

Q&A

Martha May

Back in the mid-1970s, Martha May's parents, Laura and Richard May, bought a piece of property in Brimfield, Mass. A short while after purchasing the property, the recession occurred. Her dad, a builder, had several houses that were not moving, so in order to keep things afloat, they sold their dream home in Sturbridge and built a smaller home in Brimfield. During all of this, her mother continued to run the Sturbridge Antique Show twice a year. One show was a fundraiser for the Rotary Scholarship Fund and the other was for Operation Friendship, an international program enabling youths to travel to Europe and live with host families and vice versa.

In the early days of the Brimfield markets, the May children parked cars on their property across from J&J's show, while their parents went sailing off the Connecticut coast for the weekend. But the parking lot was doing well and it was, according to Martha, the light bulb moment. The Mays had the land and the antiques show experience, so why not open their own show? Starting off with 20 dealers, they opened their first show in September 1977. They implemented their famous "no merchandise out until 9 am" rule and, because of the excitement the idea generated, the show expanded quickly. So quickly, in fact, that they needed more land. So they swapped the location of their new show with their tried and true parking lot and were able to book more than 500 dealers and a show that has not stopped since.



Describe your earliest memory at May's market.

I was coming home from Washington, DC, with college friends to work the food tent. This was when the show was on the south side of Route 20.

How have you seen Brimfield develop over the years?

The energy and enthusiasm of dealers and buyers caught on and more shows evolved throughout the town. Brimfield became a mecca for buyers and sellers of antiques and collectibles. In the peak days there were well over 6,000 dealers throughout markets. Of course, things have changed since the beginning. EBay came along, the economy got

wobbly after 9/11 and dealers have gotten older, but the overall excitement persists. People love the idea of finding something special.

You must have been witness to quite a bit over your time there. Do you have a favorite Brimfield story?

One of my mom's favorite Brimfield stories is about "Walter from Switzerland." Before cellphones and the internet, Walter from Switzerland called wanting to know all about Brimfield. Then Walter from Switzerland called again for info on airports. Then Walter from Switzerland called from New York asking about the best way to get to Brimfield. On opening day a fellow walked into the office introducing himself, "Hi, I'm Walter," and she said,

"From Switzerland?" and everyone laughed. It was a different time back then. Brimfield was far, far away, but Walter from Switzerland was determined to get here and he did.

How does May's differentiate itself from the other fields?

At times new people don't understand our approach "At May's Everyone's an Early Buyer," but those who've shopped the field since the beginning always tell us not to change it. Running an antiques and collectibles show in today's market is a challenge at times. It would be easy to bring in reproductions and mass-produced junk to fill our spaces, but we know we'd be doing ourselves and our dealers a disservice. So we work hard at keeping our show unique, knowing the return will be fruitful.

Is it a gift or a curse to have a family legacy in the Brimfield markets?

It is a gift to have a family legacy in the Brimfield markets and we love running the show together.

Who are your longest running dealers?

We have a faithful dealer base, some for the full 41 years and others well over 30 years. John Lord, Harry Hepburn, Bob Hullivan and the Stockleys started off with us in 1977. Others joined us when we expanded, Kay Baker, Bill Skerritt, Tom Nagy, Ed Hill and his wife Lynn, Phil Gallant, Dennis and Ann Berard, Michael Perez and the list goes on and on. Forgive me if I've forgotten some of you.

Any changes in the works?

None. We did make a change about six years ago, bringing in rental tents and allowing tent setup right away rather than 15 minutes before the gate opens. This decision has made a big difference for our dealers and new dealers considering doing our show.

—Greg Smith



"At May's, everyone's an early buyer" reads the slogan of May's Antique Market, one of the oldest shows at Brimfield. Since 1977, a unique policy has guided the show's allure, prohibiting dealers from setting up until the opening bell. This ensures that the best merchandise is available to everyone who stood waiting in line.