

Treasure hunters

Maybe this abandoned storage unit holds empty boxes. Maybe the boxes are hiding a motorcycle. Even the auctioneer won't know until one of these gamblers places the winning bid.

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Source: *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*

Credit: *Star-Telegram staff writer*

Sunday, June 3, 2007

Edition: Tarrant, Section: Your Life, Page G1

The door rolls up on storage unit E16, and a Tuesday-morning crowd of bidders pushes forward to peer at what's inside.

It's a mess, but you can see the highlights. A table lamp — no, two lamps. A couple of small tables. Plenty of boxes and crates. A few plastic hangers. A dusty cooler with its lid propped open. And a mattress that sags against the side wall.

"How much for it? Who needs it?" Jackie Sutton asks the group, gearing up into auctioneer mode. The 19 or 20 people in T-shirts and jeans mill around on the concrete driveway in Haltom City, casually sizing each other up, fingering lumps of cash in their pockets.

The bidding starts at \$100, and they're off. Sutton's voice accelerates into the gusty wind, driven by a dance of barely perceptible nods and finger waves.

"One-twenty-five, \$125, \$150, \$150, now \$175, \$175, \$200. Price set at two hundred twenty-five, \$225, \$250, woulda been \$250. \$225, bid, \$250, \$250, \$275, \$300, now \$300, \$300, now it's \$325, \$325, \$350, woulda been \$350. \$325 bid, \$350, \$350, woulda been \$350, anybody with \$350? \$350?"

Nobody's willing to part with \$350. The jumble of boxes and furniture goes for \$325.

"Done," Sutton declares. The winner starts to unroll a wad of bills, and the rest of the crowd ambles away.

Welcome to the self-storage foreclosure auction. For buyers, it's more adventurous than a garage sale, more risky than an estate auction. And it happens over and over, several times a week, at facilities all over North Texas.

A door rolls up and people bid to buy the contents of an abandoned storage unit — no inspecting the goods, just a quick glance from the doorway. Money changes hands. Someone's possessions are gone for good. And a few hours later, the space is cleaned out and ready for a new tenant — maybe one who'll pay the monthly bill.

The resale society

The Aloha Self Storage facility's orange doors can be seen from Loop 820 as it arcs through Haltom City. Sutton, of All American Auctioneers, shows up here about once a month to auction off the latest crop of units in foreclosure. In fact, he spends two or three days a week moving from facility to facility all over the area, auctioning off units at Access Self Storage, Lone Star Storage, Convenient Self Storage, A-Absolute Self Storage, National Self Storage, All Storage, Village Mini Storage, America's Storage, Simply Self Storage and a few locations of Pack & Stack.

At Aloha, the pickings seem pretty slim this day in May. A cheap Roadmaster bike and a couple of mattresses go for \$50. Some toys, bikes and a pile of broken particle-board furniture go for \$120.

Another door is rolled up. Unit 10. The bidders crowd in to give it the once-over, a few of them shining flashlights into the dark corners.

"They are just throwin' the 'quality' door open," somebody wisecracks.

Near the entrance, as if it's on display, hangs a sequin-studded black dress from some unknown era.

Farther back, a couple of wooden chairs. A wooden queen-size headboard and bed frame. Cardboard boxes, Christmas tree ornaments.

A half-empty water bottle. A plush toy. A lone crutch.

The whole thing goes for \$350.

Now, who would spend \$350 on a bunch of junk and furniture? A pro who knows what to do with it, knows how and where to sell that stuff and turn a profit.

A lot of the folks who show up at these auctions are regulars. They buy and sell full time, making the rounds at every auction in town. They own resale shops, a lot of them, or maybe antiques stores. They set up booths at flea markets, sell goods at Traders Village in Grand Prairie. This, for them, is a job.

The regulars see each other so often, they get to be friends. They become cliquish, joking with each other, ignoring the amateurs and playing games with the less-experienced.

Newcomers do get hazed a little bit, says Tony Fernandez, a regular who owns a resale shop on Mansfield Highway. After all, this is a business, and they're the competition.

"We'll kind of pick on them, might run them off," he says.

Even without the hazing, a storage auction is a perilous place for newcomers. It's easy to get carried away. You have to rely on instinct and to think fast, because every unit is a gamble. The rules of the Texas Self Storage Association require that bidders stay outside the unit until after it's sold. You can look, but you can't touch.

"You have to be careful what you bid on," says Frances Kennedy of Fort Worth, who, along with her husband, Madison, is an experienced auction shopper. "Sometimes you get nothing but a bunch of clothes."

And that's what makes a storage-unit auction exciting — and risky. You don't know exactly what you're getting until you've already fought for it, won it and handed over your cash.

