



PHOTOS BY PETE PATERSON



Moments before the doors open.



The post-sale clean-up begins.

For six hours the arena at Someday Farm becomes a crowded bazaar.

THE BIGGEST GARAGE SALE

The best loot

A by-product of the battle over Caledon's Rockfort Quarry, the Great Big Garage Sale has become a community tradition in its own right.

BY GRANT ELLIS

The Great Big Garage Sale seems to start the same way every year for me.

I slowly walk up the long gravel driveway to join the line of eager bargain hunters, some of whom have arrived an hour and a half before the doors are due to open. It always seems to be a misty morning at this late-spring affair and my feet get wet and muddy as I wait. I usually make a groggy, early morning trip from downtown Toronto to get here, but my senses are kindled by weak coffee in a "Stop Rockfort Quarry" mug from the food kiosk on the way into the Someday Farm equestrian arena.

It's about this time that my giddy anticipation peaks for an event I've come to call "my other Christmas." As I shuffle forward, the outside of the arena might as well be a huge, wrapped gift, and I, a delightfully greedy five year old.

The farm is owned by Willa Gauthier, who hosts the sale every year, essentially transforming her large arena into a giant, bustling flea market with a six-hour life span. There are rows and rows of eight-foot-long tables, piled high and divided into departments for electronics, kitchenwares, books, sporting gear and just about anything else you can imagine emerging from the dark corners of your average closet, crawl space, rumpus room, tool shed or Quonset hut.

Someday Farm stands on the west side of Winston Churchill Boulevard, just a country block up the road from another fine farm. That property is the site of a proposed limestone quarry and the garage sale is held annually to finance the legal fight to stop the quarry development. Acquired by James Dick Construction Ltd. over ten years ago, that farm is also just around the corner from my parents' house.

I often mucked around for pollywogs and frogs

along the marshes of Winston Churchill when my age was still in single digits and summers were long, workless and made for getting dirty. So, much like the Coalition of Concerned Citizens who organize the garage sale, I have an aversion to the idea of scores of rumbling, exhaust-spitting trucks streaming down this country road, and I'm troubled by what such a large project could do to the area's water table and sensitive wetlands.

But neither sentimentality nor social activism are front of mind while I stand in line, year after year. These days, I'm mucking about for something much more solid and foreign than a jar of amphibians; I'm looking for Danish mid-century modern furniture.

Of course, I'm not alone in my excitement. Between 2,000 and 2,500 shoppers pass through the doors every year.

The sale was pretty much an instant success

when it was started a decade ago. Coalition founder Penny Richardson knew garage sales were a good way for any fledgling group to scramble up some funds, but even though it started only a year after the neighbourhood had begun to rally against the quarry, it pulled in a big whack of cash.

"We thought 'Holy smokes!'" Penny says of the \$24,000 take in the opening year. "These are novices doing this, but there's potential here."

Enthusiasm for such events and for drawn-out legal causes often wanes over time, but in this case, about 100 volunteers have helped increase the garage sale's purse each year, levelling out at about \$40,000 each of the past two.

Among the volunteers are many concerned land-owners, a few in their late seventies and early eighties, local politicians, ex-premier David Peterson and my parents. (Dad staffs the electronics department,

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With the help of some 100 volunteers, happy shoppers leave with their loot. The garage sale is organized into departments, from copper pots to sports gear.

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Mom hawks dishes and knick-knacks, and neither has a problem pushing their wares on their bargain-addicted son.)

"The different departments compete against one another," Penny says. "It's hilarious."

Still, many items sell themselves. Penny says one year some plastic 1950s Bakelite jewellery was sold for "a couple of bucks," but was then auctioned on eBay for more than \$1,200. While finds of that magnitude are rare, great deals abound.

My first year, I found a wood cabinet RCA Victor record player from 1960 that was in showroom condition, with the labels and product catalogue still attached to the turntable. That same year, I bought an angular teak lamp for \$10 which routinely retails for \$350 in some of Toronto's swankier vintage furniture shops. (The next year I picked up four mint-condition, 1960s chrome gooseneck lamps. This past year my girlfriend implored me,

"Please, no more lamps!")

Each year, a few dozen items, including some stunning antiques, are put into the centre of the arena for a silent auction. Penny estimates this element of the sale alone brings in about \$5,000 to \$8,000.

The garage sale is the biggest of as many as a half dozen fundraising events held each year by the Coalition. Signs opposing the pits dot the hills of Caledon, Erin and north Halton as part of a long-standing, expensive fight against aggregate mining along this stretch of the Niagara Escarpment.

Recently emboldened by a series of new regulations – including the Ontario Greenbelt Plan and a resource plan for the Town of Caledon – the fight against the quarry has kept the site much the same as it was when it was sold by its long-time owners in 1996.

The site itself, just north of Olde Base Line Road, is central to the neighbourhood's history. The large stone barn was built by the Rockside

settlers in the early 1800s and is one of the most beautiful and historically relevant buildings in the area.

Like James Dick, those settlers mined the rocky shelf that lies just beneath the rich soil of the area. Aggregate mining has been a part of Caledon's history ever since. And while many residents feel the town has more than done its part in supplying the voracious industry, with its massive impact on the local environment, aggregate mining has continually provided economic benefits for the area. According to a report issued last year by the Town of Caledon, James Dick Construction is tied as the third-largest employer in the area, with 350 employees.

All of this will be taken into account as the battle for the future of this proposed quarry site comes to a close.

In November 2008, the Ontario Municipal Board is scheduled to start the final, much-delayed hearing on the quarry's application. Yet the Coalition's success or failure in front

of the OMB may not mean the end of the garage sale.

"We have people coming up to us saying 'You can't stop the sale. You can't stop it, you have to continue on,'" Penny says.

Those people are not likely the volunteers who have to give up a weekend in the middle of prime gardening season to sort through thousands and thousands of pieces of other people's castaways, then sell them as the find of the century. While the shoppers have all the fun of a kid jumping into a pile of treasure, the volunteers have all the stress of parents trying to stage a holiday for thousands of shopaholic children.

Penny says the volunteers are "like kids saying 'how many more weeks until Christmas?'" but not because of giddy anticipation; they're counting the days until they can put up their feet and relax again. "Every year I get threats from some of them, saying 'I can't do this anymore.' But every year they continue to pitch in."

It's obvious the hardworking organizers and volunteers realize they are onto something special, something that has spurred the community spirit of this friendly but private patch of countryside unlike anything else in recent years.

"We'd love to give (the proceeds) to something even more worthwhile than this, like a hospice or the Headwaters Hospital," Penny says. For now, though, the money will continue to go to the quarry fight until it is done.

"We'll just have to see how long this goes on."

One way or the other, it's tough to cancel Christmas. ≈

Grant Ellis is a business editor at the National Post.

The Great Big Garage Sale usually takes place the last weekend of April. For details on the 2008 sale, visit www.coalitioncaledon.com, or check the What's On listings in the spring.