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Assorted teacups, \$12-\$15 (Dawn Reiss, Chicago Tribune / December 2, 2009)

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By Dawn Reiss, Special to the Tribune

December 10, 2009

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Budgets are tight, and Christmas is coming. Bah humbug. Shake off that Grinchy attitude by shopping a largely overlooked venue: estate sales. (Vintage shops get much of their merchandise from estate sales, then double or triple the price.)

Many people go to estate sales to restock their cabinets with everyday items. And there certainly are things such as half-used bottles of detergent that you'd never want to give as a gift. But estate sales can be a treasure trove for finding unique wedding shower, birthday and holiday gifts.

Or so I was told.

To find out, I trekked with a friend to Barrington for my first estate sale at the home of Ralph Gilbert. Hundreds of cars lined the road as we parked within walking distance. A long line of people patiently waited to enter the 9,000-square-foot mansion, which also includes an in-ground swimming pool and guest house on the 6-acre property.

Three years ago, Connie — Gilbert's wife of 56 years — died. She wanted to downsize for years, but, Gilbert joked, he told her "someone was going to have to carry me out on my shield" if he was

going to move from his home. Now that some time had passed, Gilbert no longer wants the upkeep and is downsizing to a three-story, 3,000-square-foot home in Lake Barrington Shores.

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"It's kind of like turning over a new leaf," said Gilbert, 80, whose estate sale was hosted by Platinum Estate Sales by Lady McBeth. "I have everything I need. I have my family, and my favorite artwork and furniture that has a lot of meaning are coming with me. I feel as if a big weight has been lifted. Besides, my next move is going to be lighter because I've never seen a U-Haul at a funeral."

Gilbert's lifetime of collecting meant a lot of great deals for others.

Barrington's Jean Johnson, 46, arrived early with her husband, Ron, and quickly scored a [Nike Fighting Illini](#) jersey for \$3, a brass sundial for \$30, wrapping paper for \$1 and a plush Santa for \$8 along with a fancy gold J.G. Hook shirt she bought for \$3 for her coming holiday parties.

"I'm here doing my Christmas shopping," Jean Johnson said. "It's great for unusual things, especially for people who have everything."

Monika Harding, 26, of [Arlington Heights](#), decided to come after seeing a desk among the online photos posted before the estate sale. Harding confided that she was shopping for herself, preferring to buy new items for gifts unless she found something special that looked brand new.

Others drove more than an hour in the hopes of finding a potential deal. At a friend's suggestion, Joseph Wheeler, 55, of Chicago, started going to estate sales four months ago when he needed to furnish his [Hyde Park](#) apartment.

Wheeler first bought a wooden four-poster queen bed and frame for \$200 from an estate sale in [Crete](#). The following week he went to Shorewood and bought all of his living room furniture, an oversize sofa, loveseat and chairs, for \$600. The furniture, Wheeler said, was less than 6 months old and was being sold after its original owner had to return to India. The original price: \$3,500.

"I'm always looking for a bargain," Wheeler said. "And there are some incredible deals at estate sales. Now I'm hooked, and I go to one almost once a week."

It's the reason a lot of people go to estate sales: the thrill of the bargain hunt. Every estate sale is unique. Some are better than others. But here's what you could potentially buy based on a first-day estate sale without any negotiating:

atplay@tribune.com

• \$5 or less • Sequin tube tops, with the tags still on \$3

• New Lands' End boots \$3

• Nike Illini basketball jersey \$3

• Wrapping paper \$1

• [Ralph Lauren](#) dress shirt (brand new in plastic) \$3

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