



This Coca-Cola tray was priced at \$12. Many items cost less than \$35.

DAWN REISS/PHOTO FOR THE TRIBUNE

Frugal foraging is half the fun

Discerning eye can find
lots of gift-giving deals

By Dawn Reiss

SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

Budgets are tight, and Christmas is coming. Bah humbug. Shake off that Grinchy attitude by shopping a largely overlooked venue: estate sales. (Vintage shops get much of their merchandise from estate sales, then double or triple the price.)

Many people go to estate sales to restock their cabinets with everyday items. And there certainly are things such as half-used bottles of detergent that you'd never want to give as a gift. But estate sales can be a treasure trove for finding unique wedding shower, birthday and holiday gifts.

Or so I was told.

To find out, I trekked with a friend to Barrington for my first estate sale at the home of Ralph Gilbert. Hundreds of cars lined the road as we parked within walking distance. A long line of people patiently waited to enter the 9,000-square-foot mansion, which also includes an in-ground swimming pool and guest house on the 6-acre property.

Three years ago, Connie — Gilbert's wife of 56 years — died. She wanted to downsize for years, but, Gilbert joked, he told her “someone was going to have to carry me out on my shield” if he was going to move from his home. Now that some time had passed, Gilbert no longer wants the upkeep and is downsizing to a three-story, 3,000-square-foot home in Lake Barrington Shores.

“It's kind of like turning over a new leaf,” said Gilbert, 80, whose estate sale was hosted by Platinum Estate Sales by Lady McBeth. “I have everything I need. I have my family, and my favorite artwork and furniture that has a lot of meaning are coming with me. I feel as if a big weight has been lifted. Besides, my next move is going to be lighter because I've never seen a U-Haul at a funeral.”

Gilbert's lifetime of collecting meant a lot of great deals for others.

Barrington's Jean Johnson, 46, arrived early with her husband, Ron, and quickly scored a Nike Fighting Illini jersey for \$3, a brass sundial for \$30, wrapping paper for \$1 and a plush Santa for \$8 along

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Some surprising finds

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with a fancy gold J.G. Hook shirt she bought for \$3 for her coming holiday parties.

"I'm here doing my Christmas shopping," Jean Johnson said. "It's great for unusual things, especially for people who have everything."

Monika Harding, 26, of Arlington Heights, decided to come after seeing a desk among the online photos posted before the estate sale. Harding confided that she was shopping for herself, preferring to buy new items for gifts unless she found something special that

looked brand new.

Others drove more than an hour in the hopes of finding a potential deal. At a friend's suggestion, Joseph Wheeler, 55, of Chicago, started going to estate sales four months ago when he needed to furnish his Hyde Park apartment.

Wheeler first bought a wooden four-poster queen bed and frame for \$200 from an estate sale in Crete. The following week he went to Shorewood and bought all of his living room furniture, an oversize sofa, loveseat and chairs, for \$600. The furniture, Wheeler said, was less than 6 months old and was

being sold after its original owner had to return to India. The original price: \$3,500.

"I'm always looking for a bargain," Wheeler said. "And there are some incredible deals at estate sales. Now I'm hooked, and I go to one almost once a week."

It's the reason a lot of people go to estate sales: the thrill of the bargain hunt. Every estate sale is unique. Some are better than others. But here's what you could potentially buy based on a first-day estate sale without any negotiating:



\$5 or less

- Sequin tube tops, with the tags still on \$3
- New Lands' End boots \$3
- Nike Illini basketball jersey .. \$3
- Wrapping paper \$1
- Ralph Lauren dress shirt (brand new in plastic) \$3
- Pair of FootJoy SoftJoys Terrains Golf Shoes \$3
- Men's fedoras \$3
- Ladies hats \$3



\$10 or less

- Three glass ornaments \$8
- Cashmere/silk scarves (men's and women's) \$6
- Retro picture frame/mirror \$10
- Dietz kerosene lanterns \$6 (each)
- New golf shoes \$8



