

**A Tale of Two Markets:
The People and Culture of American Flea Markets**

by

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Abstract

This thesis explores the people and culture of American flea markets from roughly the 1880s through the present day. American flea markets started in the late nineteenth century by newly arrived immigrants who utilized them for economic and social opportunities otherwise unavailable to them. Flea markets catered toward middle- and upper-class desires emerged in the 1950s and grew in popularity from the 1960s to the present. This thesis traces the history of both types of markets by examining the ways in which people used them, public reactions toward them, and how the popular media presented them.

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Introduction

In 1967, *The New York Times* ran a story about the Rose Bowl Swap Meet and Flea Market in Pasadena, California. The story described the market as “a motley collection of junk and memorabilia, antiques and new and used merchandise available for exchange or sale.”¹ This market attracted 30,000 to 40,000 visitors each weekend and was one of the largest in the country. While the majority of flea markets were much smaller than the Rose Bowl, the description would have been familiar to most people. Over their long history, flea markets functioned as places where people could bargain for an assortment of both new and used goods, usually in the open air, from a variety of vendors who each paid to sell from an allotted space. Markets operated as part of an informal economy; customers usually paid in cash. The names for these markets sometimes varied: rag fair or thieves market in the first half of the twentieth century; swap meet in the latter half. Regardless of the name, however, the essentials of flea markets remained the same and their history is largely one of continuity.

For over a century, Americans have shopped at these markets. Many of the first flea markets started as open air markets created by immigrant communities in large urban centers like New York, Chicago, or Philadelphia. People bought and sold used items like clothing or household necessities and new items like fresh food. They haggled over prices much like they would in the open air markets of their home countries. The markets offered immigrants the opportunity to engage in trade in business centers that catered to

¹ Robert A. Wright, “See What They Did to the Garage Sale,” *The New York Times*, July 15, 1971, 26.

their communities' needs. These immigrant trading centers often operated with little attention from the American media. As this thesis will show, when noticed, they were often derided as centers of poverty, filth, and crime. Nevertheless, the markets thrived and served as a way for immigrants to make money, start their own businesses, and – for many – to eventually assimilate into American society. Some markets, like Maxwell Street in Chicago, operated for over a hundred years. The look of the participants changed as new immigrants and other communities took the place of old, but the essentials of market activity remained the same.

In the 1950s and 1960s, flea markets that served broader audiences became popular. Journalists associated these new markets with the famous flea markets of Paris and London and reported them as new to the American public, even though the open air market in second-hand goods had a much longer American history. They occupied parking lots, drive-ins, stadiums, and open fields. Some operated strictly for profit, while others raised money for specific causes. People generally sold their unwanted household items. These mainstream flea markets catered to different types of customers: those wanting to find good deals on serviceable used items or collectibles and those looking for antiques. Flea market fashion became all the rage as celebrities like Andy Warhol, Barbara Streisand, and Goldie Hawn were reported to be hunting for their own flea market treasures. Flea markets received a lot of attention in local and national newspapers, which often reported on the strange array of goods available and offered advice to potential shoppers.

From the 1970s on, reporters also associated some flea markets with crime – much like their earlier immigrant counterparts. Authorities and journalists investigated a

number of markets for selling pirated music, counterfeit clothing, and other items. News stories consistently reported on the availability of counterfeit merchandise at flea markets. State and local law enforcement agencies targeted markets for selling stolen goods or items banned by local or state laws, like guns or prescription drugs. Various groups criticized flea markets for not following tax laws or zoning codes and for contributing to neighborhood blight. Merchants often tried to keep flea markets out of their neighborhoods for fear of unfair competition. The problem of criminality was often overstated. Some market vendors disobeyed local laws, but the majority usually complied. Simultaneously, journalists celebrated other flea markets as destination spots for tourists and as fun activities to participate in close to home.

Throughout this long history, academic studies of flea markets – particularly historical – are limited. The first academic to examine flea markets was sociologist Louis Wirth. His 1928 work, *The Ghetto*, examines Chicago’s Jewish ghetto and discusses the importance of the Maxwell Street Market not only to the Jewish community, but to other immigrant groups and the black community as well.² It would be another fifty years before academics would take another look at American flea markets and their role in society. These scholars generally focused their studies on flea markets that served more affluent communities. For instance, John F. Sherry, Jr., a professor of marketing, wrote multiple articles in the 1980s and 1990s that examine higher-end flea markets that catered to middle- or upper-class shoppers.³ His articles provide insight into the motivations of more affluent flea market buyers and sellers, but leave out the experiences of

² Louis Wirth, *The Ghetto* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1928).

³ Russel W. Belk, John F. Sherry, Jr., and Melanie Wallendorf, “A Naturalistic Inquiry into Buyer and Seller Behavior at a Swap Meet,” *Journal of Consumer Research*, 14 (1988): 449-470; John F. Sherry, Jr., “A Sociocultural Analysis of a Midwestern American Flea Market,” *Journal of Consumer Research*, 17 (1990): 13-30.

marginalized groups that have also participated in flea markets. Jeffrey Gordon, a cultural geography professor who was interviewed about flea markets in 1983, professed that they were for the middle- and upper-classes. He explicitly argued that flea markets were of no interest to poor people.⁴ This would undoubtedly have come as a surprise to the numerous lower-income and marginalized groups who depended on flea markets to meet their needs each week.

With some notable exceptions, such as Ted Ownby's *American Dreams in Mississippi: Consumers, Poverty, and Culture, 1830-1998*, Susan Strasser's *Waste and Want: A Social History of Trash*, and Robert J. Shepherd's *When Culture Goes to Market: Space, Place, and Identity in an Urban Market Place*, flea markets have either been ignored by academics or have been associated strictly with more prosperous communities.⁵ The result has been to erase the much more complicated history of American flea markets that encompasses people from all economic classes and racial or ethnic communities. This issue has been further complicated by the fact that even historians who examine the history of consumerism, waste, or poverty also generally neglect to include flea markets in their research.

For instance, Lizabeth Cohen's *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* beautifully discusses the numerous ways that the poor, people of color, and other marginalized groups were continually excluded from

⁴ Jack A. Seamonds, "Nostalgia Items are Flea Market Staples," *Kentucky New Era*, March 9, 1983, 9.

⁵ Ted Ownby, *American Dreams in Mississippi: Consumers, Poverty, and Culture, 1830-1998* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999); Susan Strasser, *Waste and Want: A Social History of Trash* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1999); Robert J. Shepherd, *When Culture Goes to Market: Space, Place, and Identity in an Urban Market Place* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2008). It should be noted that only Shepherd devotes a full-length work to examining flea markets, specifically the flea market located within Eastern Market in Washington, DC. Ownby discusses flea markets in the epilogue of his work, while Strasser spends a page discussing flea markets. These notable exceptions, sadly, still demonstrate that even when historians have looked at flea markets, it is often only in passing.

participating in the mainstream American consumer economy.⁶ Her work, however, also leaves no room for understanding how these groups were able to partake in alternative options, like secondhand consumption at flea markets, which did involve participating in consumer culture. Cohen's work focuses on areas of exclusion, while examining flea markets affords the opportunity to understand places of inclusion. Examining flea markets paints a broader picture of how marginalized groups have created niches where they were able to participate in American consumption, albeit outside of the mainstream culture.

This work, then, analyzes the role of flea markets in American society over the course of the twentieth century. It identifies the variety of people who have participated in flea markets, why they participated, and what role flea markets played in their communities. Chapter 1 examines American attitudes toward flea markets across time, ranging from the often racist views that were reported in the early twentieth century to the more positive views that associated flea markets with treasure and adventure in the latter half of the century. It also argues that some of the earlier views that associated flea markets with poverty, crime, and immigrants never changed, but simply shifted to those that still resembled the earlier immigrant markets.

Chapter 2 examines the people who have participated in flea markets, looking first at markets that served more marginalized communities and then examining markets that catered to more affluent people. A case study of the Maxwell Street Market in Chicago provides a historical context of the role flea markets played in providing opportunities for immigrants, poor people, and people of color since the turn of the

⁶ Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumer's Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Knopf, 2003).

twentieth century. While Maxwell Street is unique in the national attention it received for being at the cultural center of electric blues, the day-to-day experiences of Maxwell Street vendors and buyers often mirrored those of marginalized groups in other communities. Flea markets provided people who were otherwise excluded opportunities to participate in a market economy, while also building a larger community around shared interests.

Chapter 3 discusses the ways in which flea market participants, both buyers and sellers, operated. It looks at the strategies vendors used to acquire merchandise, locate markets, set up stalls, market their wares, and negotiate with customers. It also examines strategies customers used to obtain the best deals and argues that the line between customer and merchant was not always clear-cut.

Finally, Chapter 4 analyzes the different identities that journalists, merchants, travel writers, and community members assigned to flea markets. They have been marked as particular kinds of spaces and like their participants, have often held ambiguous identities. Flea markets were identified as spaces of criminal activity, but were also recognized as destination places associated with fun and adventure. Flea markets also functioned as third places for the people who participated in them. They were places where friendships were made and communities were built.

This thesis provides a coherent history of the American flea market in all its dimensions. It argues that flea markets have a much longer and richer history than what has generally been assumed. It also argues that flea markets offered unique and interesting shopping experiences to more affluent groups, while also providing economic and social opportunities to people from marginalized classes. Because flea markets

served so many different groups, they have been also assigned various identities ranging from areas of criminal activity to hot tourist destinations. Utilizing primary sources like newspaper and magazine articles from the 1880s to the 2010s, travel literature, and flea market guides for consumers and sellers, and drawing on scholarship on immigration, poverty, waste, and consumption, it provides insight into the experiences of the many different people – both rich and poor – who utilized flea markets for their consumption purposes.

Chapter 1: The Changing Definitions and Views of the American Flea Market

Middle America Meets the Old World Bazaar

A standard popular narrative exists on the history of American flea markets. The story goes that in 1957, an antiques dealer named Russell Carrell decided to try an innovative way of selling antiques. He found around eighty dealers and suggested that they sell their goods from wagons encircling a field in Salsibury, Connecticut. He invited customers to browse through these wares in the open air and explained that he was modeling this exhibition on the famous flea markets of Paris. He dubbed it “Antiques in a Cow Pasture.” Over 1,800 bewildered, but pleased, members of the public showed up and purchased antiques and collectibles. This new flea market proved to be so successful that Carrell continued the flea market on an annual basis for at least another thirty years. Often credited as the founder of the American flea market, journalists proclaimed his market as the forerunner to the large and famous markets that exploded onto the scene in the 1960s and 1970s. Carrell certainly deserves credit for popularizing American flea markets by making them fashionable and, at least temporarily, tying them with higher-end items like antiques. However, flea markets existed in the United States well before Carrell decided to sell antiques in cow pastures, and the American public certainly knew of their existence.¹

¹ Marilyn Hoffman, “At the flea market. From tailgates in cow pastures, business booms,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, July 11, 1986, accessed August 19, 2013, <http://www.csmonitor.com/1986/0711/hflea-f.html>; Dan Shaw, “A Gentrified Flea Market in Salisbury,” *Rural Intelligence*, September 10, 2008, accessed August 20, 2013,

In 1957, many Americans knew about the concept of a flea market. Periodicals covered flea markets in foreign countries since before the turn of the twentieth century. Nineteenth century newspaper articles often focused on the famous flea markets of London and Paris, explaining to readers how flea markets operated and what could be found at them. Many articles tended to describe the flea market areas as dangerous and suitable only for people so poor that they could not afford to shop anywhere else. Writers described visits to the markets as ill-advised adventures, requiring caution and, sometimes, police protection. In 1885 a Wisconsin newspaper featured an article recounting a journalist's visit to the Petticoat Lane flea market in London. He found the area to be full of criminals and stated that he could not go through without police accompaniment for fear of being attacked. He went to great lengths to demonstrate the squalor, depravity, and filth found in the neighborhood. He noted that the area seemed somewhat safer during the Sunday flea market, which he attributed to the large number of people who visited. It can be assumed that the author did not find the Sunday crowd much better than the usual inhabitants of Petticoat Lane, as he referred to the shoppers as "[h]uman rats who vegetate underground for six days of every week [and] emerge on the seventh for one single hour like moles in wet weather, with a coin in their skinny hands, to purchase the necessities of life."²

In 1887, a Missouri newspaper featured an article that described Petticoat Lane in London and Rag Fair in Paris as places where "cast-off clothes are retailed at prices within the means of the respectable poor."³ The author noted that the business must have

http://www.ruralintelligence.com/index.php/style_section/style_articles_shopping/a_gentrified_flea_market_in_salisbury.

² "Life in Petticoat Lane," *The Forest Republican*, September 2, 1885, 1.

³ "A Queer Market," *The Sedalia Weekly Bazoo*, April 19, 1887, 5.

been good because full stalls filled a vast area, and attributed this to “the fact that it is almost wholly followed by Jews and Jewesses.”⁴ The author found the quality of the items sold to be very poor and stated, “Garments condemned as shabby, and sold for as many cents as their prime cost in francs, are said to undergo uncommon processes of restoration, which enable dealers to palm them off as new upon the unwary purchaser.”⁵ These articles explained to American readers the basics of flea markets – open and seemingly unorganized markets where poor people bought and sold used goods – while also associating them with crime, poverty, and undesirable people.

Depending on the location of the readers, they might have recognized in these descriptions markets that took place in their own communities. Public markets have been a feature of the American landscape since colonial times. In fact, the majority of American thoroughfares named “Market Street” from the public markets once held their locations.⁶ Many of these functioned no different from flea markets found in Europe. Houston’s Market Square received its name from the different markets that operated in the area as early as 1837. The first market started informally, with vendors selling from wagons or stalls near the city’s municipal buildings. The area was a center for commerce, politics, and entertainment. In 1840, the city commissioned architects to build an official public market on the site, which became City Market. It had the atmosphere of a “county fair” where customers would bargain for goods with vendors while also catching up with neighbors and discussing the latest news. Vendors hawked their wares from stalls organized along a dirt path and sold goods that included clothing, livestock, farm or

⁴ “A Queer Market.”

⁵ “A Queer Market.”

⁶ McFall Kerbey, “Open Types of Public Markets,” *United States Department of Agriculture Bulletin No. 1002*, December 23, 1921, 2.

household implements, and fresh food. The City Market proved to be so popular among residents that a number of businesses leased the surrounding area to attract customers. The market thrived until the early twentieth century when a fire destroyed most of the market. Although city officials rebuilt the market, it suffered from neglect and attracted fewer visitors and vendors. By the 1930s, the market had fallen into such a state of disrepair that its former occupants abandoned it.⁷

By the turn of the twentieth century, public markets became so popular that a number of municipalities hosted and regulated their own. In 1918, the Department of Commerce released a report, *Municipal Markets in Cities Having a Population of Over 30,000*, that examined the general trends, successes, and regulations of municipal markets. The report investigated markets in 227 municipalities. Many of these cities featured numerous markets, some containing as many as 200 at any given time. The report defined municipal markets as those that sold fresh produce, but a number of the markets listed, such as the Maxwell Street Market in Chicago, also sold other items like clothing, jewelry, books, or household items.⁸ While defined by the report as public markets, the markets selling other goods functioned as flea markets. Generally held in the open air, they featured vendors selling their wares from stalls, carts, or on a fabric or tarp laid out on the street.

Cities like Chicago, Philadelphia, and New York housed a number of these flea markets in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Usually found in immigrant communities, people knew them by a variety of names: flea market, rag market, rag fair,

⁷ Writer's Program of the Works Project Administration in the State of Texas, *Houston, a History and Guide* (Houston: The Anson Jones Press, 1942), 246-248.

⁸ Department of Commerce – U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Municipal Markets in Cities Having a Population over 30,000* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1919), 11, 31.

or street market. Sometimes residents called them by the name of the local ethnic groups associated with them. Philadelphia included an Italian market and two Jewish markets.⁹ New York featured multiple flea markets centered in Jewish, Italian, Eastern European, and Latino neighborhoods. A 1939 map for New York's Lower East Side included a bed linens market, a pushcart market, a secondhand clothing market, an outdoor jewelry market, a pushcart market, a "thieves'" market, and a secondhand book market. Vendors at the pushcart market sold "fruits, vegetables, bread, hot *knishes* (boiled buckwheat groats or mashed potatoes, wrapped in a skin of dough and baked), *bagel* (doughnut-shaped rolls), and hot *arbes* (boiled chick-peas) are offered for sale; also tools, hardware, work clothes, and many odd types of merchandise." Many of these markets were well established by the time of publication and had been in operation for decades.¹⁰ Three street markets in Philadelphia sold food items, used clothing, and other wares. According to a government report from 1915, primarily Italians, Jews, and Poles patronized these markets.¹¹ Chicago housed the Jewish Maxwell Street Market, where customers from various ethnic backgrounds haggled over the price of fresh foods and a variety of used item like shoes and umbrellas.¹²

To outsiders, these markets often appeared to be dirty and unlawful even though civic authorities regulated them. They required markets and vendors to obtain appropriate licenses and pay fees to stay in operation. Local authorities inspected them to ensure

⁹ Federal Writer's Project Works Progress Administration for the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, *Philadelphia: A Guide to the Nation's Birth Place* (Philadelphia and Harrisburg: The Telegraph Press, 1937), 27.

