

1973

Auctioneer's twang starts and 'living corpse' watches

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BURLINGTON, Colo. — A lot of the stuff appeared to be junk, even after you wiped the dust away.

But you didn't want to say that to folks who had driven in from Lamar, or Oakley, Kan., or the Nebraska panhandle—folks who wouldn't have missed this for all the world.

They were more interested in the fact that, in all the piles of well-worn items scattered everywhere in front of and behind the old frame house, there were lots of things—big things, little things—which might turn out to be useful.

As always, a few were dealers, with sharp eyes and a practiced casualness to their bidding. They zeroed in on the

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genuine antiques: The New Haven mantel clock, its works still turning; the wind-up phonograph, with a thick, 78-rpm disc on its turntable; and the tall, magnificent rocking chair which stood out with grace and dignity in the midst of stove pipes and tea kettles and dirty mason jars.

SOMETHING UNUSUAL

Yet even the professionals, along with auctioneer Pete Schlichenmayer and his two imported colleagues, seemed to sense that something quite unusual was going on Monday in the 200 block of 12th Street.

The physical mementoes of a man's whole life—from Bibles to pots and pans, from an enema bag to framed photographs—were being sold off here, bit by bit. Just like an estate sale, after a man dies. But the corpse stood in the midst of the crowd, taking it all in.

Not just any old corpse, of course. The World's Only Living Corpse. Jim Gernhart, 96 years ornery. The man who'd pioneered the custom of starring in his own funeral—and in periodic re-runs of that event—while still breathing.

Fitting, then, that The Corpse should, on the eve of moving into a local rest home, authorize an estate sale, right there in front of the white, two-bedroom cottage with his name—and his title—painted right over the numbers.

An hour before it began, Jim stood in the kitchen and munched gingerly on a boiled egg, while a bowl of well-done hamburger grew cold on the shelf next to the sink. He couldn't sit, because the furniture had all been hauled out to the yard.

EVANGELIST PRESENT

Among those who had helped haul it was Ben F. Parmer, a local radio evangelist who confided that Jim had asked him to deliver the sermon when Gernhart's final and official funeral takes place.

Little was left inside now, except for a couple of special items that weren't included on Schlichenmayer's inventory list.

One was a large funeral wreath with the word GOING across it. A card was attached. It read: "In Loving Memory of Mr. Jim Gernhart. May you rest in peace and deepest sympathy from Burlington Floral."

Another was the copper coffin, which still rested atop two sawhorses in the basement, just as it had for most of the last 22 years.

This was the point where, in the movies, the camera would have zeroed in on a tearful old man as he reminisced about the distant past. Jim chose to dwell on the present, expounding on a theme he apparently has always loved: The way he gives people hell at every possible opportunity.

CURRENT TARGETS

Current targets are the doctors, nurses and assorted employees of Kit Carson Memorial Hospital, where Gernhart has been a patient since June 1, except for the days when he has taken his leave without benefit of anyone's permission in order to plan for this very day.

"The doc says 'Give 'em hell' and I tell him you don't need to tell me," he chuckled. "It's a shame the way I gave them a bad time. I've told 'em all to go to hell a good many times."

"I tell those doctors I was doctoring before any of them was born. I used to rub everybody and they'd go to Denver and come back and tell me I done better at makin' 'em well than any of them doctors down in Denver had."

"I tell 'em I've done everything except delivering kids and makin' 'em."

Some in the wheat country say Jim could have made a fortune out of the mock funerals and the attendant worldwide publicity if he'd avoided antagonizing people. Even if true, it's probably irrelevant.

PART OF HIS LIFE

Telling people to go to hell is as much a part of Jim Gernhart as breathing. He'll undoubtedly cease doing the former only a split second before he gives up the latter activity.

With the help of his good friend, county employe Ken Keeler, Gernhart was readily persuaded to descend the basement steps for nearly the last time and to pose next to the copper casket which cost him \$1,250 in 1951.

But nobody asked him to pose in it, as he's done several times in the past. Someone explained that Jim, at nearly 97, has begun to regard the object with a more somber air than in previous years.

Elderly ladies came down the

steps and asked if he'd sell this unusual item, a used casket, at the afternoon's proceedings. Jim said he'd let it go for \$2,700, and he and Keeler trotted out a joke which sounded like it had been bouncing back and forth for some time.

"If you sell the coffin," Gernhart's friend told him, "we'll just put you on a slab and shove you in."

