

MILWAUKEE COUNTY

Massive and eclectic collection of the late Landmark 1850 Inn owner Joseph Halser is up for auction

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Joseph G. Halser III, who died last April, was an educator, visionary, inventor, tinkerer and owner of Landmark 1850 Inn and The Terminal beer garden out by Mitchell International Airport.

Throughout his life, he collected lots of stuff, so much material that he would buy buildings to store and use it all. He had everything from old radios to high-end audio equipment, beer memorabilia to big architectural items like two light fixtures from the Plankinton Arcade that were once sitting in a family's garden.

"He had a knack for saving things," said Halser's oldest son, Joseph IV, who goes by Joe. "He would see how these things that would be thrown away could be used."

The whole collection, some 3,000 lots, is now for sale in an online auction that concludes next week.

For the beer crowd, there are such things as neon signs from Gettelman, Schlitz and Blatz, a door from a 1949 vintage Schlitz brewing kettle, and thousands of tap handles collected over the decades that Halser owned the Landmark.

Light fixture from St. John's Cathedral, clock from Allen-Bradley are some of many unique items

There are plenty of architectural gems.

(Keep in mind, Halser salvaged bricks from old County Stadium and wrought iron railings from a cemetery to create a wall at the Terminal and retrieved bathroom fixtures and other items from the original Blackstone Hotel in Chicago and reinstalled them in Milwaukee. None of that material is for sale.)

But you can find those light fixtures from the Plankinton Arcade, large metal lights from the old Hotel Wisconsin, a hanging light fixture from St. John's Cathedral, even a four-sided clock that was used in the executive offices at Allen-Bradley.

There are cash registers, pool tables, train whistles, and a vintage Vendo 39 Coke Machine, from a time when a bottle of Coca-Cola cost a dime.

Two companies leading multi-day auction

Wandering through all the stuff is a bit overwhelming, like taking a trip into the city's largest attic. Two auction companies are involved in the sale.

"This is one of the largest collections of memorabilia in the Milwaukee area," said Mike Boerschinger, of The Sell It Now Store, an auction house in Waukesha. "It's the end of an era. Very few people were into collections as Joe was."

Hartland-based Gerlach Companies is also involved.

The physical properties of Landmark 1850 Inn, once a stagecoach stop between Milwaukee and Racine, and the Terminal Beer Garden, are not part of the auction.

Joseph Halser's sons amazed by their dad's collections

For Halser's three sons, it's a bittersweet moment. There's some relief that the material is all organized and ready to go. But sadness, too, as a last chapter in their father's story.

"The collection is impressive," said Halser's youngest son, Jim.

"The one word I'd describe him as is just driven," said Halser's middle son, Jeff.

That drive is exemplified in one of the largest parts of the auction, a massive collection of audio equipment that Halser built from scratch.

As a child, Halser collected old radios and that soon grew into a fascination with amplifiers and turntables. Even into his final years, he'd work on his amplifier collection in the basement of the Landmark.

The auction includes dozens of audio amplifiers with vacuum tubes, items apparently highly coveted by collectors. There are boxes and boxes of tubes as well.

"He never got rid of the stuff he loved the most," his oldest son Joe said. "He would just move it down the line."

And now, it's headed out the door.

The public can inspect the items at 5917 S. Howell Ave. from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Thursday, Feb. 16, and 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Monday, Feb. 20.

More information on the auction can be found at gerlachauctions.com.