

Not quite the last man standing, is now about to sit down.

Sub heading: Another in a very long list of Washington antique stores is about to close, leaving only a few to meet the still intense demand. WHY is a story for another day. Today, the owners are finally ready to tell you a few stories and a few secrets.

What if your work required you to very frequently spend day after day finding beautiful, interesting, remarkable things to buy? Your day was a failure if you failed to spend any money. You typically had to spend almost a third of the year doing this. In addition, those spending sprees were spent in European locations most people dream of visiting for a short vacation. And since you were spending money generously, everyone was happy to see you. Very happy indeed. Lots of dinners and conviviality.

When you returned home, first with your Polaroid snaps, later with your 15 rolls of film, and lately with your digital slide show, your customers would line up to see the bounty, and put their names down on this and that, in order to have first opportunity to buy an item when it arrived by sea a month later. A week of unpacking, rearranging your store, and furious selling, and the buying process needed to begin again. Back to the shopping routine.

This is the outline of the seemingly glamorous life of the Antique Dealer which Ed Grant and I, Jane Grant have been living for going on 40 years. It has been beyond glorious in so many ways, almost all of them occurring in the buying phase, but at 10 o'clock the other night, while preparing for our retirement/going out of business sale, I took a rest on a comfy sofa in our showroom. Most of the lights were out and the showroom was shadowy, with chandelier lights looking like stars, and smooth mahogany looking like iridescent velvet. The mixture of colors and textures, curves and angles, silver and paint, all of it beautiful and beautifully put together – that will be my take away best memory, and the saddest thing we will lose when the doors close- we lose the showroom we can see and feel proud of.

The saving grace and sometimes most damnable thing about antique dealing is the constant exploration and discovery it affords and requires. Very few Americans of the baby boom and before grew up in old architecture, or had antiques in their homes. Until the 1980's, the 99%'ers had only the most hazy idea what an antique actually is. Not so in the rest of the world where the past is an intimate part of the present from birth on. In this business, every day presents and demands close observations and discoveries about the things we own or want to own; there is always detective work to be done about the history and integrity of the thing, new fields of collecting to learn about, new buying locations to be discovered and conquered. We have never been content with our established route. England is our first and favorite country and furniture. Then we discovered France. Then Holland and Belgium. On to Italy, Spain, then Scandinavia and later China. As always, bits and pieces from the U.S. There's always something to marvel at, learn from and fall in love with. This is a great way to keep away the evils of boredom.

Then there is the cosmopolitan life that we have led. There's a lot of romance in Antique Dealing---romancing the seller, romancing the buyer, romancing the product, but most especially the romance of the landscape. I want to wax poetic about the glories we see each trip --from Yorkshire moors in all seasons, barren stony, blowy mountains in Scotland, unbelievably green valleys dissected with their river and dry stone walls hundreds of years old, truly ancient cities and buildings everywhere, a 10 foot wide farm track from here to there, enclosed by walls and hedges, and blocked by a herd of sheep, a narrow black road running through a birch forest in Sweden with heavy snow falling, the

transformation of the landscape as we drive from Paris to the south of France, detouring into the alps to visit our son in Grenoble, and then on to Provence and the Mediterranean coast.

My God, the romantic places we have dined at, where important history is part of the decor: the restaurant in the 15th C. building in Kendal, Yorkshire which only cooked food from 18th C recipes, and whose floor was a section of the Roman Road; the Bistro terrace overlooking the Palais des Papes in Avignon, the seat of the Papacy from 1309 to 1377; the discoveries in Carcassonne when we were only looking for a restroom, which the Romans had built as a hilltop fortified town in 100 BC. But by far the best meals we have had are the hundreds of home cooked meals our friends have prepared for us through the years.

Our lives have certainly been cosmopolitan, but not exactly glamorous. Our itinerary changed each of the 5 to 6 trips we took per year, but the constant was a 7 day work schedule and most evenings were spent driving to our destination for the next buying day. Usually we started in England, our favorite and easiest logistically, allowing a more gentle pace to recover from the lost night of sleep on the transatlantic flight.

