

In the Trade

# Dick and Scott Ferris, J & R Ferris Antiques, Boonville, New York

by Frank Donegan

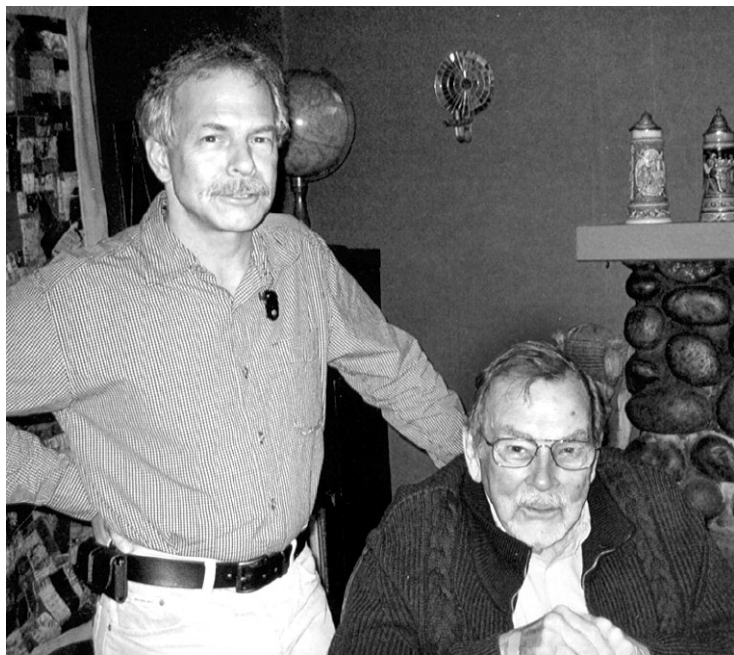
If you're going to prosper as an antiques dealer in Boonville, New York, it helps if you like to travel. The region has always been sparsely populated, so it has never been a great source of antiques, and, of course, there's the fact that it gets about a billion inches of snow a year.

The town is located in the notorious Tug Hill blizzard belt between Lake Ontario and the western Adirondacks. The Tug Hill region receives more snow than any other place east of the Rockies. In a single season, Boonville can get more than 25' of snow.

Traveling to buy and traveling to sell are essential for a dealer in this region. Luckily for them, the members of the Ferris family like to travel. Over the course of 40 years, son Scott, father Dick, and stepmom Janette have followed a herculean show circuit that at its peak stretched from Maine to California and from Illinois to New Mexico, Texas, and Florida. You could support a comfortable middle-class lifestyle on their annual IRS mileage deduction.

"It was a great way to see the country and was tax deductible," Dick said. (He's the "R"—Richard—in J & R Ferris, but everybody calls him Dick or Rick.) Scott added, "When Father and I were traveling together, we might go for six weeks at a time. We might be doing four shows a month."

These days, the Ferris show schedule is about half what it used to be in the heyday of the 1980's and '90's. At 81, Dick doesn't do shows anymore, although he remains the family



Scott and Dick Ferris.

authority on the military antiques that make up a major part of the family's inventory. Janette has retired because of her health.

Scott does the shows alone. By today's reduced standards, his show schedule is still eye-popping, especially when you consider that he has an entire other career as a leading expert on the art of Rockwell Kent (about which more later). He said he spends between one-third and one-half of the year on the road and sets up at far-flung venues in Missouri, Illinois, Ohio, Indiana, Virginia, South Carolina, Georgia, and Tennessee.

Scott, who edits the show schedule regularly, said, "It's evolving." He no longer does shows in the Northeast, for example. He said, "I tried Oley [Pennsylvania] and Baltimore; they weren't clicking for us. We used to do D.C. a lot. I did try Alexandria a couple

of times, but we didn't do well."

Recently, some of his most lucrative shows have been in the Chicago and Atlanta areas. When we interviewed him in October, he was preparing for the Fox Valley show in St. Charles, Illinois; during the winter, he'll be doing shows in Madison and Dalton, Georgia.

