

FEATURE

Finds on the Farm

At Round Top's legendary antiques show, it's all about the thrill of the hunt

BY CHARLES BOISSEAU | MARCH 2011



Something to smile about: When it comes to antiques, the joy of the business never grows old for Marburger Farm owner Rick McConnell, sharing a laugh here with two family members —sister-in-law Ashley Ferguson, left, and mother-in-law Margaret Mebus.

WILL VAN OVERBEEK



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On a Tuesday morning during harvest season, I arrive at a farm in rural South-Central Texas, park in a dusty field and get out of my car.

Inching forward nearby is a long line of cars and trucks, their drivers forking over cash to parking attendants, some of whom zip around in golf carts and communicate on crackling walkie-talkies.

This is like no farm patch I've ever seen. Instead of cotton and corn, Marburger Farm sprouts 10 circus-sized tents and 12 restored buildings, each spilling over with antiques: Victorian furniture, quilts, early 1900s jewelry, folk art, old farm tables, lighting fixtures and much, much more.

This is the heart of the Round Top Antique Show, one of America's largest antiques fairs, where twice a year tens of thousands of people pick through the goods hauled here by dealers from across the U.S. (and beyond).

Located about halfway between Austin and Houston, Round Top is one of Texas' smallest incorporated cities; signs at its city limits list a population of 77. That's a laughable number on this fall morning, given that I am within shouting distance of perhaps a thousand shoppers, dealers, promoters and handlers.

Four decades ago, Houston antiques maven Emma Lee Turney launched the first Round Top antiques fair—up the road in Round Top's quaint Rifle Hall, where she had just 22 dealers. Turney, now an energetic octogenarian who continues to operate a venue nearby during the event, says she is among the few who weren't surprised by the success of the ever-sprawling show, a collection of individually run events that now stretches over a roughly two-week period each spring and fall. Known simply as "Round Top," the show attracts 4,500 dealers at some 60 venues at half a dozen hamlets surrounding this countrified art colony.

Antiques Show Facts

- Some 100,000 shoppers attended the 2010 fall and spring shows.
- The priciest items ever sold here include an 18th century commode—a low chest of drawers—which brought more than \$100,000.
- Vendors from about 40 states and countries, including France, Italy and Brazil, displayed their wares at the 2010 fall and spring shows.

Round Top's vast scope became clear as I drove the two-lane Texas Highway 237 northeast from La Grange and passed the farming communities of Rutersville, Oldenburg and Warrenton, where it seemed every restored storefront, feed store and empty field was crammed with antiques, collectibles and, to the untrained eye, assorted junk.

Just outside of Round Top was my destination, Marburger. Launched in 1997 on what had been a working farm, Marburger now ranks among the largest and best-known of Round Top's venues: 43 acres, more than 350 dealers and a reputation for high-quality merchandise.

I arrived in time for the start of early bird shopping. Pay \$25, and you get first crack at the goods from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. on the opening of Marburger's five-day run.

Women Lead the Way

You don't have to be a cultural anthropologist to notice the place is dominated by women. The first two people I approach marching along the well-worn promenade tell me they came with a group of six women for an annual shopping spree. They always "shop the fields" for bargains over the weekend and then visit Marburger on opening day, says Shelley Beckman, an employee of Southwest Airlines in Dallas. She is dressed for shopping on this warm, sunny day: wide-brimmed hat, oversized sunglasses, casual sleeveless dress and comfortably worn cowboy boots.

Rick McConn, whose family purchased Marburger from John Sauls—one of its founders and a quilt dealer—in 2007, estimates that three-quarters of the customers are women. Veteran Round Topper Cathy Branch, shopping with longtime friend Harriet Davis, says: "It's not the thing you bring your husband to, unless he really likes to shop. Ours would rather be on the golf course."

Shop 'til You Drop

Shopping veterans provide this advice for those attending the biannual antiques show:

- **Arrive early on the first day for first dibs at the best goods.** (Some of the largest shows charge admission, usually \$10 per person but as much as \$25 for early bird shopping. Admission is good for the duration of the show. Smaller venues have no admission fee.)

- If you can't arrive early, you may find that **the best prices are often had on the second Saturday.**

- **Bring cash and be ready to haggle.** Some vendors don't take plastic.

- **Grab a free Show Daily,** the more than 100-page local guide with the latest vendor info and maps.

- **Wear comfortable shoes.** You'll do a lot of walking, including in dusty fields.

