

Storage unit auctions let people bid on junk with the hope of finding treasure

By Dan Zak, Published: August 22

Prologue: A taupe plastic tub sits in the stale darkness of unit No. 2271 in a self-storage facility in Hyattsville.

In the grand scheme of Things, the tub is nothing.

It takes up a speck of the United States' 2.3 billion square feet of rentable self-storage space, which, if parceled out equally among the populace, would give each American about 7.38 square feet. This means we could all stand comfortably — in uniform rows like tubby terra-cotta warriors — within the self-storage lockers and hangars of America. Around us would be junk: ours and others', swapped and inherited and bought for pocket change, bundled in bags and baskets and tubs and jugs, important enough to keep locked up and then sometimes trivial enough to surrender to receivership after we don't pay our rental fees.

That surrendered junk is routinely sold to strangers who drive from auction to auction, looking for deliverance in the detritus. On a Monday in August, starting at 10 a.m., they drive in a caravan of sorts through Prince George's County — through knots of on-ramps, around weedy medians, past the coin laundries, the nail salons, the charter bus lots, the mattress outlets, the Hunan buffets. Until 3 p.m. there's an auction every hour on the hour, a series of archaeo-illogical troves up for grabs.

10 a.m. Lanham

The corrugated teal door rumbles upward, and a herd of people bob and crane for a view. They flick flashlights over the dim interior of the unit. Heaps of dusty clothes, a couple of bike tires, an undergrowth of tangled power strips, a digital-camera box that may or may not contain a digital camera.

“Anybodygimmeeahunnerd?” says the auctioneer, who works for a Maryland-based private auction company contracted by storage companies. He’s leading today’s suburban safari to six facilities.

Someone offers \$100.

“Okayhowbout125? Onetwenty-five-okay150? Onefifty175? Oneseventy-fivehowbout2? Twohowboughttwoandaquarter? Okaytwoandahalf? Twoand-ahalf300? Three hunnerd. Threesifty? Threeseventyfive-thankyou. Four? Four, 425. Fourfifty? Fourfifty. Fourseventyfive. Anybodygimme500even? Five-hunnerd? No? Soldfourseventyfive. Name?”

“Winters.”

The contents of Unit 612 — which five seconds ago belonged to some anonymous person who was far behind on his rental payments — are now the property of Alfred Winters, a District cab driver propelled by fallow summer fares to seek extra money in storage. Winters stays behind to sign a paper as the rest of the herd moves onward through the maze of storage, like mice after cheese, to Unit U3. A facility employee cuts the lock and raises the door, revealing a Crossbow home-gym contraption and a boombox. Someone was using U3 as his personal workout space.

After 15 seconds of bidding, the unit goes for \$20.

“From here we’re going to Brentwood,” the auctioneer says to the herd. “Brentwood at 11 a.m.”

11 a.m. Brentwood

The people on this run look like trailer-park roughnecks and country-club wives. They are black and white and Hispanic. They walk with canes and sit in strollers. There are tattoos and there are fancy watches, sometimes on the same person. The herd seems to be, in other words, a random sampling of America.

Stacey Harris, 27, signs in with 30 other people at the second location. She wears a Harley-Davidson T-shirt and has been doing auction runs every week for two years. The best gets, she says, are tools that can be easily moved at flea markets.

“You find a lot of porn,” says Harris, a small-engine mechanic who lives in Bowie. “We actually found someone’s ashes. You never know who the [owners] are. They could’ve passed away. They could be in jail. They could’ve lost their job.”

Who rented Unit 4003 here, and why did he cram it full of dozens and dozens of car tires?

A man named Lopez buys the tire unit for \$10. The herd steps to the right, to Unit 4004. The auctioneer hurls the garage door upward.

More tires. The herd balks. Who is Mr. Tire Man?

Better yet: Who would consider bidding on abandoned tires?

Noon Hyattsville

Ron Kastronis arrives early at the third location, parks his pickup truck, rolls down the windows, reclines his seat. Eight years ago, he took a buyout offer from Pepco, got divorced and started selling his possessions on eBay. Now he’s a full-time Amazon.com bookseller, with 22,000 units online, shipping 40 a day. Auction-running is a side activity that’s become more of a grind since “Storage Wars” debuted on A&E in late 2010. Rookies and one-timers have clogged the auction

circuit, driving up bids because television has convinced them that gold bullion is buried under piles of dirty turtlenecks.

“I think it’s because the economy is down and people are underemployed and they’re trying things out,” says Kastronis, who lives in Waldorf. “I think it’ll be a while till it gets back to normal. . . . Units have been going for two to three times what they should be today. It’s been awful for the regulars. Used to buy 12 to 15 [units] a week. Now it’s maybe one.”

His retirement is in gold jewelry, he says. He has tubs of it, gathered from auctions over the years.

“Okay, we’ve got four units here today,” the auctioneer says just after noon. “From here we’re going to Forestville.”

The herd scampers through storage corridors. For \$7.50, Harris buys the contents of No. 2271, which contains the aforementioned taupe plastic tub that had been sitting in the stale darkness for God knows how long.

“You never know what’s in a tub,” Harris says.

No. 2373 contains two box springs, two mattresses, two sad chairs and one sadder ironing board. The herd is unimpressed. Tony and Debbie Scoblick of Baltimore bid \$1.

“Anybody \$2?” the auctioneer asks, hopelessly.

Nope.

“It’ll cost \$40 to sanitize the mattresses,” Debbie says.

“We’ll still make \$250 to \$300 on this,” Tony says.