The unusual nature of the Ferrises' inventory dictates the mix of shows at which they exhibit. They carry general-line stuff: country furniture, smalls, paintings, folk art. They also carry a substantial amount of medical, nautical, and scientific material. Finally, they have a large variety of military items from the Indian Wars of the 1870's and earlier.

Dick said, "Civil War stuff was my first love; then I went on to the Revolutionary War, the French and Indian War, the War of 1812."

Even though much of his income has come from Civil War material, Dick laments how expensive it has become to collect in this field. "Civil War prices are what's keeping young people away." He noted that even the cheapest items, such as the Minié

balls used in Civil War firearms, have jumped tenfold. "Minié balls for muskets used to be ten cents apiece; now they're a dollar." Price inflation in early material, he said, accounts for the growing popularity of things from the First and Second World Wars, for which prices are a lot lower.

Their broad inventory has led the Ferris family over the years to exhibit at "regular" antiques shows, such as Fox Valley, the HADA show in Houston, and the Indianapolis Methodist Hospital show, and at military shows, such as the one in Mansfield, Ohio, which can be decidedly less genteel—and noisier—than your run-of-the-mill antiques shows.

Scott noted that at Mansfield there are four buildings, each with 100 to 150 dealers. He said, "Next to our building there's the Revolutionary reenactors' camp; on the other side there's the Civil War doctors' tent; and next to them are the Nazis and the Allies."

"And don't forget the artillery guys," Dick added.

As far as total sales go, Scott said, "What carries the load is still military. It's definitely over fifty percent of our gross." He

noted that, even when showgoers may not be military collectors, it is often this material that draws them into his booth. "We used to joke that we'd make more money if we had a turnstile and charged admission."

Through the years, the nature of the firm's inventory has evolved. It was almost exclusively military at the start, but then, Dick said, "my wife liked things other than I did, so we bought them to keep peace in the family. It's like an itch. When you get it you have to scratch it. I never stop buying."

As Scott, who joined the firm as a full-time employee in 1984, has taken an ever larger role in the business, the inventory has continued to evolve. Things such as toys and American Indian material are less prominent, and there are more paintings and folk art than there used to be. "It reflects what I see at shows," Scott said. "They're things we

can market to keep the business going."

Dick began collecting Civil War material as a kid in the 1940's. He was born in Oneonta, New York, and graduated from Boonville High School after his parents bought a business in the town. He joined the U.S. Air Force in 1951 and didn't get shipped to Korea. Instead, he spent time at the F.E. Warren Air Force Base in Cheyenne, Wyoming.

Dick said, "I got picked to write a course on laundry and dry cleaning." It was, according to Dick, a subject about which he knew nothing. What he did know about was guns, and as a sideline while still in the Air Force, he cataloged the firearms collection at the state museum in Cheyenne.

The inscrutable logic of the armed services next brought him to Westover Air Force Base in Massachusetts to work on another subject about which he knew nothing. "I got stuck writing a course on flyaway kits," he said. "Flyaway kits," he explained, contain all the spare

parts and other odds and ends that a plane would need if it were to be stranded away from its base.

Upon his homecoming after his four-year hitch, Dick's Civil War collection rated an article in the Boonville newspaper. In 1956 Scott was born, and Dick and Faye, his first wife, bought the house in which Scott now lives.

Dick said, "I started picking back in the 1950's. I would buy and sell to dealers. Pretty soon stuff accumulated, and we did shows."

They opened a shop in the barn and ran the business as F & R Antiques. By this time Dick was well enough known to have served as a consultant for Francis Lord's *Civil War Collector's Encyclopedia*.