¹⁰ Works Progress Administration, *New York City Guide: American Guide Series* (New York: Guilds' Committee for Federal Writer's Publications, Inc., 1939), 110, 117-18, 157-58, 266.

¹¹ State Department of Health, "On the Prevalence of Typhoid Fever in Philadelphia in the Autumn of 1915," *Pennsylvania Health Bulletin* 76 (December 1915): 12-13.

¹² Workers of the Writers' Program of the Works Progress Administration in the State of Illinois, *Illinois, a Descriptive and Historical Guide* (Chicago: A.C. McClurg & Co., 1939), 220.

compliance. The markets often faced criticism and threats of closure from local and state agencies over issues like proper sanitation, appearances, and crime. Authorities sometimes forced them to move to other areas or threatened to shut them down. The markets also relied on internal regulations to keep them running smoothly. One of the defining features of flea markets was that vendors brought their goods into an area owned by someone else. Most paid for the use of space. At the very least, sellers and organizers arranged among themselves how space would be allotted. However, most outsiders did not observe this type of organization; they only saw confusion.

Like their European counterparts, these American markets also received attention from the press, familiarizing American readers with the way that immigrants and other Americans less fortunate than themselves sometimes engaged in trade and found ways to meet their needs. Newspaper discussions of these flea markets often provided descriptions of the trade that took place and focused on the poverty and undesirable qualities of the people, mostly foreigners, who utilized them. They also commented on the chaos and mused about the desirability of visiting these local markets.¹³ For instance, one visitor to Harlem's Rag Market noted "It was sometimes difficult for us to distinguish the women from the rags. They were large, bulging old peasants that might have been so many sacks tied in the middle."¹⁴ The writer obviously intended to slander the Italian women she encountered, but also expressed her confusion in deciphering between the different merchandise available.

An article from 1910 reminded readers that rag fairs were not just to be found in London, but also in Manhattan. The fair, found at the corner of Thomas Jefferson Park,

¹³ "Rag Market in New York," *The Sun*, January 16, 1910, 7.

¹⁴ Helen Worden, *Round Manhattan's Rim* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1934), 130.

spanned at least three blocks, and specialized in used clothing. The author noted that the neighborhood, known as Pleasant Avenue, once lived up to the name for its picturesque homes and gardens and mourned that “this little bit of the country is rapidly becoming obliterated” as “dark eyed immigrants...have converted this neighborhood into the uptown Little Italy.” The author provided the following description of the market, later commenting on the outdated clothing available:

There the clothing venders display their wares. The seller spreads on the ground a tattered quilt, an old bedtick or a piece of gayly tinted cotton goods – anything to make a background for the merchandise and keep it from the earth. On these cloths are spread decadent samples of almost everything New York has worn at the behest of necessity or fashion.¹⁵

Next, the author described the inspecting and haggling process that took place before a sale commenced. Customers, primarily Italians, scrutinized each item by tossing it about and holding it up to the light to make sure the fabric was free of holes. Once the customer felt sure of the garment’s quality, the bidding process began. “The saleswoman asks twice as much as she expects to get. Chattering is fast and furious. Friends and neighborhoods join in it. The voices become so shrill, the gestures so impassioned that the spectator fears a hair pulling match.” The author noted that these fears subsided when, at the end of the battle, he found the ladies would both left smiling and happy with their transaction.

Some of the language in the article suggested that many Americans may not have noticed these markets, even though they could be found in American cities, because they viewed them as a foreign enterprise. The author stated, “The rag fair of Manhattan is not picturesque. It is not even indigenous, but is an Italian institution.” The author went on to suggest, in disparaging and even racist terms, that by visiting the rag market, Americans

¹⁵ “Rag Market in New York”

would gain a better understanding of the Italians they had seen throughout the city.

“Having seen this clothes market you can form a theory why there are so few picturesque figures in Little Italy.”¹⁶ This article appeared in a section of *The Sun* that discussed other immigrant communities, like Irish and Jewish groups, further reinforcing the notion that flea markets were not an activity in which “real” Americans participated.

This market still existed in 1934. An article from *Miami Daily News* described it in the following terms: “Nearest perhaps to the flea market of Paris in New York is the rag market of E. 115 st. It’s a dumping ground for the attic and cellar scavengings of some 5,000 Old Clo’ men who roam the streets bargaining for the contents of rag bags.”¹⁷ In 1934, Helen Worden devoted a chapter of her book, *Round Manhattan’s Rim*, to the Harlem rag market.¹⁸ Her description of that market echoed that of the 1910 article on Manhattan’s markets, describing it as “a strange mixture of all nationalities,” but dominated by Italians. Like the author of the 1910 article, she also bemoaned the Italian takeover of a once American neighborhood.¹⁹ She described rag pickers as lazy darkies, emphasizing the negative view some white Americans held about their immigrant neighbors and the activities they engaged in.²⁰ She also described another flea market as “sinister” and implied that some of the items might be stolen. “Sometimes they display bits of jewelry. No questions are asked.”²¹ Together, these authors provide examples of the suspicion some Americans felt toward flea markets in the earlier part of the twentieth century.

¹⁶ “Rag Market in New York”

¹⁷ O. O. McIntyre, “New York By Day,” *Miami Daily News*, July 3, 1934, 4.

¹⁸ Worden, *Round Manhattan’s Rim*, 130-34.

¹⁹ Worden, *Round Manhattan’s Rim*, 133.

²⁰ Worden, 147.

²¹ Worden, 50.

In the same time period that Helen Worden and others criticized New York's flea markets, American journalists continued to cover European markets. A 1937 article in *The Rotarian* described the pleasures adventurous travelers could experience by visiting flea markets abroad. The author told her readers of the treasures they could find when traveling through London, Paris, and Geneva and commented that

There is absolutely nothing you can think of that is not huddled higgledy-piggledy on these rows and rows of stalls or strewn on the ground. There are radio-sets, chinaware, Persian rugs, necklaces (the vendor will tell you that a necklace worth \$100,000 was recently sold for a dollar!) and Indian palanquins, silver trays, old clothes, old tires, old violins ("It might be a Strad!"), old furniture, skeins of wool, grand pianos, vases, oil paintings, electrical appliances, birds in cages...²²

Entitled *Adventures in Eating – To Say Nothing of Shopping*, the article highlighted the positive experience a visitor could have visiting the European flea markets. Almost twenty years later, in 1952, newspaper columnist Henry McLemore romantically described the strong appeal of the Paris Flea Market by commenting on the array of mysterious treasures. "There is always the possibility that the shop which sells old razor blades will also have for sale the shaving brush that Napoleon used at Marengo. People have been known to step over a rusty duck press and buy a book inscribed by Lorenzo the Magnificent." He tried to understand the draw of the flea markets. Does he enjoy them "because Americans are young and like to own things that are old? Or is it a showoff gesture on my part?"²³ These articles all highlighted the existence of flea markets throughout Europe and the travel stories tended to present the markets as opportunities for tourists to participate in exciting and mysterious adventures.

²² Sisley Huddleston, "Adventures in Eating – To Say Nothing of Shopping," *The Rotarian*, June 1934, 28-31.

²³ Henry McLemore, "Flea Market in Paris Has a Strong Appeal for Hank," *The Owosso (Mich.) Argus-Press*, January 23, 1952, 4.

This type of exposure made many Americans aware of flea markets abroad. Newspapers throughout the United States featured these types of stories. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, journalists described them as dirty and full of suspicious looking people selling a plethora of used and, largely, undesirable goods. From the 1930s on, writers portrayed them as exciting destinations where Americans could have fun browsing through the various curios on display. Visits to the flea markets of Paris or London involved an adventure or treasure hunt. Americans also knew of flea markets closer to home because newspapers and travel writers covered them. While some coverage of early flea markets, such as Houston's City Market, suggested city-wide participation, most reporting in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was decidedly negative. Coverage of American flea markets associated them with poverty, immigrants, and disease. Writers viewed the markets as ugly and suspicious; visiting one was to encounter another world and possibly contagious diseases.

Multiple government reports on Philadelphia's flea markets directly associated the markets with the outbreak of typhoid fever, noting that

the majority of all these cases were clustered in and about three public markets, the South Street market, the Seventh Street market and the Christian Street market. These are all curb markets. Fruits, vegetables, pastry, clothing and miscellaneous merchandise of every description are dumped on push-carts and pavements without regard for any sanitary precautions. The patrons of these markets handle and pick over the exposed foodstuffs, thus giving every opportunity for the transmission of disease.²⁴

Other coverage tied them to foreign communities removed from and incomprehensible to "real" Americans. Urban readers of these publications probably ignored the markets in their own communities because they seemed too foreign and different for them to feel

²⁴ Pennsylvania Department of Health, *Tenth Annual Report for the Commissioner of Health for the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania* (Harrisburg, PA: J.L.L. Kuhn, Printer to the Commonwealth, 1918), 1451.

comfortable attending. Flea markets existed in a grey area which generally kept them far from the average middle-class American's mind. These Americans had other avenues for shopping and did not need to rely on flea markets to meet their consumption needs or desires. Journalists and government agencies usually paid attention to the markets by associating them with disease, crime, or general anti-immigrant sentiment. A sympathetic Works Progress Administrator who covered the the Orchard Street Pushcart Market in 1937 noted, "It may not be long before this and other open-air pushcart markets will disappear, for the Department of Markets, more interested in sanitation than in the picturesque, plans to house them all indoors."²⁵

To Each His Own: A Flea Market For All Tastes

Carrell popularized flea markets by disassociating them from the the longstanding traditional urban markets, linking them to the exotic markets of Europe, selling higher end goods, like antiques, and by making them safe and fun for middle- and upper-class white American shoppers. He did not invent the flea market. He gentrified it. By the 1960s, many communities across the United States hosted their own homegrown flea markets, many of which they modeled on the famous markets of Paris. One journalist described the myriad of markets he visited in Connecticut as "off shoots of, but no poor imitations of, the Paris Flea Market."²⁶ Different neighborhoods hosted weekly, monthly, or annual markets. Civic and religious organizations organized them to raise money for charity and public goods like nursing scholarships and museums. Markets charged

²⁵ *New York City Guide: American Guide Series*, 117.

²⁶ Howard M. Greenwald, "Connecticut's Flea-Market Circuit," *New York Times*, Jun 17, 1962; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: *The New York Times* (1851-2009), 303.

admission fees to cover the costs of hosting the events.²⁷ The flea markets of New York that were once derided because of their foreign populations became celebrated. An article from 1961 noted that “Orchard Street, on the Lower East Side, is the city’s unofficial street of bargains. Intrepid shoppers flock here from all five boroughs and the bargaining would do credit to the Paris Flea Market or a Near Eastern Bazaar.” According to the author, market offered opportunities for families to relish in a fun day. Kids enjoyed munching on hotdogs while their parents happily browsed for bargains.²⁸

Options catering to a variety of tastes emerged following the flea market explosion. Many markets followed Carrell’s lead and focused on antiques and high-end collectibles. Others seemed to follow the more traditional route of American flea markets, selling anything and everything their customers might want to buy. Some also specialized in particular types of items that appealed to hobbyists. Since the 1950s, these niche markets grew into very large affairs that appealed to specific audiences like automobile or electronics enthusiasts. In 1984, the MIT Radio Society began sponsoring an electronics themed flea market called Swapfest on the third Sunday of each month, April through October. The market specialized in amateur radios, electronics, and computer equipment and continues to operate.²⁹ A 2001 article entitled “The Island of Discarded Macs,” stated that “geeks of every size, gender, race, creed, and operating system can’t

²⁷ “Monmouth Fair to Aid Public Health Nursing,” *New York Times*, August 26, 1960; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: *The New York Times* (1851-2009), 22; “Antiques Show at Fairfield U. to Aid Museum,” *New York Times*, April 30, 1961; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: *The New York Times* (1851-2009), 108. A Flea Market Set in Fairfield to Aid Museum,” *New York Times*, May 20, 1962; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: *The New York Times* (1851-2009), 99.

²⁸ Joan Cook, “Pumpernickel and Plates Still East Side Bargains,” *New York Times*, February 23, 1961; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: *The New York Times* (1851-2009), 32.

²⁹ “The Flea at MIT,” The MIT Radio Society, accessed April 1, 2013, <http://w1mx.mit.edu/flea-at-mit>; “MIT flea market: ‘All things nerdly,’” The Associated Press, NBCNews.com, June 16, 2005, accessed April 2, 2013 http://www.nbcnews.com/id/8280449/ns/technology_and_science-tech_and_gadgets/t/mit-flea-market-all-things-nerdly/#.UWIfbVcQqSo.

help but heed the siren call emanating from the corner of Albany and Main Streets – for there, in the shadow of one of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology’s cyclotrons, lies the MIT Flea Market.” The article described the market as a place where “old technology goes to die. It’s also where old technology goes to be reborn.”

Visitors to the flea market purchased old computers, radios, cell phones, televisions, and a wide variety of other types of electronics. In a review of the flea market, one visitor stated that they enjoy it so much that they have been visiting it for fifteen years. Another claimed,

This was neat. It’s less junky than your typical flea market and extra cool because you can get electronics real cheap. We left with a super-computer that was 8-core and had 12 gigs of RAM for under \$400. We also got a super old camera, complete with case and kit for only \$25 bucks, a color laser printer for \$30 bucks and some neat old stamps too.³⁰

A regular visitor to the market hosted photo galleries of Swapfest on his Flickr account that featured eleven albums dedicated to the flea market, consisting of 472 photos that showed different items available for sale. One photo from 2009 displayed a KIM-1 computer. The photographer deemed it “The Coolest Thing for Sale at the Flea,” and stated that the “sight of this machine (which was hidden away in a box full of manuals when I came along) stopped me in my tracks the same way that a (insert name of very rare vintage muscle car) would do for a car nut.”³¹

Car nuts also enjoyed an abundance of swap meets and flea markets dedicated to their interests. Held annually throughout the United States, they often ran in conjunction

³⁰ Review of the MIT Flea Market by Bud D. on April 4, 2013, accessed April 6, 2013, <http://www.yelp.com/biz/mit-flea-market-cambridge>; Review of MIT Flea Market by A. M. on November 6, 2012, accessed April 6, 2013, <http://www.yelp.com/biz/mit-flea-market-cambridge>.

³¹ “Flickr: Search andyi’s photostream,” Flickr. accessed April 6, 2013 <http://www.flickr.com/search/?w=48889065425@N01&q=mit%20flea>; “Star Quality” andyi, Flickr, accessed April 6, 2013, <http://www.flickr.com/photos/andyi/3649335995/in/set-72157620182282780/>.

with auto shows. The flea market at the Hershey Fall Meet, held annually in Hershey, Pennsylvania, since 1955 – two years before Russell Carrell’s flea market – opened with seven vendors who sold cars. In 1958, a few “parts peddlers” also started selling at the market. Ten years after the market opened, it hosted 336 vendors.³² A 1979 article in *Popular Mechanics* noted that the flea market popularity had grown to such a level that people traveled from across the United States and Europe to attend and cautioned that finding lodgings could be nearly impossible. He wrote, “the first time I made Hershey, I slept in the back of a pickup truck. In 1973, I borrowed a Ford van and lived in that. That’s not to complain, mind; I figure just being there is worth any inconvenience short of out-and-out pain.” He noted that one vendor started selling at the meet in 1958 once he realized that all of his Model T Ford parts were taking over his garage, basement, attic, and the rooms of his home. This seller carted his Model T leftovers to the market, quickly sold them off, and then started acquiring other used auto parts to sell at the market.³³ The number of sellers at the Hershey flea market mushroomed over the years. Today, the market features over 9,000 vendors specializing in classic cars and auto parts.³⁴

Priceless, Worthless Things

The Swapfest and Hershey flea market offer examples of product-specific markets held a few times a year. Unlike these specialty markets, most catered to a more general audience and operated on a weekly or daily basis. Newspaper articles, buying guides, and television shows attested to the continuous popularity of these more general

³² “Fall Meet History,” Hershey Region AACA, accessed April 6, 2013, <http://www.hersheyaaca.org/meethistory.html>.

³³ Michael Lamm, “Never say scrap!” *Popular Mechanics*, October 1979, 115, 186, 188.

³⁴ “2013 AACA Eastern Regional Fall Meet,” accessed April 6, 2013, <http://www.hersheyaaca.org/fallmeet.html>.

flea markets over the past half century. Most coverage of these markets focused on the vast quantity of items available. Those that gained the most positive attention tended to be the markets selling antiques, collectibles, and specialty items fitting a niche audience. This is not surprising because since the 1930s, Americans increasingly became interested in collecting not just antiques, but items of a more recent vintage.