They pay their \$1 at the facility’s front desk and then jump into their silver Mercedes.

## Lunch

The Scoblicks won’t make anything on Unit 2373. In fact, they’ll trash its contents. The mattresses are decent but scribbled over with permanent marker — a hazard of a business that’s 60 percent landfill material, says Tony, who for 30 years has made a living off storage-unit auctions and wholesale flea-marketing. Before that, in the early ’70s, he was indicted with six other Catholic radicals (dubbed “The Harrisburg Seven” by the media) for allegedly plotting to kidnap then-national security adviser Henry Kissinger in order to force a peaceful resolution to the Vietnam War.

You meet all kinds of people on auction runs.

Anyway. The jury deadlocked, Tony and his co-defendants were not convicted, and his life’s second act consists of scooping up the abandoned building blocks of modern living (sofas, kitchen chairs, bed frames) and selling them at reasonable rates to working-class Baltimoreans.

“It’s a good way to redistribute things at reasonable prices back to people, without being a charity,” says Tony, 71. “The sad part is that they really get squeezed out from storage companies. Whatever you pay on a house payment, sometimes it’s three times that per square foot for storage. But these days real estate is so hard to buy that they’re forced to use storage companies.”

Then people fall behind on their payments and storage companies exercise their right to liquidate delinquent units. What's lost is found, and bought, and sold, and maybe stored again, and maybe lost again.

Between the third and fourth auctions, there is time for a Big Gulp.

1 p.m. Forestville

Unit No. 2013. Two rose-colored mattresses. A basketball trophy. A knife block. A George Foreman grill. A computer printer. A plastic rosary.

"Those are nice chrome chairs," a man observes as the herd peers into the unit.

"I got glass that could fit on that table," says another.

The auction is quick. Winters, the cabbie, snaps up his second unit — for \$125. The herd winds its way through the storage facility until the manager notices a reporter taking notes.

"Can't have you taking notes or doing what it is you're doing," she says to the reporter, who is promptly escorted from the premises. "I'm not gonna lose my job over whatever this is."

Self-storage companies don't like to be known for auctioning off a delinquent customer's stuff because that's not their main business, and because they don't want to invite a stampede of plunderers. And because the industry already has an aura of quiet desperation. People lose their homes, and stuff goes into storage. Uncle George dies, and stuff goes into storage. Someone who's on the run from something needs to go somewhere, and stuff goes into storage.

The only time that self-storage facilities make the news is when a corpse is discovered inside a unit. This happens more frequently than it should. It happened last month in Gresham, Ore. (alleged foul play). It happened in February in San Bernardino, Calif. (presumed natural causes). It happened in January in Clearwater, Fla., where police found the skeletal remains of an old woman at U-Stor Self Storage, just before the contents of Unit B8 were to be auctioned. The woman's daughter, an inveterate hoarder, had stashed the body in the unit years before, the Tampa Bay Times reported, after she was unable to transport it to Alabama for burial in 1995.

"My mom was terribly embarrassed about not being able to do it herself," the granddaughter of the deceased woman told WTSP 10 News, "and basically swore me to secrecy."

2 p.m. Capitol Heights

The manager at the Forestville facility phones the next location to warn them that a reporter is running with the herd. The reporter, not wanting to cause a scene, remains politely outside and passes the time by crudely plotting the history of mankind in his notebook:

The Stone, Bronze and Iron ages.

The Middle Ages.

The Renaissance.

The Industrial Revolution.

The Age of Consumerism. Or, the Storage Age.

The last several millennia, in two sentences: Man learns to make things. Things start to accumulate.

The modern self-storage industry began in the 1960s and has grown ever since, almost exclusively in America. About 85 percent of the world's 58,500 self-storage facilities are in the United States, according to the Alexandria-based Self Storage Association, and those facilities grossed a combined \$22.45 billion last year. What Americans pay to store their junk is about equal to the gross domestic product of the west African nation of Burkina Faso. The industry added a billion square feet of storage space between 1998 and 2005, with 8,694 facilities opening between '04 and '05 alone.

Such data, extrapolated imaginatively, herald a future dystopia wherein self-storage space outnumbers all else, and America is little more than row after row of quiet closed units containing saggy mattresses, rusty ironing boards and boxy computer printers from the 20th century.

3 p.m. Fort Washington

The last auction of the day is lackluster. Unit B165 looks like someone shoved Grandma's entire living room into it, lengthwise. Bidders approach the unit as if appraising a painting. They can look but not touch. They can stand on their tiptoes, but they can't cross the threshold. Grandma's living room goes for \$20.

The herd disperses. Except for a man named Shawn P., a Southeast D.C. resident who's wearing athletic clothing and a fanny pack with a cellphone holster. As bidders drive away, he picks through the facility's dumpster. The dumpster at a storage facility is for the most unwanted of unwanted items, but unwanted doesn't mean worthless.

"This is just economics," says Shawn P., arms reaching into the dumpster, his digital tablet playing a gospel/house-music mix. "If you're here, go for it."



He recovers leather jackets, gloves and a tuxedo and lays them in a plastic bin. He'll probably sell them at the flea market on Sheriff's Road just over the District line.

"D.C.'s a throwaway society," he says. It's "people with a lot of money who don't give a [care]."

Epilogue

You never know what's in a tub, as Stacey Harris says.

What's inside the taupe plastic tub, the one she paid \$7.50 for?

Porn?

Photo albums?

An urn?

(A corpse?)

As it turns out: Elmo, bright red and furry and smiling, as if happy to be possessed again, as if unaware that he's just one more thing in a cycle of Things.