One of the first distant shows the Ferris family did was in Denver, Colorado. Dick said, "My wife and I started doing Denver. We took advantage of the chance to see the mountains." Since they were doing Denver, it seemed only natural to pick up shows in Kansas,



The pair of landscape paintings is \$6700. The top one appears to depict the upper Hudson River; the bottom one, Scott said, is based on Jasper Cropsey's 1851 *American Harvesting*. "It was famous as a print" and was frequently copied, he said. Stretchers and frames are identical, although the lower frame has an extra coat of darker gilding.



A small traveling apothecary from the mid-19th century is \$2250.



A grain-painted dome-top chest, probably from New England, is \$700.



Two cavalry sabers. The one on the left is a dragoon saber, 1840 model, made by Tiffany and Company, and \$1500. The other is Confederate-made from Kenansville, North Carolina, and \$4500. Dick pointed out that its guard is much cruder than the Tiffany model and added, "Confederate scabbards often have brass mounts," as this one does.



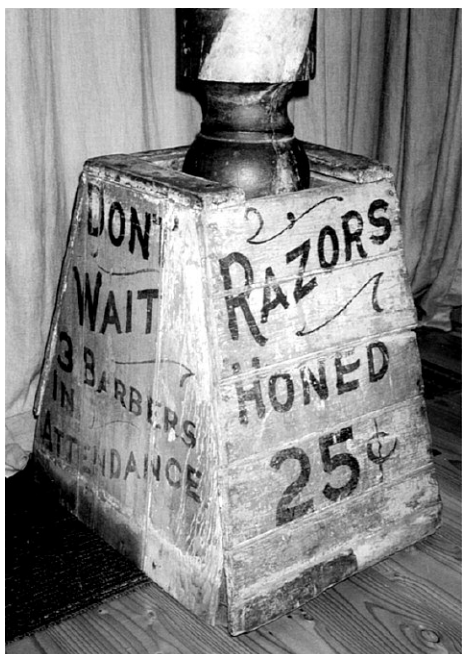
Three pieces of headgear, from left: militia or political campaign hat from the 1840's, \$1900; American militia dragoon helmet from the 1850's, \$5300; and American chapeau, probably militia, from the 1820's, trimmed in ribbon with a repeat eagle pattern, \$2150. Dick said, "Decorators love things like this. These always attract attention. You have to watch them because they also attract fingers. They get brittle, and if you handle them too much, they disintegrate."



Two Civil War uniforms with caps. The one on the left belonged to General George F. Davis of Cavendish, Vermont, who was prominent in Vermont public affairs. The outfit, along with Davis's framed picture (leaning against the coat) and some books he owned, is a package priced at \$11,000. The other uniform belonged to infantry Captain Wilson W. Fay, who enlisted in a New York City regiment and then transferred to a Massachusetts one. He was captured at Gettysburg and then captured again in a later engagement. It is \$9000. Scott noted that "cloth," such as these uniforms, is particularly popular now among Civil War collectors. He said that the most common question he gets when he exhibits this type of thing at shows is, "Were people really this small?"



A red, white, and blue barber pole is \$4000. Scott said, "I got it from an Indiana collector, but he said he got it out of Virginia."



The barber-pole base has lettering on four sides. Two say, "Don't Wait/ 3 Barbers in Attendance." The other sides say, "Razors Honed 25¢."



Two ventriloquist dummies—one White, one Black—from about the turn of the 20th century. They appear to retain their original clothing. The carved wooden hands differ a bit from one figure to the other, but overall the wood-and-papier-mâché construction seems to be the same. The Black figure is \$3500; the White, \$2800.



Four pistols, from top: Colt model 1860, \$1650; Manhattan "Navy Type," \$1175; Remington new model Army, \$1150; and Whitney with U.S. Navy markings, \$2500.

given that it was on the way. And since they were in the West anyway, why not do San Francisco and Albuquerque as well?

Scott acquired his taste for the business early. From the time he was a toddler he was brought along to places such as Shupp's Grove in Pennsylvania. But before becoming a full-fledged antiques dealer, Scott became an expert on Rockwell Kent (1882-1971), the prolific painter, printmaker, illustrator, progressive political activist, dairy farmer, and mystic.