In 1932, *Popular Mechanics* published an article entitled “Have You a Pot of Gold in your Home?” The article encouraged people to look through their attics, under their beds, and throughout their house for old items that might interest collectors. While most people wanted antiques, others also wanted to collect relatively newer items. “It is a strange paradox that many things regarded as family treasures have only nominal worth, while other supposedly worthless objects command good prices.” The article advised readers that toys, stamps, clocks, and books all appealed to different collectors and could be sold for more than their original price.³⁵ Antiques remained popular, but a market also existed for buying and selling less expensive items that appealed to a person’s nostalgia or aesthetic tastes. Harry McLemore spoke of a similar phenomenon in his 1952 article on the Paris flea market. He stated that many people, including Americans, visited the market because they liked collecting different items and the market gave them an opportunity to do so. He had no interest in antiques, but found himself drawn like a magnet to the stalls at the market featuring a random assortment of goods. He found himself purchasing things he did not need, but bought them because they appealed to him for reasons he could not explain. “A half dozen silk ties would have served me better. A

³⁵ Thomas E. Stimson, Jr., “Have You a Pot of Gold in your Home?” *Popular Mechanics*, October 1932, 590-593.

lovely scarf for my niece. But no one can ever say that I don't have in my home priceless, worthless things. And for some reason or other that makes us Americans happy."³⁶

The flea markets that popped up in the 1950s and 1960s allowed Americans easy opportunities to indulge in their collecting desires. They also offered used housewares and clothing that appealed to shoppers' practical needs. News stories frequently attested to the variety of collectibles available at the markets. An article from 1967 attested to the popularity of collectibles. The author found that at the Madison Square Garden flea market, people sought out collectibles. A seller stated, "Here we spell junk 'junque'...and the word for what we sell is 'collectibles.' We have something here for everybody." The author found dealers selling false teeth, stamps, cigar labels, war uniforms, stuffed eagles, and whaling harpoons. Some of the dealers sold antiques, but most sold random collectibles sought out by the shoppers.³⁷ Another article that year found a similar theme among the sellers. "The merchandise usually includes folk art, furniture, clocks, dolls, books, glassware, pottery, jewelry and other items for the home." Most of the merchandise appealed to customers bent on finding nostalgic items from their youth or practical items for their homes.³⁸

In the 1970s and 1980s, a number of sellers started authoring guides to buying and selling at flea markets. These guides attest to the continuing popularity of collectibles and everyday items at flea markets. Authors advised their readers that they would make the most money by catering to the tastes of people seeking practical and collectible goods. One such author was Irene Copeland, who authored *The Flea Market and Garage*

³⁶ McLemore, "Flea Market in Paris Has a Strong Appeal for Hank."

³⁷ "Bargains Sought at Antique Show: Tiffany Glass is on Sale as Well as Less Rare Items," *New York Times*, November 19, 1967; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: *The New York Times* (1851-2009), 84.

³⁸ Sando Bologna, "US Flea Markets: Outdoor Sales of Bric-a-Brac are on the Increase in the Northeast," *New York Times*, May 28, 1967; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: *The New York Times* (1851-2009), XX9.

Sale Handbook in 1977. She advised her readers on a number of different ways that they could start selling at flea markets. Her first piece of advice: “You are limited only by your imagination...If you can dream it up, make, buy or otherwise acquire it, and transport it, you can sell it.”³⁹ Copeland identified three categories of items to sell at flea markets: used and still usable, oldies and goodies, and trivia and nostalgia. The used and still usable category included newly-vintage furniture, clothing, and housewares. She noted that assessing the value of these items would be fairly easy because the seller could go to a department or hardware store to check current prices and then choose a price that was one-quarter to one-third of the new replacement price. She suggested that some items, like chairs, end tables, mirrors, bookcases, and patio furniture sold fairly easily.⁴⁰

Copeland classified antiques as oldies and goodies and suggested that readers visit antique stores to gauge appropriate prices. Items she classified under this category included oak furniture, Depression glass, silver, paintings, and pine furniture. Collectibles fell under the trivia and nostalgia category. Copeland stated, “Today people are mad not just for fine antiques, but for crazy collectibles that may date back only ten or fifteen years. Remember that anything having to do with early radio stars, TV personalities of the fifties, film stars and comic strip characters, is collectible.”⁴¹

The interest in collectibles continued in the 1990s. Books by Harry L. Rinker, Jr. about flea markets spoke to the growing popularity of collectibles throughout the years. Rinker is an author of numerous books on flea markets, antiques, and collectibles. He also hosted a few television programs about collecting on HGTV and the Discovery Channel. Through his years of research and participation in flea markets, antique sales,

³⁹ Irene Copeland. *The Flea Market and Garage Sale Handbook* (New York: Popular Library, 1977), 32.

⁴⁰ Copeland. *The Flea Market and Garage Sale Handbook*. 8-9.

⁴¹ Copeland, 10.

and auctions, he became an expert on the collectibles trade.⁴² In 1991, he wrote his first book on flea market buying, *Price Guide to Flea Market Treasures*, which would eventually see four updated editions and two additional works called *The Official Guide to Flea Market Prices*.⁴³ Rinker wrote from the perspective of a serious collector, but his works provide a very broad insight into what types of items people looked for in the 1990s and 2000s. The collectibles market was huge. In his first edition of *Flea Market Treasures*, the categories of collectible items he covered encompassed over two hundred pages. These categories expanded to over 400 pages in his latest addition of *Flea Market Prices*.

Some of collectibles Rinker identified included apparel and accessories, vintage glass, musical instruments, war memorabilia, action figures and toys, and advertising items. In his guides, he provided descriptions of items found in those categories and example prices. He did this to ensure that readers would have an idea of the value of the item they wanted to purchase before heading to a flea market. He noted, however, that the value of items could vary depending on region, taste of the buyer and the seller, the rarity of an item, and other less tangible reasons. For example, the age of an item did not always correlate with the price attached to it. Under the “binoculars” category, he listed a pair of German North Africa Corps trench binoculars as being valued at \$350. A pair of World War I French officer’s binoculars with the original leather carrying case was valued at \$30.⁴⁴ Rinker provided no explanation for this huge divergence in value, but noted that World War II items tended to be the most popular of military collectibles, along with Civil War memorabilia. This suggests that value of some items had more to do

⁴² Harry Rinker, “Who is Harry?” accessed April 2, 2013, <http://www.harryrinker.com/harry.html>.

⁴³ Harry Rinker, *Price Guide to Flea Market Treasures* (Radnor, Pennsylvania: Wallace-Homestead, 1991).

⁴⁴ Rinker, *Price Guide to Flea Market Treasures*, 70.

with personal or societal interests than with a fixed value. For instance, World War II binoculars may have cost more than World War I binoculars because throughout the second half of the twentieth century, the former tended to be more celebrated in popular media and literature than the latter.

Rinker also stated that many people assigned a higher value to items that they could recall from their childhood or other periods in their lives. For instance, he noted that college collectibles were quite popular, but that college-specific memorabilia often only had value to the people who attended that college.⁴⁵ This is in contrast with theories of value presented by Michael Thompson in *Rubbish Theory*. Thompson argues that items go through stages of different value: transient and durable. “Objects in the transient category decrease in value over time and have finite life-spans. Objects in the durable category increase in value over time and have (ideally) infinite life-spans.” Between these two stages, an item is considered rubbish and has no value.⁴⁶ An example provided by Thompson, relevant in a discussion of collectibles, concerns the value of Stevengraphs, silk pictures produced in England between 1879 and 1940. Thompson found that Stevengraphs sold for small sums when they first retailed, but “fetch[ed] hundreds of times their original price” at the time of his research. This was particularly true of the Stevengraphs produced in the late 1800s.⁴⁷ They shifted from the transient category to the rubbish category and finally to the durable category. Thompson suggests that a significant period of time must pass before items can transfer from the transient to the durable category. “The human life-span and the time taken for an item to pass from the

⁴⁵ Rinker, 100.

⁴⁶ Michael Thompson, *Rubbish Theory: The Creation and Destruction of Value* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 7.

⁴⁷ Michael Thompson, *Rubbish Theory*, 14.

transient, through the rubbish to the durable category are of the same order, and this both facilitates the rubbish to durable transfer (as those to whom it is unacceptable die off) and obscures our understanding of it.”⁴⁸ Thompson’s theory accurately describes the value assigned to antiques, which are generally accepted to be items that are one hundred years or older. It is inadequate, however, in explaining the phenomenon of collecting. The value of collectibles were assigned by the people who collected them and this was often based on personal nostalgia for particular items.

Rinker examples suggest a widespread connection between personal connections and collecting. He noted that when people purchased toys, games, and puzzles, they often chose ones remembered from their childhood.⁴⁹ Rinker identified numerous pop culture specific items that related to particular bands, television shows, and movies. For instance, he noted that “Elvis was hot, is hot, and promises to be hot well into the future. Elvis is a collectible that is bought from the heart, not the head.”⁵⁰ Similarly, he identified collectibles related to *The Planet of the Apes*, *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, and *King Kong*.⁵¹ Other popular culture items Rinker listed as categories include fast food collectibles, soft drink, and space collectibles. In the space collectibles category, he stated that interest in space heroes varied depending on the age of the person and what types of media they consumed, noting “My grandfather followed Buck Rogers in the Sunday funnies. Dad saw Buster Crabbe as Flash Gordon in the movies and cut his teeth on early television with Captain Video. I am from the Star Trek generation.” These types of collectibles included a Buck Rogers rubber stamp set, valued at \$90, or a Star Trek utility

⁴⁸ Thompson, 27.

⁴⁹ Rinker, 87.

⁵⁰ Rinker, 130.

⁵¹ Rinker, 101, 108.

belt, valued at \$30.⁵² Again, all of these items suggest that the value was assigned not by their age, but by their significance to the collector. When people felt a personal connection to items, they valued them more.

Some of the categories listed by Rinker implied that gender also influenced some types of flea market collecting. He identified some categories that seemed as if they would have appealed more to men. He listed baseball cards and memorabilia, basketball and football memorabilia, pin up photographs and calendars, Playboy magazines and collectibles, beer cans and whiskey bottles, Boy Scout and military paraphernalia, and car and motorcycle products. While these items could certainly have appealed to either gender, it seems likely that men primarily collected these items as many of them have a history of marketing toward men and associations with masculinity. Conversely, Rinker also identified vintage kitchen items, Kewpie and Barbie dolls, lace and linens, jewelry and cosmetic accessories, perfume bottles and antique glass as popular collectibles. Because many of these items were originally marketed to women, it seems reasonable to suggest that women might have been the primary collectors of these items.

Copeland and Rinker's guides attested to the longstanding popularity of collectibles at flea markets and swap meets. Rinker's later work *The Official Guide to Flea Market Prices*, published in 2004, made it clear that collectibles continued to be popular for flea market customers. In this book, Rinker included hundreds of new categories and expanded on some of the categories identified in his earlier work. For instance, in the 1991 book, he listed *Star Trek* and *Star Wars* items under space collectibles. In the 2002, book, these items had grown to such a level of popularity that Rinker placed them in categories of their own. In spite of the continuing popularity of

⁵² Rinker, 227.

used and collectible items at flea markets, a growing number of flea markets moved away from selling second-hand items and started focusing primarily on newer items in the 1980s. The Costa Mesa Swap Meet held at the Orange County Fairgrounds steadily moved from selling used items to offering “almost entirely new merchandise,” according to the *U.S. Flea Market Directory* published in 2000.⁵³

Seller interest in trading primarily new items appears to have started in the 1980s. In her 1981 book *Successful Flea Market Selling*, Valerie Bohigian devoted a chapter to different kinds of merchandise. Although the majority of the pictures Bohigian included in her book featured used items and collectibles, many of her recommendations for selling involved new merchandise. For instance, she stated that “Merchandise which is easily available is useful. An item (or items) which a manufacturer or distributor usually has in stock or is able to ship to you immediately is preferable to an item which you are told he is waiting to receive from his overseas contacts.”⁵⁴ She suggested that sellers visit trade and gift shows to build connections with wholesalers that specialized in the type of merchandise that interested sellers.⁵⁵

In his 1988 book *How to Make Cash Money Selling at Swap Meets, Flea Markets, Etc.*, Jordan L. Cooper also recommended wholesale gift shows as a “lucrative source for good merchandise.” He also encouraged trading in regional handcrafted items. He acknowledged that used items sold at swap meets, but suggested that the vendors of these lacked imagination⁵⁶ Cooper also stated that while “flea market” and “swap meet” were

⁵³ Albert LaFarge, *U.S. Flea Market Directory, 3rd Edition: A Guide to the Best Flea Markets in all 50 States* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 2000), 30.

⁵⁴ Valerie Bohigian, *Successful Flea Market Selling* (Blue Ridge Summit, PA: Tab Books Inc, 1981), 63.

⁵⁵ Bohigian. *Successful Flea Market Selling*. 82-95.

⁵⁶ Jordan L. Cooper, *How to Make Cash Money Selling at Swap Meets, Flea Markets. Etc.* (Port Townsend, WA: Loompanics Unlimited, 1988), 27-29.

essentially regional terms that refer to the same type of business, he preferred the term swap meet because it “conjures up visions of a high percentage of professional dealers selling new, first quality merchandise.” He associated flea markets, on the other hand, with “a bunch of scruffy looking characters driving rattletrap cars and trying to sell junk which should actually be thrown away.”⁵⁷

Rinker noticed this trend in his 1991 work:

If you visit the Rose Bowl Flea Market in Pasadena, California, you will find discontinued and knockoff merchandise, handmade crafts, clothing (from tube socks to dresses), home care items, plants of all types, and specialty foods more in evidence than antiques and collectibles.⁵⁸

Because this work, and other later works by Rinker, focused on collectibles, it is clear that he and his readers preferred the flea markets that sold used items to those that focused on new items. He was not alone. Many authors published books that advised readers on how to find the best collectibles and second-hand goods at flea markets. Other books explained how to decorate with flea market finds and how to rebuild and restore flea market treasures.⁵⁹

“It looked shady to me” – The Seedier Side of the Market

While flea markets grew in popularity since the 1950s, they also continued to be associated with negative characteristics like criminal behavior and undesirable people. In the 1970s and 1980s, the FBI and other law enforcement agencies frequently raided flea markets throughout the United States for selling stolen or pirated items. The music

⁵⁷ Cooper, *How to Make Cash Money Selling at Swap Meets, Flea Markets, Etc.*, 2-3.

⁵⁸ Rinker, 4.

⁵⁹ Mary Randolph Carter, *American Junk* (New York: Penguin Books, 1994); Emelie Tolley and Chris Mead, *Flea Market Style: Decorating with a Creative Edge* (New York: Clarkson Potter Publishers, 1998); Martha Stewart, *Good Things from Tag Sales and Flea Markets* (New York: Potter Craft, 2002).

industry in particular associated flea markets with the distribution of pirated music and appears to be the first major industry to legally challenge vendors and market owners for the selling of pirated or counterfeit goods. Throughout these decades, the music magazine *Billboard* repeatedly reported on the connections between flea markets and pirated music. One story from 1973 noted that the confiscated tapes from a raid on The Flea Market in Santa Clara included music from “75 percent of the LP’s on Billboard’s Top LP’s and Tapes Chart,” again demonstrating how widespread the problem came to be for the recording industry.⁶⁰

In October of 1976, *Billboard* ran a short article noting that authorities confiscated over 20,000 tapes from four swap meets in California, Wisconsin, Kentucky, and Florida.⁶¹ A few months later, on December 25, 1976, the magazine reported that “[b]etween 50,000 and 70,000 allegedly counterfeit 8-track tapes, the largest quantity uncovered to date in North Carolina, were seized by FBI agents, the Buncombe County Sheriff’s Dept., and the Asheville City Police in simultaneous raids on a rented house and a flea market operation at the Dreamland Drive-in Theatre.” The flea market was believed to be the distribution center.⁶² An article from 1980 stated that Latin music labels began raiding swap meets in western states in an effort to end music piracy.⁶³ Six years later, *Billboard* reported the Latin music industry continued to deal with the

⁶⁰ “\$\$ Awarded in Piracy Case; Raids Net 9,000 Recordings,” *Billboard*, November 10, 1984, 78; “NARM & RIAA in Anti-Piracy Pledges,” *Billboard*, March 10, 1973, 13; “FBI Searching for a Convicted California Tape Pirate,” *Billboard*, October 15, 1977, 10; “\$5 Million Haul Ends FBI’s Year: Raids in Four States See 32,000 Tapes, LPs Seized,” *Billboard*, December 27, 1980, 4; “Tape Raids in Eight Cities,” *Billboard*, November 30, 1985, 65; “First Tape Raid by FBI in Fla. Hits 3 Outlets,” *Billboard*, May 11, 1974, 3; “Hold 7 Men in California Tape Raid,” *Billboard*, November 20, 1976, 3; “FBI Takes Antipiracy Action in 2 States: Product Seized,” *Billboard*, October 24, 1981, 10; Bob Kirsch, “Seize 28,000 Tapes Including 4-tracks,” *Billboard*, March 24, 1973, 40.