\$35 or less

- Wicker trunk \$20
- Set of 24 wine glasses \$34
- Giraffe lamp \$25
- Coca-Cola tray \$12
- Assorted teacups \$12-\$15



DAWN REISS/PHOTOS FOR THE TRIBUNE

\$100 or less

- Black leather butterfly chair \$90 (each)
- Green leather footrest \$66



Splurge

- Vintage wooden armoire... \$380
- Bausch & Lomb "Criterion 4000" Observatory Telescope \$425

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Tips point the way to bargain presents

By Dawn Reiss

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For first-time estate sale shoppers, there's a lot to learn. Here are some tips that will make you a savvy searcher:

Find a sale: Most estate sales post photos a few days before the sale, and some host presales for select buyers. Check out estatesales.net. Sign up for e-mail alerts to be notified of estate sales within a certain radius or ZIP code. Check out newspaper classified ads and view the garage sales subheading on Craigslist, which will mention estate sales. Look for estate sales in Chicago's older neighborhoods such as Old Irving Park, Edgebrook and Norwood Park and homes on the North Shore or in the northwest suburbs such as Barrington, where homeowners are retiring and downsizing.

what a comparable or the same item might cost in today's market. A \$400 telescope might be a deal if it typically costs \$5,000. Make sure you inspect each item well, recommends Corrine Schreiber, who hosts estate sales and owns Calico Cat Antiques in Chicago's Norwood Park. Fill a vase with water to make sure there aren't any cracks. Turn a lamp on. Run your finger around the rims of glasses to make sure there aren't any chips. Open cupboards, because some estate sales don't clearly display all items. In some cases, an estate sale may be categorized as a "diggers sale," where items haven't been washed and potential buyers literally dig through unopened boxes. Just make sure you know before you go, so you can wear old clothes and gloves if you want to dig.

Expect the unexpected: Each

Most estate sales last two days, typically Friday and Saturday. If you want the best selection, go early when the serious buyers, including antique dealers and collectors, go. Sometimes numbers are given out, which means only a specific number of people are allowed into the home at one time or for the day. To gain entry you must be in line and get a number. Other times, you just show up and wait.

Bring cash and negotiate:

Most people no longer take checks.

“Be prepared with cash,” said Jeanette McBeth, owner of Platinum Estate Sales by Lady McBeth; she typically hosts 35 estate sales a year. “It is your best negotiating tool.”

Her other recommendation: Don't be afraid to ask, “Can you do a little better on that?” But also be reasonable. Don't say, “I'll give you \$1 for a \$100 item.”

estate sale is unique. Most people don't know what they will find until they arrive and start looking around. That's why it's such a hot spot for unique gifts or unexpected surprises.

Schreiber was preparing a home for a sale when she found \$40,000 in cash in several envelopes marked 1999, 2000 and 2001, presumably, she said, as a hedge against the potential Y2K meltdown. The envelopes were hidden in a plastic vegetable bin, which Schreiber nearly missed. Another time she was cleaning out a kitchen cabinet when she found a jar full of glass eyes.

“I screamed, and I don't think my feet hit the floor as I booked it out of the house,” Schreiber said. “I thought they were real.”

She later returned to the house and learned that the eyeballs were the previous homeowner's prosthetics, tucked away for safe keeping.

Most items should cost 40 to 60 percent less than their original purchase value, based on the condition and quality of the item, McBeth said. If you don't go to an estate sale on the first day, you can find deals starting at noon on the second day, when many estate sales offer 50 percent off to unload items.

What to look for: If you find a particular item listed before the sale, do your homework. Find out

What's hot: The TV show "Mad Men" has created a huge market for retro 1950s and '60s clothing, chunky jewelry, brooches and bold prints. Think leisure suits, pastel wool skirts and bright colors. Also popular: midmodern furniture (think Heywood-Wakefield, Howard Miller and other designers from that era/style), abstract artwork and geometric designs, vintage toys and Christmas ornaments.