Here's the itinerary for September/October 2000, one of my travel folders picked at random: Tuesday night, September 26 Dulles-Milan; With only a few hours sleep, drive to Parma on Wednesday; shop Thursday and Friday at the largest fair in Europe -- 4 huge airplane hangars plus outdoor stands filled with antiques; Friday afternoon with 8 hours of indoor/outdoor dust and debris coating our bodies and caked into our nostrils, we rush to catch a flight to Copenhagen. Shop Saturday in Copenhagen, catch the first ferry to Sweden on Sunday, and visit the country dealers on the 40 hour trip to Stockholm; Wednesday night, fly to Frankfurt and drive to Holland/Belgium; Thursday at 2 huge wholesalers and a 5 hour drive to Paris; up for the 5 am start at the Paris Flea market, then drive to Rouen two hours away for an afternoon in the great antique district, and back to Paris in the evening; Saturday an 8 am start at the flea market, and Saturday night a flight to Manchester England, where we begin a week combing the country from the north (less expensive) to the south (more expensive) to London (mainly prohibitive). Sunday fly home, turn in our rolls of film at the processor, pick them up at 10 on Monday, and off to the store to start the selling part of the routine. I remember wanting to strangle the employee who used to say, when we arrived at 10:30, "Oh, great, you're finally here"

Out of this trip I have a wonderful memory of an outdoor meal in Parma with 10 other antique dealers (eating Parma ham and the world's best Parmesan), some we knew and some we met that night and made friends with, and went on to have many more meals with, squeezed in here and there in many different locations. And always, shop talk, shop talk, shop talk and lots of laughter. On that trip, I don't think we had another proper meal until we got to England 12 days later. Then we had many to make up for the dearth. Lunch was always a sandwich in a packet with an almost microscopic filling.

Each trip was different. Sometimes we would spend a week in France combing the country side and only a few days in England. A memorable call was Beaune. It is a city with a large gypsy population who deal in antiques and brocante, which is French for second-hand. (This is actually a rigorous distinction in France, and enforced by the "sign police"). They live in a large neighborhood of newly built houses of brick with concrete surrounds, no grass. They are usually furnished with new and traditional furniture, with the seating covered with plastic. But the gypsies mainly lived out back in their caravans (U.S. translation, trailers, but these are highly personalized and exotic, often charming.) Actually, we have not been to Beaune in many years, so the younger generation may have decided to

move indoors. Back then we found interesting tidbits among the brocante and antiques, and got to know a slice of life few are familiar with.

Here's the hard reality behind every trip: the logistics. Transatlantic flights: Washington to Milan, London to Washington; 3 internal flights: Bologna to Copenhagen, Stockholm to Frankfurt, Paris to Manchester; 4 rental cars; 17 different hotels for a 19 day trip. Calls to all the wholesalers we want to visit to make sure they are available on the day of our call. (If not, start again.) Coordinate schedules with fairs or auctions we also need to attend, and find someone to bid for us because we cannot stay in one location more than a day. All booked in advance, calculating travel durations and likely times at particular destinations, but never factoring in time for meals or a good night's sleep. If we ran late for an appointment, we had to call from a pay phone, as cell phones came later. We had an entire suitcase of country maps, city maps, and magnifying glasses in order to read them at night; hotel guides, business supplies, camera's, walkie talkies – no cell phones -- flashlights, batteries for everything, an immersion heater for tea and tea bags, bags of snacks for the long night rides. Later we had to add computers, phones, very fancy camera and lenses, and loads of chargers.

Another essential reality of life: the money! How to juggle the money in perhaps 8 different currencies in the space of 3 weeks. (Now, thankfully, we have the Euro, making things so much easier, and the players in European buying and selling have gotten to know each other better.) But in the beginning, we had checking accounts in all the different countries we wanted to buy in, often dealing with clerks who didn't speak English and we didn't speak their language. We had to get familiar with often arcane requirements. We had to get money into each account in advance, not knowing how much we might spend in any particular country. Study the currency fluctuations to know when to transfer money. “Read” our bank statements and balance the checkbooks. Find time to find and visit the bank in the midst of hectic shopping days, in order to withdraw cash, because so many dealers wouldn't take checks.

On one trip to the bank in Paris, we were the targets of an elaborate sting by maybe 10 men and women. Apparently, they had look outs in the bank waiting for people that were getting cash. I was waiting in the car outside as Ed emerged from the bank and tossed the knapsack onto the backseat. Suddenly there were 5 chattering and gesticulating people surrounding the car with bank notes in the air and on the pavement. Ed thought the money had come out of his bag, and ran around trying to pick it up. Then there was a guy opening the back door on my side and I jumped out, thinking he was trying to carjack the car and he wouldn't get me as well. But it wasn't in park and starting to roll backward, which knocked him off balance and gave me a chance to call out for Ed. The man grabbed the bag, and headed into traffic, where he handed it off to a woman. Ed saw the hand off, also ran off into oncoming traffic, jerked the bag out of her hands, and ran back to the car where I was already pulling out of the parking place. Somehow we zoomed into traffic on one of the busiest streets of Paris, but the gang was not done with us. Four men pursued us, surrounded the car, and flattened a tire with a knife. We drove two blocks on the flat tire, until we saw a gendarme on the corner and pulled over to him. The gangsters abandoned the chase and we came out ahead of the game, counting the money Ed had picked up from the street. It went to pay for the flat tire, and the bottle of wine we needed to calm our nerves. The irony was, we didn't even have that much cash in the car.