⁶¹ “Tapes Confiscated in 4 U.S. Cities,” *Billboard*, October 16, 1976, 14.

⁶² “N.C. Tape Raid Nets Law a Huge Haul,” *Billboard*, December 25, 1976, 16.

⁶³ “L.A. Latin Labels Hunt Pirates,” *Billboard*, October 11, 1980, 82.

distribution of pirated music at flea markets and that the Latin music company Profono Internacional Inc. had “been involved in raids on street and swap meet vendors that have netted over 100,000 illegal cassettes in the last month.” While the intention of the raids was to uncover pirated Latin music, the company found the problem to be widespread throughout the music industry. The company argued, “We recently went to a swap meet where all the recordings being offered were counterfeits – and there was no Latin Product.”⁶⁴

More recent stories showed that the selling of illegal goods continued to be a problem at flea markets and swap meets. An interesting story of a sleuthing librarian from the June 1995 issue of *American Libraries* showed that tracking down illegal music was not limited to just law enforcement or the music industry. The magazine reported that, “[a] librarian acting on an anonymous tip found more than \$17,000 worth of CDs on loan from three Maryland libraries being sold at a flea market,” and the police eventually seized over 1,300 CDs belonging to neighborhood libraries.⁶⁵ Notably, in this story, the illegal merchandise was not pirated, but stolen. In the 1990s, many Americans were making the shift from cassette tapes to CDs and it was probably not as easy for people to make pirated music on CDs as it was for them to make pirated cassette tapes. Within a few years, the consumer access to this technology would have improved to a point where theft of CDs would likely have been unnecessary.

While music continued to be an issue, another Maryland story demonstrated that the problem of counterfeit merchandise extended well beyond the music industry. A story from *The Washington Post* in May of 2012 noted that federal authorities seized over \$47

⁶⁴ Fred Goodman, “U.S. Latin Label Gets Tough on Parallel Imports,” *Billboard*, October 5, 1986, 92.

⁶⁵ “Hot CDs Found at Flea Market,” *American Libraries*, June 1995, 504.

million dollars in counterfeit merchandise from the Patapsco Flea Market in Maryland, “the largest such seizure ever at a flea market.” The merchandise included “nearly 220,000 counterfeit items including clothing, shoes, jewelry, handbags, DVDs, CDs, perfume, makeup, and other personal care items.”⁶⁶ The 2012 raid received a great deal of press attention because of the amount of counterfeit merchandise found, but it was not the first time the Patapsco Flea Market was raided by law enforcement. Law enforcement raided the Patapsco market at least three other times between 1996 and 2006 for selling counterfeit items, primarily counterfeit luxury brand clothing and accessories. Just as the recording industry took on the role of investigating pirated music at flea markets in the 1970s, luxury clothing brands also played a role in identifying fake goods at flea markets. Following the 2012 raid, *The Morning Call* featured an article describing the process, noting that the luxury brands “gather intelligence on wholesalers and manufacturers of these counterfeit products and report their findings to the authorities.”⁶⁷

Sellers also knew of the perceived association between flea markets and criminal behavior. In *How to Make Cash Money Selling at Swap Meets, Flea Markets, Etc.*, Jordan L. Cooper, who preferred the term “swap meet” because he associated flea markets with “scruffy looking characters...trying to sell junk which should actually be thrown away,” advised future sellers to be aware of common scams he encountered while selling at swap meets and flea markets. His concerns mainly focused on con artists trying to swindle people out of their money with either fake sob stories or counterfeit merchandise.⁶⁸ Many

⁶⁶ The Associated Press, “Large counterfeit merchandise seizure at Md. flea market,” *The Washington Post*, May 4, 2012, accessed February 20, 2013, http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/crime-scene/post/large-counterfeit-merchandise-seizure-at-md-flea-market/2012/05/04/gIQAagg40T_blog.html.

⁶⁷ Hannah Cho, “Homeland Security: Patapsco Flea Market has history of selling allegedly counterfeit merchandise,” *The Morning Call*, April 23, 2012, accessed March 1, 2013, <http://www.mcall.com/news/breaking/bs-bz-patapsco-flea-market-raid-20120423,0,3021596,full.story>.

⁶⁸ Cooper, 2, 168-171.

sellers often traded merchandise with each other, so vendors could also become prey to those selling fakes and then inadvertently pass them on to customers. While Cooper's example referred specifically to native art, the lesson could also be applied to a broader range of items such as antiques, clothing, or other household items. Cooper knew that flea market customers felt wary of markets or vendors that they suspected of selling counterfeit goods and strongly urged potential sellers to be careful about this issue because it contributed to the negative perceptions people held of all swap meets and flea markets.⁶⁹

Customers also sometimes held negative views about flea markets they attended. An example of this can be seen in stories and reviews surrounding the Star-Lite Swap & Shop in Lakewood, Washington. One visitor wrote this about her experience:

As far as the actual vendor area, you have a whole bunch of vendors selling anything from tools to electronics to clothes to tacos. I wasn't looking for anything in particular, it's just that I've always been curious of this place and never came here before. Walking around, it looked shady to me, I don't know why...it looks like something the FBI might have their sights on, just put it that way. I'm quite sure that most of the stuff sold there are stolen goods or counterfeit knockoffs of the real deal (this place had tons of obvious knockoffs, clothes and shoes in particular). There were questionable-looking people walking around--the kind that look like they were part of a drug gang or fresh out of prison. Let's just say I felt very uncomfortable and left shortly afterwards."⁷⁰

While the reviewer may have been a little extreme in their fears of drug gangs and FBI surveillance, others also shared suspicions of the Star-Lite Swap & Shop. The Lakewood Police Department and the Pierce County Health Department investigated The Star-Lite Swap & Shop numerous times throughout the 2000s by, resulting in citations for allowing vendors to operate without licenses, selling stolen goods – the police uncovered tools

⁶⁹ Cooper, 35.

⁷⁰ K.M. September 29, 2012. Review comment on the "Star-Lite Swap & Shop - Lakewood, Washington," *Yelp*, accessed February 20, 2013, <http://www.yelp.com/biz/star-lite-swap-and-shop-lakewood#hrid:i1XLhYssdyL1vCd6HyIiAw>.

without serial numbers, and violating health department code. Authorities also temporarily shut the market down in 2001 after local authorities tied the previous owners to organized crime in the area.

While many visitors enjoyed the Star-Lite for the variety of goods available at cheap prices, other community members called for the closure of the market, arguing that the Star-Lite attracted criminal elements, created an eyesore in the neighborhood, and contributed to trash problems and traffic congestion throughout the area. The majority of vendors at the Star-Lite were from the Mexican and Asian communities. While the diversity of the market appealed to many customers over the years – one visitor noted that the Star-Lite reminded her of the “open air market” she visited as a child in Korea, some neighborhood residents associated their concerns about criminal behavior with the ethnic and socioeconomic makeup of the swap meet. One commenter noted that “the lot is filled with junk, and meth addicts selling stuff. I think it should be shut down” and another declared, “As a kid I remember the old outside swap meet where Grandma would take us on the weekend. I would hunt for baseball cards or Star Wars toys and the such. 20 years later I wouldn't even think of taking my children there. That old eyesore needs to go.” Hank Bardon, owner of the Star-Lite acknowledged that some vendors traded in stolen goods his market, but argued that “the large number of transactions at the swap meet makes it impossible to keep completely free of questionable items.”⁷¹

⁷¹ Christian Hill, “Complaints lead to inspection at Star Lite Swap Meet in Lakewood,” The News Tribune, September 29, 2010, accessed February 19, 2013, http://www.thenewstribune.com/2010/09/29/1360663/swap-meet-complaints-lead-to-inspection.html#disqus_thread; Christian Hill, “Lakewood swap meet owner will pay \$8,000 to settle lawsuit by tenant,” The News Tribune, April 6, 2011, accessed February 19, 2013, <http://www.thenewstribune.com/2011/04/06/1614680/star-lite-swap-meet-owner-will.html#storylink=misearch>.

While some potential customers worried about the honesty of sellers at flea markets, sellers sometimes expressed similar concerns about their potential customers. When selling in large, high-traffic areas, sellers worried about the safety of their items. One vendor who sold at the Rose Bowl Stadium Flea Market in Pasadena California, complained that in a venue as large as the Rose Bowl, and with so many buyers walking through all the time, a seller's attention could easily become diverted and may end up having their items stolen when they were occupied with customers. The seller advised, "Unless you are selling clothing, I would not recommend the white section. Watch for low-life scumbags who will steal items from you if given the opportunity. I lost a couple of \$40 items because I got distracted with potential buyers." The same reviewer later noted that they did not observe any security in the area and advised other sellers to be prepared if they chose to sell at this flea market.⁷²

Consumer studies of flea markets also demonstrated the perceptions that sellers and buyer alike held about flea markets and crime. In their study of the Red Mesa Swap Meet in 1988, Russell W. Belk, John F. Sherry Jr., and Melanie Wallendorf observed that several dealers sold "real guns, bows, and self-defense equipment." They also noticed that vendors wore "sidearms or knives in many cases and ma[de] it clear that they were ready and willing to defend themselves and their merchandise." They also found that buyers and sellers alluded to a "presence (although not pervasiveness) of illegal aliens, tax evasion, stolen merchandise, and conflict with government authorities." The flea market sellers felt alienated from the city officials and believed that the local authorities

⁷² bighornnevada, "Rose Bowl Flea Market-Vendor point of view." Comment on "Review of Rose Bowl Stadium, Pasadena, CA," *Trip Advisor*, accessed February 19, 2013, http://www.tripadvisor.com/ShowUserReviews-g32859-d284712-r151938382-Rose_Bowl_Stadium-Pasadena_California.html#CHECK_RATES_CONT.

would eventually push the market out of the city. The researchers went on to say that, “Not only was the swap meet described as a “thieves’ market” (like the old thieves’ market in Hong Kong), but patrons and sellers alike seemed to revel in sustaining the image that this was a thieves’ hideout where all are safe from the mainstream rules and law.”⁷³ In a similar study in 1990, Sherry interviewed a woman who noted that while she personally liked visiting the flea market, “[i]t’s got a sleazy element – people with tattoos, people on the shady side, you know....Like it’s a little dangerous for a white, upper-class, suburban female....The flea market is imperfection. It’s jumbled, dirty and unorganized.” Another woman who refused to shop at flea markets proclaimed that they were full of junk and that “unsavory and unkempt people shop at the flea market.”⁷⁴

Online reviews of flea markets demonstrated a variety of opinions regarding the criminality or unsavoriness of different markets. Many markets received a number of positive reviews that noted the range of interesting items available, enjoyable entertainment, and good prices. However, some reviews tended to have more in common with the quote about the Star-Lite Swap & Shop above. Complaints often focused on the lack of cleanliness of the market, the possibility of stolen or counterfeit items, the quality of the goods available, and the astronomical prices and unfriendliness of some dealers. One review of the Westwind Capital Flea Market in San Jose, California stated, “Many people are selling stolen bikes and equipment here. I know of several people who have purchased items and then found out that their purchases were stolen items.”⁷⁵ Another

⁷³ Russell W. Belk, John F. Sherry, Jr., and Melanie Wallendorf, “A Naturalistic Inquiry into Buyer and Seller Behavior at a Swap Meet,” *Journal of Consumer Research*, 14 (1988): 462.

⁷⁴ John F. Sherry, Jr., “A Sociocultural Analysis of a Midwestern American Flea Market,” *Journal of Consumer Research*, 17 (1990): 17.

⁷⁵ R.K. May 22, 2010. Review comment on the Westwind Capitol Flea Market – San Jose, CA. *Yelp*, accessed February 21, 2013, <http://www.yelp.com/biz/westwind-capitol-flea-market-san-jose#hrid:WjhBNeX9lwVHSr4JIcfDrA>,

reviewer stated that the market was “disgustingly dirty. Poorly run. Parking is almost impossible and your car is always at risk. I got keyed there last time...I would never bring a young child here as it is not safe. The majority of clothes vendors are really rude and resentful if you are white. I am tired of being called rich woman in a derogatory manner when I try to bargain. I am not returning.”⁷⁶ A third reviewer asked, “How many stolen tools, CD’s and stereos can you buy?”⁷⁷

The negative attitudes toward flea markets found in the early 1900s – that they were dirty and areas of criminal behavior and scams –remained largely the same throughout the century. Concerns over sales of stolen goods remained, while worries about counterfeit and pirated goods increased as technology and production changed in ways that made these goods more readily available. Doubts about the trustworthiness and cleanliness of the people who bought and sold at flea markets continued to be issues for both those who participated in flea markets and for the residents who lived within the areas where flea markets operated. In some areas, racist attitudes and fears of immigrants contributed to suspicion of flea markets. Because of this and anxieties about crime and trash, flea market owners and sellers sometimes faced marginalization from surrounding communities that wished to push flea markets out of town. These issues seemed less worrying for the majority of people who enjoyed shopping at or visiting flea markets and some stories of criminal behavior appeared to be exaggerated. For instance, investigations at the Star-Lite only turned up six potential stolen items out of hundreds of

⁷⁶ sarah s. April 28, 2012. Review comment on the Westwind Capitol Flea Market – San Jose, CA. *Yelp*, accessed February 21, 2013, <http://www.yelp.com/biz/westwind-capitol-flea-market-san-jose#hrid:j60kCyssmISSWq3-wDbjfw>.

⁷⁷ Terry H. August 11, 2008. Review comment on the Westwind Capitol Flea Market – San Jose, CA. *Yelp*, accessed February 21, 2013, <http://www.yelp.com/biz/westwind-capitol-flea-market-san-jose#hrid:5glqP78Hh3DDpYRHrYdnjQ>.

vendors. However, some of these perceptions existed because there was an element of criminal behavior and uncleanness at *some* flea markets. When Jordan Cooper wrote his guide to swap meet selling in 1988, he noted that flea markets suffered from a “bad image” even though most sellers were “responsible citizens who just happen to be a little more independent than the average guy.”⁷⁸ This bad image started in the late nineteenth century and continued throughout the twentieth.

⁷⁸ Cooper, 21.

Chapter 2: People at the Markets

Many people defined flea markets by the merchandise sold at them, but the perceptions about the people participating in them also influenced how the public viewed them. Prior to the gentrified markets that developed in the 1950s, commentary generally focused more on the people utilizing them, usually immigrants, than on the products being sold. Because these people came from poor and marginalized communities, most reporting on flea markets took the form of negative curiosity. Sympathetic writers occasionally commented on the cultural heritage found in the market, but more often than not, mainstream attention focused on the negative. Markets were dirty. The people were poor and foreign.

However, once flea markets became gentrified, the attention they received more often focused on the variety of collectibles available at them. Different types of flea markets emerged that catered to specific needs and these became associated with particular types of customers. These markets included those that catered to particular clienteles, such as collectors or electronic or automobile enthusiasts. Markets that catered to the poor or other marginalized groups also flourished, albeit with less popular support in the media. These less affluent markets offered opportunities for both vendors and buyers to participate in the consumer economy. The experiences of the people who utilized both types of markets provide a better understanding of the dual role these markets played in American culture – economic opportunity and nostalgic collecting.

In addition, a closer look at flea market sellers provides valuable insight into the business of these markets. They functioned as an entry point into the larger economy and provided opportunities for sellers to acquire financial independence and success. At the same time, they also allowed for marginalized people, such as poor immigrants, to participate in the economy and meet their basic needs – and, in some cases, their luxury desires. Flea markets that received the most positive attention generally catered to white, middle- and upper-class desires like cars, electronics, collectibles, or antiques. The markets that received the most negative attention usually catered to marginalized groups. This attention often focused on crime or the supposed character or physical characteristics of the participants, which sometimes resulted in efforts to shut flea markets down. This was not always true, as dominant groups occasionally adopted marginal flea markets as their own, but even that has not always enabled them to remain open. Such was the case with Chicago’s Maxwell Street Market.

The Maxwell Street Market provides a unique opportunity to examine the people who participated in these lower-end markets because it existed for over a hundred years and was documented throughout. More than a flea market, Maxwell Street also consisted of retail shops and other amusements like street performers and food vendors. Together, all of these components created a carnival type atmosphere that found people encountering buskers, pitchmen, pullers, pushcarts, hot dog vendors, and a plethora of different merchandise to attract their attention. Maxwell Street was more than a flea market, but the flea market also contributed to and helped define the culture of the community.

The market began informally sometime in the 1890s and the city of Chicago designated it an official municipal market in 1912.¹ Located in an area known as ‘the Ghetto,’ from its inception until the mid-twentieth century its vendors and business owners primarily consisted of Jewish immigrants and their descendants. The market served the local Jewish population, other immigrant communities, and African Americans. Locals sometimes referred to the market as “Jewtown,” a name that stuck with it even after many of the Jewish vendors were replaced by African Americans, Hispanics, and Eastern Europeans². The market included retail stores, curbside vendors, and pushcarts. Anything and everything was available at Maxwell Street.

