

Old Phones Ring Up Big Bucks

Most of us can't imagine life without cell phones, but there are many collectors who value the history and development of conventional telephones. You might have one stashed away that could net you some extra change.

"The oldest I have is a matched pair of 1878 telephones, commonly referred to as 'Coffins' due to their similarity to a real coffin. They were made by Charles Williams Jr. in Boston, for Bell Telephone Co. – the same location where Alexander Graham Bell invented the telephone in 1876. They were found in a suitcase under the floor of a barn," says collector Tom Adams. The barn owners discovered the phones when they tore down the barn. In today's market, they are valued at about \$12,500 each.

At a recent auction in Cologne, Germany, one of the first American phones, an 1876 National Bell Telephone Co. wall phone, sold for just under \$40,000. "I thought that one was a little high, but in Philadelphia at an auction there was a similar phone by Watts Co. that sold for \$33,000," Adams notes. He has a similar model from 1879 in his collection.

Adams' collection started harmlessly when he went looking for an old oak wall phone to display in his home. An antique store owner offered him 10 old disassembled phone cases and a box full of parts for \$200. Unfortunately, there weren't enough parts to finish even one phone, and in his search to find parts Adams was introduced to an Alabama game warden's collection. "He had a beautiful display, and that lit the fire," Adams says. "That was 40 years ago." Now he serves on the board of the Antique Telephone Collectors Association (ATCA, 1,000 members) and is a member

of Telephone Collectors International (500 members). He has 1,500 sq. ft. of space in his home dedicated to his telephones and other collections.

Adams focuses on early models prior to 1910 – mostly phones made for Bell Telephone. As indicated by past auctions, the oldest phones can be valued in the tens of thousands of dollars range, depending on age, condition, rarity – and of course how much someone is willing to pay for it.

But other phones have good value, too, Adams notes. "The latest trend has been the more modern phone from the 30's and 40's in colors, like Peking Red and Dark Blue," he explains. Collectors remember them from their childhood and pay as much as \$4,000 to \$5,000. Old pay phones sell in the \$3,000 to \$4,000 range. Candlestick phones – desk models with interesting potbelly, fluted and ornate bodies made in the late 1800's – are also very valuable, sometimes in the \$2,000 to \$30,000 range.

The crank-type wall phones most folks are familiar with are much more common and have gone down in value from 30 years ago. One in good condition sells for about \$150, Adams says.

He noted that when he was younger he found some of his best phones by stopping in at farms and that there are likely many treasures yet to be discovered.

He offers a few tips for people who have telephones they would like to sell.

"Keep them as original as you can," he says, explaining that having them re-nickled and putting on new parts devalues them.

Listing them on eBay is a good way to sell them, he adds. Craigslist is often a good option for local sales. People can also contact



Some of the old phones in Tom Adams' collection include an AE blue (left), CW Jr. tap Bell (center), and candlestick.



Shown here are a Coffin switch (left), Holtzer Cabot-Ness Co. no. 11 (center), and National Coffin 1879.



the ATCA (atcaonline.com), which lists phones for collectors.

There are a few reference guides about collectable phones such as "Telephones: Antique to Modern" by Kate Dooner, which focuses mostly on U.S. phones.

It's possible a phone you have is something a collector is searching for.

"For me it's a Tap Bell phone made in 1878 and 1879 by Charles Williams Jr.," Adams says. He saw a couple on eBay but his bids fell short of taking it home. One went for a hefty \$23,000.

Contact: FARM SHOW Followup, Tom Adams (ph 919 761-8784; http://home.roadrunner.com/~tom.adams1).



Rich Flanagan has fixed up and sold at least 200 gas cans, funnels, barrels and pails in the past 4 years. The colors and logos are true to the brands.

Restored Gas Cans Sell Like Hotcakes

Give Rich Flanagan a rusty, dented, old metal gas can, and he'll have it all fixed up in no time. Flanagan dresses up old cans with logos from farm equipment companies, oil companies and more.

It all started by accident when he decided to paint an old gas can in IH colors and then another in Deere yellow and green. "I hung them in my garage, and people saw them and asked for them," he recalls.

Soon Flanagan was going to auctions and estate sales buying up old cans and related items. He only works with steel cans, no plastic. Age doesn't matter or how the cans have been treated.

"Some are in pretty rough shape when I start, missing caps and with rust holes in

the bottom. I empty them out, sometimes including dead mice, take them down to bare metal, prime them, paint them, coat them and then sell them."

While the colors and logos are true to the brands, Flanagan doesn't worry about authentic designs, often making up his own. Decals are as likely to be from newer tractors as old. Case IH cans can be found with the eagle and without, with IH and sometimes Case-IH.

Parts are replaced, including caps and even wooden grips that a cousin makes for him. He doesn't worry about patching the cans. A new paint job is enough.

"I paint flowers on some and colored dots around the caps, whatever I want," he says.

Civil War Hand Pump Still Works

Larry Fulton's Civil War era pump still works fine. The hand-powered cup chain still dips water and carries it to the spout, just as it did 150 years ago.

"Until the Civil War, most pumps were made out of wood," says Fulton. "During the war they perfected galvanized tin and cast iron, so pumps like these started to appear."

Fulton found the pump sitting alongside a garage. When he picked it up, the chain unfolded, and he realized what it was. All that was needed was a new handle to put it in working order.

The pump has a simple sprocket drive with cups about the size of a quarter stick of butter attached to the outside of the chain. As the chain revolves, the cups carry water up and dump it as they crest over the sprocket.

The original chain on Fulton's pump would have been long enough to dip into a 30 to 40-ft. deep well. For display purposes, he shortened the chain and sets it over a half barrel.

"It still works just fine," says Fulton. "People enjoy turning the crank and watching it work. It takes about 20 cranks to move a gallon of water."

Contact: FARM SHOW Followup, Larry



Larry Fulton's Civil War era pump uses a hand-cranked cup chain that dips into water and carries it to the spout.

Fulton, 4504 E. 17th St., Cheyenne, Wyo. 82001 (ph 307 634-7042; lhfulton@msn.com).

"Some of the cans are old enough to have the dots embossed into them. In some cases, I will mimic the rivets that hold the handles in place."

Flanagan has sold 15-gal. oil and grease barrels without their tops for use as patio trash cans.

When FARM SHOW visited with him recently, he was looking for cans to work on. He was all out of inventory, having been to a tractor show where he sold out. Flanagan

estimates he has fixed up and sold at least a couple hundred gas cans, funnels, barrels and pails in the past four years. When he has them in stock, he gets \$39 to \$55 for smaller cans and \$69 to \$75 for 5-gal. cans. Other prices depend on the item.

"Some are useable, but I tell people not to put anything in them, just in case," he says.

Contact: FARM SHOW Followup, Big D's Cans, 35 Reidwood Ln., Caledonia, Ill. 61011 (ph 815 885-3794).