

Lang's Sporting Collectables, Inc., Boxborough, Massachusetts

Reel Photos Bring Real Money at the First \$1 Million Fishing Tackle Sale

by Jeanne Schinto

Photos courtesy Lang's Sporting Collectables, Inc.

The first-ever \$1 million antique fishing tackle auction took place over three days, November 3-5, 2005, at the Holiday Inn in Boxborough, Massachusetts. Lang's Sporting Collectables, the auction house that holds every other price record in the category, now can claim this one too. The new benchmark was achieved when nearly 2300 lots were sold. Lang's owners, John and Debbie Ganung of Waterville, New York, reported the grand total as \$1,133,496.32 (includes buyers' premiums).

Not ordinarily inclined to follow the tackle market, we were attracted to the sale because of a single category that came up on the second day. In addition to the usual lures, rods, reels, carvings, decoys, creels, bobbers, flies, minnow buckets, books, and ephemera, something was consigned that must be unique in auction annals—110 lots of fishing photographica. The vintage ambrotypes, tintypes, cabinet cards, and cartes de visite had been collected over the past 15 years by Tom Penniston of New Glarus, Wisconsin.

According to Debbie Ganung, when Penniston decided to sell, he debated about whether to give them to Lang's or to an auctioneer whose specialty is photography. The Ganungs, likewise, wondered whether this consignment was a suitable one for them. In the end, the right decision was apparently made. "Every lot went to tackle collectors, not photography collectors," said Ganung. This, after promoting them heavily to both



The top lot of the photography section of the sale, a 5" x 7" tintype of fishermen with skittering rods in sections and wrapped with line, estimated at \$400/500, sold for \$1980. (Skittering rods are 10' to 12' long and employ an equal length of line to pull a lure along the surface of the water in a skittering motion.) "The estimates were generic ones, not taking into consideration the content," said Debbie Ganung. As for estimating the date of this and the other photographs in the sale, Ganung and consignor Tom Penniston used the portrait subjects' fishing tackle as a gauge, along with their clothing. This one they concluded was an example from the 1860's or 1870's. Tintypes in general were popular from 1860 to 1910, and in some places through the 1930's, while cabinet cards were introduced in the 1860's and remained popular through the early 20th century.

markets.

We asked John and Debbie Ganung if there was any correlation between the quality of the rods, reels, and creels in the photos and the prices of the images themselves. "I have to say it was a combination of the number and kinds of tackle, the composition of the photos, their size, and their condition," said Debbie, who, with Penniston, wrote the catalog descriptions for his lots. Whether or not a

name could be put to the person in the photo also affected value, said John.

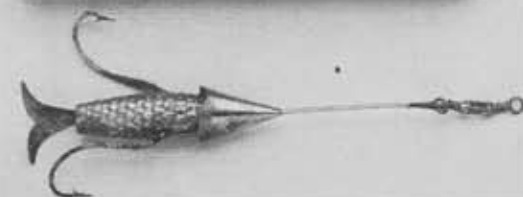
One of those identifiable portraits was of reel maker William Van Antwerp. He is seated, working at a table on one of his namesake Henshall-Van Antwerp reels, with two other examples on rods close at hand. An ink inscription written in period script at the bottom of this cabinet card stated: "Old Van putting in the last screw."



This tintype, in the same large size as the top dollar-getter, was cataloged as appearing to be a copy of an earlier daguerreotype. (The sale offered no daguerreotypes.) Note the tightly woven creel under the man's arm and the dog at his feet—either a very obedient or very tethered one, considering that a posing stand for the man is visible. With condition problems, it was bought by an absentee bidder for \$368.50 (est. \$300/400).



This tintype, showing a woman angler outfitted with a quality rod, center-hole creel, and classic New York ball-handle reel, is a sixth-plate tintype (approximately 3 1/4" x 2 5/8"). "That's the most expensive creel of its day," said Debbie Ganung. "And that is the kind of dark clothing that women fished in." In excellent condition, it went to a room bidder competing against the photos at \$1210 (est. \$200/250). Of that buyer, Ganung said, "He's a tackle collector who'd never before bought a photograph in his life." He went on to buy another, spending a total of \$1650.



The top lot of the whole three-day sale, a copper Chautauqua weedless trolling lure in its rare picture box, which made \$37,400 (est. \$25,000/30,000). "The lure is not as rare as the box," said John Ganung, adding that the box-to-lure price ratio was roughly 2:1.



Going for the same price as the Shakespeare, \$23,100, was this muskellunge minnow by J.L. Clark of Rockford, Illinois (est. \$15,000/20,000). The colors are blended green and white with sweeping red gill marks. There are probably only two or three of these in the world, said John Ganung.



