

# Almost a Plane Wreck

The perilous flight of the world's most valuable tool.

Half of the airplane's hydraulic system had failed at take-off; the other half failed as the plane was 10 minutes from the Atlanta airport. So the flight crew prepared the passengers for an emergency landing because they were going to hit the ground at about 200 miles an hour.

"Arms crossed; heads down," came the instructions from the crew. Clarence Blanchard was about to do as he was told, but there was something nagging at him so much that he just had to stand up and rummage through the overhead compartment.

Blanchard, you see, just happened to have the world's most expensive tool in a 1971 hard-case Samsonite above his head. He retrieved the ebony and ivory hand plane and cradled it between his legs. And then he waited for the plane to hit the ground.

The story of Blanchard and the now-famous Sandusky centerwheel plow plane began on the last day of June 2004 with a phone call to Blanchard's office at Brown Auction Services in Pownal, Maine.

The woman on the phone had a relative who wanted to sell an antique hand plane, and asked if Blanchard's auction house would sell it for them. Blanchard said he would be willing to take a look; and so they e-mailed him some photos.

When he saw the tool on the computer screen, he knew it was special – despite its crust of 100 years of coal dust. This was a "presentation" tool made by the Sandusky Tool Co. in Sandusky, Ohio, to likely display at the 1876 Centennial Exposition.

After the Sandusky Tool Co. fell on hard times and was sold in the early 20th century, some of its assets went on the block about 1934. A local construction magnate, John Charles Feick, wanted that plane badly. After the sale he walked out of the building and handed the tool to his son, Thomas,

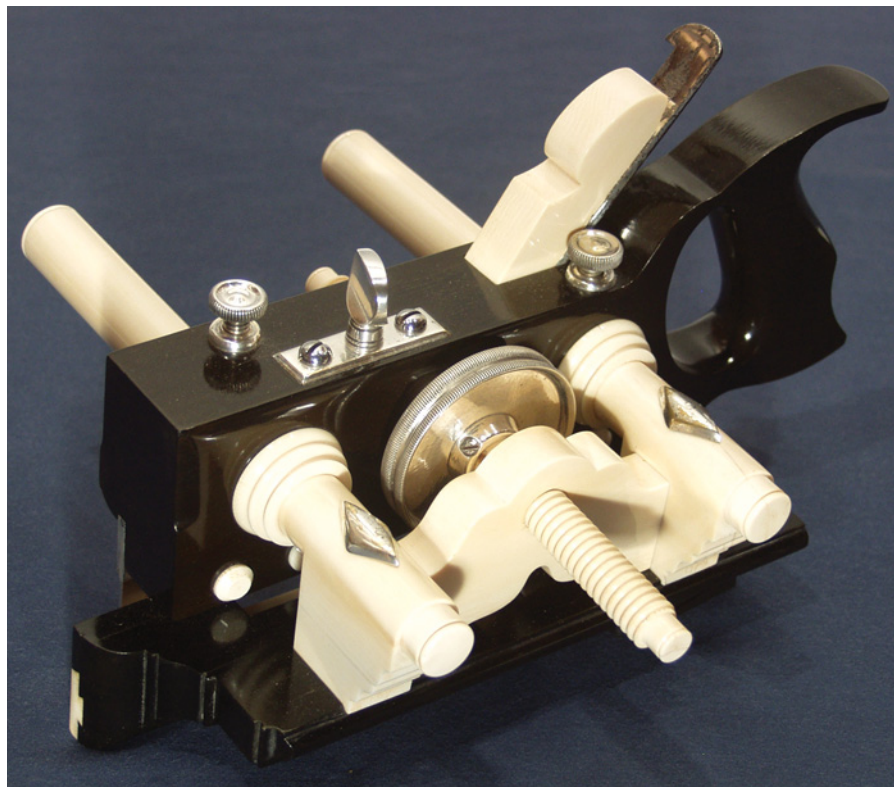


Photo courtesy of Brown Auction Services

who was then 4 or 5 years old. John told his son he bought the contents of the entire building just to own that tool.

The plane remained in the family and then passed to Thomas, who retired to Florida and kept the plane there until a phone call summoned Blanchard to fly south to retrieve it during the 4th of July weekend.

While in Florida, Blanchard disassembled the tool to get it through airport security. The metal parts went in his checked luggage; the ebony and ivory parts into his carry-on. And as the airplane lost altitude on its final descent into Atlanta, Blanchard says he wasn't afraid for his life.

Instead, he feared what would happen to the tool after the plane went down and Blanchard tried to leave the airplane with lots of officials around. "What would I do,"

Blanchard says, "if one of these great big guys tries to take it away from me?"

The airplane landed smoothly. And the Sandusky plane – which Blanchard affectionately calls "Sandy" – was unscratched.

Three months later in Harrisburg, Pa., lot #308 opened up at \$64,000. Until that moment, the record for any single tool sold at auction was about \$32,000. There were three bidders left when the plane hit \$100,000, and the gavel fell at \$104,000. With the buyer's premium, the total price was \$114,400 plus sales tax (the buyer was a Pennsylvania tool collector in the audience).

Avrum Silverman, a Massachusetts tool collector, says the room erupted in cheers when bidding hit \$100,000 and then applause for the buyer when the hammer dropped. "I don't think there's anything out there that can top this plane," he says. "It came out of nowhere. It has never been written about and it was only rumored to have existed. What else can top this plane?" **PW**

by Christopher Schwarz

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