

Weston, Massachusetts

Golden Ball Tavern Museum Show: Nice, Folksy Venue in a Very Tony Town

by Jeanne Schinto

When we drove into Weston, Massachusetts, on Saturday afternoon, September 24, 2005, we were reminded of the scene three times a year in Brimfield. The whole town was out for this one, just as we had been told it would be. Even before we got to our destination—the antiques show and sale at the Golden Ball Tavern Museum in this western suburb of Boston—the atmosphere was that of the carnival, the tent city, the gypsy encampment. That's because many organizations and smart individuals were piggybacking on the museum show with events of their own.

We passed multiple signs for yard sales. We saw high-school students having a car wash, dozens of wet towels spread across a lawn. Katrina victims funds-seekers were imploring. A church was selling knitwear and lunch. Real-estate agents were having open houses, and one had a banner on its headquarters. Bigger banners were stretched across the road, one for the museum show itself and another for an antique car show. There were balloons at an interior-design shop and at other retail shops along the Boston Post Road, which was lined with cars for a mile. In the driveway of a residence, near which we finally parked, a Save-the-Newfoundlands exhibit was set up like a lemonade stand.

Always held on the last Saturday of September, this annual rite of autumn began 38 years ago when the museum first invited antiques dealers to set up and sell to the public on its sprawling six acres. The show's inaugural promoter was the legendary Russell Carrell (1916-1998), widely credited with originating the outdoor antiques show concept in the United States. For the last eight years, the show has been managed by Tom D'Arruda and Brian Ferguson of Providence, Rhode Island.

This wasn't our first visit to Weston that weekend. We had been there on the day before to sample the flavor of Friday's traditional barn preview. For \$85 (partially tax deductible), one can take an early look at what has been donated to the museum for the sale, eat lunch, and support the cause at the same time. The ticket also entitles its holder to lunch the next day. "Anyone can donate, not just museum members," said Martha J. "Martie" Campbell, organizer of the barn preview this year. "We price things as a committee, with no dealer markup."

While we spoke to Campbell on that Friday, two dealers approached the entrance to the barn. "You did this last year, and you're doing this to us again," Campbell gently scolded. "It's not fair to others if we let you in early." The doors weren't scheduled to open for another 30 minutes.

Dealers are expectant because they know Weston (population 11,652) is home to money, even if they can't quote the latest statistics: highest median household

income in the greater Boston area, \$153,918; highest median home price, and the only one above \$1 million, \$1,202,500 (as reported in *Boston Magazine* in 2005, based on latest government figures available). We didn't see any Seymour tables as we glanced around, but D'Arruda, who is a dealer as well as promoter, told us, "Some great stuff has come out of there over the years."

At Friday lunch under the tent we spoke with Joan Bines, director of the museum for 20 years and currently one of only two paid employees. The rest are volunteers. "I'm the driver of the Clydesdales," said Bines. We had been to the museum to do research in the past, but we took a refresher-course tour with Bines.

The Golden Ball Tavern was built in 1768 by Isaac Jones (1728-1813) as a tavern and family home. Jones had previously made a fortune as a merchant shipper of goods (we like to think of him as an early FedEx operation). The house was built as a symbol of his wealth and his continuing business acumen, since the Boston Post Road was highly traveled during the years leading up to the Revolution and beyond.

Bines, whose Ph.D. is in American diplomatic history, is proud of the fact that her museum has a unique story to tell about the Revolution, since Jones was a Tory, remaining deeply loyal to England even after most of his friends had switched to supporting the patriots. On at least one occasion Jones entertained British spies at the tavern. Publicly, in the *Massachusetts Spy*, he was accused of being a traitor. Needless to say, Jones gradually came around, and by January 1777 he began hauling goods for the American army.

As Weston grew, along with the rest of the new republic, and times changed, the tavern was closed. Six succeeding generations of Joneses lived at the address until 1963, when Ralph Frost Jones died. In 1964 Howard Gambrell Jr., while doing a survey of the 50 oldest houses in Weston, identified the property as a worthy place for the town to buy and restore. An endowment was raised, the purchase was made, and a trust was formed. Since 1967, the antiques show has been the museum's major fundraising event of the year.

When Russell Carrell was promoter of the show, 100 dealers could fit into the acreage. D'Arruda and Ferguson can fit only 85, since so many dealers drive vans now instead of the station wagons of yore.

Dealers make a reservation for a space but aren't assigned to any particular one. "It's always first-come, first-served," said D'Arruda. "It used to be that dealers would park outside the museum gate as early as Tuesday. They'd park one vehicle there as a marker and drive away in another. Lately they have been parking on Thursday. It's to try and get the space they want. It's sort of like a strange superstition. A woman once said to me, 'What am I going to do? That young policeman told me to move my car. I won't get my space.' It turned out the space she wanted was the worst space in the whole field, but she thought of it as hers."

Setup on Saturday starts officially at 6 a.m. Early buyers are permitted in at 7. "And the space costs only a hundred and twenty-five dollars," D'Arruda told us. "So nobody gets hurt if they don't do well."

Admittedly it wasn't a scientific survey, but of the 16 dealers we spoke to on Saturday afternoon in the waning hours before the show closed at 4 p.m., most were very happy with their results, the mood of every one of them unable to be anything but buoyant, perhaps because the weather was absolute perfection. (In other years, D'Arruda said, he had faced "everything but snow.") If you miss here, a couple of them told us, check your merchandise. Fittingly, on our way out of town, we followed a bright yellow 355 F1 GTS Ferrari. The driver wound it up when the red light switched to green, leaving us far behind.

For more information about the museum, phone (781) 894-1751 or see the Web site (www.goldenballtavern.org). For more information about the show, contact Ferguson and D'Arruda by phone at (401) 273-5550 or by e-mail at t-darruda@comcast.net.