Here's the 'Shakespeare' muskellunge minnow from the yard sale that made \$23,100 (est. \$4500/5500). "It's the first one they produced," said John Ganung, adding that the rule of thumb for lures is either very large or tiny, unless it's a special color. This one was scarlet with a yellow eye. A lure's color can make thousands of dollars of difference, he said.



One of the other top lures of this sale, sold with its correct and rare two-piece cardboard box, was a Keeling's green and silver musky Expert that made \$19,800.

Printed on the card was the name of the photographer, C.H. Bryan of Mt. Sterling, Kentucky, Van Antwerp's home base.

Believed to be the only known image of the Kentuckian, it fetched \$1705 from a phone bidder, number 338, who bought 19 photo lots in all, including the top dollar-getter, a large (5" x 7") tintype of six anonymous fishermen posed with their skittering rods in a studio, for \$1980. All but names came together in that one: aesthetics and accoutrements, clarity and content. The painted backdrop unifies the whole.

An ambrotype of four fisher-

men at streamside was the only major photography lot that did not sell. It was also the only lot that carried a reserve, said Debbie Ganung. A good, clean, early outdoor view—possibly very early (the ambrotype process was invented in 1851 and was popular from 1854 through the late 1880's)—it was bought in at \$2300 against an estimate of \$2000/3000. What stopped bidders from going higher? It was cataloged as appearing to be an English scene, based on the men's clothing and tackle.

American material is clearly what Lang's bidders wanted and were willing to compete for, just as American tackle, not English,



A 7 5/8" x 9 5/8" albumen print of two fishing tackle company wagon trains belonging to the Kingfisher company, which, according to the catalog, was one of the earliest fishing line makers and tackle distributors in the country. It was bought by voracious phone bidder number 338 for \$522.50 (est. \$400/500).



The two men in street dress have just one quality rod and reel between them, along with a stringer of what appear to be smallmouth bass. Another sixth-plate tintype, it was bought in the room at \$269.50 (est. \$100/150).



Like fencing swords, the split-bamboo fly rods in the hands of these women are crossed. The little girl is holding one too. The stringer of largemouth bass is hopefully not too stinky, considering the finery they're all wearing. A sixth-plate tintype, it made \$165 on the bid of an absentee (est. \$150/200).



Here's a gentleman who isn't dressed for fishing, but he's posed with a fine woven center-hole creel and fly rod in sections. In excellent condition, this sixth-plate tintype went at \$275 (est. \$100/150) to phone bidder number 338, who took the top photo lot, among others.



The fishing buddies in this sixth-plate tintype in a union case are wearing early waders and have high-quality Kentucky-style reels on their rods. Each also has a well-made center-hole creel on his lap, and one has a pearl-handled revolver. It sold in the room at \$522.50 (est. \$200/250).



An ink inscription on the face of this cabinet card identifies the whiskered fellow as "Wm. E. Owens, Utica, N.Y., Pine Lake Camp." Besides the nice creel under his arm, there is also one on the ground and a third one attached to the side of the log cabin. It sold to phone bidder number 338 at \$165 (est. \$100/150).



This 6" diameter celluloid photo button, made to display on a small stand, shows Kentucky-style reels, steel rods, creels, landing nets, and a belt bait tin marked "Leurre." In pristine condition, it sold for \$258.50 (est. \$200/300) to an absentee bidder.

is what they also covet. At tackle auctions in England, by contrast, "bidders tend not to value American material," said Debbie Ganung, who characterized the Lang's mailing list as 90% buyers in the United States, with the other 10% being "very serious competitive buyers" from 27 foreign countries.

That mailing list got started over 20 years ago in Maine, where the nation's first major fishing tackle auction was held on July 3, 1985. Richard W. Oliver, the former auctioneer, conducted that inaugural sale and subsequent ones in his Kennebunk gallery. Bob Lang, one of the earliest promoters of antique tackle as a collectible, was Oliver's partner in the venture. He was also the sale's cataloger. "Bob had the knowledge; Richard had the facility," said Peggy Merritt of Falmouth, Maine, who worked for them then and now works for Lang's as auction manager.

"Those sales really took off between 1986 and 1988," Oliver told us when we reached him on his cell phone. "The Japanese were our big customers in those years." By 1990, however, Oliver, who also held the first golfing collectibles auction in the nation, was having financial troubles that were beginning to show. "When things were falling apart for me, I sold the mailing list to Bob," he said. Oliver closed his gallery two years later, after declaring bankruptcy.

