

Giving away the farm — there's gold in them tractors

NOKOMIS is a small town in south central Illinois with a population just over 2,000.



AT HOME WITH
Marni Jameson

Unassuming though it may seem, Nokomis happens to be home to Aumann Auctions, the world's leader in the auctioning of antique tractors and collectible farm equipment. Who knew?

"Antique tractors?" I ask when I get owner Kurt Aumann on the phone. "Is that a thing?"

I'm trying to be polite, but am picturing huge, rusty, old contraptions cluttering the landscape, eyesores in the hayfields. I am, after all, a city girl.

He lets out a big chuckle and says, "You sound like my wife when I first met her. She was from Mississippi. When I told her I collected antique tractors, she said, 'Nobody collects tractors.'"

Boy, were we wrong.

And, yes, this is a thing. "A Rockwellian kind of nostalgia surrounds old tractors," Aumann said. "Folks who grew up on farms or around agriculture remember the tractors of those days fondly."

"And they want a piece of that?"

Apparently. Aumann Auctions sells between 2,000 and 2,500 antique and vintage tractors a year, ranging from old steam tractors to those from the 1970s. They can fetch anywhere from \$2,000 to over half a million dollars. He sold a 1911 Marshall Colonial Tractor last year for \$535,000.

"When selling old farm equipment, the biggest mistake folks make especially city dwellers who inherit a parent's farm and don't know what they have is not consulting an expert before they put the whole shooting match on Facebook Marketplace," he said. Just the day before, he

said, a woman had been by who had just inherited her father's tractor collection. A banker, she didn't know much about her dad's tractors or their worth. She recalled asking him about them once, and he waved her off saying, "Oh, you're just going to sell them to the first person who comes by," she told Aumann.

And she almost did. As she was clearing out the family farm, someone came by and offered her \$150,000 for all of 18 of them. She almost accepted but decided to ask around first.

Good thing. Aumann estimates they will bring over \$400,000 at auction.

Now, folks, I am not giving you an excuse to hang onto stuff you don't need. I am saying know what you have before you give away the farm.

The second time I talked to Aumann, he was in Iowa visiting three farms, all in various stages of downsizing. (Cue the angel chorus!) He had crews working in three other states. "Our business is really rocking right now. Sellers want to get it done before cold weather hits."

In most cases, folks have a lot of "salvage." His nice word for junk.

They are also often emotionally overwhelmed. A woman he'd met that day was dealing with an Iowa farm her 94-year-old father had just moved off and into assisted living. The seven-acre property had seven buildings that were "jam packed," plus the house,



Jonathan Jacob

Hidden treasures This 1911 Marshall Colonial Tractor sold last year at auction for \$535,000. Photo courtesy of Aumann Auctions.

and more than ... ready for this? ... 300 vehicles in various stages of disrepair.

I'm getting hives just listening to this.

"She's embarrassed about his place," he said, "but it's nothing we haven't seen before. We also know it's very emotional to watch the home of someone you love get dismantled. We see it clinically and objectively."

Based on prior jobs, he estimates that two-thirds of what they find will go to salvage and sold for scrap. "We will cherry pick the rest. And sell what's valuable at auction. It's nothing we can't handle."

And instead of a big, dirty mess, the daughter and her dad will have a nice check in a clean, white envelope.

The loud-and-clear take-away from Aumann and other niche auctioneers is this:

• *You are not alone.* Let this story be a parable. However big your mess, someone else has a bigger one, and experts are avail-

able to you help you out from under it.

• *Find out what you have.* Whether you have inherited a collection of vintage tractors, or a pile of old silverware, or a closet full of Ar-

mani suits, if you think it might be valuable, take the time to check it out before you literally give away the farm.

SEE MARNI, 3H

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