

Taking a chance on what's left behind

As popularity of self-storage units rises, so do auctions of abandoned property

By Emily Sweeney, Globe Staff | December 15, 2005

Bob Rochefort sometimes breaks into places. He doesn't particularly enjoy doing this, but it's part of his job.

Rochefort is the assistant manager at Uncle Bob's Self Storage in Weymouth, which rents out 440 locked spaces where people can store things. If they stop paying the rental fee and don't return to get their stuff within three months -- well, that's when Rochefort steps in. He will pull out his trusty bolt cutters, clip the padlock, and roll up the unit's corrugated steel door, so its contents can be sold at auction.

The Uncle Bob's outlet, part of a nationwide chain, typically holds one auction per month, said Rochefort. Such auctions are being held more frequently these days because the self-storage industry is growing, according to Justin J. Manning, who is president of StorageAuctionsUSA.com in Yarmouthport. "Self-storage facilities are popping up all over the place," he said.

Indeed, the number of self-storage facilities in Massachusetts has doubled in the last decade. Local telephone directories list at least a dozen in Brockton, five in Stoughton, and six in Weymouth, including Uncle Bob's, among a host of other facilities across the area.

Business also is good at Manning's company, which conducts auctions for storage facilities in New England and as far south as Pennsylvania and New Jersey. His website lists 112 auctions being held this month, or roughly twice as many as when he started out seven years ago, Manning said.

Storage auctions typically are low-key events, perhaps listed in the classified section of a local newspaper, and attract a handful of bargain-hunters, flea market vendors, and eBay entrepreneurs willing to bid on a grab bag of someone else's discards. For efficiency's sake, potential bidders only get a few moments to peek inside each unit, which makes it something of a gamble because the auctions are for the whole lot.

"It's not like 'Oh, I like that lamp,' " said Manning. "You're buying the whole unit -- there's no cherry-picking."

Occasionally bidders strike gold. Ed Benson, an auctioneer from StorageAuctionsUSA.com, once sold a 1928 four-door Buick for \$50. The winning bidder soon sold it online for \$3,000, he said.

Of course, not every unit contains hidden treasures. And the winner is responsible for hauling everything away, be it a broken air conditioner, refrigerator, or mattress and box spring. One experienced bidder at a recent auction recalled paying \$900 for a unit, then having to spend \$1,300 to dispose of its contents -- including containers of cremation ashes from a human and from a family's pets.

One thing is for sure: Self-storage facility owners don't like holding these auctions.

"We have a saying in the industry, that the only good auction is no auction," said Chris McGrath, executive director of the Massachusetts Self Storage Association.

"It's always better to work out these situations," he said. "The only problem we have is when we can't maintain communication with people, and you're left with unpaid bills and a part of your property that's not accessible to you."

The law is not unkind to self-storage customers. State regulations protect delinquent renters from losing their stuff for at least two months, and most facilities wait even longer. In most cases, an auction is called off if a customer appears and pays the back rent even at the last minute.

Massachusetts first enacted a law regulating self-storage auctions in 1984, when the facilities began gaining popularity in the Northeast, said McGrath.

Of course, storage warehouses were around long before then. Metropolitan Moving & Storage Corp., which bills itself as the largest self-storage facility in New England, has been in business since 1894, renting out space in its massive, five-story warehouse at Massachusetts Avenue and Vassar Street in Cambridge. The place looks like a brick fortress.

Today's self-storage facilities are typically one-story, prefabricated structures with exterior garage-like doors for every unit, so customers can get to their possessions with minimum fuss. This form of self-storage, or ministorage, is a relatively young industry: The now-familiar facilities started to appear in the 1960s and 1970s, when they flourished in places such as California, Texas, and Florida. But the self-storage craze took a bit longer to catch on in the Northeast, probably due to the region's older and larger houses, according to McGrath. Most homes in Massachusetts have basements and attics, and many have garages or carriage houses, too, offering space to stash a family's excess belongings.

The industry is definitely thriving in the Bay State today. McGrath estimates there are more than 400 self-storage facilities statewide. And the Massachusetts Self Storage Association has grown from a half-dozen members in 1998 to 120 members today, he said.

Rental fees vary according to the size of the space and its location. Community Mini Storage in Wareham, for example, offers closet-size units measuring 5 feet wide, 5 feet deep, and 9 feet tall for \$33 to \$38 per month; the largest units measure 10 by 30 feet, and cost \$215 per month.

Extra Space Storage, a national chain, has several facilities south of Boston. In Abington, a closet-size unit costs \$19 per month, a 10-foot-by-30-foot space costs \$199. In Quincy, a closet-size unit costs between \$24 and \$48 per month, and a 10-foot-by-30-foot unit rents for \$345, according to the chain's website, www.extraspace.com.

"We're growing every year," McGrath said of the self-storage industry. People are moving around more, and they're buying more stuff. Baby boomers are inheriting their parents' property. Retirees are downsizing their living space, selling their large homes and moving to smaller condos.

Whatever the reason, there is increasing demand for storage space. And more storage facilities mean more auctions.

And that's good news to part-time treasure hunters like David Fregeau, a 40-year-old correctional officer who was introduced to the hobby by a friend and attended his first auction this fall.

On a Tuesday afternoon in September, Fregeau drove to Extra Space of Kingston, a storage facility off Route 3A, where the auctioneer led potential bidders through its entrance gates and past rows of beige storage units. The first stop was a unit the size of an oversized closet, 5 feet wide by 5 feet deep. An employee rolled up the green corrugated steel door as the bidders -- Fregeau and two other men -- looked on in anticipation.

What followed was like a scene from a game show that didn't end well for the contestants. Behind the door was a stack of white plastic buckets, a box for a portable table saw, a box for a Toshiba flat-screen-TV, and plastic bags of clothes. The only visible garments were a fuzzy coat and a pair of green military fatigue pants.

The collection failed to inspire a bidding war, or even a skirmish; Fregeau snagged it for \$5.

Then the group strolled over to a larger unit, about the size of a garage, that contained piles of electronic equipment, a car speaker tipped on its side, and several new Bazooka subwoofers, still in their original packaging. Fregeau and a rival bidder pulled out flashlights and began scanning the boxes of gear, trying to quickly figure out the value of their contents before the auctioneer called them out of the unit.

Bidding started at \$50 and escalated quickly: \$125, \$275, \$300, \$350, \$400, \$425, \$450. That's where Fregeau drew the line, and his rival took it all for \$475.

Fregeau offered his congratulations: "That's a good score -- that stuff is worth some cash."

Later Fregeau returned to the smaller unit to retrieve his haul. Rummaging through piles of women's clothes, he also found drug paraphernalia, a camcorder, a hammock, and a Coleman camping stove, among other things.

"There were these high patent-leather boots in there," he said. "There was some silver jewelry . . . but a lot of it was just junk."

Fregeau gave the clothes to charity, kept the hammock and camping stove for himself -- "I do a lot of camping, so that will come in handy" -- and ditched the rest.

All told, he considered his purchase a success -- "well worth five bucks," he said.

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