It is lined on either side for about six blocks with booths where new and second hand articles are displayed, where clothing is hung from lines stretched across the sidewalk, and where all kinds of fruit and vegetables, live fowl, clothing of all descriptions, calico and silk – in fact everything is here offered for sale. In the crowded street among the booths and the piles of goods displayed on the sidewalk wander the traders dickering with each other as to prices, finally purchasing and wending their way with the crowd.³

Home to shop keepers, pullers, hustlers, buskers, and pitchmen throughout its long history, Maxwell Street attracted immigrant and low-income customers, middle-class suburban shoppers, and looky-loos interested in viewing the spectacle. Throughout its many years in operation, it received both praise and criticism from a variety of academics, journalists, aid societies, and Chicago residents. In 1919, an author described the market by stating, “Here we have squalor, perhaps, and yet a pretty clean and a wholly orderly squalor.”⁴

¹ “Street Peddling,” *Encyclopedia of Chicago*, accessed September 1, 2013, <http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/794.html>.

² Anne Keegan, “Maxwell Street: At the poor man’s galleria, wheeling and dealing is still a way of life,” *Chicago Tribune Magazine*, December 10, 1990, 18.

³ Mary B. Taylor, “In the Heart of the City,” *Woman’s Home Missions*, April 1921, 4.

⁴ Meredith Nicholson, *The Valley of Democracy* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1919), 151.

But commentators also associated it with criminal activity. A 1927 study of Chicago gangs called the market “one of the liveliest and most picturesque spots in Chicago” that transacted around “\$1,000,000 worth of business a month,” but also noted that “thousands of dollars worth of stolen goods have been sold each year through numerous ‘fences.’”⁵ Stolen items remained a constant at the market. Over sixty years later, a reporter for *The Chicago Tribune* also commented on fenced items. “Almost every hubcap and tire that ever disappeared off a car is here, arranged in distinctive junkyard design.”⁶

The market endured until the early 1990s, when it came under threat by expansions of the University of Illinois. A group of supporters that included local historians, musicians, journalists, and residents rallied to save the market. They were ultimately defeated and the market closed. City officials leveled the area and forced the remaining storefront businesses to close. They encouraged former vendors to move to a new market a few blocks away. All that was left was a different type of preservation in the form of pictures, music, stories, and films, associated with the original market.

Like many other early urban markets, the market on Maxwell Street was founded in the latter half of the 19th century by Jewish immigrants who lived in the area. These immigrants created their own economic opportunities by building Jewish businesses – stores, restaurants, and market stalls – and catering to the Jewish and immigrant communities. People marginalized from mainstream retail options found themselves welcomed on Maxwell Street. This parallels the experiences of other immigrant urban markets of the same time period. After the Jewish families started moving out of the area,

⁵ Frederic M. Thrasher, *The Gang: A Study of 1,313 Gangs in Chicago* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1921 and 1936), 12, 134.

⁶ Keegan, “Maxwell Street: At the poor man’s galleria, wheeling and dealing is still a way of life,” 18.

new immigrant communities and African Americans moved in and utilized the market for consumption and economic opportunities. Again, this is similar to the experiences of other markets catering to economically disadvantaged communities in other areas. Over the course of its existence, the market faced the threat of being forced to move or shut down from the local government. It was forced to move and reduce its size several times. In 1994, the market was shut down so that the University of Illinois at Chicago could expand student housing and shopping options. Other markets of this type faced similar threats. For these reasons, the Maxwell Street Market provides an in-depth look at the importance of flea markets to marginalized communities and the threats they faced throughout the twentieth century.

The Early Years: Life and Opportunity at the Maxwell Street Market

Maxwell Street, the ghetto's great outdoor market is full of color, action, shouts, odors, and dirt. It resembles a medieval European fair more than the market of a great city of today. Its origins are to be sought in the traditions of the Jews, whose occupations in the Old World differed little from what they are here.⁷

Louis Wirth, a sociologist at the University of Chicago whose research focused on urban communities and immigrant experiences, first examined the importance of the market to Chicago's Jewish community. In 1928, Wirth published *The Ghetto*, a study of Jewish ghettos that particularly focused on the Chicago's Jewish residents. Portions of the book focused exclusively on the community life he observed on Maxwell Street. The first vendors of the market were European immigrants, primarily Jews. Wirth argued that these people brought their culture with them, which included trading in the old-world

⁷ Louis Wirth, *The Ghetto* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1928), 296.

fashion of bartering and haggling for goods.⁸ In an interview with Ira Berkow, former resident and conman Joseph Rene “Yellow Kid” Weil explained why Maxwell Street became such a center for the Jewish community at the turn of the twentieth century:

The Jews located around through there because they were starving and had no place else to go....The city was highly anti-Jewish and they had an awful tough go of it. They couldn't get anything to do. Nobody would hire them. They had to do something to make a living, so the market got started over in there. And it came to be Jewish headquarters.”⁹

Selling at the market provided immigrants and their children with an avenue for making money when other paths were not always open to them. This often paved the way to better futures, both within the market and outside of it. Successful street vendors often opened their own storefront businesses.

The most successful businessmen opened stores outside of the neighborhood, on Halstead Street – a more prosperous Jewish neighborhood – or in other areas throughout the city. Wirth argued that many businessmen found enough success on Maxwell Street to provide a better life for themselves and their families. “The Jewish tradesmen who conduct the business of the market are very enterprising and eventually they usually move out of the Ghetto to more prosperous communities.”¹⁰ Women also found opportunities for economic advancement by participating in the market; a number of stalls were run by women.

In 2004, one man who grew up on Maxwell Street remembered how his mother sold at the market to make extra money for the family. In the 1920s, his mother owned a second hand clothing shop and also bought and sold at the market. “On Sundays we would go to Maxwell Street where it was absolutely vibrant and thriving. There was

⁸ Wirth, *The Ghetto*, 296.

⁹ Ira Berkow, *Maxwell Street: Survival in a Bazaar* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1977), 360.

¹⁰ Thrasher, *The Gang*, 134.

anything and everything for sale. And second-hand clothing found a ready market in those days.” His mother bought second hand clothes and repaired them for resale at the market. He and his siblings assisted her when she sold on the market. She sold year-round at the market and he pulled the clothes along in a wagon or a sled as his mother negotiated with the market master over a location. This involved paying extra for a prime location. This woman, like many others, sold at the market to provide her sons with better opportunities, which ultimately led to this man becoming a successful lawyer. He felt that his time in the market prepared him for his career in law by teaching him how to negotiate with different kinds of people.¹¹ Many other people recalled similar experiences. Another woman asserted that she learned how to become a businesswoman by working on Maxwell Street.

We were business people. I mean, even though we were selling for nickels, we were in business. We had a product to sell, we had to get it to the buyer. Who is going to buy it? How are we going to negotiate with them and get them to take ours over somebody else’s. And that’s the same thing I do today. The exact same thing. I’ve got to sell somebody on why they should do business with me, and why I should sell it to them.¹²

Wirth confirmed that the market was seen as a pathway to success and that many people sold at the market in the hope of finding greater economic opportunities for themselves and their families. He noted that many of the successful Jewish businessmen in Chicago were “graduates of Maxwell” and that the “modern business man on Halsted Street represents the ideal of the sons of the pushcart owners on Maxwell Street.”¹³ These young men developed specific skills to find success at the market. They focused on finding ways to appeal to the large variety of groups who shopped there. They also

¹¹ Shuli Eshel and Roger Schatz, *Jewish Maxwell Street Stories* (Chicago: Arcadia Publishing, 2004), 13-15.

¹² Eshel and Schatz, *Jewish Maxwell Street Stories*, 48.

¹³ Wirth, 296.

acquired new language skills to speak with customers from different countries. One former Maxwell Street resident recalled, “My Dad and my uncles spoke a lot of languages, not fluently; they spoke them commercially, so that they could make a sale.”¹⁴

Vendors also offered a variety of items that would appeal to people from different cultural backgrounds. According to Wirth, “They know their tastes and their prejudices. They have on hand gingham in loud, gay colors for one group, and for one occasion; and drab and black mourning wear for others.”¹⁵ Sellers negotiated with their customers over a mutually agreed upon price. Nothing was fixed. Sellers asked more than they expected to receive, while buyers offered less than they expected to pay.¹⁶ This negotiation worked for the culture of the market. Another former resident recalled, “Everybody was bargaining. And when they struck that bargain, it was a great feeling. The customer said, ‘Boy, I really took those guys,’ and we said, ‘Boy we took them.’ And everybody walked away happy.”¹⁷

The stores in the market engaged in similar practices. Customers walking through the market encountered “pullers,” who would seek out potential customers and try to engage them in conversations about their wares. These pullers usually worked for the retail stores and would stand on the street and try to pull customers into the stores. Wirth noted that pullers practiced well-honed techniques to get customers to buy from their employers. “Before he is aware of it, the unwitting and unsuspecting customer is trying on a suit that is many sizes too large and of a vintage of a decade ago. The seller swears

¹⁴ Eshel and Schatz, 28.

¹⁵ Wirth, 296.

¹⁶ Wirth, 297.

¹⁷ Eshel and Schatz, 28.

by all that is holy that it fits like a glove.”¹⁸ While the exchanges between pullers and customers were generally benign and contributed to a friendly market atmosphere, they could occasionally take on a more unpleasant tone. In 1921, a customer went to court because a puller hit him when he refused to purchase a suit. He stated, “I didn’t need no suit, but he grabs me by the arm, drags me inside, and tells me if I don’t take advantage of a bargain sale and buy a suit, he’ll crack me in the eye. I told ‘im those suits would be all right for guys that carry umbrellas and he hit me.”¹⁹

The Maxwell Street Market was a place of racial, cultural, and ethnic integration where people from a number of backgrounds could do business and exchange pleasantries without the discrimination they faced in other parts of the city. The vendors were primarily Jewish, but also included other groups like Italians.²⁰ The customers came from a multitude of different ethnic groups as well. For newly arrived immigrants, the method of exchange at the market provided a familiar setting in their new and foreign environment. It also gave them the opportunity to do business in their own language. Wirth noted that other immigrant groups would seek out the Jewish market because it felt more familiar to them than buying in American stores. These immigrants preferred haggling over prices at the market to fixed-price stores.²¹ According to Wirth, Poles and Galicians preferred “the thrill which comes with shopping on Maxwell Street. Buying is an adventure in which one matches his wits against those of an opponent, a Jew. The

¹⁸ Wirth, 297.

¹⁹ Thrasher, 135.

²⁰ Wirth, 294.

²¹ Wirth, 293.

Jews are versatile; they speak Yiddish among themselves, and Polish, Russian, Lithuanian, Hungarian, Bohemian, and what not to their customers.”²²

In addition to Eastern European customers, African Americans also found acceptance at the market. In 1919, Indiana author Meredith Nicholson observed African Americans shopping there. “Negroes occasionally cross the bounds of their own quarter to shop among these children of the Ghettos – I wonder whether by some instinctive confidence in the good-will of a people who like themselves do daily battle with the most deeply planted of all prejudices.”²³ Similarly, Wirth argued “The Negro, like the immigrant, is segregated into a racial colony. Economic considerations, race prejudice, and cultural differences combine to set him apart.”²⁴ In spite of this, African Americans found that their business was welcome on Maxwell Street. The Jewish vendors did not care about race. They cared about making money. One seller summed this up by stating, “A dollar is just as good whether a white hand or black hand hands it over. Anyway, their hands are white on the inside.”²⁵

Some vendors and customers certainly held their own personal prejudices against people outside of their own ethnic or racial group, but this did not prevent them from seeking these people out for economic advantage. Wirth provided an example of this in his discussion of the historical animosity between the Jewish and Polish people in Chicago. “These two groups detest each other thoroughly, but they live side by side.” He noted that while the two groups hated each other, they sought each other out for business because they were “used to each other’s business methods. They have accommodated

²² Wirth, 296.

²³ Nicholson, *The Valley of Democracy*, 152.

²⁴ Wirth, 294.

²⁵ Wirth, 294.

themselves to one another, and this accommodation persists in America.”²⁶ Customers were not turned away because of their background. On the contrary, they were welcomed and encouraged to spend their money. This open attitude created a unique physical space where people of any background could engage in business and shop for items otherwise unavailable to them. This also contributed to a successful market teeming with different types of customers. “On Sundays there is bedlam on Maxwell Street. The customers are in a holiday mood. Shouts and curses in many languages mingle with polite and familiar conversations in Yiddish.”²⁷

After the War: New Faces and New Sounds

Following World War II, the demographics of the market shifted from predominantly Jewish to a mixture diverse group of customers and vendors. As Jewish residents of the neighborhood found success, they often moved their families to better neighborhoods that featured newer homes and better amenities. When the Jews moved out, African Americans and other groups moved in. “By the 1950s, Mexicans and Puerto Ricans walked among Italians, Greeks, Arabs, Gypsies, Jews, and African Americans in the public bazaar, where folks gathered to bargain, barter, sing, eat, preach the gospel, listen to music, and make a living.”²⁸ In his tribute to the neighborhood he grew up in, *Maxwell Street: Survival in a Bazaar*, Ira Berkow interviewed a number of African Americans who found homes on Maxwell Street. He noted that the Great Migration brought a steady stream of African Americans to Chicago, particularly after the First and

²⁶ Wirth, 293.

²⁷ Wirth, 302.

²⁸ Lilia Fernandez, *Brown in the Windy City: Mexicans and Puerto Ricans in Postwar Chicago* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 61.

Second World Wars.²⁹ Many of the men he interviewed recalled leaving the extreme racism and deprivation of the South behind as they searched for new opportunities in Chicago. On Maxwell Street, they found a community where they could make a life for themselves. They still encountered prejudice in Chicago, and even on Maxwell Street, but they had more options than what was available to them in the South.

African Americans lived in the neighborhood, made purchases at the market, and were sometimes employed by Jewish business owners. This led to cross cultural connections for both communities. Some African American men learned to speak Yiddish and prepare kosher food, while some Jews became familiar with – and even promoted – African American blues music.³⁰ Nate Duncan and Ben Lyon represented these cultural connections and friendships that sometimes developed. Ben Lyon’s family opened a kosher delicatessen in the neighborhood in 1913. They moved the business to Maxwell Street in 1924. In 1948, Lyon hired Nate Duncan, an African American, to work in the deli. From the Lyon family, Duncan learned to prepare kosher food so authentically that many Jewish customers asked for his recipes. The two families developed a close friendship and Lyon sold the deli to Duncan in 1973.³¹ In spite of living through a time nationwide racism and segregation, these two families from different racial and cultural backgrounds found friendship in the multicultural community of Maxwell Street.

African Americans found opportunities on Maxwell Street, but not everyone welcomed this demographic change. One graduate of Maxwell Street recalled that after the war, as more African Americans moved into the area, the market attracted different types of customers. “It changed in the ‘50s with the migration of African-Americans to

²⁹ Berkow, *Maxwell Street*, 387.

³⁰ Berkow, 388,394,393.

³¹ Berkow, 394-402.

the north, they started coming down to the market more and more, and it changed. We didn't get that customer who used to come in from Iowa or Michigan on an early Sunday morning."³² By the 1950s, nearly all of the Jewish residents had moved out of the area and into more affluent neighborhoods. Jews still owned most of the businesses, but they lived elsewhere. Through the success they found on Maxwell Street, the descendants of the original immigrant families had become more Americanized and joined the mainstream Chicago community. The same was not true of the African Americans, Gypsies, and other minorities who now lived in the area.

The culture of the market shifted as African Americans brought their own cultural traditions with them. Maxwell Street always attracted onlookers who would come to participate in the circus of different people and items. African Americans contributed to the attractions by bringing their music with them. These musicians would set up on street corners and perform for the passing shoppers. They also collaborated with each other and invited participation from their audiences.³³ The market became renowned as a place where people could listen to urban blues, a musical genre invented by African American musicians on Maxwell Street. The distinctive sound became famous throughout the United States. Musicians like Muddy Waters and Hound Dog Taylor all played at the market and put Maxwell Street on the radar of American blues enthusiasts throughout the country.³⁴ These black musicians were joined by a host of other street performers

³² Eschel and Schatz, 28.

³³ Steve Balkin and Brian Mier, "Maxwell Street" in *Celebrating the Third Place: Inspiring Stories about the Great Good Places at the Heart of Our Communities*, ed. Roy Oldenburg (New York: Marlowe & Company, 2001), 202.

