



THE VALUE OF STUFF AND NONSENSE

by Betty Sharp

I serve salad in a 19th century cut glass bowl because I like to use beautiful items, not store them. I'm not a collector. Except for books. Well, and dogs. And clothes in five sizes, vinyl albums, including a prime condition Doc Watson, and seven saddles I don't use. I have a 1960 G. H. Vaught roper with a 15" seat I'll never get my seat in again. Ok, I guess I'm a collector, but I inherited that cut glass bowl from Great Aunt Ruby, whom I inherited through marriage.



Aunt Ruby had over 500 cut glass pieces that she never used. She hosted no dinner parties, no special occasions. Twelve punch bowls with cups and ladles, pitchers, serving dishes and vases were crowded onto bookshelves, marble topped tables and dining room hutches. Her cut glass never made an appearance at a wedding, a christening or on New Year's Eve. Vases never held flowers on a dinner table, but then she never hosted a dinner party. In fact she seldom had anyone but a handful of relatives in her home. So her collection seemed, well, a bit crazy. What was it for?

I first saw Aunt Ruby's mausoleum of a house when I was still in my teens.

My childhood home had one bathroom for six people, and I shared a bedroom with two sisters, so I found her unused rooms filled with unused objects unsettling. It seemed to me that the rooms were purposely decorated to be unwelcoming. I tried to describe the white carpeted formal living room with Victorian velvet couches that no one ever sat on to a friend. I said "Nothing in this house is used, not the rooms or the things. No one sits on the couches. Aunt Ruby lives in the den. The bathroom towels are brand new. I don't think the toilet paper has ever been used."

"Well," he said, you wouldn't want used toilet paper, would you?" Now that set me back a bit.

Although Aunt Ruby's penchant for stiff Victorian couches, oppressive ornately carved furniture and marble topped tables shaped my dislike for that style, through the years I've come to appreciate antiques. I do tend to prefer contemporary style, however. Right now, I'm intrigued by modern architecture mixed with ecologically friendly rustic design, like the Leaning Pear restaurant in Wimberly. If I win the lottery, I'm going to build a house that looks like the Leaning Pear building and fill it with people, parties and a lot of ruckus. But I'd throw in some antiques because I've learned something—objects with a past can make the present richer. The key is why they're collected and how they're used.

Financial guru Suzi Orman says, "People first, then money, then things." Apply that philosophy to collected stuff and add some nonsense. In other words, if your collectibles and antiques bring affordable pleasure, then have some fun with them. I have a friend who loves knife rests. I didn't know what a knife rest was until she gave dinner parties. Soon, I looked for them in antique shops and bought a few for her. Now that years have passed,

I hope she doesn't save them just for dinner parties but enjoys them on her table in the morning when she butters her toast.

Some people like to collect memorabilia, like old Coke signs and bottles, or artistic rarities like handmade fishing lures. What I hope is that they share their treasures. Have people over. Tell stories about the history of Coke. Use those fishing lures as table decorations, which would surely start a conversation. Take that cut glass to Antiques Roadshow. Enter one of your prized possessions in the State Fair. Stuff is fine, but nonsense is a lot more fun. Aunt Ruby's cut glass collection never made her smile. I think that's because the collection wasn't shared with people and used at parties. Aunt Ruby would brook no nonsense.

When I moved into my rural home years ago and invited neighbors over, invariably someone would say "Now, don't get out your nice things for me." I wondered why I shouldn't use my "nice things" for them, so I retorted, "Who should I save them for? The Queen of England?" Soon neighbors announced themselves at my door hollering "It's the Queen of England!" It always made me laugh. After twenty-four years, some of those people are gone but whenever I use my "nice things" I have their memory with me.

I know using collectibles or antiques chances damage, and I know some people collect for investment. That is certainly their call, but fads come and go and markets go up and down. If you were lucky enough to sell a rare beanie baby for a fortune while others have sacks full of fairly worthless critters, good for you. But that bumper sticker that reads "She Who Dies with the Most Stuff Wins" probably isn't true. Chances are that whomever cleans up after you will have different tastes even if it's your children. Most likely if it's your children!

Whatever your reasons, I hope you enjoy "antiquing" in the shops for fun. It is possible to come across a priceless item for a steal and resell it for a fortune, I guess, but you can enjoy stuff and non-

sense without a lot of money. I spent \$10 for an unframed original oil painting that hangs over the Bon Appétit sign in my kitchen. It makes me smile every morning. And I found a copy of Now Voyager that I reread often.

As for those vinyl records, I play them often. That 1960 saddle? I enjoy a younger neighbor using it. Clothes in five sizes stuffed in my closet? If I solve that problem, I'll fit back in my saddle! That's another value of stuff and nonsense—it helps you dream.

Hill Country author Susan Witting Albert's Last Chance Olive Ranch is about the dream of sustaining an old Hill Country ranch by creating groves of olive trees. Ms. Albert writes with authority about olive oil processing and with heart about families. It won't spoil the story, so here's a hint from this book: if you collect antique documents, keep them in a safety deposit box!

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