expenses, in short, should be viewed as a cost of doing business. He said, "Dealers say, 'I'm dropping that show because I didn't make expenses.' I rarely make expenses." He recalled that at one show he sold a single piece only. He didn't make expenses at that show, but the single sale led to many more sales to that collector over the ensuing years. "We have relationships with our collectors," John said. "We sell to them; we sell to their kids; we sell for their kids."

Ultimately, Russell feels he's had a satisfying career. He said, "I've never been a high-volume dealer. I don't deal in high-volume items. You don't get wealthy selling Americana, but you can make a living and pay your debts."

He foresees a bright future ahead for collectors who still want to buy. "I think we're about to embark on a golden age

of collecting." As boomers who've been collecting for 30, 40, or 50 years retire and die, spectacular collections will be coming on the market. "Whether anybody shows up to buy is the question," he said.

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The large oval carrier in chrome yellow paint from New Lebanon was priced at \$23,000. The tiny fingered box in bittersweet paint is also from New Lebanon. It's 4 3/8" wide and 2" high and shown here with the fingers out of view. Russell said that's how the Shakers preferred to show them; it's tidier and doesn't call attention to the construction. The box is \$6800.



The bittersweet box with its fingers showing.

Russell likes to buy material that was produced nearby. He said this type of large basket was made in Pound Ridge or North Stamford, which is just over the state line in Connecticut, for more than 100 years, from about 1830 to 1940. It's \$450.



This stoneware jar, dated 1835 and probably from Pennsylvania, was \$975.



Another local piece, made by the Smith & Day pottery in Norwalk, Connecticut, was \$850.



This is a delicate little stretcher table, signed in chalk on the drawer by New Lebanon Shaker cabinetmaker Timothy Hubbard. There are earlier pieces of Shaker furniture, but, Russell said, this is the earliest documented piece, since it had to have been made before 1806, the year the aged Hubbard stopped making furniture. It's \$35,000 and is pictured in the *Encyclopedia of Shaker Furniture* by Timothy Riegan and Jean Burks.



This Connecticut sack-back Windsor armchair, probably from the Guilford area, was \$8000.



Dunlap maple tall chest in extraordinary condition. Russell said it is arguably the best surviving piece of Dunlap furniture in terms of condition. Brasses and mahogany finish are original. "Everything—every knee return—everything is original," he said. It's \$165,000.

Three Shaker community chairs with very different values. "Two you can sit on, and one you hang on the wall," Russell said. The one on the left is a Canterbury chair that retains its original brown paint and has wooden tilting balls. It's \$1800. The middle chair retains original yellow paint turned to ocher. It is from Enfield, Connecticut, has brass tilters, is one of two known, and is priced at \$5500. The chair on the right is the museum piece. It is tiger and bird's-eye maple and was made in New Lebanon and has pewter collars and tilters. It is from the seminal collection put together by Edward Deming Andrews and Faith Andrews. It's \$37,000. (It's also the latest of the three chairs, dating from around 1853. The other two chairs are from the 1830's or '40's.)



This joined and paneled blanket chest retains remains of original chrome yellow paint. "It's a nineteenth-century version of a seventeenth-century form," Russell said. He thinks it's from New York state. It was \$6500.



This butternut secretary desk surely feels like a Shaker piece, but it's not documented. Russell and his wife, Cynthia, have used it since John bought it in 1982 at the Folk Art Show in New York City. He said it came with an oral history of use by Ohio Shakers. The writing surface, rather than being supported from underneath by typical pull-out slides, is secured by ingeniously designed hand-wrought iron bars on top that lock the lid in place. The piece is \$7500. (It should be noted that Cynthia also grew up in Pound Ridge. Russell said, "We went to elementary school together but didn't like each other. We met years later in the 1970's when she came home for Christmas and I came home for Christmas." In these upscale commuter communities, it's probably even rarer to find a married couple who still work and live near where they grew up than it is to find museum-quality Shaker furniture.)