

# The Last Auction

By Sandy Schilling Payne

Germans from Russia did not invent the auction sale, but they are a long-standing tradition in rural Germans from Russia communities reaching back to Russia. Auctions can be likened to punctuation marks: an exclamation mark for those buying getting a good deal; a question mark for those selling and maybe starting over, doing something else, somewhere else; and a period for those marking the end by retirement or death. The last auction sale that my immediate Schilling family had was in 2003 for my grandfather, Jacob Schilling.

My great-grandfather (Johann), grandfather (Jacob), and father (Cornelius John “C.J.”) went to every auction sale they could and always bought something, no matter how small, to help support their neighbors. When Dad was young, going to auctions was a learning experience. He learned how to bid, how to read the crowd, how to determine the value of something, and even more importantly, when to stop bidding when an item was no longer a good deal. He said he enjoyed the excitement and watching others go crazy over some little thing they just had to have and competing with each other to get it. In his words, “They was just fun to go to!” Grandpa would buy tools and old plows. He would straighten the tines and then use them as fence posts and salvage any other iron. In his shop, there were boxes of books that he got at auc-



The Wilhelm Schilling family of Glückstal. This was taken after the wedding of Johann Schilling and Rosina Keszler on 27 November 1895. Back (l-r): Friedrich, Maria Keszler, Johann, Rosina. Front (l-r): George, Wilhelm (Sr.), Wilhelm (Jr.), unknown possible Keszler (3rd wife of Wilhelm, Sr.), and Christian.

tions because there was one book or catalog in the box he wanted. That was how my mom got her copy of the *White House Cookbook*. At an auction sale in the early 1970s, she found it in a box of books to be auctioned together, so she buried it underneath a bunch of other less interesting books. She won the box and the book.

When it came time to retire from farming, my great-grandfather, Johann, held an auction on his farm west of Hosmer, on 10 March 1927. After the sale, he moved to into town, to Hosmer with my great-grandmother, Rosina (Keszler), and their three youngest children, Rose, Bill, and George. Their house was located where the parking lot for the old school is now.



The Schilling farm west of Hosmer, South Dakota.



Jacob Schilling and Lydia Martel, 4 September 1927.

Grandpa took over the farm in the spring of 1927, and in the fall, he married Grandma, Lydia Martel (Eisenbeisz by adoption), a neighbor girl he'd been sweet on for some time.

They farmed until 1942 when Grandpa moved his family to Bowdle and started a dairy shortly after. The barn was sold and moved, and the house that his dad built was dismantled, the nails salvaged for iron and the wood sold for scrap. The land was rented out almost every year after that for grazing or cultivation. Grandpa mentioned to me in 2001 that someone should put a wind farm on it and sell the power to California. The old man was always thinking about how to profit from his land.

When Grandma died in March 1988, Grandpa continued to live alone in his house in Bowdle. Every weekday, he drove his pickup the half mile from his house to the Bowdle Senior Center at noon for dinner and socializing. He did this until he was over 100 years old. He was born on 8 September 1901 on the family homestead southwest of Wishek, North Dakota. Although still clear of mind and eyesight well



Jake and Lydia Schilling, early 1988.

enough to drive in the sleepy little town where everyone knew him (and maybe knew to steer clear of him), he no longer had the strength in his hands to push the button latch on his pickup to open the door. He fashioned a tool in the shape of a T so that he could line up one end against the button, hold on with both hands, and just lean in with all his remaining weight to trigger the latch and open the door. Driving was easy; getting into the pickup was the difficult part.

Grandpa moved into the assisted living facility in Bowdle in the spring following his 100th birthday, after having had a disagreement with a rocking chair in which the chair won. A year later when his small savings no longer covered the bills, it was time to literally sell the farm. It was time for an auction.

By 2003, the family had scattered across the country from coast-to-coast. No one was interested in farming, to Grandpa's dismay, even though, honestly, he didn't care for it much himself either. He farmed because he had to, but his heart was in blacksmithing. He held out on sell-



ing the farm, hoping one of his grandkids or great-grandkids would change their minds and consider farming. The number of changes to his last will and testament kept his lawyer in Ipswich in business for decades.

Dad arranged for one of his high school buddies, Dick Giedt, to call the sale, and it would be held near Grandpa's 102nd birthday so it could be coupled with a birthday party. As was customary, an auction bill was made up with some teaser items listed out to generate interest, another long-standing tradition. Local newspapers and print shops found a market in printing up these flyers for auctioneers and sellers in the 1920s. Grandpa's flyer included household items, antiques (desk, sewing machine, dressers), oil lamps, items from the shop (including his homemade tractor), and Grandpa's truck, and Grandma's car. I was living in Northern Virginia at the time and was able to take time off of work to visit with Grandpa, sort through a century of memories, and help with the sale.