EXPLANATION GIVEN

Keeler explained that Jim, with or without casket, would eventually be interred in a mausoleum crypt in nearby Goodland, Kan.

Finally, at 12:30 p.m., Schlichenmayer stood up in a big wagon parked at the curb and introduced his helpers: Fellow auctioneers Park McKim of Simla and Hugh Kelly of Calhan. Then the twang of the auctioneer's chant began:

"Do I hear twenny two dollah bill? Twenny two twenny two twenny two . . . Sold for nineteen dollah bill!"

Some 250 to 300 persons were crowded into the yard. A few young couples were there, and tiny tots frolicked atop an old mattress which stood upright. But men and women in their 60s and 70s seemed in the majority.

By contrast, two young men with long locks and the uniform of a hipper world stood by the front fence. They were Daniel and Frank McLister, owners of a shop in a San Francisco suburb. Dan said they read of the auction while in Denver on a buying trip.

Among their purchases was a 1924 model Eureka electric vacuum sweeper. They paid \$2 for it.

REPRODUCTIONS BOUGHT

Others bought framed reproductions of newspaper and magazine articles showing Jim, the coffin and the funeral processions of past years. The

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'Living corpse' sees his goods being sold

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test of one article was in French.

Bibles. Lanterns. A shoeshine box. Razor strops. Step stools. buckets. A grindstone, with crank. An old saw, with horse. And that Edison recording of the Yale Collegians, singing "You'll Do it Someday (So Why Not Now)," a fox trot.

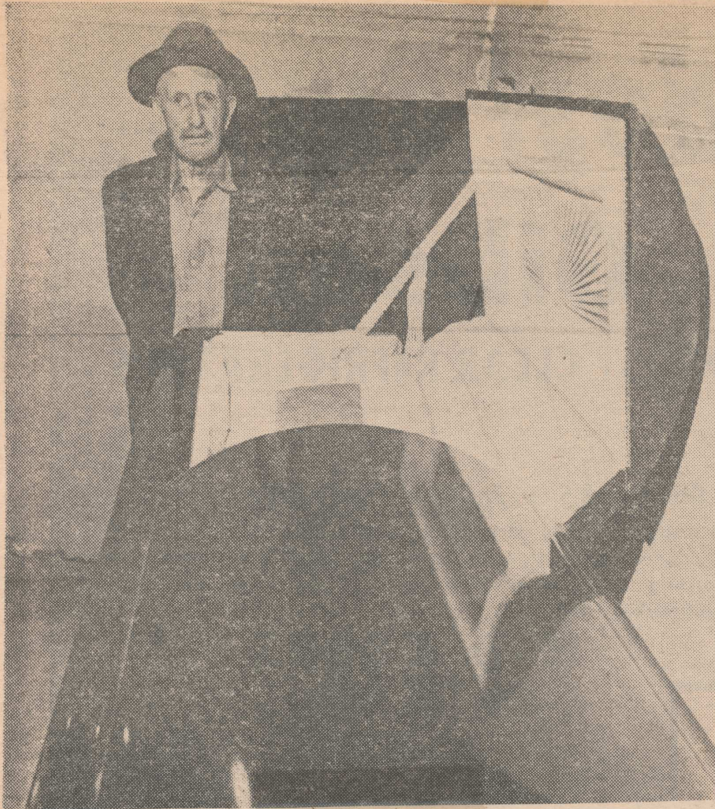
Jim stood in the crowd, not saying much, with a couple of days' growth of beard, a bat-

tered hat on his head, his coat and pants not matching.

A couple of woman talked about the irresistible urge of all those old, old items.

"I've got plenty of my own," one confessed. "I should have an auction myslef."

But nobody in Burlington will ever have another auction just like that one. After all, nobody else can claim to be The World's Only Living Corpse.



Some 22nd funeral

Jim Gernhart, 96, posed once more Monday next to the copper casket he's been keeping in his basement since he held his first "funeral" in Burlington, Colo., 22 years ago.

But a few hours later, practically everything in the house was sold by a trio of auctioneers as Gernhart prepared to move into a rest home. Nobody seemed to know where the coffin would be stored from now on, but it won't stay in the house. That's being sold, too.

Gernhart will keep the wreath shown at right. But, as a tiny child watched, men and women from Burlington and other communities looked over his many belongings, then bid on them in a spirited auction which lasted most of the afternoon.