- **Go against the crowd.** When a venue opens, most people shop at the first booths. If you go back to front, you get first crack at items that haven't yet been picked over.

- Since you'll never know what you'll buy, **empty the bed of your pickup or your car's trunk.** (You also can ship items home. Some venues offer porter and shipping services.)

- Planning to stay the night? **Make your reservations early.** Many shoppers reserve their

Standing next to the porch of a restored farmhouse, the two women discuss the merits of a selection of aqua-blue coral harvested from the South Seas. Would the color match the shade in an oil painting Davis had recently hung in her McLennan County home? After a few moments, they decide yes, and Davis purchases five chunks of coral from a Springfield, Massachusetts, dealer for \$325.

Professional Shoppers

Shoppers like these rub shoulders with the second chief type of customer here: the professionals—antiques dealers and interior designers who come in search of goods with which to stock their own stores or for clients. These pros say Round Top rivals the top antiques shows in the country, including an older show held three times a year in Brimfield, Massachusetts.

Among the highly discerning buyers is Rachel Ashwell, owner of Rachel Ashwell Shabby Chic Couture in Los Angeles, New York and London, the inspiration for a line of furnishings sold at Target stores and onetime star of a cable TV design show.

Sitting with two employees under the shade of a tent, Ashwell, wearing a bright pink head wrap, spots a tufted headboard across the way and asks an assistant to investigate. For whatever reason, the gold-colored piece fails her test. “We are known for having a specific palette, based on white and authentic, distressed woods,” she explains.

Even so, she will come away with plenty. Workers later load a shipping container filled with merchandise to send back to her California headquarters.

Among the other savvy buyers are two employees of a Japanese antiques seller. By 3 p.m., they have bought 70 items, and they plan to fill a 40-foot container destined for Japan, where their company has 10 stores, says Mika Ryder, a freight forwarder who also serves as an impromptu translator.

rooms at each show for the next one.

- **Come prepared for the weather.** The show goes on, rain or shine. (Bring appropriate gear: suntan lotion, hat, umbrella, etc.).

2011 shows: March 21 through April 3 and September 19 through October 2. Some dealers open or close earlier and later, so check official schedules beforehand.

For more about the venues, dealers and their schedules, visit:

- [Show Daily's website](http://www.showdaily.us) (<http://www.showdaily.us>)

- The [Round Top Area Chamber of Commerce](http://www.roundtop.org) (<http://www.roundtop.org>) provides links to nearby lodging options.

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Variety of Venues

While some venues carry downscale eclectic merchandise, Marburger and the nearby Big Red Barn—home to the Original Round Top Antiques Fair, the oldest and second-largest venue with 250 dealers—provide the widest gamut, from inexpensive curios to rare antiques. They also offer lots of amenities: porter and shipping services, wireless Internet and food booths serving shrimp BLTs, pimento cheese sandwiches and coffee lattes. Standing near a restored blacksmith shop, McConn notes the recent addition of a full bar and air-conditioned portable restrooms with flush toilets and full-length mirrors.

There's no denying that getting the goods and making money are priorities, but Round Top's secret goes deeper, say some. There's a strong social aspect that compels shoppers to come back year after year as they develop friendships with their favorite dealers and strengthen bonds with friends and family.

The shopping excursions, which often include staying overnight at a bed-and-breakfast or country inn, provide precious quality time and memory-building activities, says Susan Franks, a 25-year shopper at Round Top before she and her husband, Bo, a longtime merchandise manager for Willie Nelson, purchased the Big Red Barn from Turney.

"I can look at [each of my] pieces and tell you exactly where I was when I bought it, who I was with, why I bought it and the feeling that I had when I bought it," Susan Franks says. "I guess that's what it is: Pieces evoke feelings."

All the quality time is well and good, of course, but it's also clear these shoppers don't let that get in the way of the big thrill: the hunt.

Taking a refreshment break, friends Robyn Moore and Diana Humphrey of Houston stop long enough to offer advice: Yes, certainly come with a friend, but make sure to bring one with a similar temperament and tastes. One mustn't be slowed when in hot pursuit of one-of-a-kind objects amid the countless booths, tents, bins and stacks.

"We have a similar rhythm of how we go through the tents together," says Moore.

Their speed? "Medium to fast," Humphrey adds.

Also, they advise, get here early, start in the back and work forward so you can get first crack at items before they are picked over.

"That's top secret," Humphrey says of this last tactic.

If you reveal that, "we'll hunt you down," says Moore, with a laugh.

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