³⁴ Berkow, 393.

including white musicians, street preachers, and pitchmen who travelled to different markets to sell items like incense or magical cleaners.³⁵

A 1964 documentary about Maxwell Street showed the different characters found on the street. The film showed sellers and pullers, street musicians, preachers, customers, and sightseers. Some of the people interacted with the filmmaker and provided commentary on the market. One vendor commented that the market was only successful on Sundays and that he did not do well the rest of the week. He also noted that when they experienced poor sales their stores, businessmen often brought extra merchandise to the market on Sundays where they could sell it. Another vendor stated that a number of suburban shoppers came to the market on the weekends to find deals. The sellers and customers appeared to be from a variety of backgrounds. Keeping with the reputation of the market as a place where the only color that mattered was green, customers, sellers, and performers did not appear to care about the race of the people around them.

The film showed streets alive and teeming with activity. An African American woman sang gospel music accompanied by tambourine and guitar players, while people sat on surrounding cars and the street to listen. A young white street preacher tried to convince customers to accept Christianity by shouting, “God is interested in you!”³⁶ Later, an African American man preached fire and brimstone to the passing crowds. A pitchman demonstrated methods of removing corns and callouses on an artificial foot to potential buyers. A white gentleman, sometimes enthusiastic and sometimes desperate, tried to interest customers in his large table of tube socks by yelling, “Eight pair of socks for one dollar!” A Jewish puller selling suits joked, “We only got rich people come down

³⁵ *Maxwell Street Market*, Mike Shea Films, film, 1:47:43, 1964, <http://www.historicfilms.com/tapes/3229>.

³⁶ *Maxwell Street Market*, Mike Shea Films, 1:03.

here.” A street hustler performed card tricks and promised to explain to men in the audience why their women didn’t want them anymore. The market was animated and people from a variety of backgrounds were seen eating, shopping, and enjoying themselves as they listened to the entertainers on the streets.

Vendors sold an assortment of goods, including old furniture, new clothes, musical instruments, household items, and used records. The market was not well kept in terms of sanitation. Garbage could clearly be seen on the ground, but none of the participants appeared to be bothered by it. The people shopping looked like they came from a variety of different ethnic backgrounds and were a mixture of lower and middle class. The scenes from the film reinforced the arguments of Louis Wirth forty years earlier when he argued that “on Maxwell Street there is life.”³⁷ Some things had changed since Wirth’s study. The sellers and the patrons had a more American look than the immigrants who bought and sold there in the earlier days of the market. They wore typical American clothing and those who can be heard on the film all spoke English. More African Americans took an active role in the market as customers, vendors, and performers. There appeared to be fewer established stores and the street market reigned over the area. But the culture of haggling, hustling, and entertainment remained.

A 1990 article about Maxwell Street suggested that while some things had changed, much remained the same in the market that had operated for almost one hundred years. As its author noted, “It is not pretty. It is not clean. It is not organized. But it is fun and not like any other place in America.” Most of the sellers were not Jewish. “They are black. Gypsy. Eastern European. Puerto Rican and Mexican. People in the same shoes the Jews were in when they first came.” Over the market’s long history, just

³⁷ Wirth, 296.

about anything was available for sale and the author found that this aspect of the market remained the same: “used wheelchairs, rusty chainsaws, a bag of old baseball bats, World War II binoculars, half-filled cans of paint” were available for sale.³⁸

The biggest differences, one which a vendor foreshadowed in the 1964 film on Maxwell Street, was that the market only operated on Sundays and the majority of the old tenement buildings were gone. The vendors and customers continued to show up early to do business. The market still offered opportunities for people with few other options. Musicians continued to play on the street. Though still plagued by criminal activity and rumors of fenced merchandise, people continued to love the Maxwell Street market. A state senator interviewed for the article stated, “People go down there to get fleeced or hoping they can outsmart the fleecers....They go for the adventure of it. The mystery of buying something at the Maxwell Street Market is similar to that of meeting up with Gypsies from the carnival. There is a mystery to the place.”³⁹ Four years later, the market closed, against the protest of vendors, scholars, musicians, the descendants of the original Jewish vendors, and residents who viewed the market as a Chicago institution.

The closure of the market was a disappointment to supporters, but probably not a surprise. In *Maxwell Street: Survival in a Bazaar*, Ira Berkow identified multiple newspaper columns predicting the market’s demise. He found an article for every decade between the 1920s and the 1970s that included headlines like “Maxwell Street May Be Abolished” from 1926 and “Doom Hangs Over Maxwell Street” from 1962. In the 1950s, the city reduced the market space to make way for the Ryan Expressway. In the 1960s, the area again came under threat because the University of Illinois wanted the space for

³⁸ Keegan, 16.

³⁹ Keegan, 20.

its Chicago campus. The city razed businesses and housing. As people fought to keep their homes and properties were demolished, community members saw just how much the neighborhood suffered from decades of neglect on the part of city officials. At the time that Berkow published his book in 1977, neighborhood residents lived in poverty and squalor. Most people lived in the same tenements and shacks that had previously housed generations of immigrants and their families, which had never been renovated to meet modern standards of living. In 1977, not much was left of the original neighborhood. Between 1977 and 1993, most of the housing and other structures in the neighborhood were pulled down by city authorities and the only thing left of the once thriving community was the market. In 1994, the city demolished the original market.

A new market, renamed the New Maxwell Street Market, opened a few blocks away. This market attracted a number the old vendors who sold at the original market as well as some newcomers. It operated strictly as a quasi-public-flea market. Gone were the old storefronts and restaurants that contributed to the historical atmosphere of the old market. In 2007, the new market moved again to another location. In 2006, the Maxwell Street Foundation recruited Alfonso Morales, a scholar of urban and regional planning, to submit a report on how the new market could be more successful in its new location. Morales studies street vending and public markets. He also used to be a vendor at the original market. For this study, he interviewed vendors at the market and officials who oversaw other public markets throughout the country. His findings about the new market suggested that it was healthy and had the potential to be successful at the new location.

Vendors enjoyed the new space and hoped that their future space would afford them the opportunity to attract more customers, maintain ties with their fellow vendors,

and take an active role in deciding how the market would be run. Their experiences at the old market provided them with many opportunities to advance themselves and their families economically, socially, and educationally. Many of them hoped that their children would have opportunities to sell at the new market. A number of them credited their experiences at the market with helping them find success in other areas of their lives. They learned a lot about life and business on Maxwell Street. These experiences reflect those of the Jewish immigrants at the original Maxwell Street Market. The report also suggests that while the old market was gone, the new market could still serve as a place that could incubate future businesspeople and provide shopping and entertainment options to the community. The report also suggests the importance of flea markets in creating economic and social opportunities for communities.⁴⁰

Maxwell and Beyond: The Diversity of Buyers and Sellers

The Maxwell Street Market provides a useful context for understanding the people who participated in flea markets as buyers and sellers. In some ways, the people of Maxwell Street were representative of many others who turned to flea markets. The struggle to survive and the opportunity to make it in a world with limited choices were common to many, but not all, flea market participants. In *Cash for Your Trash* Carl A. Zimring argues that American social taboos about waste in the early twentieth century created opportunities for people outside of the mainstream American culture to participate in the market economy by trading in scrap recycling. Whereas Americans once found ways to reuse their household waste, at end of the nineteenth century, they

⁴⁰ Alfonso Morales, "Maxwell Street Market: Its Present and Future," prepared for the Maxwell Street Foundation, 2006, accessed October 20, 2013, http://urpl.wisc.edu/people/morales/NMSM_Report%202006.PDF.

started seeing household waste as dirty and unsanitary and something that was dangerous to be around. Zimring discusses the roles of immigrants in the scrap recycling trade and notes that many of these immigrants did not share these social taboos.⁴¹ Throughout the twentieth century a number of people who engaged in the junk trade and sold at markets experienced similar obstacles in finding traditional work, because of prejudice or language or cultural barriers, and turned to these businesses because they offered them an opportunity to get ahead in life.

With very little startup money, they could collect unwanted rags and metals and sell them to other individuals or businesses that could reuse them.⁴² This exchange of goods resulted in very high profits for many scrap traders. In addition to the financial incentives, these individuals also found other incentives to participate in the junk business. Many immigrants found the scrap trade appealing because “the lure to be one’s own boss was very strong,” especially because self-employment allowed them complete control over their working hours.⁴³ These junk collectors would acquire their goods by either sorting through trash heaps or going to houses or businesses and collecting unwanted items such as clothes, metals, and glass⁴⁴ As recently as the 1940s and 1950s, some junk men continued to acquire their items in this way. In an interview with C.P. and Alfreda Everett, both recalled that while growing up in West Montgomery, Alabama during the late ‘40s and 50s, the rag man would come every week to collect their old fabric, which he would later resell to businesses for a profit.⁴⁵ Flea market sellers often

⁴¹ Carl A. Zimring, *Cash for Your Trash: Scrap Recycling in America* (New Brunswick, New Jersey, and London: Rutgers University Press, 2009), 5.

⁴² Zimring, *Cash for Your Trash*, 45.

⁴³ Zimring, 50.

⁴⁴ Zimring, 45, 50, 60-70

⁴⁵ C. P. and Alfreda Everett, interview, conducted March 17, 2013.

encountered similar obstacles and opportunities. Because of discrimination and language or economic barriers, they were often prevented from seeking more traditional employment options. Willingness to work in a less desirable trade – essentially collecting the unwanted junk of others – allowed them to start their own businesses. This was particularly true of early immigrant sellers, but can also be seen in more recent experiences as well.

Academic studies on women, poverty, and immigration show that flea markets have continued to offer marginalized groups opportunities for participating in the consumer economy. Marjorie Bard's examination of female homelessness found that a number of women turned to the underground economy to meet their basic daily needs. One option that worked for some women was selling at flea markets. The markets in which these women took part sold everything from high-end antiques to ordinary street-market wares. One woman Bard interviewed in 1975 recalled how she would collect things left behind by tourists to sell at the flea market. "I spend all week gathering all the odd bits of belongings that are left on the beach, in restaurants, in hotel and motel bins, along the boardwalk, and in parking lots. Then I add that to my stash from buying and selling over the last couple of years, and off I go on weekends to flea markets." While still homeless and living in her car, she maintained that the flea markets provided a good way for her to make a living. "I can make a hundred dollars a day. I can come up selling practically nothing. If I can trade up, then I've done good, and I can make money off the trade."⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Marjorie Bard, *Shadow Women: Homeless Women's Survival Stories* (Plymouth, UK: National Book Network, 1990), 73.

A 1978 interviewee stated, “I don’t smell so good, so you’d better keep your distance. I haven’t taken a bath for months, and I don’t intend to. But if I have the right items to sell, no one cares how I smell or look.” The woman acknowledged that she led a very difficult life, but still made money by selling collectibles at the market. She admitted to occasionally selling stolen goods, some of which were stolen by her. She also took measures to prevent others from stealing her wares. “I live with my stuff. I mean right on top of it so no one does to me what I do to them...I’ll make out.”⁴⁷ Another woman interviewed in 1985 explained how she made her living by selling at the Pasadena Rose Bowl Flea Market. “I buy and trade with some of the other nuts here, but I spend the week going from one garage and estate sale to another, and I only take the things that I know I can mark up real good.” She enjoyed selling at the market and expected to find more success as a vendor than she had in previous jobs.

When I get enough money together, I’m going in for one of those motor homes, and I’m going to travel up and down the coast to all the big shows. I can see big money there, and I won’t have to account for it, either. Not like when I worked for peanuts in a department store and it seemed like I had more taken out of my paycheck every week than I got...So I’m saving money and living real close to the bone so I can have a better future.⁴⁸

The women interviewed by Bard turned to flea market selling to avoid extreme poverty. Some of lived in extreme poverty and selling at the markets allowed them to survive. People in less dire circumstances have also turned to flea market work to make ends meet. A 1990 study by John F. Sherry noted that even in a prosperous flea market that catered mostly to antique collectors, the proprietor of the flea market preferred to “hire workers who are retired or laid off from other jobs, and those she views as ‘hard luck cases’ beset with problems that regular employment might help resolve.” One such

⁴⁷ Bard, *Shadow Women*, 74.

⁴⁸ Bard, 73.

worker was a local butcher who had recently been laid off and found work at the flea market.⁴⁹ These markets have also given poor people the opportunity to be both sellers and buyers. An *Ebony* story about an African American Chicago family struggling with poverty noted that the family relied on flea markets and dollar stores to acquire household items and clothing.⁵⁰ Similarly, an interview from 1997 documented the experiences of one woman who relied on state support to provide for her family. The woman noted that she carefully managed her money and made all of her clothing and household purchases at the local flea market. She and her son would also gather up any unwanted items once a year to sell at the same flea market.⁵¹

Immigrants also continued take advantage of opportunities to participate in consumerism at flea markets, both as sellers and customers. In Los Angeles and other areas, Korean immigrants and their children began opening flea markets in the 1980s, serving primarily African American and Hispanic customers.⁵² Following the 1992 Los Angeles riots, an event that resulted in a number of Korean American business being looted, journalists and academics showed an increased interest in this community. A 1992 article on urban blight in Los Angeles noted that while many people living in the South Central community suffered from rampant poverty and unemployment, the Korean community did not. “The Korean community has been able to keep its unemployment numbers low by opening ‘swap-meets’ (similar to flea markets), small groceries, and

⁴⁹ John F. Sherry, Jr., “A Sociocultural Analysis of a Midwestern American Flea Market,” *Journal of Consumer Research*, 17 (June 1990): 19.

⁵⁰ “Down but not out, Chicago family keeps hope alive,” *Ebony*, August 1993, 38-44.

⁵¹ Patricia Zavella, “The Tables are Turned: Immigration, Poverty, and Social Conflict in California Communities,” in *Immigrants Out! The New Nativism and Anti-immigrant Impulse in the United States*, ed. Juan F. Perea (New York and London: New York University Press, 1997), 155.

⁵² Pyong Gap Min and Andrew Kolodny, “The Middleman Minority Characteristics of Korean Immigrants in the United States,” in *Koreans in the Hood: Conflict with African Americans*, ed. Kwang Chung Kim (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1999), 137-138.

liquor stores.”⁵³ In another story from 1992, a Korean stall owner at a Los Angeles swap meet recalled that when she came to the United States, she struggled to make ends meet. She relied on swap meets to clothe her family and eventually opened her own stall.⁵⁴

A 1996 study of the Korean community in Los Angeles also noted the prevalence of Korean-owned swap meets. The author noted that in July of 1992, “approximately 100 of 130 indoor swap meets in Southern California were owned by Koreans,” and “more than 5,000 Koreans in Southern California were operating swap meet business.” Like many other groups, these sellers were attracted to the flea market business because it required little capital and experience to start up. The author also suggested that some Korean immigrants would sell at the swap meet on weekends to earn extra money, while maintaining full-time jobs during the week.⁵⁵

Similarly, Hispanic Americans also found opportunities to participate in the consumer economy through flea markets. A 1993 study of Guatemalan immigrants in Florida noted that flea markets were the closest experience that Hispanic immigrants had to the market cultures from which they came. The author found that most members of the Hispanic community participated in flea markets, but in different ways. In South Florida, Mexican American immigrants sold at flea markets, while Maya and Haitian immigrants visited them for shopping and entertainment. The author of the study noted that while flea markets created opportunities for Hispanic immigrants, they were also dangerous places for those who were undocumented because the Immigration and Naturalization Service

⁵³ Matthew S. Scott, “Special Report: Los Angeles, Resurrecting the City,” *Black Enterprise*, November 1992, 95.

⁵⁴ Nancy Abelmann and John Lie, *Blue Dreams: Korean Americans and the Los Angeles Riots* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 154.

⁵⁵ Pyong Gap Min, *Caught in the Middle: Korean Merchants in America’s Multiethnic Cities* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), 64.

often raided the markets to try to catch them.⁵⁶ A 1995 study of Latinos in the United States also found that Hispanic people used flea markets for their shopping needs. One woman regularly purchased “clothes, toys, and other goods...at bargain prices at the local flea market.”⁵⁷

A 2011 study of teenage Latino girls in Napa Valley found that the majority of these girls went to flea markets to hang out and that they often helped purchase their families’ household items from these markets.⁵⁸ The author also explained that the flea market in the community she studied primarily served Mexican immigrants. She found that a racial gulf existed between the more affluent white community that frequented the wineries and the Mexican community that relied on the flea market for entertainment and consumption.

Northbound cars hold tourists and *bon vivants*, mostly white, all eager to indulge in the pleasures of tasting and purchasing fine wine. Southbound lanes are filled with working class people, mostly ‘brown,’ going shopping for cheaper prices on food, clothing, and electronics. Mexican immigrant workers and tourists thus inhabit the same valley, but they rarely see each other en masse.⁵⁹

A number of newspaper stories also connected flea markets with immigrant communities. These stories often tied the markets to undocumented immigrants who utilized them for both employment and consumption. In 2006, fear broke out at an East Austin flea market when merchants and shoppers suspected that a federal raid was taking

⁵⁶ Allan Burns, *Maya in Exile: Guatemalans in Florida* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 150-106.

⁵⁷ Carola Suarez-Orozco and Marcelo Suarez-Orozco, *Transformations: Immigration, Family Life, and Achievement Motivation Among Latino Adolescents* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 55.

