

# Who gets grandmother's yellow pie plate?

**M**om always kept a pitcher of water chilling in her refrigerator.

When Mom died, it was that pitcher — an inexpensive, nothing special container — that tore the family apart.

Each kid wanted it. It was something to remember her by.

And when no one could let go of the deep-seated emotional desire to have that pitcher, they parted company.

Forever.

Deciding who gets what after a loved one dies tears apart families more than any other issue, said Debbie Butt, outreach/education coordinator for Roper and Sons and Metcalf funeral home who recalled the pitcher story.

"It's an issue funeral directors hear about when they are meeting with the family. It begins that early," Butt said. "And even at a funeral, tensions run high and family members already begin to squabble over who gets what."

They get even higher at estate auctions, said Greg Ford of Ford & Ford auctioneers. He's watched family members purposely drive up prices just to get even with an aunt, sister or cousin. He's heard of fistfights.

And then there was the time two brothers who wanted their mom's composition doll (value \$100) got into a bidding war at the family estate auction. Bidding between the brothers ended at \$25,000.

"There are such strong emotions attached to non-titled family property," Butt said.

Most families have wills for the valuable stuff.

But it's the other stuff that rips them up, said Paul Rusten, author of "Dividing Family Belongings Without Conflict." It's the plates, cookie jars, tools, quilts and letter openers — the everyday things filled with memories that cause the biggest rifts.

It's stuff the deceased person usually never dreams is important, Butt said. "It's stupid stuff sometimes," she said.

When family conflict develops over these things, you have to step back and ask yourself: Is that item worth sacrificing a relationship with a sister, a brother or a loved one?

"Because in the end it is just stuff," Butt said. "And it is the relationship that is enduring, not the stuff."

The advice makes sense — on paper.

But real life is never that easy. Families are not perfect. Rivalries, jealousy, fear and anger run deep. People are not purely logical.

And it's our memories that

make up who we are and where we came from.

Death is never easy to talk about. Even if it may be years or decades away, giving away things or asking for sentimental items raises uneasy feelings about death, as well as feelings of greed or selfishness.

"Communication is the key," said Barbara Callan-Bogia, a Massachusetts-based consultant who travels the country talking

about this issue and the author of "49 Tips for Determining Who Gets What."

"You need to ask your children or your loved ones what do they want," Callan-Bogia said.

Potential recipients also need to talk about why they may want a certain item, Butt said.

Usually everyone has a sentimental reason for giving or wanting. And, Rusten says, givers need to avoid presuming either that they have nothing of worth to give or that some item dear to them may hold the same value for the receiver.

They also need to avoid thinking in terms of money. Assuming well-to-do children need nothing, and therefore will receive nothing, denies them the precious memories and heritage everyone needs, said Callan-Bogia.

By the same token, families need to understand that people die the way they live.

"Life is not fair," Callan-Bogia said. "Parents who have favored a child their whole life will favor that child as they leave this world. As much as you would like to, you can't change that."

But families can alleviate a lot of conflict by talking about the memories the items evoke. Givers need to share the stories behind the stuff — and family members need to write it down so everyone knows the emotional value of the item.

To illustrate the point, Butt told about a piece of etched crystal stemware, a gift from her late mother-in-law.

Without the story behind the crystal, it is just a pretty glass. But as a young girl fresh out of school and in her first job as a teacher, her mother-in-law wanted to buy something nice. Each month, she would buy one or two pieces of crystal with money squirreled away from her paycheck. She continued the process until she

## ■ Yellow plate

Continued from Page 1C

had a set of eight glasses.

"The stories are really what adds value to the item," Butt said. "How it was acquired, where it came from — if the stories aren't written down and shared, the recipient doesn't place the same value on that item."

Butt shared the story of an elderly woman who for Christmas gave her daughter-in-law a quilt that had been used by the woman's husband as a baby. But the mother-in-law failed to share the story, and the daughter-in-law expressed dismay at getting an old used blanket as a gift.

"She didn't understand the meaning behind the gift," Butt said. "If you don't share the stories with the recipient, it is hard to have the same connection to the item."

Those stories give the item more value as it is passed down from generation to generation.

But items mean different things to different people — and no one, not even the giver, can make someone have different feelings about a piece, said Rusten.

That's why family lotteries, funny-money auctions and arbitrary decisions don't always work when dividing family belongings, he said.

Years ago when Rusten's wife said she liked her mother-in-law's plate, the woman tried to give it to her. But knowing that her husband's sisters might like first say, Rusten's wife declined the offer.

"Then my mother was confused. She thought, 'She doesn't really like it,'" Rusten said.

People need to understand that casual remarks are not reliable evidence of that person's feelings, he said.

"'I like this,' and 'I like that' talk can be very dangerous," he said.

The reverse can also be true when people don't make the intensity of their feelings known. He might want a chair because his granddaughter could use it in her college dorm room. His sister might want the same chair because she has fond memories of her father rocking her in it.

The reasoning behind the desire is no one's business, Rusten said. But the degree of that desire is.

Following his father's death, Rusten made a list of every item in the home. He sent the list to his three grown sons and asked them to attach a number value to the

items they wanted.

Rusten compiled the lists, sent copies of the completed lists to each son so they all knew what one another wanted. Decisions were based purely on the ranking each son put on an item.

Callan-Bogia's family combined a play money auction with sibling camaraderie in deciding who should get what. Ties were settled with flips of a quarter. Cleaning out mom's and dad's longtime home was thus filled with laughter, tears and countless memories.

It could have turned ugly, she admitted.

"But we made remaining a family our credo," she said.

"Families build a lifetime of memories," Callan-Bogia said. "It is worth the effort to keep them."

Reach Erin Andersen at 473-7217 or [eandersen@journalstar.com](mailto:eandersen@journalstar.com).