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## New story of stuff: Estate sales see changes in what's selling, who's buying



Fancy items, such as the silver set shown here, aren't selling as quickly or fetching as much money as they used to in estate sales. "What I think is going to sell sits here. What I think will never sell goes away tomorrow," said Jim Wilson, co-owner of Wilson Estate Sales in the Teller Arms Shopping Center, 2401 North Ave.



Practical items, such as tools or locks, are more popular at estate sales these days, according to Mark Bloom, who

By Kelly Slivka  
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When I was growing up, my grandparents' houses felt more like museums than homes.

There were chairs I couldn't sit on, and rugs I couldn't step on. And more than half of the glasses and dishes on display in the heavy, floor-to-ceiling hutches — yes, there were multiple hutches — were off limits to my Cheerios and chocolate milk.

Special occasions only, Grandma would say.

I never understood the point of having so much "useless" stuff around, and now, in my own house, I don't have much that I don't use every day. There are a few pieces of art on the walls and some cool rocks I've collected on my outdoor adventures.

But you won't find bookshelves. I use stacks of old wine crates to store my favorite novels.

And you won't find china cabinets. When you only have a dozen plates and bowls and a handful of mismatched, second-hand coffee mugs, what's the point?

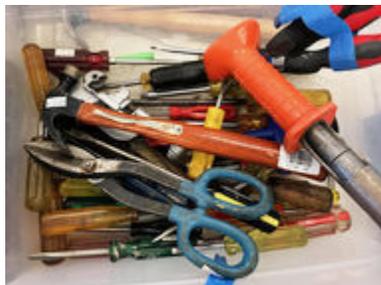
Maybe my lifestyle — should we call it stuff-style? — sounds charmingly simple or even annoyingly hip. However it sounds, you can be sure that those around town who are downsizing a home or depending on an estate sale for a financial boost and unburdening of belongings see me as part of a problem.

"I listen to it about 10 times a week," said Mark Bluhm, who owns the local company Reliable Estate Sales.

He listens to complaints from his clients about how the returns on once-valuable estate sale items have dropped.

It's a trend Bluhm has noticed since the start of the Great Recession:

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Practical items, such as tools or locks, are more popular at estate sales these days, according to Mark Bloom, who owns the local company Reliable Estate Sales.



Jim and Colleen Wilson own Wilson Estate Sales, which may be the only brick-and-mortar estate sale store between Denver and Salt Lake City. The Wilsons operate by buying an entire estate and then clearing it out for their clients and selling what they can at their store in the Teller Arms Shopping Center, 2401 North Ave.

Antiques, collectibles, china, hutches and the like are no longer fetching the amounts they used to.

Bluhm attributes the decline in value for these sorts of estate sale items to two main factors.

First, Gen-Xers and Millennials, like me, aren't interested in old-timey stuff, and as the Baby Boomers' parents' age and pass away, the market is becoming saturated.

He had one customer bring a collection of antique tools to him that was appraised at \$12,000 12 years ago but would only fetch \$1,000 now.

A quality couch that used to bring in \$450 might make \$150, he said. And he has a hard time even selling antique dressers that would have fetched \$300 a decade ago.

"The antique furniture market is probably at a 20 year low," Bluhm said.

And Bluhm knows his stuff. Not only has he operated Reliable Estate Sales for 16 years, he also travels the country to appraise valuables. He has found that modern people want contemporary-looking decor for their homes, and no one seems to be much into collector's items anymore.

"Especially the Millennials — they're the worst," Bluhm said. "They collect video games. That's it."

While I do have a good collection of classic Nintendo video games, I have to defend myself.

I buy a lot of older, used furnishings, appreciating the craftsmanship and durability present in the pre-superstore days, when build-it-yourself furniture didn't come in a slim box packaged en masse in a distant land.

But, according to Bluhm, I might be an aberration.

"Go into these kids' houses and find one that has a china hutch — or find one that has a decent dining table," Bluhm said of young folks. "They don't want a couch that will last for 10 years."

He mentioned how his son will just go to American Furniture Warehouse and buy a "disposable couch."

In the end, this "disposable" culture hurts people, Bluhm said, and he often has to break very bad news to hopeful clients.

Some of them were relying on a successful estate sale from a family member who has died to pay for their kids to attend college or to pay off a mortgage or to help them otherwise achieve their dreams, such as opening a business, retiring early or moving to a better area.



These German gas mask cartridges at Wilson Estate Sales are an example of the variety of items that can be encountered at an estate sale.

But the poor value of old treasures and the unforeseen costs of closing a loved one's affairs can put his clients more in the hole than they were when they started, Bluhm said.

"It can be a devastating blow to the surviving family members," he said.

Bluhm doesn't expect the downward trend in the value of antiques and collectibles to rebound anytime in the near future, but he did mention another post-recession trend that is a bit of a silver-lining.

"There's a whole new crowd of people coming to estate sales since the last recession," Bluhm said.

Young Boomers, Millennials, people of all stripes, really, are showing up more and showing a lot more interest than they used to in used practical items.

I'm on board with this. Why would I buy a new hammer when a secondhand store might have a half-dozen of them on the cheap, no worse for wear?

Men and women are buying old coffee pots and refrigerators, used hunting and fishing gear, used machinery and used tools for low prices at high levels, Bluhm said.

"You can go online and watch a YouTube video on how to install a toilet and save a hundred bucks," he said. "After this last depression, people wisened up."

Yet, the story is more complicated than what's old and pricey stays, what's old and cheap sells.

Jim and Colleen Wilson, who own Wilson Estate Sales, see more of a trend in how long it takes to sell certain things, not whether they can sell certain things.

Most estate salespeople hold sales in or outside their clients' homes and don't have an actual shop location, but the Wilsons have a physical store in the Teller Arms Shopping Center, 2401 North Ave.

In fact, Jim Wilson thinks the store, which the couple opened two years ago, is probably the only brick-and-mortar estate sale store between Denver and Salt Lake City.

The Wilsons operate by making a bid on an entire estate and then clearing it out for their clients. What needs to be trashed will be. What can be sold is taken to their store so customers may browse and buy on their own time.

While Jim Wilson has noticed people are getting less likely to buy big, bulky items — "entertainment centers, armoires, that kind of stuff," he said — he doesn't have any trouble selling antiques.

It just takes the right customer, he said.

Sure, some things, such as tools and appliances, fly out of their store right away, the Wilsons said. But someone comes along eventually to buy niche items. Often, it's unpredictable, they said.

"What I think is going to sell sits here. What I think will never sell goes away tomorrow," Jim Wilson said.

The Wilsons noticed that most people who come into their store are simply out for a deal, be it a deal on an expensive item or an inexpensive item.

“Our typical customer is looking for a bargain,” Colleen Wilson said, “whether it’s a drill or whether it’s a bookcase.”

Colleen said most customers will have a need for something, and they’ll come in and poke around before buying it new. She also said she finds customers who come into the shop are interested in older stuff that is well-made, not merely cheap.

And she didn’t mention any generational differences in her trends.

So maybe there is hope for me, and all the people depending on me to buy their stuff, after all.