⁵⁸ Lilia Soto, “Migration as a matter of time: Perspectives from Mexican immigrant adolescent girls in California’s Napa Valley,” (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2008), 163, 182.

⁵⁹ Soto, “Migration as a matter of time: Perspectives from Mexican immigrant adolescent girls in California’s Napa Valley,” 176.

place to capture undocumented immigrants.⁶⁰ A 2008 Houston raid stemmed from suspicions that illegal workers received false papers, with the encouragement of employers, at the local flea market.⁶¹ In 2010, Houston flea markets were again tied to undocumented Hispanic workers when immigration officers raided the Sunny Flea Market and arrested eighteen vendors suspected of selling fraudulent documents.

Members of other immigrant communities also turned to flea-market selling to get started in their new country. Yuvraj Ramsaroop, an immigrant from Guyana, recalled that between 1986 and 1990, he and his wife would often sell at flea markets to make extra money.

Afternoons and weekends I fixed and prepared slightly scratched and dented items for sale, which I purchased by the truckload.... It was a marvelous experience for me, and I did well trying to wheel and deal in a world of cutthroat competition and haggling with irritating bargain hunters bent on getting a deal for a dollar.”⁶²

A 1998 study on immigrant experiences in America recounts the story of a man from India who got his start in Tallahassee, Florida by selling at flea markets with his family, eventually running multiple stalls.⁶³ Another study on immigration and women chronicles the story of a woman from Ghana who, while already employed in a different profession, decided to start selling traditional African clothing she had stored in her basement. “The clothing proved to be popular, and the experiment paid off. From there, she continued the flea-market circuit almost weekly, in her free time. Soon she needed to restock, so she

⁶⁰ Reagan Hackleman, “Flea market turns chaotic over possible raid,” *Free Republic*, April 24, 2006, accessed September 1, 2013 <http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-news/1620767/posts>.

⁶¹ James Pinkerton, “Plant’s leaders arrested after Houston immigration raid,” *The Houston Chronicle*, July 2, 2008, accessed September 1, 2012, <http://www.chron.com/news/houston-texas/article/Plant-s-leaders-arrested-after-Houston-1773588.php>.

⁶² Yuvraj Ramsaroop, *Realizing the American Dream – The Personal Triumph of a Guyanese Immigrant* (Xlibris Corporation, 2010), 233-34.

⁶³ Sanford J. Ungar, *Fresh Blood: The New American Immigrants* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 30.

began to send regular orders to Ghana.” Her success in flea market selling allowed her to retire from her job and focus on selling the goods at flea markets. Eventually, she made enough money that she was able to own her own storefront business.⁶⁴

The Incentives of Working at Fleas

These stories all illustrate the numerous ways that immigrants and poor people turned to flea markets for employment and shopping purposes. They show that flea markets provided opportunities for people, but do not necessarily illustrate the benefits people found in selling at markets. Jordan Cooper’s 1988 book *How to Make Cash Money Selling at Swap Meets, Flea Markets, Etc.* outlined a number of reasons why a person may want to become a regular flea market vendor and helps to illustrate some of the appeal. Many of his points correspond with the experience of the sellers at Maxwell and other flea markets that catered to poor or immigrant communities. Cooper’s reasons included:

- a) Low initial investment.
- b) Can be done part-time to start while holding a regular job.
- c) Low overhead as compared to a storefront.
- d) High traffic pattern of potential customers.
- e) Be your own boss.
- f) Live wherever you like, as long as there is a good market nearby.
- g) The opportunity to travel, as you aren’t tied to one market unless you wish, or have children in school.
- h) Certain tax advantages due to write-offs against the business.
- i) Equal opportunities for all, regardless of race, creed, color, age, etc.⁶⁵

Many vendors at Maxwell sold used or wholesaled merchandise that they acquired inexpensively. Sometimes they bought used items, mended them, and resold them for a

⁶⁴ Susan C. Peace, Elizabeth J. Clifford, and Reena Tandon, *Immigration and Women: Understanding the American Experience* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 138-139.

⁶⁵ Jordan L. Cooper, *How to Make Cash Money Selling at Swap Meets, Flea Markets, Etc.* (Port Townsend, WA: Loompanics Unlimited, 1988), 17-18.

higher price. A number of the vendors at Maxwell Street also did so on a part time basis, working the market after they were finished with school or another job. Pushcart or stall sellers had to pay a small fee for space and use of the cart or stall. This allowed them to engage in business without having to pay rent on a building. In its heyday, the market attracted thousands of visitors each day, providing vendors with a high amount of foot traffic.

Most regular Maxwell vendors worked very hard and long days, but they enjoyed the advantage of having control over their businesses. When they found other opportunities unavailable, they made their own at the market. A number of vendors lived in the area, but the most successful sellers moved to more prosperous areas while continuing to sell in the market. Some musicians, entertainers, and pitchmen called Maxwell Street their home, but others travelled from market to market to make money. These people were not sellers, but they were a part of the market and contributed to its attractions. *Billboard* featured a column for pitchmen called “Pipes for Pitchmen” that featured advice and stories from pitchmen who travelled all over the country. A number of pitchmen regularly wrote in about their experiences with Maxwell Street Market, while also discussing other markets they worked.⁶⁶

Cooper discussed particular tax advantages that had to do with writing off expenses on tax returns. Much of this would not have been an issue in the first few decades of the market, as tax codes differed over time. However, Maxwell merchants did benefit from doing their business largely tax free for a number of years. Finally, the merchants and customers at Maxwell Street both enjoyed the ability to do business in an

⁶⁶ Bill Baker, “Pipes for Pitchmen by Bill Baker,” *Billboard*, May 16, 1942, 65. Bill Baker, “Pipes for Pitchmen,” *Billboard*, January 3, 1953, 48.

environment largely free of discrimination, in contrast to much of the area outside of the market. The market was famous for the diversity of the people who occupied it. Cooper's statements regarding equal opportunity at flea markets suggest that, in the 1980s and 1990s, flea markets continued to be places where people could find success in spite of discrimination in the larger community.

The Appeal of the Higher End Markets

In spite of the widespread utilization of flea markets for immigrants, minorities, and economically disadvantaged people, news journalists rarely covered them. Some stories suggested that marginalized people had no business at flea markets. One 1983 newspaper article quoted a professor who claimed to study flea markets as stating that they were “a relatively new phenomenon” and that “[f]lea markets only developed during the 1950s.” He also argued that they did not appeal to the poor and primarily existed to serve the middle and upper classes. “The poor are too close to it, having to buy from thrift shops, to go to flea markets....For the middle class it just makes good sense – for the upper classes, goods from flea markets are bargains, trivia, or just ‘camp’ avant-garde humor.”⁶⁷ Presumably, the professor from Ohio kept his visits to more refined flea markets that sold antiques and collectibles to white middle class shoppers.

In fact, most academic inquiries of American flea markets focused on those that catered to more middle- or upper-class consumers. These studies often showed that while some aspects of flea markets – such as the array of items available or the bargaining process – were universal, the motivations of buyers, and sometimes sellers, were

⁶⁷ Jack A. Seamonds, “Nostalgia Items are Flea Market Staples,” *Spartanburg Herald-Journal*, March 11, 1983, A6.

different. A 1988 study of the Red Mesa Swap Meet in Arizona was one such study. Russell W. Belk, John F. Sherry Jr., and Melanie Wallendorf spent four days at the Red Mesa Swap Meet to conduct a study into the behavior of buyers and sellers. They noted that the town hosted two different markets – the Red Mesa and a smaller Mexican flea market, but chose to visit the larger market located in a white, middle class area.⁶⁸ The sellers came from a number of different backgrounds. Some retirees and people with full-time jobs sold on the weekends. The majority were full-time vendors and worked a variety of different markets. These sellers had established a sort of community because they saw each other on a regular basis at Red Mesa and other area markets.⁶⁹ They varied in age and many worked and sold with family members. Most sellers were white, but some came from different racial groups.⁷⁰

The researchers did not explicitly discuss the economic motivations of the sellers, focusing instead on sociocultural incentives. They found that many people sold because they found it fun or saw it as a good way to get rid of unwanted items. One group of men did not believe they would ever find a steady income vending, but still enjoyed selling used household items at the market each weekend. Two divorced women found selling at the flea market to be a good way to remove painful memories from their homes. One noted that, after having sold her “wedding dress, prom dress, and the headboard from her bed...that will be the end of him.”⁷¹ Other sellers noted the sense of community that existed between the vendors. The researchers found that “the family metaphor was a

⁶⁸ Russell W. Belk, John F. Sherry, Jr., and Melanie Wallendorf, “A Naturalistic Inquiry into Buyer and Seller Behavior at a Swap Meet,” *Journal of Consumer Research*, 14 (1988): 459.

⁶⁹ Belk, Sherry, and Wallendorf, “Naturalistic Inquiry into Buyer and Seller Behavior at a Swap Meet,” 459-60.

⁷⁰ Belk *et al*, 460.

⁷¹ Belk *et al*, 461.

common one at the swap meet, implying a form of cooperative collectivism.” The vendors enjoyed regular and close contact with each other, both in and out of the market.⁷²

This sense of community also included the buyers, who often developed relationships with the regular sellers. They encountered one buyer who “jokes with a number of the regular merchants whom he knows by name. They know him also; they are aware of some of the events in each others’ lives.”⁷³ Many visitors attended as family groups. One family attended almost every weekend and viewed the market as entertainment. They stated, “If we come out here and spend \$10, \$15, or \$20, it is money well spent... We’d rather be out here enjoying the sunshine than inside watching a movie.”⁷⁴ While the buyers enjoyed finding good bargains, they did not appear to be shopping at the flea market out of any economic necessity. Instead, they primarily visited the market to be entertained or to meet people.

One of the researchers from that study, John F. Sherry Jr., conducted a similar study in 1990. The subject of this study, the Dalton Valley Flea Market, also catered more toward middle- and upper-class buyers, was held once a month, and focused primarily on antiques and collectibles. Sherry noted that the flea market grew from 35 vendors and about a thousand customers to over a thousand vendors and thousands of customers over the course of its twenty years in operation.⁷⁵ The market had acquired such a high level of popularity that the “dealers on its waiting list could fill another

⁷² Belk *et al*, 465.

⁷³ Belk *et al*, 461.

⁷⁴ Belk *et al*, 461.

⁷⁵ Sherry, *Sociocultural Analysis of a Midwestern Flea Market*, 18.

market” and had become a “state tourist attraction where the governor has been an occasional vendor and where other politicians routinely campaign.”⁷⁶

Sherry’s conclusions conformed to his previous findings in terms of vendor and customer experiences. The market had a community-like atmosphere. The owner of the market sought out her own family members, friends, and people who were related to each other to staff her market.⁷⁷ Many of the regular vendors had established relationships with each other, were familiar with each other from selling at this and other flea markets, and a number of them camped out together on the market grounds.⁷⁸ The shoppers often came together in groups, with other family members or with friends, and displayed identifiers of being part of a flea market community. “Many vehicles bear vanity plates attesting to their owners’ passions: ANTEES, ARTIFACTS, I REHAB, TINKER, MR. SIGN. Bumper stickers and window hangings warn: This Car Stops at All Garage Sales, Shopper on Board, Licensed Junk Collector.”⁷⁹

Unlike the Red Mesa Flea Market, the primary motivation of Dalton sellers was to make money. Most vendors in the highly-coveted inside portion of the market worked full time in mainstream retail businesses and sold at the flea market to increase their income and attract more customers.⁸⁰ Many had their own business cards and shopping bags that they used to promote their businesses. The outside vendors were full-time sellers that worked different flea markets throughout the region.⁸¹ Sellers would often arrive days before the opening day of the market and buy from or trade with each other:

⁷⁶ Sherry, 18.

⁷⁷ Sherry, 19.

⁷⁸ Sherry, 19.

⁷⁹ Sherry, 23.

⁸⁰ Sherry, 20.

⁸¹ Sherry, 20.

On Saturday, individuals continually shift from buyer to seller as goods begin circulating through the marketplace. A particular item may change hands more than a dozen times before it winds up for sale to naïve consumers on Sunday morning. Dealers casually survey each other's merchandise during setup and more systematically once their booths are prepared. Market intelligence is collected and recorded in notepads by individuals on random walks, by teams in constant contact by walkie-talkie as they scour the grounds, and by others still who rely on word of mouth from passersby.⁸²

These sellers wanted to find the best deals on items that they could resell at Dalton or another market. Even after the market started, dealers continued to buy and sell from each other.⁸³

Sherry's observations about buyers at Dalton were similar to those at Red Mesa. Customers came to find good deals and have fun. "They come for a day to live in the market experience, even if their principal aim is to purchase."⁸⁴ The buyers interviewed and observed by Sherry had other options for purchasing, but they chose the flea market because it offered a different kind of shopping experience. They enjoyed the personal attention they received from sellers and the community atmosphere. One woman explained, "The flea market is not as *sterile* as a mall. You don't get the same franchises over and over again. There are lots of different people around the flea market – it's more of a *social* atmosphere. The talk is more personal and personable."⁸⁵ For this woman, the flea market provided a more personalized experience than traditional retail options. She saw it as an event and invited her closest friends to spend a day shopping, browsing, and visiting with different people. Another interviewee stated, "I like the atmosphere of the flea market – the feeling you get there. You have all this stuff around you, but you don't

⁸² Sherry, 21.

⁸³ Sherry, 21.

⁸⁴ Sherry, 26.

⁸⁵ Sherry, 17.

even *need* to buy anything.”⁸⁶ For this person, shopping was just one of the many benefits he enjoyed in visiting flea markets. He felt that there was more variety, that it was more interesting, and that people were kinder at the flea market than at the mall.

Visitors at Dalton went for the atmosphere, but they also sought out specialty items like antiques or collectibles that were likely to be a better price at the flea market. One informant noted, “There’s a sense of excitement with lots of people being there... The whole thing is just exhilarating. Other people’s excitement is contagious, and the stuff is exciting too. You just know you’re going to get a real bargain – something unique, not mass produced, but it’s going to be cheap.”⁸⁷ The prospect of bargains was part of the thrill. Because of this, many devised strategies to acquire the items they wanted at the best price. This occasionally involved acts of deception. Some visitors attended in groups and acted as a team. One group of women would try to trick a vendor into giving them a better price by having one woman express interest in an item while another would try to talk her out of it. The buyer would then offer a cheaper price and the women would happily make their purchases.⁸⁸ Another visitor noted that he would sometimes pretend to be a seller in order to obtain a vendor’s discount. He would purchase these items cheaply so that he could later sell them for a profit at other markets.⁸⁹

The behavior of buyers and sellers at Dalton was typical of other large, specialty flea markets. In 1997, journalist Rene Chun investigated the Brimfield Outdoor Antique Show – which the writer repeatedly identified as a flea market – for *New York Magazine*.

⁸⁶ Sherry, 17.

⁸⁷ Sherry, 23.

⁸⁸ Sherry, 24.

⁸⁹ Sherry, 24.

Brimfield buyers and sellers displayed behaviors similar to the Dalton market, although Brimfield dealt in higher end antiques and larger quantities of money. Chun reported that the Brimfield market was held three times a year, attracted tens of thousands of buyers, and more than 3,000 dealers. She called it “the country’s biggest flea market.”⁹⁰ The market specialized in antiques and collectibles and attracted celebrities like Madonna, Barbara Streisand, Whoopi Goldberg, Elton John, and Martha Stewart.⁹¹

Like at the Dalton market, the dealers at Brimfield sold to each other in the days before the market opened to customers. She observed, “Dealers are furiously buying and selling merchandise everywhere I look. In one field, I see an alabaster lamp being passed from dealer to dealer like a baton in a relay race. With each successive sale, its price doubles. The \$30 lamp ultimately becomes a \$120 lamp. Tomorrow, it will sell for twice that.”⁹² Also like the Dalton market, some dealers left before the market even opened, happy with the trades they made with other sellers before opening day. Dealers sold an array of collectibles and antiques, ranging in prices from the low tens to thousands of dollars. Buyers and sellers typically carried rolls of hundred dollar bills as cash was the preferred form of currency and trades often took place in large amounts of money.⁹³

Buyers at Brimfield were often collectors or looking for items to resell in their own shops or display in their businesses. As with Dalton buyers, many had devised strategies for dealing with the market. Some would carry walkie-talkies to coordinate with friends and discuss merchandise and prices. Others would wear shirts advertising

⁹⁰ Rene Chun, “Haul of Fame,” *New York Magazine*, July 7, 1997, 33-34.

⁹¹ Chun, “Haul of Fame,” 34.

⁹² Chun, 34.

⁹³ Chun, 35.

their interests, such as “I COLLECT FIESTAWARE.”⁹⁴ Unlike the Dalton market, there did not appear to be a sense of community among buyers or sellers. The sellers were there to make money and trade with each other, not to make friends. The buyers sought out hard-to-find antiques and specialty items, which they would either resell or display in their businesses or homes.