Robberies were also a big problem at the Paris flea market and at the huge fairs in the south. The thieves got to know who the buyers were who paid with cash. Then they would follow them until they found a quiet place to do the heist. If you objected, you got beaten up. After a few years of this, the dealers found a way to pay without the risk – we would pay the transporter, whose burly guys would pay as they picked up each item for shipment.

Buying antiques overseas used to be a very cold business. Most of the wholesalers kept their inventory in unheated locations with cement or dirt floors, and of course the flea markets and huge fairs were unheated. Barns were also very popular or shed or garages. Calling at one of these places was not a brief stop. Furniture was usually displayed in long rows with tiny isles between; often chests of drawers were piled so high you had to get the top one down to see it properly. Lighting was almost nonexistent. One dealer in Stockholm had such an extensive inventory it took most of a day to walk the aisles. Not only no heat, but no bathroom. He kept his customers going with doses of Jagermeister but never any snacks. At the end of the day it took hours for our bodies to warm up.

The big fairs were the agony and the ecstasy in microcosm. They were generally held in the rough: cement floored expo centers with roofs but gaping open doors, and miles of outdoor stands. Of course, no heat or air conditioning. During most of the 80's, they opened, like the Paris flea market, according to long tradition, under cover of darkness. The night before opening, all the lorries (trucks) were guided into their positions in enormous halls or adjoining fields. NO one was allowed to open his truck until the whistle blew at the appointed hour: usually 5 or 6 in the 80's, although at some fairs some dealers would sneak in earlier and the rest of us followed. In the 90's the time became saner at about 8.

The whistle at 5: there was a frenzy of activity: trucks were thrown open, dealers worked frantically to get their things unloaded. The buyers ran from truck to truck with their torches (flashlights) looking for a compelling leg or silhouette. The rule was that once you put your hand on a piece and asked the price, the dealer would give you the first chance to buy, but you had better be quick. The conversation would continue about the item's merits and unseen elements, and the prospect could ask for a discount, but he more or less had to buy it sight unseen. Once he declined to buy at the negotiated price another prospect could inquire about it.

It was a mark of your mettle as a dealer to be able to take the risk of spending sometimes quite a bit of money on an object you could only see a small portion of. Those who waited had only 2nd tier things to choose from. No one stopped to pay during the first hours, just slapped his sticker on the item and ran to the next lorry. There was a lot of trust in the air. When we all returned to the site of our blind and aggressive decisions after sun up, there was jubilation or despair. The wine started to flow early on these occasions at the outdoor concessions. What's wrong with wine with your croissant? In France, absolutely nothing. The buying continued in the more sober, or not, light of day and was essentially finished by 11 am.

Then it was time for Lunch. There were numerous outdoor grills cooking delicious smelling cuts of meat, sausages and pommes frites. There were paella stands, crepe stands, wine tasting stands, and usually 2 sit down restaurants. There were small groups of intense friends and huge tables of English speakers from America, England, Australia and wherever. Food and lots of wine and stories about the conquests of the day. Lots of bonhomie, even though we were competitors in the buying. After the Fair at Chatou, an island in the Seine, we could go to lunch at the restaurant pictured in "The Boating Party" by Renoir. The balcony and the red and white awning are still there.

Now for the mop up. The industrious dealers would travel all the aisles again, looking for good things that had been overlooked or unloaded too late for the frenzied buying. Many of the most eye catching things were gone, but often there were still treasures that had to be carefully unwrapped and were now there in full splendor. We were more the tortoises than the hares, and we spent the afternoon in a slow mop up action, with extensive rewards.

On to the peacock parade. Through the morning we handed in our buy sheets to the transporters. After lunch the transporters began their pick up in earnest. (The transport companies follow dealers around collecting purchases to take to a central distribution center.) As the items arrived back at the lorries, we began to compare our choices to our competitors—I mean lunch mates and friends. At times we would pick up the light things ourselves, and proudly march our trophies through the halls and on to the shipper, meanwhile looking with jealousy at great things others bought or with pride at what we had scored. Or sometimes with horror. “Oh God, how will we ever sell that!” “Oh Damn! I saw that before he did, and I didn't have the nerve to pay the price and now look how fabulous it is. I have to have it, and now I have to pay even more.” Lots of further dealing took place in the parking lots, current anger and jealousy at being aced out turned into satisfaction at the subsequent purchase, for a modest up charge. Those were the days, my friends.