Dave Hamilton, who lives in Hurst, sells a lot of his stuff on eBay. He also sells gifts and goods on his Web site, texasonlinesales.com. At these auctions, he's looking for small household goods. If you're an eBay-er, you're looking for items you can ship.

Hamilton will bid on boxes, even mysterious ones, because boxes contain that small stuff. An old Griswold cast-iron skillet. China. Jewelry. Computer stuff. Or not.

"It's pretty much a crapshoot," Hamilton says. "And there have been times that you'll find two or three of those boxes empty."

Sometimes they contain clothes, and clothes don't bring in much resale money. Small appliances — microwaves, toaster ovens, breadmakers — are so inexpensive new, they're barely worth the trouble to sell used. But if you're lucky, you might stumble across something collectible, like a Red Wing jug. Put one of those things on eBay, he says, and it'll bring in hundreds.

Urban storage legends

Everybody has a story about something that's been found inside a unit after the sale. A saxophone. Illegal drugs. A safe full of handguns. A German tea set worth thousands.

Here's a story that everybody who does storage auctions has heard: There was this guy who paid almost nothing for a bunch of boxes, contents unknown. And then? When he moved the boxes? He discovered the hidden treasure: a Harley-Davidson motorcycle.

No one actually saw that happen, but "everybody knows about it," Tony Fernandez says.

In the version Hamilton has heard, there were two Harleys. He's also heard about a woman who found \$10,000 in cash. (It makes you wonder: If the tenant had \$10,000 in cash, why didn't he pay the rent?)

"You hear all kinds of stories," Hamilton says. "I haven't seen it, so I don't know if it's true."

He knows one thing: "I have never opened it up and found a bunch of money."

Well, just recently, Hamilton was cleaning out a unit and nearly threw away a stray sock until he realized it was full of 10 Morgan silver dollars. Those things were minted mostly in the 19th century, and collectors go crazy for them. The most valuable one in that sock, Hamilton says, went for more than \$400.

Fernandez has found some surprises, too. Once, hidden in the junk was a Bible from 1849. Another time, it was a racing poster autographed by Dale Earnhardt. But Fernandez's son still has the best treasure they've found: an autographed photo of Babe Ruth.

If it's unbelievable stories you want, talk to Rhonda Tiek. The storage-unit property supervisor has been in this business for 19 years. Tiek's the one who goes out to the property when it's time to cut the locks, so she's the first one to peer in at some of this junk from the doorway.

Tiek has stumbled across a unit used as a porn studio, she says, and a space that served as the closet for a drag queen. One time in Dallas — get ready for this — a tenant booby-trapped the place with a shotgun. When the buyer cleaned it out, she moved a piece of furniture and a shotgun shell went clean through the walls of the next six units.

One of Tiek's best stories is about the time she opened up a unit in Fort Worth and saw a casket inside. Inside the casket? A skeleton. The whole thing, it turns out, belonged to a local biology teacher who used it as a prop in the classroom.

Unless there's something like a casket in sight, the management doesn't touch the contents before the auction. They peer inside just like the buyers do, estimating the value from the doorway.

Tiek's pretty good at estimating by now. But sometimes even she gets tricked.

"About 11 or 12 years ago," she says, "I had a unit over in Dallas. It was a big 10-by-30 and it was full. Full."

There were nice Craftsman tools in that floor-to-ceiling jumble, so Tiek knew the unit wouldn't go for peanuts. And sure enough, it sold for \$2,200 — definitely on the high end. But \$2,200, it turns out, was a steal. Completely hidden amid all that junk? A car.

"It wasn't a real expensive car," Tiek says, shaking her head, "but, I mean, it was a *car*. I had no idea it was in there."

The human factor

"What blows my mind on some of them," says Hamilton, the eBay-er, "is why people would leave their stuff there."

There's usually something sad about the contents. You wonder where that sequined dress was worn, and who might have first plucked it from the department-store rack. You wonder if family photos are tucked away in those lumpy albums. You wonder, above all, why they didn't just give

that mattress away — after all, you could buy another mattress for the same money you'll pay to store the old one for a year.

Sometimes, when you see a pile of poorly stacked boxes and piles of stained clothing, you wonder what it meant to the people who chose to store it. At one time, it meant about \$35 or \$70 a month. And then, somehow, it didn't anymore.

What's the story? Maybe those missing tenants just forgot all about that stuff. Moved and couldn't take it along, moved in with someone else, moved into a furnished apartment.

Maybe it was easier to abandon it than it would have been to borrow somebody's truck, load up their junk and take it somewhere else.

Most likely, they just couldn't afford to pay the rent one month. The late fees added up and, before they knew it, they were in a hole too deep.

