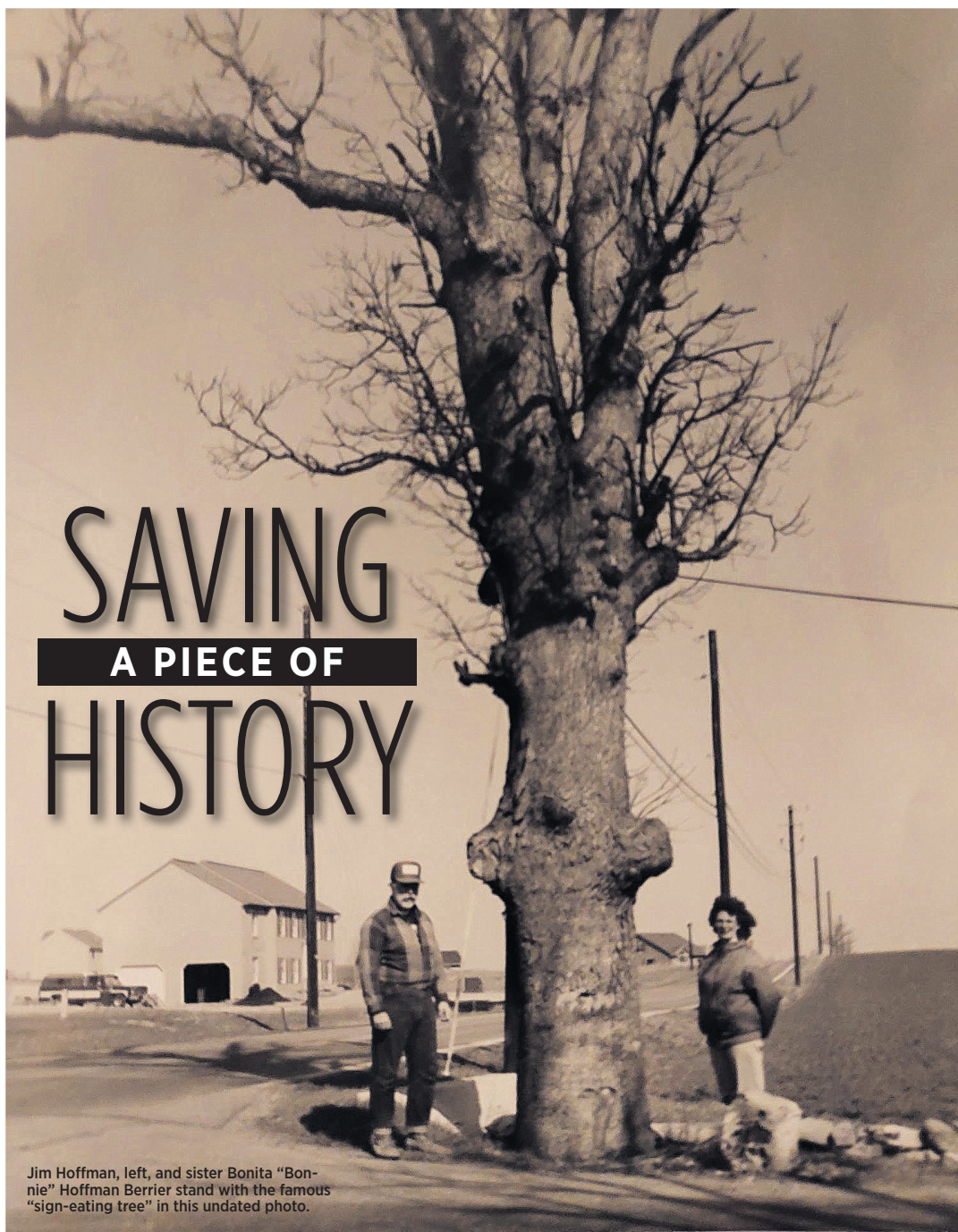


||||||| AUCTION |||||



Jim Hoffman, left, and sister Bonita "Bonnie" Hoffman Berrier stand with the famous "sign-eating tree" in this undated photo.

SUBMITTED

KARYL CARMIGNANI | FOR LNP | LANCASTERONLINE

*Estate sale
to feature
pieces from
James
'Jim'
Hoffman's
extensive
collection
of antiques*

If Lancaster County lore is your thing, there's a "trunkful" of must-see valuables up for auction on Nov. 8, including a mysterious sign that was swallowed up — albeit in slow motion — by a 200-year-old white oak tree in Mount Joy. • Ink has been spilled about the voracious appetite of a tree offended by a slim metal road sign nailed to it a century ago, eventually growing its bark over the interloper like a layer of lava, leaving only knobs visible on either side of the trunk.

