

SPIRITUAL LIFE

The Boston Globe

Taking a new look at the family Bible

By Rich Barlow | September 8, 2007

Doing his regular gig as an appraiser on public television's "Antiques Roadshow", Ken Gloss once found himself in Omaha. Sampling restaurants in cattle country, he had a lousy steak but the best Persian food he had ever tasted. The lesson of this parable is that you should not take things for granted. Expectations can be confounded.

It is a moral that can apply to that most mundane of religious heirlooms, the family Bible, and Gloss - owner of Boston's 182-year-old Brattle Book Shop - has a tale about that, too.

Earlier this summer, he got a call from a local man who was moving. Might Gloss be interested in his family's Bible?

"It's not unusual to get five or 10 [calls] a week, with people who have 100-, 200-year-old family Bibles that want to sell them," says Gloss. "Or they just want to know what their value is."

Ninety-five percent of the time, he says, the book is worth little. That is not a surprise; the Bible is the most printed book of all time, and laws of supply and demand suggest such a common commodity would not tip the gold scale much.

But Gloss is always happy to take a look. The man brought in the Bible - and left Gloss's shop with about \$2,500, obviously more than he expected.

He did not dicker, said Gloss, who will now sell it for \$3,000 to \$4,000.

Gloss displays the 12-pound, 3 1/2-inch-thick Bible. It is not size that made it worth a decent IRA contribution. Nor is it in mint condition. One side of the binding is detached.

But the Bible, published in 1792, is the first version of the holy book ever made in New York state. It had been illegal under British rule to print English-language Bibles in the Colonies, to give British bookmakers a monopoly, says Gloss.

And in those days, people often prepaid for the books, and a list of these subscribers would be printed on a page in the front. Topping this Bible's list: "George Washington, Esq., President of the United States of America."

"My guess is, they probably gave him a copy" as a promotion, Gloss says of the publisher. This particular copy (which was not Washington's) has an unclear line of ownership.

The names Edward and Sarah Shields are embossed in gold on the cover, but the man who sold the book to Gloss was not sure who they were or whether they were his ancestors. Through Gloss, the seller declined to be interviewed.

The heavy Bible's mottled, brown cover, gold border, and quality paper made from cloth, made it a treasure in its day.

In the past decade, the market for religious books has surged, according to Gloss. "What might have been [a time when] most of these Bibles, you couldn't even move, now some of these big old Bibles people will buy to give as gifts to divinity students, priests retiring. . . . There [are] definitely more people interested in religion, the history of religion, religious books, [and] different religions."

That is true in some corners of Europe as well. AbeBooks.com - described by spokesman Scott Laming as "an online shopping mall for bookstores" - monitors sales among its members in 50 countries.

"I know, when we do our UK figures, [that] we always have a couple of religious and spiritual books in the top 10 every week," sold on the group's British website, says Laming.

Most of the time, Laming says, "If you've got an old book, it's probably an old book" and nothing more. Gloss's hit-the-jackpot Bible customer is a rarity.

Gloss says he is not religious, but history imparts a spirituality to things. Gloss's father once appraised the Bible upon which

John F. Kennedy placed his hand to take the presidential oath of office.

"Take the Kennedy part away, the Bible's worthless," he said. On one "Antiques Roadshow" trip, he spoke with someone who owned a prayer book from the 1800s. Nothing notable about that, except the book had belonged to Abraham Lincoln, who had kept it in his coat pocket.

"If I actually ever get to hold it, I'll get my sport coat out, I'll put it in the side pocket, leave it there for 30 seconds, give it back . . . and then never clean my coat. I'm not religious in that sort of formal sense, but that's something that is tremendously spiritual."

Questions, comments, or story ideas can be sent to spiritual@globe.com. ■