"Kent came into my life when I went up to Plattsburgh State [University] to go to school in 1977," he said. The school received a large bequest from Kent's estate. "Kent's widow had given a large group of her husband's work," Scott said. In 1927 Kent had bought Asgaard Farm in Au Sable Forks, about 20 miles south of Plattsburgh, and lived there until his death.

Scott said gallery director

Edward Brohel was building an excellent study collection, but "Kent was not his favorite artist. He liked contemporary stuff." So he assigned Scott to catalog the Kent material. Of Brohel, Scott joked, "The best thing he did was behave himself and not insult the widow."

After leaving school Scott went to work for the widow, Kent's third wife, Sally Kent Gorton, and over the course of the next decade he became the expert you consulted if you had any questions about Kent. He is currently working on Kent's catalogue raisonné. He provides catalog entries on Kent for major auction houses, writes about Kent, tracks down missing works by the artist, writes articles on the subject, and acts as a consultant to collectors, dealers, museums, and other authors. He does appraisals of Kent works, has curated exhibits of Kent material, and has lectured on the artist at the Library of Congress,



This 1978 oil on board shore scene of Rockport, Massachusetts, by Wayne Morrell (b. 1923), inscribed on the back "To Bruce Hammond from Wayne Morrell 1978," is \$1100.

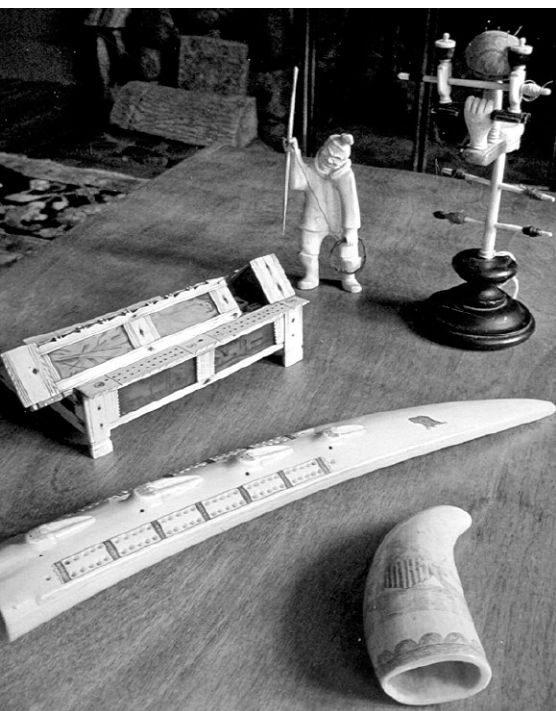
the Smithsonian, and New York University, among other places. (See [www.scottrferris.com] for more information.)

One thing he doesn't do. "I'm not a dealer in Rockwell Kent." That would be a conflict of interest, he said. There are, however, certainly times when, as an expert and consultant, he may facilitate bringing a buyer and seller together.

Given his two busy careers, is there anything else Scott would like to do? "I'd like to fill in gaps in my show schedule," he said.

For information, contact J & R Ferris Antiques, LLC, 3000 Moose River Road, Boonville, NY 13309; (315) 542-1643 or (315) 942-2642; (www.jandrfferrisantiques.com). At shows and by appointment.





A group of whale and walrus ivory. Scott said the figure of the Inuit hunter is from the 1930's, attributed to Esra Berthelsen from Kangaamiut, West Greenland, and \$1400. The sailor-made mid-19th-century sewing tree with carved hand is \$1150. The coffin-shaped game box has folky miniature watercolors under glass. One of the paintings depicts a man in a Regency-style coat, suggesting quite an early date. It's \$2100. The early 20th-century walrus-tusk cribbage board with four carved walrus heads running down the middle of the tusk and two whales swimming depicted on the reverse is \$1300. The mid-19th-century whale's tooth has the Pennsylvania state seal on one side and the American flag with a liberty cap on the other and is \$1200.