My parents arrived few days prior and had already been through the shop, the garage, the basement, and were working on the main floor of the house. My assignment was upstairs: two bedrooms and the attic that ran the length of them on the north side of the house. I have

since gained quite a bit of experience in sorting a life's worth of stuff, but this was my first time. I was also the grandkid. There was some trepidation on my part touching things I was never allowed to touch before, but at the same time, it was thrilling.

Everything was just as it was when I was little. The east bedroom was still painted Pepto Bismol pink. The bedroom at the landing of the narrow, creaky stairs was still cool blue. Lace curtains hung on the windows of both rooms. Pillows were piled high, still covered with pillowcases that bore Grandma's signature embroidery on the edges. Quilts and blankets weighed heavy on the old mattresses. I closed my eyes. It smelled like I was five years old again.

My instructions were simple: four piles—sell, keep, donate, trash. My oldest brother and I used to joke about knowing whether we were in a Lutheran house or a Catholic house by how much clutter there was in the living room. Our mom was Catholic, and our dad was Lutheran. Our Catholic grandma's house let it all hang out, while our Lutheran grandparent's house was more austere. It turned out that our Lutheran grandparents were just much better at hiding their stuff. Grandpa saved everything, and what he didn't save he recorded in ledgers. Sometimes he did both. Utility bills, medical bills, magazines, newspapers, catalogs, church bulletins, receipts, gifts to the church, gifts to his sons, donations to the school, Christmas cards, birthday cards, anniversary cards, funeral cards, letters written but unsent—all neatly tied, labeled and stacked in a closet, waiting to become important again.

As I found things I thought I wanted to keep, I'd spend just a moment marveling at the treasure before moving on to the next box or drawer. A suitcase filled with studio photos. A tiny wool coat made by my great-grandmother for my grandfather. A pair of knitted baby socks with seed beads woven into them. Grandma's jewelry in a metal recipe box (because where else would you keep it?), including the pearls she wore on her wedding day. My late uncle Roland's billfold that contained only his Social Security card and school photos of me and my brothers. My great-grandmother's sewing basket from Russia, the pincushion still filled with needles. A Russian kopeck bearing the year my great-grandparents left Russia for America. A piece of paper with the legal land description of where

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SALE TIME  
12:00  
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**AUCTION**

**4076 NINTH AVENUE - BOWDLE, SOUTH DAKOTA**  
**Sun., Sept. 7, 2003**

HOUSEHOLD	ANTIQUES	SHOP
Whirlpool Washer	Roll Top Desk	Platform Scale
Small Upright Freezer	Wardrobe	Battery Charger
Westinghouse Refrigerator	Wash Stand	Shovels
Frigidaire Electric Stove	Square Table with Leaves and Chairs	Saws
Frigidaire Dryer	Chest of Drawers / Top & Glass Front	Barrel Pump
Dresser with Mirror	Singer Treadle Sewing Machine	Tree Saw
Davenport	Square End Table	Electric Extension Cords
Oil Stove	Chest of Drawers	Chop Saw
Towel Chest	Wooden Folding Davenport	Big 3/4" Drill Press (like new)
(2) Steel Beds	Big Steamer Trunk	Electric Motors
Big Safe	Metal Bread Box	Bench Grinder
Vacuum Cleaner	Collector Dishes	160 lb. Anvil
Typing Desk	Single Trees	Old Time Forge
Small Wooden Coal Stove	(2) Kerosene Lamps	Ladders
Steel Kitchen Table and Cupboard	Collector Books	Lots of Small Bolts, Washers, Etc.
(3) Swivel Rockers	Big Old Pancake Griddle	Homemade Ladder
Rockers	Horse Weight for Windmill	Dixon Lawn Mower w/ Grass Catcher
(2) Roll-away Beds		
Chest of Drawers		
Square Table		
6-Piece China (nice)		
Some Bedding, (6) Feather Pillows		
Book Cases		
Kitchen Items		

**VEHICLES**

1970 Malibu 4-Door, Excellent Shape, No Dents  
1978 Ranger Pickup, 86,000 Miles, Nice

**REAL ESTATE TO BE SOLD AT 4:00 P.M.**

Meakins 5th Addition, Lots 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, & 6, 13-16, Block 20 with Buildings and House. Property can be inspected on Sept. 4, 5, 6, 7. Simon Auction Service acting as agent for the seller. To view property call: 605-397-8507.  
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**JACOB SCHILLING, OWNER**  
**C.J. SCHILLING, PERSONAL REPRESENTATIVE**

AUCTIONEER'S NOTE: EVERYTHING IS IN NICE CONDITION. SOME OF THE ANTIQUES ARE 100 YEARS OLD PLUS. SHOP ITEMS ARE IN VERY GOOD SHAPE AND NOT USED MUCH. SALES TAX WILL BE CHARGED. CASH OR BANKABLE CHECK ON SALE DAY. NOT RESPONSIBLE FOR ACCIDENTS. ANNOUNCEMENTS MADE DAY OF SALE TAKE PRECEDENCE OVER WRITTEN ADVERTISEMENTS. LUNCH WILL BE SERVED.

