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Walking the NY, MA, VT Line

Hillsdale Barn Antiques on Route 22 in Columbia County, NY

By Noah Fleisher

In the modern antiques world of co-ops, multi-dealer malls, packed auction houses and a well-traveled show circuit, *Hillsdale Barn Antiques*, at 10394 Route 22 in Hillsdale, N.Y., is a bit of an anomaly; a good, old-fashioned single owner antiques shop on a lonely stretch of road that winds along the border between three states, offering a tasteful array of handpicked, well-vetted American antiques in a comfortable and sunny c. 1880 converted barn.

Frank and Rose Marie Francis,

the husband and wife team who bought the property and opened Hillsdale Barn in 2000, were antique dealers working the Northeast and New England show circuit for many years before opening the shop. The barn, part of a two-structure complex that includes an exquisite late 1800s house commanding a breathtaking view of more than 180 degrees, is a retirement business for the Francis', though to hear them tell it, they work harder now than they ever did in their careers in business or as dealers.



The Hillsdale Barn Antiques Center at 10394 Route 22 in Hillsdale, NY.



An exquisite sheet iron horse and rider weathervane, possibly Fisk, dating to the late nineteenth century.

"We work at it 12 months a year, seven days a week," says Frank. "You have to love what you sell to be successful in this business. We go all over New England to find our antiques."

"We try to buy affordable antiques," says Rose Marie, "and then pass that on to the customer. Ninety-eight percent of the things we buy don't need repair."

Besides bringing 35 years of marriage, a practiced and in-sync back-and-forth banter, and a great love of old surfaces to their business, Frank and Rose Marie also possess that most intangible of assets necessary for success in the business: the eye.

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One trip through the barn is enough to convince even the pickiest of antiquers. You will not find \$50,000 high-boys on the floor and \$100,000 paintings on the walls - the Francis' do not aspire to such merchandise - but you will find good antiques in excellent condition, from as little as \$50 up to \$5,000, all of which have been subject to Frank and Rose Marie's exhaustive scholarship, all of which lovers of country and American forms - from furniture to folk art to accessories - would be happy to get their hands on.

"We do get a fair amount of traffic through here, depending on the month," says Rose Marie. "People, after six years, are still discovering us."

"We get some pretty good reactions from people coming in here," says Frank. "One fellow drove by and stopped, then after coming in and looking around exclaimed loudly, 'You really do have antiques!'"

It's not hard to see how Hillsdale Barn could elicit this kind of reaction among intrepid antiquers. There are just too many junk shops and sub-par warehouses brimming with old cast-offs masquerading as antiques. The thrill of the hunt may lure mid-level and high-end buyers and antiques lovers in to some of these desolate roadside shops, but the generally low degree of quality will quickly send them packing. Not so in Hillsdale. As easy as the barn is to get in to, it is even harder to leave.

The Genesis of the Idea

The story of Hillsdale Barn Antiques, its genesis and evolution, starts back in the early 1970s, when Frank was a corporate accountant and Rose Marie a registered nurse. With a growing family - two boys, Mark and John - the pair drove to New Jersey to buy a house, and in the process came across a "good, old-fashioned, true country auction" that piqued their interest. Both realized they would need furniture for their new house, and where better to start than at an auction? Without any previous experience with country furniture, both Frank and Rose Marie had an inherent awareness of the depth of what they were seeing.

"We were fascinated," says Frank. "We could just sense the intrinsic value in the pieces that were being sold."

"We just naturally gravitated towards country things," Rose Marie adds.

There was also a practical reason for Frank and Rose Marie to invest their time and effort into country antiques. With two young boys at the time, they needed useful furniture and other articles that could withstand the curiosity and abuse a couple of little kids could dish out. The surfaces they found on country antiques were not only attractive and inviting, they were imperfect by their very nature, already bearing the scuffs and scars of generations past. It made sense in terms of the lives they led and it fit in beautifully with their burgeoning aesthetic.

"It's practical," says Rose Marie, "really practical. Especially if you're raising children and you're not overly concerned with a couple of extra distress marks."

Within five years, the Francis' would



do their first show. After that, participating in events throughout New York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania, on the weekends, they steadily built their inventory, their knowledge and their reputations in the business. Always, however, in the back of their minds, was the thought that they would one day retire to New England and start a little shop.

"It was a dream going back a long time," says Frank.

Hillsdale Barn is Born

Fast forward to 1997. Children grown, and on their own once again, Rose Marie and Frank began a search through New England for the right place. After searching everywhere but Connecticut, they found themselves in the Berkshires. The fit seemed right initially, as the market at the time was quite brisk in the area - this is the late '90s, mind you - but it became evident that it was a little too crowded for them. Then their realtor told them about a place on Route 22 in Hillsdale, NY, in Columbia County. While not officially in the Berkshires, or Massachusetts for that matter, Route 22 in Hillsdale runs contiguous with the Berkshire County line, is about 30 minutes from Great Barrington, and lies just north of the Hudson Valley and its antique riches, as well as being a main back-way artery into Vermont, frequented by those in the know, as well as those seeking out a scenic route that bypasses the Thruway and the Masspike.

"It was like the realtor knew we would buy this property," Rose Marie says. "We had only seen the barn when we made up our mind."

