

No longer saved for generations, family heirlooms are being shed.



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It's the doll collection that weighs heaviest on Denise Rostad's mind.

After her mother died, Rostad and her brothers inherited a house full of stuff, including 150 antique dolls. Rostad thinks her mother would have wanted her precious collection to stay in the family, but relatives "don't have the room or the inclination" to take the dolls, said Rostad.

Her dilemma is an increasingly common one. Scattered families, warp-speed lifestyles and changing tastes have resulted in a growing inventory of orphaned heirlooms — from fine china and formal furniture to old photos and love letters.

"It's a tidal wave — you don't have to be a rocket scientist to see what's coming," said Julie Hall, a North Carolina liquidation appraiser and author of "The Boomer Burden: Dealing With Your Parents' Lifetime Accumulation of Stuff."

As their parents die, baby boomers are on the receiving end of the largest transfer of wealth in U.S. history: estimated at \$8.4 trillion, according to a 2010 study by the Center for Retirement Research at Boston College.

Along with that inheritance comes a lifetime of belongings. The generation that lived through the Great Depression didn't throw anything away, said Hall. But their children and grandchildren don't place the same value on heirloom possessions, she said. "They don't want grandmother's carved walnut love seat. They'd rather go to Ikea."

The children of Depression-era elders “tend to be baby boomers, and we have a lot of stuff, too,” said Patty Burley, store manager for Empty the Nest, a local firm that helps seniors downsize. Boomers, who are already anticipating their own downsizing, don’t want any more stuff.

Younger generations have been molded by very different cultural forces, according to Amy Lynch, a consultant for BridgeWorks, a Minneapolis firm that studies generational trends. During their formative years, “the pace of life sped up immensely,” she said, producing people who value time and experiences more than objects. They’d rather inherit money to travel than a piece of furniture.

The millennials, those born in the 1980s and ’90s, in particular, have little interest in heirlooms, according to Lynch. “They’re urban animals,” who prefer small apartments in cities to bigger homes outside them. They move frequently, and often great distances. “An armoire to take care of for the rest of their life is a burden.”

### Supply cuts demand

As more families shed heirlooms, their monetary value is dropping dramatically. “It’s the law of supply and demand,” said Hall. “The Depression-era generation’s things are flooding the market, and when there’s an abundance of something, the price drops.”

Jay Hall (no relation), owner of Mainstreet Consignment in St. Louis Park, is experiencing this firsthand. “I’ve never seen so profound a market change,” said Hall, who founded his business in the 1980s to sell high-end used furniture. Younger buyers aren’t interested in traditional styles that they associate with their parents. “The concept of heirloom is not all that important anymore,” said Hall. “The 37-year-old buyer is not that into a Louis XIV dining-room set.”

Fine china is another once-prized possession that has lost its luster. “People don’t want to hand wash it, and they don’t dare put Royal Doulton in the dishwasher,” Hall said. “There’s a huge ground shift going on.”

Formal dining sets and big hutches, the kind of furniture that once stayed in a family for generations, increasingly wind up on the sales floor of Empty the Nest’s Burnsville showroom. “The older generation thinks it’s the most fabulous thing. The younger generation, not so much,” said owner Sharon Fischman.

Even highly personal items, such as scrapbooks, letters and photos, are now being shed. “We’re surprised,” Burley said. Empty the Nest sells those items to vintage dealers who buy in lots, turning mementos into art-work for others.

### Spurned love letters

Jenni Mueller of Bloomington, who operates the Etsy site A Vintage Parcel, recently bought a collection of

World War II-era travel slides that she and her husband plan to transfer onto glass suncatchers and decoupage onto vases. “It’s cool stuff. I can’t believe people don’t keep it,” she said.

Mueller has purchased other personal items, including vintage diplomas and handwritten love letters, which she plans to use, along with vintage maps, to create retro decor.

Hall, the appraiser, believes that families who shed personal mementos will eventually regret losing that link to their history. “It’s very sad,” she said. “They don’t want to take the time to read Dad’s letters from the fox-hole to Mom.” When Hall encounters such keepsakes, “I tie a ribbon around them and send them to a family member with a note saying, ‘One day these could be important to you or your children or grandchildren.’”

Some families are finding new ways to “keep” items with sentimental value. The Olson siblings, who recently hired Empty the Nest to help their mother, Garnet Olson, downsize from the house she’s lived in for 52 years, agreed to part with their family camping equipment after a sister set it up in vignettes and took pictures, which will be preserved in a book, Liz Olson said.

Rostad, who’s a retired teacher, moved back to her childhood home in Houston, Minn., to dispose of parents’ belongings. She’s done well. “Goodwill knows my car by sight,” she said. Still, many items remain, including her mother’s cookbooks, fabrics and, of course, the dolls.

“I have strong sentimental ties, but from a practical standpoint, I can’t keep everything,” she said. “We are just so overwhelmed with stuff in our society. But the stuff meant something to somebody. I’m trying to find a way to honor that while still paring down.”