Meanwhile, Lang named the newly created auction business after himself, moved the sales from Kennebunk to Boxborough, and nurtured the market for the next 12 years. Then, in November 2002, following complications after back surgery, Lang sold the business to the Ganungs. A year later, on November 8, 2003, John and Debbie sold a giant Haskell for \$101,200, setting the record for an antique lure and making a splash in the process, not only in the antiques trade papers (see *M.A.D.*, January 2004, p. 8-A) but also in national media such as CNN, *Sports Illustrated*, and even

Playboy.

Although their tenure as auctioneers has been relatively short, both of the Ganungs bring a fully developed expertise to the business. John, 53, has been collecting tackle since he was a teenager growing up in Watkins Glen, New York, where he worked in a bait shop and fished in the Finger Lakes. Debbie, who also grew up in central New York, has been in the antiques business "since birth," by her reckoning. "I'm third generation," she said. "I have been in it my whole life. I missed the first day of kindergarten because I was at Brimfield."

When we spoke to the Ganungs, the November sale already seemed long past, and John was about to pick up a consignment in the Great Lakes region of Michigan for their upcoming spring sale, scheduled to take place in Boxborough on April 21 and 22. "You still have an extremely good chance of finding an untouched tackle box at a yard sale," said Debbie. At this sale, one of the top-selling lures, a Shakespeare muskellunge minnow, was a yard sale find, said John. It sold at the sale for \$23,100.

"Tackle is in every garage, every attic, every basement," Debbie continued. "Baseball isn't the national pastime. Fishing is. Everybody has fished. Everybody has stuck a pole in the water at some point in their lives." Of course, not everyone who fishes becomes a collector, she knows. ("It's a progressive thing.") But she believes that tackle as a collectible still has a very long way to travel. "Once you get the investors in here, it's going to explode."

The live audience at Lang's ebbed and flowed while we were there, depending on what was being offered. Only about 35 bidders were in the room for the photos. Still, few bargains were available. In addition to the photos, there were absentee bids as well as ones coming from the Internet, which Lang's used for the first time at this auction. "We introduced it



An inscription on the back of this sixth-plate tintype states: "Group of B...taken near Buzzards Bay, Mass. Josephine Short with fishing pole afterwards coordinating touring parties around the world. Standing Abbie Bates." Could she be a female fishing guide? In the picture with the women is a nice early fly reel. This research project sold to a bidder in the room for \$275 (est. \$150/250).



The reel on the rod in the boy's hand appears to be an Edward Vom Hofe Restigouche, according to the catalog. "That reel is worth thousands of dollars," said Debbie Ganung. An inscription on the cabinet card's back gives these other details: "Frank Cross Jr. at New Found Lake, Bristol, N.H., May 20, 1895, 20 lbs. 6 oz." The card made \$187 (est. \$100/150).

because of the photos," said Debbie. It brought good results on lower-priced items in every category, she said. (Bottom feeders at these sales are almost literal, one could say.) Lang's will use the Inter-

net again in April, said Debbie. For more information, contact Lang's at (315) 841-4623; Web site (www.Langsauction.com).



The inscription on the back of this 7½" x 5¼" oval albumen identifies the sitters, the date, and the place: "Edward P. Miller, Francis H. Ilyers, Elizabeth N.J., May 30th, 1872." Used on the cover of the catalog, it went to phone bidder 338, who swept so many choice lots, at \$577.50 (est. \$200/300).



Here's the cabinet card photo of reel maker William Van Antwerp that made \$1705, and here's an actual Henshall-Van Antwerp reel, which brought \$3520. Cabinet cards are typically 6" x 4", give or take—this one was 5 5/8" x 3 7/8".



A pair of cabinet cards showing the contrasting styles of fishing women of the day, one removing a fish from her hook, the other a kind of caught fish herself, wearing a fishnet skirt with cork bobber adornment. Price for the pair was \$214.50 (est. \$100/150).



We counted the fish; there are 20 of them. Also showing early rods and reels, this cabinet card was bought in the room at \$357.50 (est. \$75/150).



Three in the room wanted this cabinet card of a sportsman with his Marlin rifle and shell belt and a sportswoman with her reel and center-hole creel. Their dog is sitting at attention in the chair. Final price: \$247.50 (est. \$75/125).



We felt a little like the FBI at a Mafia funeral but took these vanity license plates anyway, just four of the many we saw in the parking lot on the day we attended the sale: "DRY-FLY," "BAMBOO," "FLY-ROD," and our favorite, "OLD-GUY." "This isn't merely a male-dominated field; it's a male field period," said Debbie Ganung. "I know of only one or two women who participate." Schinto photos.

