

Prices were jumpin' at an auction of collectible fishing gear. Remembering the most fanatical fisherman of all time—and his many paramours.

# Reeling It in: When Fishing Lures Fetch \$30,000

by Robert H. Boyle

THE STOCK MARKET IS SINKING, THE DOLLAR IS DIVING, and housing has hit the skids, but the market for fishing "collectibles"—rods, reels, creels, lures, flies and more—is on the up, up and even further up.

Witness the prices realized, some absolutely crazy, at Lang's auction in Boxborough, Mass., in November. Two years earlier, Lang's had set a world angling-auction record by topping \$1 million. Since then, for the fifth straight sale, the Waterville, N.Y., firm has set record after record, with this last auction totalling a new high of \$2.8 million.

Angling enjoys worldwide popularity, and about 175 of the 700 bidders came from Japan, Britain, Argentina, New Zealand, Germany, Norway, Canada, Sweden, Korea, Australia, and China, while absentee bidders, wherever they were on the planet, could call in on seven phone lines or bid by Internet via eBay. According to John Ganung, who with his wife, Debbie, owns Lang's, Internetters accounted for a third of the buys.

The big draw: two very special collections, the first owned by San Diego Padres owner John Moores, who consigned 657 lots to benefit the Carter Center in Atlanta. Moores chairs the Center for ex-President Jimmy, his fly-fishing buddy whom he described in the catalog as "the first guy in the river and the last guy out."

The second collection, 150 lots offered by the husband-and-wife team of Dan Brock and Terri Tinglum, consisted of tackle and artifacts that belonged to Zane Grey, the purple-prose author of Western novels and the most fanatical fisherman in history. He once went 88 days at sea without even a strike, but remained ever enthusiastic, saying, "The enchantment never palls."

Hot bidding began almost instantly with Lot No. 5 in the Moores collection: the only known example of a boxed-birdcage reel, made in 1859 by William Billinghurst in Rochester, N.Y. It's not anything that anyone would actually use, but as the first patented American fly reel, it fetched \$40,320, more than double the high pre-sale estimate of \$18,000.

A more orthodox offering, a Philbrook & Paine handmade raised-pillar trout reel, estimated at \$7,000 to \$9,000, went for \$10,080. As the only known example of a reel marked "Wm. Mills—NY," Wall Street nostalgia may have played a part in the bidding. Until the venerable tackle shop of William Mills & Son at 21 Park Place closed in 1971, it was the favorite toy store for generations of piscatorially passionate brokers and bankers, many of them members of the nearby Anglers' Club of New York.

Rod collectors, whose mantra is "condition, condition,

condition," can be ultra-fussy, with just one little "ding"—say, a hook-point puncture in the cork handle—enough to put them off.

But rarity and historical importance trumped condition with four dinged 19th-century American fly rods. Compare the estimates with the prices realized: a Charles Murphy 12-footer (estimated at \$800 to \$1,200 for \$3,575; a 14' 3" by Thomas Mack of Boston (estimated at \$700 to \$1,000) for \$8,960; a 14' 6" J. C. Conroy (\$600 to \$800) for \$9,240; and a 12' Thaddeus Norris (\$5,000 to \$7,000) for \$17,920.

In line with this, seven historic flies in a shadow box (estimated at \$2,500 to \$3,500)—with one fly tied by Theodore Gordon, hailed in the catalog as "the father of American fly fishing," and another one by his admirer, Wall Streeter and angling author George LaBranche—brought \$7,975.

Prices rocketed into outer space for books from the great collection of Derrydale Press limited editions that Moores bought 12 years ago from Don Frazier for a now-bargain \$225,000. Just three of the 379 lots realized \$207,080, as *Atlantic Salmon Fishing* by Charles Phair, deluxe two volumes, one with mounted flies and materials (estimated at \$10,000 to \$20,000), sold for \$50,400. Four 1928-1931 membership booklets of the Anglers' Club of New York, three printed by Derrydale (estimated at \$4,000 to \$8,000) brought \$67,200. *A Book of Trout Flies*, by Preston Jennings, deluxe two volumes, one with mounted flies (\$20,000 to \$30,000) soared to \$89,600, more than double the auction record set a year ago.

Dealer Judith Bowman of Bedford, N.Y., lamented: "I went with \$180,000 to bid on seven books, and I got just one." Her catch: *Charles Cotton and His River* (estimate: \$1,000 to \$2,000), required her to pony up \$11,200.

Zane Grey prices were, well, zany. His original fighting chair (estimated at \$7,500 to \$10,000) realized \$24,640. His personal fishing pennant in red and blue, with initials "ZG," (estimated at \$3,000 to \$5,000) went for \$23,400. A pair of leather cowboy pants he wore in the West (estimated at \$3,000 to \$4,000) sold for \$9,625.

A recent biography by scholar Thomas Pauly revealed that although Grey was married, he had a dozen women on the side. The auction included four lots of love letters to him in a code that he devised for his gals. The top lot: two partly coded letters from a Mildred Smith (estimated at \$300 to \$500) brought \$1,064. Well, the man didn't fish all the time. ■

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Top to bottom: The first patented American fly reel recently sold for \$40,320. A fighting chair, used on a boat for landing big fish, went for \$24,640; it was part of a collection of artifacts once owned by enthusiast Zane Grey. A finely detailed, pre-Civil War lure commanded \$32,250. And a trout reel sold for \$10,080—perhaps because of its connection to a bygone fishing store near Wall Street.