At the end of the day: 1) filthy clothes, most especially if it rained, turning the fields into mud piles 2) filthy body 3) sunburn or freezer burn 4) nostrils petrified with dust and truck exhaust 5) an empty bank account 6) merchandise we are exulting or pouting about 7) a long way to drive and an unknown bed.

Speaking of beds, here are my hotel recommendations starting with the ones to stay away from: your car. Don't travel without booking a room (in the early days, this lack of foresight made us cozy up into our car regularly), but even with a destination, the night may find you up close and personal with your car for the intimate 8 hours: an unexpected blizzard on the motorway; unexpectedly running out of gas on the London ring road at 2 am in the fog; arriving after the cut off time for your reservation, and suffering the slap of paying for the room you can't sleep in. The night in the car and the wash up at the petrol station next morning....well, what words are there?

Further up the hostelry chain is the Auberge du Lac, where we stayed somewhere in the Burgundy country. After a really fine country dinner, thank goodness, we investigated our room. It presented us with the alternative of opening our suitcase or moving. Literally, we had to take our suitcase into the hall to open it. Two children's beds, sunken in the middle with unspeakable bedding. Another night in our clothes. Early in the morning we woke up to screeching noises outside. The window 3 inches away showed us the landlord's wife butchering the chickens and rabbits for that day's meals. We had roast chicken for lunch, and they were indeed an epiphany of taste. We were still there at lunch because there was only one shower for the 10 rooms, and the slow drizzle of water meant very long showers. Happily, the line for the single WC was a bit shorter.

Of course we have a car story. We were there so much we finally bought a station wagon (estate car) from a dealer in England. A year or two later, just as we were pulling in the pay station 25 miles outside of Paris, of course at midnight, the engine seized. Out of the car, peer into the engine, despair. An English truck driver, recognizing the distress of a fellow Briton, came to our rescue. We pushed the car to the side, emptied our luggage and multiple boxes of antique accessories we were taking to the shipper, put everything into the cab including ourselves, and he took us as far as he could. No trucks his size was allowed into Paris proper so he dumped us on the outskirts of the peripherique in the middle of the night with all of our belongings around us. Finally, a cab appeared, and luckily the hotel had not given away our room. The Paris mechanic we towed the car to said he would have it fixed in a week, but three weeks later, we had our transporter put it into one of his trucks and take it to England. New engine, \$3000, no problem. A few months later, it was stolen from a petrol station while in for a tune up.

The very best part of buying trips was visiting with the dealers we got to be friends with. We would

plan our visits to them for the end of the day, and then have dinner together, and often a bed in a house instead of a hotel. We followed them as they moved houses and stores, watched their kids grow up, and talked shop and local politics incessantly. At our favorite stop, we watched as our friends, mainly by themselves, turn a tip of a farm house back into the comfortable Elizabethan manor house it had started life as.

Another regular early stop was the moated Thurland Castle, outside Kirby Lonsdale in Cumbria. (Google it). One antique dealer friend hit on the idea of buying a castle instead of a retail shop in a city. It had acres of room and romance, he could live in it and entertain in it, everyone would be impressed and want to buy things that came with such a wonderful provenance. It also had loads of upkeep expenses, but that discovery came later. For two years, the castle flourished. Buyers came and went, and after buying we all joined in cooking dinner in the huge servant's kitchen, and then marched the results to the grand candlelit dining room. It was dress up make believe, but it was wonderful.

On the other side of reality, the bedrooms were not heated, and we slept under mountains of covers. The bathroom was down the hall and then into ghost territory down another long unused hall. It was a later addition pasted onto the exterior of the castle at a window. If the rooms and hall were frigid, the bathroom was deep freeze. I took soft cloth things with me when I had to wander off in the middle of the night (believe me, I put those trips off as long as possible) in order to keep my skin from freezing to the toilet seat.

So many other wonderful places. Beere Manor, Pennard House, Bath Market, Islington, Kensington Church Street, King's Road, Warminster, Brighton, Leeds, Harrogate, Arundel, Lewes, Edenbridge, Petworth, Avon, Knaresborough, Gidley Manor, Fawsley Hall, crossing the English channel in a tempest, Calais, the markets of Paris, the Left Bank, Terrass Hotel, Toulouse, Avignon, Bezier, Bonnieux, Lyon, Nimes, Rome, Amsterdam, Brussels, Bruges, Mechelen, Knokke, Roermond, Antwerp, Helsingborg, Ljungby, Norrkoping, Gamla Stan, Clas Pa Horner...In the dealing world, an interesting location to end the story with.