"We knew this would be the perfect shop," says Frank.

The decision proved to be a good one. The location provided them enough privacy to enjoy the country life in their retirement, as well as a central enough location that the true, hardcore antiquers would find them. A case of "build it and they will come" if ever there was one. The decision was made. Within three years, they were up and running their business, with time off for good behavior in the hard months of the winter for good behavior.

The 2000 square feet of Hillsdale Barn is a treat to walk through. Decorated to the Francis' tastes, styles and forms mix freely across the floor. Good furniture, folk art and rugs occupy a place next to rare paintings, antique signage or a weathervane. The only limit the Francis' see on their creativity is what's available when they make buying excursions. Beyond that, their fine tastes are in full effect. There's also the added bonus

that, like any antique dealers worth their salt and their reputations, the Francis' offer an unconditional guarantee of everything they sell, not only vouchsafing the authenticity of their merchandise, but also allowing returns if an antique simply doesn't look the way a client thought it would in a room, or just "isn't right" with what they already have.

"We feel that what we need, in order to be successful," says Rose Marie, "is to be priced reasonably and we need to take care of the people that buy from us."

Looking at Today's Market

As for trends in the market, Frank and Rose Marie don't put a lot of effort into thinking about such things. The barn has its customer base, a steady stream of dealers, weekenders and collectors drawn by the practical quality they know is on the floor, and, being a single owner shop, doesn't necessarily need to be bothered worrying about what the brand name designers and brokers are touting this year.

One thing that Rose Marie and Frank do notice in dealing with customers, is that very few of the people who come through their doors are under the age of 40. This is a problem endemic to the industry in general right now - one that Northeast has taken notice of many times before - and one not lost on the longtime show veterans. For Rose Marie, she believes it's not necessarily just a matter of not having the money to buy antiques, it's a fundamental disconnect from history, and the value of preserving it.

"Collecting, and antiques in general seems to be a mystery to many of them," she says.

Frank agrees, noting that it is a troubling trend. "It concerns me," he says, "because I don't know where the future of the business lies."

There is also the matter of shrinking availability of good material and the impact that has on young collectors. With the boom of the last 25 years, fine antiques are at a premium and those that have them aren't letting go - at least not at affordable prices.

"The middle market seems to be disappearing," says Frank. "I think (good antiques) were more readily available when we were that age."

It also has to be noted that Hillsdale Barn Antiques has a decent Web site, that, if not an overwhelming business tool for Frank and Rose Marie, is classy, easy to navigate, and helps keep the couple in the loop with a percentage of



Rose Marie and Frank Francis on a hot August afternoon.

their client base that they might otherwise lose touch with. While some dealers do as much as half and more of their business via the Internet, the Francis' are not that in tune with the ways of the Web. That said, however, it has played an important role in a good number of sales.

"The Web site has definitely brought people in," says Frank.

Rose Marie quickly agrees. "We've sold a lot through it," she says. "All domestic, within the country."

As for the future, Frank and Rose Marie have a simple plan: to keep on keeping on, right where they are.

"We're here in a permanent spot," says Frank, "and we hope to be here for a number of years yet."

Hours for the shop are Thursday through Monday, 11 a.m. to 7 p.m., or by appointment.

For more information, call (518) 325-1357.

www.hillsdalebarn.com

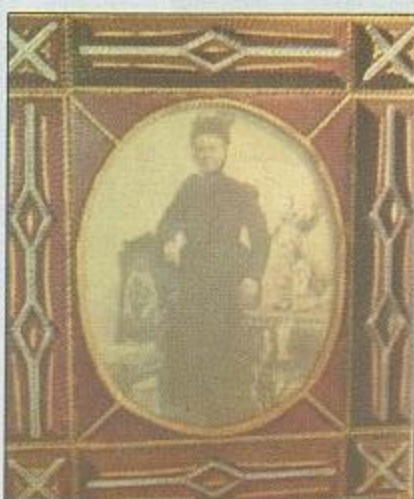
To reach Hillsdale barn from New York City, Albany and Boston: 12 miles south of the Berkshire Spur of the New York State Thruway and the Massachusetts Turnpike Route 90 at Exit B3 (Route 22 - Austerlitz, New Lebanon) and 2 miles south of Route 71. The shop is on the left.

From the South and West: Hillsdale Barn is 5 miles north of the traffic light at the intersection of Routes 22 and 23. The shop is 12 miles east from the Taconic State Parkway. Take the exit for Claverack/Hillsdale Route 23 and proceed approximately 7 miles east on Route 23 to the village of Hillsdale. Make a left onto Route 22 and proceed 5 miles. The shop is on the right.

From the East, Connecticut, Great Barrington, Sheffield, and the Berkshires in Massachusetts, take Route 7 to Great Barrington to Route 23 west to South Egremont and then into Hillsdale, New York. At the traffic light at the intersection of Routes 22 and 23 make a right onto Route 22 and proceed 5 miles. The shop is on the right.



Hillsdale Barn Antiques is a very comfortable place to spend an afternoon treasure hunting.



Wonderful and rare painted tramp art frame, out of Housatonic, MA, c. 1890.



The whimsy displayed in this folk art deer is quite engaging. While the antlers are real, the head has been sculpted to resemble a deer.