A sampling of smalls. "We take hundreds of items to shows," Scott said. The French brass telescope on stand is \$1400. The legs unscrew and are stored in wooden channels in the shaft. The octant with case, by the London maker Spencer & Co., dates from the early 1800's and is \$1200. The anonymous portrait on paper of a man in an early oak frame is \$1000. The hand-held telescope with case is \$855.



This is one wall of Scott's office. That's all Kent research material on the shelves.



The pair of Federal andirons, probably Philadelphia, is \$2100. On the plinths are opposing but otherwise identical engraved views of a house and a bending tree.



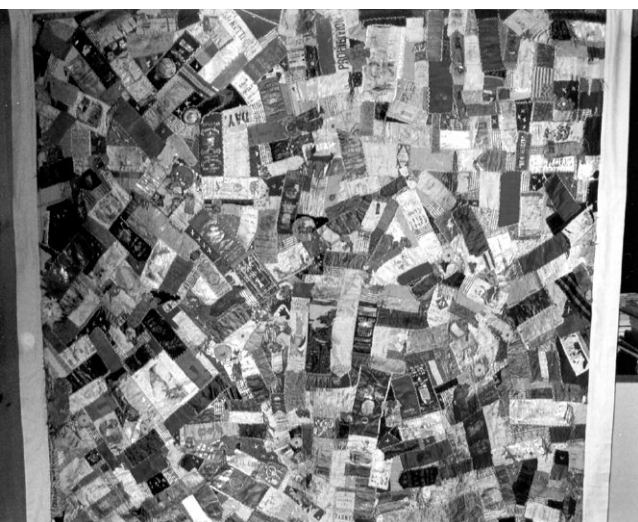
This Civil War-era surgical kit is by Louis V. Helmold at 135 South 10th Street, Philadelphia. "It's not a made-up kit," Scott said. "Every piece is marked. It's missing the rongeur [for biting through tough tissue or bone] and one trephine bit [for making circular cuts]." Helmold's address dates the kit to between 1858 and 1870. The kit is \$3400.



This is another wall of Scott's office. The place is devoted entirely to Rockwell Kent. The cabinets reach to the cathedral ceiling and are filled with Kent material.



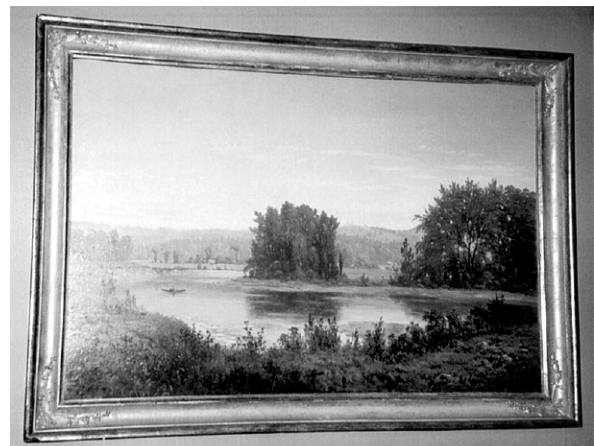
This is a sampling of publications about Rockwell Kent that Scott has consulted on, edited, or written for.



This crazy quilt is made up of all types of 19th-century ribbons—political, civic, military—from places as far flung as San Francisco, New York, and Maine. For example, there's a Benjamin Harrison campaign ribbon, Civil War reunion ribbons, a Statue of Liberty inauguration ribbon, and various firemen's badges. Most appear to be from the 1879-89 time period. It's \$3500.



The walnut chest of drawers is \$850, and Scott attributes it to North Carolina.



A 30" x 45" painting by George Frank Higgins (1850-1884), signed lower right "G.F. Higgins," is \$5500. Scott thinks it depicts a Massachusetts landscape.