

# ROADTRIP MY, WHAT AN AUCTION

By Bart Crattie, LS

**Roadtrip!** The very expression sets one's tail wagging with the accompanying whimpering and scampering about the kitchen floor. My wife has to tell me "down boy". Goodness, can you imagine the unbridled excitement and anticipation rendered when there is a combination of roadtrip and auction of vintage surveying instruments and equipment? That joyful mix was grounds for a brief sojourn through the Smokies on a magnificent fall weekend in early November.

Leaving Chattanooga, TN cruising through the fiery flames of the fall foliage, our destination was Asheville, NC. Asheville is a beautiful, progressive city situated dead smack in the heart of the mountains. In this part of the southeastern United States, the city is highly regarded as a center for the arts. Not us though, we were seeking transits and plumb bobs. Following a brief and unprofitable stop at the Cherokee casino, we subsequently strolled into the house of Brunk's Auctions.

Over a two day period, Brunk's was charged with conveying 1418 lots of merchandise. The lots included paintings, furniture, guns, coins, toys and most especially, surveying equipment. Upon entering the building and turning left, we fell into the looking glass. Here was a room of about 40 feet by 24 feet completely jam-packed with compasses, transits, tripods, cases, levels, plane tables, theodolites and any number of surveying odds and ends. In all, there were 129 lots of surveying equipment. Each lot might be only one item or maybe up to 25 items. The auction staff had no problem with our handling anything. We were able to mount instruments to tripods, checking the workings and possible flaws. We viewed for a period but had to exercise patience...the survey items were to be the last lots to be brought up. A short calculation based on between 70 and 82 lots per hour told us to come back on Sunday at 3:45 p.m.

Asheville isn't a bad place to kill some time. Not being in any hurry, after a late start on Sunday, we found ourselves following the Blue Ridge Parkway. The southern terminus of the Parkway is near Cherokee, North Carolina, just some 40 miles south of Asheville. We pulled off the road into a National Park Service facility called the "Blue Ridge Parkway Destination Center". Within the typical Park Service high ceilinged structure with exposed beams and lot of glass was a diorama devoted to surveying and its role in the construction of the Parkway. It included a huge alidade, level, portable drafting arm and a life size fellow peering through an instrument. We thank the National Park Service for the recognition of our profession.

Back to Brunk's. To those bidding live on the auction floor, there was competition by concurrent Ebay participants as well a bank of telephone land lines. There were many reasons for the competition, notably an 1858 Gurley solar compass with documentation stating in part, "This example is the earliest known Gurley Solar Compass..." (In the end, this brought \$13,000). On the other hand, a beautiful Gurley light mountain transit with Burt solar attachment (including the leather lidded case, tripod etc) sold for \$3400. A 1952 Gurley transit with the Smith Solar Attachment that had never gone out into the field went for a \$550. K & E transits sold for between \$175 and \$350. The Gurley transits went from between \$100 and \$1800 with the average about \$500. Levels and alidades were practically given away.

Sight vane compasses, all 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century examples were averaging \$1000 with many staying in the \$600 range. One fellow paid \$425 for 14 plumb bobs while another gladly carried home 25 tripods for \$1900. All in all, it was a real hoot. The Surveyors Historical Society was proudly represented with 4 members there. When all was said and done, the two days of selling amounted to \$1,891,160 with the surveying portion bringing a total of \$86,860.

Unfortunately though, roadtrips must come to an end. With the survey auction beginning right around 3:45 on Sunday, needless to say it was a long dark ride home that evening. Driving along with slumber threatening, my mates dozing to bad radio stations, my only thought was "Thank goodness we brought a pickup truck".