

With gavel they travel

There are two things I don't know for sure about auctioneers: I can't pin down exactly why they are called "Colonels," and I don't know where the tradition started that they use gavels. Whoever that first hammerhead was I'd like to kill him.

You see, I'm gradually going deaf, and it's not because I've been married for 36 years but because of the auctioneer's incessant hammering with their gavels. Rat-a-tat-tat, they sound like some woodpecker on steroids. It's enough to drive a person crazy. And in my case, the damage appears to be irreversible.

In many ways auctioneers are like rock stars. They are both high maintenance celebrities and they both perform to a beat. The rockers keep their beat with drums and guitars while the auctioneers use a gavel. While car auctioneers at the big Barrett Jackson auto auctions use a gavel the size of a small sledge hammer, art auctioneers at Sotheby's and Christie's usually use a petite round chunk of wood.

I've seen auctioneers use everything from a Copenhagen can to a two-by-four and I even saw my friend Butch Booker use a ball peen hammer one time at a farm sale. The spoon makes a good gavel unless it is in the hands of Rick Machado who is so rough on the silverware that he can go through an entire service for 16 during one sale. With the silverware often flying out of his hand we have tried to keep the knives and forks away from him. But then he starts borrowing pocket knives, which can be even more lethal.

Some auctioneers have told me they use a gavel to point to the bidders in the crowd because pointing at them with your hand would be rude. But I hardly see how threatening them with a hammer can be considered more polite.

My good friend and one of the best auctioneers of all time, Skinner Hardy, used a gavel like an orchestra conductor. He kept a better beat than a bass drum, which I think is why I am deaf! I also traveled with Stanley Stout quite a bit and besides using his gavel to sell cattle he used his to break car windshields, open beer bottles, defend himself and otherwise wreak general havoc.

Some other great auctioneers I've worked with, men like Pat Goggins, John Rodgers, his brother Eddie and the late great Ken Troutt, were never known as big bangers and yet they had some of the sweetest sounding singsong chants ever heard, proving that you don't need a gavel to be good.

In the prehistoric past, before computers, auction clerks hated to work with auctioneers who used gavels. Have you ever tried to write while the table you were writing on was bouncing up and down? Even after they started using computers, the gavel men were still a major headache.

One time during a video auction I was reading the descriptions off a computer monitor when all of a sudden it dropped off the table, crashing to the ground. It had gradually been edging towards the edge with each pounding of the auctioneer's gavel but we'd all failed to notice it.

Most gavel men have a favorite hammer that they use and, despite the strong attachment they feel towards their gavel, they are always leaving them behind.

I have returned no less than a dozen gavels over the years to auctioneers who left them on the auction block. (As I was writing that sentence I realized what an idiot I've been. I still might have partial hearing if I'd have just burned them for firewood.)

These days the airlines confiscate gavels because they could be weapons in the hands of terrorists which, when you think about it, accurately describes an auctioneer's gavel. Before they were considered terrorist tools, I was traveling with a Colonel who, when he got his coat out of the overhead compartment, dropped his gavel in the aisle. The attendant picked it up and, mistaking him for a traveling Judge, said with a twinkle in her eye, "Here's your gavel your Honor."

Never in the history of all mankind has anyone ever been more mistaken!

It's the Pitts

Written by Lee Pitts