Grandma was born. She wrote it down and saved it, so I thought it must be important. I saved it, too, and years later figured out the story behind it. When I came upon a fur coat (*Pelitz*) in the pink bedroom closet, I had to consult with Dad. He told me that his grandfather brought it with him from Russia and that one of his cousins had one like it from his dad. He also said that his dad used to wear it in the winter time when he went out with the horses. He couldn't decide on the spot if it was a keep or sell item, so we put it aside. He lived in New Mexico. Not much use for a fur coat there, even in winter. Ultimately, he decided to sell it.



Fur coat brought from Russia by Johann Schilling.

And in the end, we sold nearly everything that wasn't of sentimental or historical value to the family. Practicality won out in the end. We are Germans after all. What was sold had not been used in many years, and it was better in the hands of someone who could make use of it. And the money generated would fund Grandpa's final years, which reached their end at

106 years, 6 months, 25 days. Grandpa always used to say that he was here temporarily, "just passing through," he'd say. And the stuff in the house? It was just stuff. He wouldn't need it where he was going.

The sale was to start at noon, and as expected, people began to arrive very early, before we had everything out of the house and into the yard and on flatbed trailers. Cousins from both my dad and mom's side came from all over the area, and everyone had memories to share with me. One man extolled the excellence of my Grandma's bread, which he recalled from his youth some fifty or sixty years prior. The garage was cleared of vehicles so the church ladies could set up tables for a lunch of Sloppy Joes, bars, coffee, and pop. Food was an important component of any auction. No one should have to leave to get something to eat. You want to keep everyone at the sale so they would not miss a chance to buy something.

Although Grandpa had agreed to the auction months before, the day of the sale, he was understandably unhappy. His house had been turned inside out. Everything that had been inside was now out in the yard and up for grabs. I had brought him to the house and got him set up under the old apple tree by the garage with a few extra chairs so that people could sit and visit with him. I sat with him for a while holding his hand.

He said to me, "You know I have a girlfriend."

I said that I'd heard as much.

"She's 80, a few years younger than me."

I asked if he'd like me to bring her to the sale, and he yes.

I drove the two blocks from Grandpa's house to the Bowdle hospital. The assisted living, nursing home, and hospital were all in one complex. I introduced myself to the nurse at the desk and stated my mission. She took me to Clara's room, where I repeated what I said to the nurse. "My name is Sandy, and I'm Jake Schilling's granddaughter. He'd like to know if you'd like to join him at his auction." Her face lit up, and she said, "Oh yes!" She grabbed her walker and her purse and off we went.

Grandpa was still sad but happier that Clara was there with him.

After the sale was over and tallied up, Dad came over and told Grandpa the total take, including the amount they got for his prized 160





Jake as a young man on the farm.

lb. anvil. Grandpa was pleased and asked who bought Grandma's car. As buyers packed up their haul and things were cleared from the yard, I stayed with Grandpa under the tree. He asked me again, "Who bought Grandma's car?"

After the auction, I took Grandpa and Clara back to assisted living. Grandpa moved slowly with his walker and had to stop a couple of times to catch his breath. I recalled a photo I found of him manning a team of horses on the farm seeding the fields one spring. When we got to his room, he sat in his recliner that sort of caught him in mid-air and slowly, pneumatically lowered him to a sitting position. I told him I'd see him at noon the next day at the Senior Center for dinner and birthday cake. He said, "Not so much fuss," and I said it would be a small celebration this time. He kissed me on the cheek, something I don't think he's ever done before. It was always a handshake, even when I was a little girl. The girlfriend must be softening him, I thought. Before I left his room, he asked again who bought Grandma's car.

The following year, I visited him again in the fall, a few weeks after his 103rd birthday. Even though it was empty, he wanted to go see the house. So, we did. He carefully climbed up the stairs to the back door and walked into the house and looked around. Then he turned to me and said, "I want to see your grandma's car now."

Grandma had always wanted a new car. Not a pickup, not a tractor. A new car. A new, baby blue car. And so Grandpa bought her 1970 Chevy Malibu in two-toned baby blue and white.

Very carefully I said, "Grandpa, we sold that last year at the auction."

He looked at me. "I bought it back."

"You what?"

"I bought it back. It's over in the garage."

With a sly smile on his face he asked, "You want to have a look?"

"Yes, I think I'd better."

We slowly crossed the yard to the garage, passing by the apple tree and its windfall, the tree under which he had asked me several times who'd bought Grandma's car.

He pulled a skeleton key out of his coat pocket, unlocked the garage door and pushed it open. Sure enough, there it was.

"What are you going to do with it?" I asked.

He looked at me for a moment then looked at the car, "Guess I should sell it."

"Yeah, I guess so." ❧