Because here's the thing about self-storage: it costs money. You pay hard-earned cash to put your stuff in somebody else's garage. It's money that you'd spend elsewhere, if you could — on a bigger house, a new life. Nobody wants to grow up and have a self-storage unit.

"Typically when people put their stuff in storage, it's a distress situation," says Tiek, the property management supervisor. "Mostly they're breaking up, a death in the family, hiding stuff from their spouse. We're not retail. They don't want us; they have to have us."

And frankly, the stuff behind those doors isn't usually all that valuable. Not monetarily, anyway.

"Lots of sentimental stuff," Tiek says. "It's 'Grandma died and the house is full and I really don't want to get rid of Grandma's stuff.'"

That sentimental value is what makes people pay up, month after month. Around \$25 for a closet-size unit. Maybe \$50 for a space that'll hold a couch and some chairs. At least \$150, maybe more, for a 10-by-30-foot unit that can hold the contents of a five-bedroom house.

Every month the payments come, except when they don't. And when the payments stop? That's when the trouble begins, in the form of fees. There's a fee when, after about 40 days of delinquency, the property manager cuts the lock to seize the property. A fee for the certified letter that goes out to notify you. A fee for the newspaper ad the company places, making a public announcement to tell you your stuff is about to be auctioned off. There's even a fee for the foreclosure sale itself.

Hamilton remembers being at an auction where a guy showed up to bid for his own stuff. He won it, but he bid several hundred dollars. Depending on how much he owed, the delinquent tenant might have come out ahead.

Money for nothing?

Back at Aloha Self Storage, Tiek jiggles the lock on Unit 1 and again, up goes the door. The bidding dance starts again.

At stake this time: A cascade of cardboard boxes. A fading soft-sided suitcase. An artificial Christmas tree, with stray branches scattered loosely on the floor. A pile of clothes — a pink sundress, a blue cap. Dirty socks and a dusty book, its title imprinted with gold leaf: *The Testament for Fishers of Men*.

Bidding starts at \$10 and it doesn't go much higher. Nobody sees much in here.

"I got a dump run coming up for sure," the winning buyer tells Sutton, handing over his \$40 and eyeing what might be worth keeping.

K18, the last unit of the day, goes to brothers Mariano and Mac Vela. They pay \$70 for the unit's two oscillating fans, the baby mobile, the queen-size headboard with a shattered mirror, the little portable grill.

It's their third win of the day.

The Vela brothers, who live in Fort Worth, are in business together. Every couple of months, they load up a rented truck and two trailers and lug it all down to a flea market on the Texas-Mexico border. It's a way to earn extra cash, Mac Vela says, because everything sells on the border. "For some people it's trash, but for some it's good," he says.

Yep, it's the old one-man's-trash phenomenon. The bidders know what they're looking for, but to the untrained eye, the stuff inside these storage units looks like a lot of junk. Disintegrating cardboard boxes full of it. Plastic garbage bags and laundry baskets loaded with it.

Fernandez has a theory. He sees his thrift store as a service to the community. After all, he is tracking down used goods and redistributing them to the people who need them.

"You'd be surprised how much need there is for used stuff," he says. "The way the economy is going, there is going to be more and more of a need for used stuff — used furniture, used clothes."

This bidding and buying and selling, then, becomes not just a process of its own, but a part of the whole economic cycle. Somebody's abandoned stuff becomes someone else's new stuff. The flotsam we leave behind is claimed by another, paid for, used all over again. And the self-storage auction is simply a stop along the way. It's the place where the valueless becomes valuable again, where objects once cared for are dusted off and given new attention.

And where there's always the chance that hidden in boxes, lurking behind a crate, is a Harley-Davidson, a suitcase full of money, a safe full of precious jewels.

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Storage units by the numbers

5,100 storage facilities in Texas

360 facilities in the 817 area code

\$69.37 average monthly rent for a 10-by-10-foot unit in the Fort Worth area

\$108 average monthly rent for a 10-by-10 foot climate-controlled unit in the Fort Worth area

70 percent of storage units in Texas rented by individuals (the rest are businesses storing equipment or documents)

35 number of years the storage business has been around

Source: Texas Self-Storage Association

Want to attend a storage auction?

Here's how:

www.auctionzip.com: a site that lets you search for auctions in your area. You can search by ZIP code, but it's most effective to click on "Texas" and view the auctions listed all over the state. You'll also find links to local auctioneers and can set up alerts to receive updates about scheduled auctions.

A few of the auctioneers who specialize in self-storage units:

Jackie Sutton, All American Auctioneers. www.allamericauctioneers.com or call 817-461-6006 for recorded updates.

Luther Davis, Davis Auctioneers. www.davisauctiontx.com

John Ashley, Auctioneer. Find his schedule at auctionzip.com or e-mail auctioneertx6048@sbcglobal.net.