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ANTIQUES

## Bloodstains With a Story: The Allure of Artifacts Linked to Famous Crimes



RR Auction

Artifacts from gangsters, outlaws and lawmen are to be sold by R R Auction this month.

By *EVE M. KAHN*

A bloodstained tan stocking was unrolled across a Manhattan cafe table the other day. It had belonged to Bonnie Parker, the murderous robber, and was found in her getaway car in 1934 after she and her partner, Clyde Barrow, died in a hail of police bullets.

A waitress at the cafe was told about the clothing's notorious past. "That is awesome," she replied. Then she asked, "How much is it worth?"

The stocking had arrived in New York in the company of Bobby Livingston, a vice president at R R Auction in Amherst, N.H. The company has organized a "Gangsters, Outlaws, and Lawmen" memorabilia sale for Sept. 30 in Nashua, N.H.

Souvenir hunters descending on crime scenes had saved many of the objects now in the auction, with estimates into the six figures. The stocking is expected to bring \$1,000 to \$2,000, in a group lot with Parker's empty aspirin tin, an engraved metal eyeglass earpiece and a screwdriver useful for repairing guns.

Law officers and vigilantes who had gunned down outlaws would routinely hand out bloody relics as crowds gathered. “There was a mania or whatever about collecting that stuff,” Mr. Livingston said.

The R R sale is part of a torrent this fall of exhibitions and sales of artifacts connected to felonies.

The public clearly has a taste for the material, given the longstanding popularity of prison museums, including Alcatraz on an island in the San Francisco Bay and Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia. New high-profile displays in Las Vegas, the Mob Museum and Mob Attraction Las Vegas, opened in the last year, and the normally unflashy Library Company of Philadelphia filled galleries this year with theft and prostitution documents for a show, “Capitalism by Gaslight: The Shadow Economies of 19th-Century America.”

“Moonshine,” a show opening on Friday at the Gaston County Museum in Dallas, N.C., contains about 75 pieces covering three centuries of illegal distilleries and police crackdowns. Lenders offering their families’ bootlegging equipment did not mind having their names mentioned on the wall labels.

On Staten Island new facsimiles of a Prohibition-era diner and a gas station frequented by fictional criminals have been on view for months amid colonial and Victorian buildings at Historic Richmond Town. Film crews constructed the buildings for HBO’s “Boardwalk Empire,” and the historic site hopes to make them a permanent attraction.

Entire properties where real outlaws holed up have come on the market.

Woodside, a 707-acre ghost town in eastern Utah along Butch Cassidy’s thieving trail, is on the market for \$3.9 million. Bridge Realty’s online ad for Woodside notes that some form of local government could be reinstated, with the new owner in charge: “Your chance to be the mayor the sheriff the judge and the executioner!!!”

Through Oct. 5 offers are being sought for **Ma Barker’s** lakefront [hide-out](#) in Ocklawaha, in central Florida, with a suggested \$1 million minimum. The nine-acre property features traces of the F.B.I.’s 1935 machine-gun onslaught that killed Barker and one of her sons, Fred, who had been posing as her husband. Along interior walls “bullet holes were plastered over but remain clearly visible,” a news release from Stirling Sotheby’s International Realty notes.

The promotional material suggests that new owners could transform the place into a historical society headquarters or bed-and-breakfast. Furniture has been arranged as it looked in F.B.I. photos of the shootout’s aftermath.

Evidence of violent death does seem to increase appeal and prices. Last Saturday a pearl-handled Colt revolver taken off the corpse of a Dalton gang member after a botched 1892 bank robbery in Coffeyville, Kan., brought \$322,000 at Rock Island Auction Company in Illinois.

In the R R sale a framed array of John Dillinger memorabilia (\$6,000 to \$8,000) includes a mustache hair pulled off his corpse. A Colt revolver found strapped to Bonnie Parker’s thigh is estimated at \$150,000 to \$200,000. “Bonnie was ‘squatting’ on it,” Frank A. Hamer, the Texas Ranger who led the team ambushing the robbers, wrote in a note authenticating the gun’s provenance.

The active roles of female outlaws, including Parker, are receiving more scholarly attention, said Ellen Poulsen, a crime historian and the author of several books, including “Don’t Call Us Molls: Women of

the John Dillinger Gang.” “These auctions, in a lot of ways, do act as conduits to history and updating what we already know about these people,” she added.

Criminals’ sweeter and more pathetic sides can emerge in objects for sale. R R is offering numerous gangsters’ affectionate letters to family members, as well as Al Capone’s white plastic rosary (\$3,000 to \$5,000) and his handwritten sheet music for a love song to his wife (\$45,000 to \$50,000). Parker’s reddish-brown leatherette cosmetic case (\$5,000 to \$10,000) is described as “one of the only creature comforts in the otherwise rough and violent life of a young fugitive.”

Gruesome crime artifacts have been pulled from the market in recent weeks. Vintage Memorabilia, a manuscripts and autographs dealer in Seattle, has offered a 1960s archive from the Kansas criminal investigator Harold Nye, who tracked down the Clutter family murderers and was the hero of Truman Capote’s “In Cold Blood.” Vintage Memorabilia’s online request for bids, which closes on Friday, was originally to have included unpublished crime-scene photos.

But the gory images have been deemed unsalable and returned to Kansas authorities to prevent new owners from disseminating them. Bids are being sought instead for Nye’s letters from Capote and signed copies of Capote’s books (with minimum offers between \$2,500 and \$10,000 each). In one letter Capote wrote that he longed for the murder trials to end and the executions to take place, “so that I can finish the book before I’m too old and feeble to hold a pen.”