

THE "FLEA MART" ADVENTURE

There is a phenomenon going on, throughout this country, that is unique in the field of merchandising. Would you believe it is so popular that its customers simply can't wait to start shopping, even before the lights are turned on. (flash lights are in evidence everywhere). They literally shop in the "dark".

In fact the entire relationship between buyers and sellers stretches the imagination. There are no window displays, little or no advertising, no trained salespeople or department managers. You will find no security guards hiding behind counters, in fact there are no counters!

Their merchandise is more often than not, displayed on a piece of four by eight wall board stretched across a couple of saw horses and covered with a sheet or perhaps you may find that item you have been looking for, draped across the hood of a 1975 Chevy pick-up.

This phenomenon is known as a Flea Mart. Here in Pittsburgh, for example on any give weekend you will find more than a half-dozen marts throughout the suburbs. From as far south as a race track in Washington County, to a firehouse annex in Heidelberg, over to the Northside and probably the best known is one that was formerly and outdoor theater.

In spite of the seemingly casual air it's very professionally run. Not because there are people giving orders or directing

activities, but because both buyers and sellers seem to know instinctively what needs to be done.

You may find a prospective buyer helping a seller guide his car into a parking space. A small crowd may collect to help an older man or woman unload their vehicle and then even help them set up their stand. There is an atmosphere surrounding these places that can only be called "country like".

It reminds this writer of his early youth when with his family, he visited places like East Charleston, Vermont, Kittery, Maine just two of the hundreds of small towns with its general stores and meeting houses that once covered this land.

I was introduced into the world of the "Flea Mart" by a neighbor. I must admit I was not very excited at first, the idea of spending a Saturday or Sunday morning simply walking around, looking at someone else's junk, did seem like a real waste of time. However, it didn't take long to find I was "hooked". For me it happened just as I strolled (no one hurries) down the aisle between stand after stand filled with everything from ancient hand drill or wooden planes, to a Zippo lighters, scarred and still carrying the insignia of some outfit from World War II.

I know "doubters" at first will not understand why anyone in his right mind would get out of a warm bed, throw down a cup of coffee and fight the traffic (it forms early) all the way into some "Mart".

What I said earlier about the flashlights wasn't a joke. The

sun doesn't come up early enough for those hardy souls who just can't wait for the days activities to begin. One clever entrepreneur put up flood lights to catch the "early birds". But for those who are willing to wait for the sun to fight for its rightful place over some Fleamart, there will be a world of wonders to see.

What did they use to say, something about a "million stories in the Naked City"? Well I can relate a few of those myself. How about that crowd standing around a beat up old van on whose hood was a miniature replica of the once famous "Twenty Mule Team Borax Wagon". You may even remember the title of the early TV program, "Death Valley Days" or its narrator? He later became the President of the United States!

But hold on, it's now time for that second cup of coffee and if your will power is low, one of those delicious, home-made pastries. As you look around you can feel yourself becoming the member of a family. As you wander down the Isles, faces start to look familiar, for instance there is that lady you purchased your granddaughters doll from. The man that just nodded to you? Of course, he had that Zippo lighter you now prize so much.

But back to the stories and one that will always stay with me. A group was starting to collect up ahead, this is always a sure sign that an important transaction is going on. When you reach the crowd and looked through, you can see the reason. On the tailgate of an old pick-up sat two of the most beautiful Water Spaniel pups

I'd ever seen. The boys said he was going into the service and was unable to keep them. Being an animal lover, I couldn't take it, I had to leave the vicinity at once. Later, I went by the pick-up, the boy was still there, but his dogs were gone. I can only hope that whoever had bought them would love them as much as he obviously did.

But to a story with a more pleasant setting. The more important stands are those that offer the professional type of tools. Large drills, generators and the like. One fellow obviously was known to have such items, for his area was always crowded. The only problem was that he had so much stuff that it could not be displayed in the normal manner on tables or benches. However he had devised a unique way to display his merchandise. He lined both sides of his area and across the back with big items the smaller, less bulky items down the center. This meant that you had to walk single file, down one isle and up the other and there was no way you could turn around because you'd meet other customers coming up behind you.

I joined the ranks and started through with the others. Taking your time is the key word. I was about half way through when a panicky voice broke the stillness. "Dad, I have to go to the bathroom."

Good natured laughter bounced off the walls as the crowd moved into high gear to let him out. As he rushed away, they merely reformed and started through again, a typical gesture for a Sunday

morning.

One of the really fascinating features of these marts is how the price one will charge is arrived at. I saw this being put to the test, one Sunday, not long ago.

On a table among a lot of bric-a-brac was a safe-deposit box, (the kind you rent at your local bank). The "lines were drawn", the seller asking fifteen, the buyer offering eight. Words like "one of a kind, never before" came from the seller, the buyer merely nodding and upping his bid to ten. As time went on the fifteen came down to fourteen then thirteen, on the other hand the eight moved up to ten and finally reached twelve. That seemed to be the magic number. Both parties were satisfied, the man walked away with his prize, the seller pocketing the money. It didn't occur to me until afterwards, "where do you suppose he'd gotten hold of a safe-deposit box in the first place?"

I should explain that in addition to the stands that the average person sets up on a Saturday or Sunday there are also the permanent locations. They are built like a series of attached garages, the occupants rent these for the season (which usually runs from March to December). These people are what might be called 'professionals'.

They are, in many cases retirees or persons who are "moonlighting" on weekends to earn additional income. Usually they are very sharp, they know the market and what is selling. So, often they are your earliest customers (I, like most of the

"sellers" set up a few time during the season). They too may be part of the early morning "flashlight" brigade and it is funny to later take a stroll around the mart and find an item you just sold someone for \$3.00 now being displayed for \$5.00 or \$6.00. But that is the name of the game!

Note I said take a stroll around the mart. "What about your stand? Is it safe? Being 'ripped off' is never a problem, "it just doesn't happen".

If this were fiction I'd try to close with a strong "wrap-up" line, but as it's not I'll close by relating and incident that happened the very first time I'd set-up. I had arrived about 5 a.m., parked the car and started putting up my tables, not an easy task when it is pitch black and your only assistant is a "battered Boy Scout flashlight ("nope, that's not for sale").

I'd carefully packed the car so that the items I thought would sell first came out in that order. It was a number of 'cheese boxes' containing cassette tapes, followed by a set of V.W. wheel covers and thirdly a pair of hiking boots. What I didn't realize was that I'd already collected a small crowd that were not only interested in buying, but were asking the prices.

Perhaps because it was so early in the morning (one cup of coffee doesn't exactly make me ready to do "battle") or the surprise at finding customers at my tables, I don't know. But the first transactions of the day were almost a disaster. Offering a man holding the wheel covers a price of fifty cents a piece while

explaining that I was asking \$12.00 for each cassette tape and that the 'hiking' boots had "only been played a few times" caused a moment of confusion, until one of the customers turned on his flash light and the day went from there into high gear, but I noticed more than once a couple would walk by point at my stand and break out in a broad grin.

"I can only guess what they must be saying, especially when I saw one of them was carrying my set of 'V.W.' wheel covers".....

THE END