The mighty oak reached for the stars at the Hoffman farm, at the corner of Nolt and Colebrook roads in Mount Joy, for many decades until a storm brought it down in 2018. Part sign post, part sentimental legend, the mystery of what was on the sign lives on.

James "Jim" Hoffman, collector, fixer, creator and farmer died July 24 at age 78. His eclectic estate — including a beefy chunk of tree covering the sign — will be sold at a public auction at 490

Colebrook Road in Mount Joy. Folks can also bid online at the Hoffman Country Store Auction, hosted by Hess Auction Group, where the diverse items — called "lots" on the site — are available, including a broad range of antiques, farmhouse functional decor and crockery, railroad lanterns, old local business signs and souvenirs, farm equipment, vintage clothing and more.

But the tree is the star of the auction's offerings.

AUCTION, page E2

Auction: Collection of local antiques for sale

Continued from E1

Bidding starts at \$5, and the item is available for local pickup only.

"As a landmark, it has received a lot of press over the years," says Andy Kmiec, lead cataloguer at Hess Auction Group. He curated the collection of over 500 items for the Hoffman Country Store Auction currently available online.

A story in the Elizabethtown Chronicle in 1968 quoted residents' speculations on what the sign says. Guesses ranged from "To Rheems" or "To Marietta" or "To Donegal Springs." A Scribbler column in the Lancaster New Era in 1991 spoke poetically of the tree's curio, including its mention in the 1979 book "Lancaster County Waysides" by John Kendig of Manheim. Copies of the book, as well as a circa 1910 photograph showing the sign embedded in the tree, are included in the auction lot.

Bonita "Bonnie" Hoffman Berrier, 74, says she hopes people will come out to the auction to be a part of the atmosphere and experience her brother's preservation of history.

"At least view if not buy a little piece of history," she says. "It will be all around them."

Family farm

Jim, a 1964 Donegal High School graduate, worked at the Hamilton Watch Co. in Lancaster before starting as an apprentice ironworker with Ironworkers Local 404. He worked at nuclear power plants, including Peach Bottom and TMI, as well as for various other union contractors, until he retired in 2002.

Berrier says her parents bought the Mount Joy farm in 1947 — it was a fixer-upper. They worked hard on the place and toiled in the fields, with Jim and his dad using Farmall tractors. Her mother kept a flower bed around the famous tree, planting lilies and irises and other colorful plants. The tree was near the road, so it occasionally got clipped by trucks making the turn, to Jim's frustration.

After their parents passed away, Jim bought the farm



HESS AUCTION GROUP

A section of tree that "ate" a sign, once a landmark in Mount Joy, is up for auction as part of the Hoffman Country Store Auction.



The sign-eating tree stood at the corner of Nolt and Colebrook Roads, as seen in this undated family photo.

HOW TO BID

The Hoffman Country Store Auction is Saturday, Nov. 8, at 9 a.m. starting with the first lot. (The sign-eating tree is Lot 329.) It will be at 490 Colebrook Road in Mount Joy. Bidding is also online through the Hess Auction Group and closes with the live auction. To see the catalog and for more information, visit lanc.newshoffmanauction25.

in 1988 and continued their legacy, including tending to the flower bed around the tree. The trunk bulged around sign ends that were completely ensconced inside the tree.

After that fateful storm in 2018, Jim said in an interview with the Scribbler that he considered the tree part of the family, as it had stood tall since his parents bought the farm. He had a neighbor cut it up and saved the section containing the sign.

Today, it is a 700-pound piece of local history on the auction block.

More than stuff

While Jim's childhood collecting diminished as a teen, he resumed acquiring collectibles in the 1960s, Berrier says.

"Jim got our Dad into it — it was something they could do together," she says.

"Sometimes they went to two (public) sales in a day."

That diligence paid off, as Jim's estate features well-preserved, one-of-a-kind pieces that reflect his varied interests, from muscle cars to tiny tins.

Berrier says "he was not a hoarder, he was organized and kept the pieces pristine" with some even shrink-wrapped. He was a "caretaker of history," she adds.

"He did a lot of research," Berrier says. "He was a serious collector."

She says there were many facets to her brother. While he could be taciturn at times, he was "kind and gracious and had a great personality." She says he was always there to help someone else, even pumping out water from basements of people he didn't know following Hurricane Agnes in 1972.

Berrier says he enjoyed hosting his "motor head" friends at his home, preparing food for a couple dozen car enthusiasts. There are car-themed items in the auction.

Berrier lauds his artistic craftsmanship, storytelling talents, and his deep appreciation for history. The auction items — including a piece of the landmark tree — reflect these qualities.

"I do miss him, but we have so many memories," she adds.