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Chips Off the Auction Block

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STAFF WRITER

What becomes a legend most? Why, a feud, of course. Say, over her silver-screen memorabilia 14 years after her death.

So the zeitgeist of Joan Crawford, whose temper is at least as well known as her talent, came from Los Angeles to New York this week in the form of a lawsuit involving some ardent admirers.

A settlement reached yesterday stipulates that nine lots of Hollywood mementos that were to be auctioned tonight at Swann Galleries in Manhattan will be pulled and given to the man who claims he was robbed of them and that he will receive half the proceeds of some others. The auction at 7 tonight at the 104 E. 25th St. gallery is open to the public.

Alas, pity the poor groupie drooling over that Crawford hospital bracelet from 1964 and the accompanying letter to movie publicist Isadore (Dore) Freeman, who worked for MGM for 55 years.

"Dore dear," it reads. "I just came out of the hospital this morning, and I didn't forget that you want my 'bracelet' . . . Bless you, and my love to you and Bill," Freeman's friend. The letter, signed, simply, "Joan," is among items that have been pulled from the auction, said Garden City attorneys Cary Goldinger and Harry Weinberg, and their Los Angeles associate Peter Goldstein.

In the golden glow of nostalgia, how glamorous it all seems — that bracelet-immortalized bout with dysentery. Or was it pneumonia? Or was it, as the auction catalog suggests, just a ruse to try to get out of the contract for "Hush . . . Hush, Sweet Charlotte," in which Crawford was sure rival Bette Davis was getting the better part? If hospital bracelets could only speak.

Other auction items — estimated by Goldinger



Joan Crawford during her heyday

and Weinberg at at least \$100,000 — also come from Freeman's collection, which Goldinger said includes costumes, letters, Crawford's copies of screenplays, signed posters, snapshots and the like. The suit's plaintiff, Phillip Aumontte, said that among items recovered in the nine lots, in addition

to the bracelet, are 225 Crawford letters to Freeman, movie contracts and publicity material surrounding the 1932 Crawford vehicle "Letty Lynton," which was never released due to a contract dispute.

What sparked, in Swann owner George Lowry's words, this "very messy situation" over the memorabilia?

Freeman — whom court papers describe as a "notorious collector of Crawford memorabilia" as well as a "personal friend" of Crawford — bequeathed, along with his house, thousands of items of Crawfordiana at his death from a stroke in 1988 to his friend Aumontte. While Aumontte, 46, a marketing manager, spent five years sifting through the collection and having it catalogued, two other determined Crawford fans befriended him "and plaintiff invited them to stay at his residence, wherein the Freeman collection was housed," court papers say.

Aumontte gave the two "full access to the premises and the collection," and in 1989, suspected they were stealing bits and pieces of it and kicked them out. Those involved in the case say the alleged thieves later had a falling out over splitting millions from a winning lottery ticket. They had put the Crawford items in storage in Brooklyn, and when they failed to pay the storage lease, the items were bought up by the Swann auction consignor.

One of the two alleged thieves has died, Goldinger said. The other couldn't be reached for comment, and Goldinger said his firm hasn't spoken to him.

The settlement among Aumontte, the gallery and the consignor is, Lowry said, "very satisfactory."

Goldinger called it a "Michael Jackson kind of agreement. Nobody admits anything and everybody denies everything."

It's the perfect Hollywood ending.