The varying behaviors and motivations of buyers and sellers at different types of markets are not surprising, because so many types of flea markets existed to cater to a multitude of needs and desires. For more affluent shoppers, the flea market was one of many different options available to them. The higher end markets appealed to them because they offered different types of experiences than what they found at traditional retail outlets. Some people liked the prospect of buying antiques or collectibles at bargain prices. Others felt a sense of community with buyers and sellers over shared interests. Some enjoyed the thrill of slumming it at the flea market. Others liked the hustle and bustle and dickering for the best price.

These motivations were studied in the United Kingdom by Collin Williams, who looked at the experiences of poor and wealthy people who utilized non-traditional outlets to purchase consumer goods. The experiences of UK and US shoppers are comparable because Williams’ study provides insight into the types of choices people have made when shopping secondhand that are reflected in the experiences discussed above. His study also provides perspective on how different economic groups felt about buying secondhand. He found that people from economically disadvantaged communities utilized non-traditional options, like flea markets – referred to in the United Kingdom as “boot sales” – because they did not have many shopping options. They could not afford

⁹⁴ Chun, 35.

to buy new items from traditional retail outlets. They did not prefer shopping at flea markets, but found them to be the best choice based on what they could afford to spend.

One unemployed informant noted, “If you’ve got plenty of money, going down St. Mary’s [an area of second-hand shops] or up the boot sale must be a laugh. It ain’t for me.” He emphasized that he only bought at boot sales and thrift stores because he could not afford to buy anywhere else.⁹⁵ Another informant expressed regret at having to purchase second hand:

I would love to be able to wander into the co-op and have the assistant go, ‘yes sir, no sir’. That’s my dream. But we can’t buy things like that. We look in the newspaper, we keep our ears to the ground, we look out for people chucking things out, we ask around. There’s one world for the rich in their plush shops where they throw their money away like it’s going out of fashion and one for us.⁹⁶

Williams found that for people often excluded from traditional purchasing, relying on second-hand alternatives emphasized to them that they were not a part of mainstream society. He noted, “Few bought second-hand...as a long term strategy. They perceive it as a sign that they are no longer capable of getting by and of their inability to be like everybody else.”⁹⁷ These experiences were similar to those of marginalized American communities who used flea markets as a means to participate in the market economy.

Williams also found that those not marginalized from mainstream shopping experienced second-hand purchasing differently. They purposely sought out flea markets because they wanted to acquire good-quality older items, to cultivate a personal sense of style, or have fun. “For them, it was ‘good fun seeking out something different’, ‘brilliant rummaging around for that “je ne sais quoi”’, ‘one of the more fun things you can do at a

⁹⁵Colin C. Williams, “Why do People Use Alternative Retail Channels? Some Case-study Evidence from Two English Cities,” *Urban Studies*, 39 (2002): 1906.

⁹⁶ Williams, “Why do People Use Alternative Retail Channels?” 1906.

⁹⁷ Williams, 1907.

weekend’, ‘great because you can haggle’ and ‘a way of making your home reflect who you are’.”⁹⁸ They saw second hand purchasing as the best choice out of a multitude of shopping options. Williams noted that these motivations had previously been studied by other researchers and that his study reinforced earlier conclusions that affluent people shop second-hand for reasons of “fun, discernment, sociality, distinction, display, possession, the spectacular, seeking out bargains and being seen to be buying the ‘right’ things.”⁹⁹ These experiences paralleled those noted by Sherry, who found that more affluent shoppers tended to frequent flea markets as a way to find entertainment and seek out interesting purchases.

Flea markets existed in various forms throughout the twentieth century. They did not all, however, receive the same level of acclaim and attention from mainstream journalists or academics. The flea markets that gained the most positive coverage, or been subject to academic study, have been those that catered to the desires of middle- and upper-class consumers. In the case of academics, this could be attributed to specific research interests that focused on more affluent market culture. It could also be that language or class barriers prevented access to less-affluent markets. Researchers may not have been comfortable attending flea markets that catered immigrants and poor people. For others, like the professor who suggested that poor people had no interest in markets, it is clear that these other markets were simply off of their radar. Similar reasons might also have been true for journalists. They also may not have seen any reason to cover these markets because they only saw them as newsworthy when they were busted for violating the law.

⁹⁸ Williams, 1905.

⁹⁹ Williams, 1905.

More affluent markets probably received better coverage because reporters saw them as good local or tourist attractions. People sought out these markets for a variety of purposes including adventure, fun, and to find interesting or unique items for good prices. The coverage of these flea markets was accurate in terms of explaining the experience of these buyers and sellers. It did not, however, tell the entire story. Flea markets with a much longer history – those served marginalized communities like immigrants, people of color, and the economically disadvantaged – rarely received the same attention or praise. They were generally not promoted as tourist attractions or weekend getaways. Newspaper columnists rarely been celebrated for their charm, character, or good bargains. Instead, they were often ignored or chastised – even though they provided opportunities for both buyers and sellers to participate in the consumer economy and to build communities that served their needs. The lack of coverage about these markets and the people who utilized them has effectively silenced their experiences and ignored the role they played in opening doors for marginalized groups otherwise excluded from mainstream society.

Chapter 3: Operating at the Flea Market

Regardless of what type of customer markets catered to, vendors often took similar approaches to running their businesses. They needed to acquire their goods, locate a market, set up their wares, negotiate with customers, and break down their displays. This required them to develop certain strategies for success. The frequency and diligence a seller took in approaches to these tasks depended on a number of factors: how frequently they sold, what they traded, how many markets they participated in, and how dedicated they were to making money at their business.

Getting the Goods

As discussed in Chapter 2, vendors in the early twentieth century often obtained their items from junk and rag collectors. Some Maxwell Street vendors also sold items they purchased at wholesale warehouses or from discount retailers. Occasional vendors sometimes owned storefront business and sold their surplus stock at the market. It is likely that other early vendors did the same, as many of the practices at the Maxwell Street Market paralleled those of other markets and these same strategies were found in sellers of later eras. One of the main advantages many people found in selling at flea markets was the ability to earn a profit with very little upfront investment.¹ This was true

¹ Jordan L. Cooper, *How to Make Cash Money Selling at Swap Meets, Flea Markets. Etc.* (Port Townsend, WA: Loompanics Unlimited, 1988), 17.

throughout the twentieth century. Selling guides from the 1970s and 1980s provide further insight into how regular sellers found items to sell.

While it may have cost little in terms of startup money, sellers had to work hard to acquire their merchandise. A number of selling guides were published in the 1970s and 1980s which explained how potential sellers could find stuff to sell. Flea markets in the first half of the twentieth century generally sold used items, and much of the advice provided by these publications demonstrated that markets of the 1970s and 1980s largely continued to revolve around others' castoffs. According to these books, many sellers began by collecting unwanted items from their own homes, such as what one might normally sell at a garage sale, and taking them to the flea market to see what they could get for them. For the small price of a booth, some people found that they could make a very large profit. Many of these vendors sold on a one-time basis, but others were intrigued by the prospect of making a living at flea markets and decided to pursue it full time. Once they exhausted their own supply of merchandise, however, determined flea market sellers had to find new sources of goods.

Irene Copeland, the author of *The Flea Market and Garage Sale Handbook*, advised her readers on different ways to acquire good, cheap merchandise. She commented on the difficulty of acquiring a constant supply of merchandise that could be bought inexpensively and resold for a profit, but suggested that devising different strategies could remedy this issue.² She strongly advocated finding as much free stuff as possible and described a variety of methods she used to obtain free things to sell at garage sales and flea markets. The easiest strategy she recommended was to just ask others – family, friends, neighbors, and local businesses – for their unwanted items. She noted

² Irene Copeland, *The Flea Market and Garage Sale Handbook* (New York: Popular Library, 1977), 51.

that, “There isn’t much you might turn up that isn’t salable – to someone,” reminding her readers that just about anything could be turned into a profit.³

Copeland also suggested advertising as a cleanup or junk removal service as a way of gaining access to a stranger’s castoffs. She added that a friend of hers often cleaned out the apartments of evicted tenants and then sold their abandoned items at flea markets on the weekends.⁴ For more adventurous sellers, free stuff could also be obtained by getting it off the street. Copeland noted that this was a common way for people to acquire free stuff. “There is indeed, in every city, a determined band of scavengers who have researched the schedule of garbage pickup days in various neighborhoods and make their rounds just ahead of the garbage trucks.”⁵ She also advocated rummaging through buildings about to be torn down to find interesting resalable goods, some of which, she stated, could have been of museum quality. The final method she suggested was to scavenge local dumps in search of other’s discards.⁶ Many of these suggestions can also be found in Valerie Bohigian’s *Successful Flea Market Selling*, which also recommended searching the classified ads for anyone giving away free stuff.⁷ All of these scavenging strategies parallel the experiences of early immigrant junk dealers, who acquired their goods by taking unwanted clothes, scraps, and household items off the street or from householders who gave them away for free. This scavenging mirrors the experiences of the homeless women described in Chapter 2, who made their living selling abandoned items they found on the streets.

³ Copeland, *The Flea Market and Garage Sale Handbook*, 53.

⁴ Copeland, 52.

⁵ Copeland, 54.

⁶ Copeland, 55-56.

⁷ Valerie Bohigian, *Successful Flea Market Selling* (Blue Ridge Summit, Pennsylvania: TAB Books, Inc.: 1981), 169.

Once sellers exhausted their access to free stuff, they next needed to search for inexpensive used items to buy. Both Bohigian and Copeland suggested different strategies for acquiring used goods cheaply. Copeland argued that rummage sales and bazaars often presented potential flea market sellers with opportunities to find good, inexpensive stuff. Copeland noted that most of these were hosted by charitable organizations that received most of their merchandise through donations from local businesses and community members. She stated that, “Because the offerings are usually priced by amateurs you can pick up an underpriced sleeper.”⁸ She suggested, however, that buyers needed to arrive as early as possible to find the best deals. She also said that arriving early would be a good way to preview the merchandise and locate the best items without wasting time sorting through less interesting ones. Another strategy she recommended was to bring a friend with good taste but no desire to sell at a flea market, allowing the potential seller to cover more ground in a shorter amount of time.⁹ Similarly, Bohigian advocated buying at rummage sales and bazaars for three reasons: the seller did not have a personal attachment to the merchandise, they often did not know its value, and prices were generally low and negotiable. For these reasons, she suggested that sellers would find themselves “in the most desirable dealer position – that of being able to purchase low and sell high.”¹⁰

Good used merchandise was could also be acquired inexpensively by visiting garage and estate sales. As with rummage sales and bazaars, both authors suggested employing certain strategies to acquire the best deals. Copeland recommended calling

⁸ Copeland, 58.

⁹ Copeland, 58.

¹⁰ Bohigian, *Successful Flea Market Selling*, 176.

ahead to find what type of items would be sold at the sale.¹¹ Both women emphasized the importance of reading advertisements carefully to search for clues as to what type and quality of goods would be available. Bohigian noted that unless specific items of interest were available, sales located far away were to be avoided: “Your time is money; so is your gas.”¹² She also stated that multi-family sales rarely generated good merchandise because the families often bought the best items from each other.

Copeland disagreed, noting that a greater choice of merchandise could be found in multiple family sales. She recommended considering the demographics of the neighborhood to determine whether or not desirable merchandise would be sold, and she reminded readers that neighborhoods with older homes generally housed elderly people who might own antiques and other collectibles. She advocated driving by the site of the sale to determine the taste and style of the sellers.¹³ Both women stressed the importance of arriving early. As with rummage sales and bazaars, arriving early at estate and garage sales allowed buyers to preview the merchandise and decide which items to purchase and which to ignore.¹⁴ Copeland noted that “it is an inescapable fact of life that the best bargains disappear first.”¹⁵ While both women argued that arriving early allowed one to find the best items, they also both suggested that attending at the end of the day enabled one to find the best deals.¹⁶ Copeland advised returning to sales later in the day to see if the sellers had reduced their prices. She also advocated bargaining with the seller to bring

¹¹ Copeland, 62-63.

¹² Bohigian, 177.

¹³ Copeland, 64.

¹⁴ Bohigian, 177-78; Copeland, 61-62.

¹⁵ Copeland, 61.

¹⁶ Bohigian, 178; Copeland, 65-66.

prices down to the desired level, but reminded readers to avoid wasting time arguing over reasonably priced merchandise.¹⁷

Flea marketers have also found merchandise by visiting thrift stores and antique stores, but Copeland noted that thrift stores presented certain problems that an astute buyer would need to overcome. One problem she found was that thrift stores had become fashionable places to buy unique, hard-to-find, vintage items and she identified celebrities as one of the sources of this trend. She also noted that many people started selling their old things at garage sales or flea markets instead of donating them to charity. Both of these issues resulted in there being fewer interesting items for flea market sellers to acquire for resale. Copeland also warned that while many rummage sellers undervalued their items, some thrift stores overvalued their merchandise and tried to sell it at higher prices.

Even with these issues, she still found thrift stores to be good places to find certain items, particularly clothing and shoes. She advised readers to “patronize the shops in wealthy neighborhoods or those run by charities that appeal to the rich” to find the best items.¹⁸ Bohigian also cautioned her readers to be prepared before visiting thrift stores and advised them to research prices ahead of time. She noted that pricing was often based on individual taste rather than on actual value, which resulted in odd combinations of overpriced and underpriced items.¹⁹ Antique stores had the potential to present similar problems and opportunities for flea marketers because owners did not always know the value of their goods. In tackling this problem, Copeland advised, “Nobody can know all there is to know about everything. It pays to develop a few specialties of your own so you

¹⁷ Copeland, 66.

¹⁸ Copeland, 67-68.

¹⁹ Bohigian, 179.

will be able to spot real bargains in those areas.”²⁰ Both women claimed that antique dealers often wanted to get rid of old stock quickly and would probably be willing to sell cheaply to facilitate the process. Bohigian suggested that “Very often these dealers will be willing to come down considerably on the price of an expensive piece, if they feel they can also sell you several other things as well.”²¹

Bohigian and Copeland both suggested buying at auctions. They presented unique opportunities because they varied so much in the type of items available at them. Some auctions sold items from a family estate, while others specialized in particular items such as Asian paintings or antique jewelry.²² Both authors advised against buying at auctions run by professional auctioneering businesses and instead trying auctions run by local community organizations or charities. As with rummage sales and bazaars, the advantage to this strategy was the probability that non-professionals would not know the value of the items they sold. Copeland offered a list of advice for flea marketers who employed this method: Do not purchase anything unexamined. Choose a top price beforehand. Avoid listening to other buyers. Arrive early and stay late. Watch out for scrupulous tactics. Be certain before bidding.²³

Many of the strategies suggested by Bohigian and Copeland to find used merchandise for market selling paralleled approaches taken by others who were previously involved in the junk business. These approaches have continued and expanded with more recent flea market entrepreneurs. In recent years, as Americans acquired more stuff and required more places to put it, the storage unit industry grew. This brought with

²⁰ Copeland, 69.

²¹ Bohigian, 180.

²² Copeland, 78.

²³ Copeland, 81-83.

it new opportunities for flea market and eBay sellers to acquire cheap, used items to sell. When renters of these units failed to pay their bills, the owner of the storage unit would occasionally auction their contents.²⁴ In many states, if a storage unit renter failed to pay their monthly bill, they would lose access to their belongings. In these cases, storage units were auctioned off to the highest bidder. This method of auctioning carried a unique risk – bidders could not enter the storage unit to view the contents. They generally could only view the unit from outside, using a flashlight to inspect the contents. Bidders often had no idea what they would get if they won the auction, as many people kept their stored items in plastic bags, storage bins, and boxes. These auctions could result in high profits or huge losses, depending on what the original owner kept in their unit. In 2012, a Vancouver man paid \$50 for a storage unit that yielded \$1200 worth of furniture, but missed out on purchasing a unit that contained a piece of medical equipment valued at a minimum of \$10,000.²⁵ Of course, some units also sold for larger sums of money than the value of the items found inside. Transportation for hauling potential treasures or trash presented another problem for buyers at storage units, as whatever was purchased – large furniture, vehicles, or statuary (to name a few items) – had to be removed from the site.²⁶

John F. Sherry, Jr observed many of these strategies in his study of the Dalton Market. He referred to them as “picking” and found that the majority of vendors at Dalton, who specialized in antiques and collectibles, engaged in this in one form or another and often had to work with banks to acquire the necessary funds. Sherry noted

²⁴ Discussion Board – Storage Auctions, last updated April 18, 2012, accessed April 20, 2012, <http://forums.ebay.com/db1/topic/Building-An-Ebay/Storage-Auctions/5200076866?#msg5201091270>.

²⁵ Sean Kolenko, “Storage wars in North Vancouver,” *North Shore Outlook*, March 30, 2012, accessed April 18, 2012, <http://www.northshoreoutlook.com/news/145188515.html>.

²⁶ Discussion Board – Storage Auctions, last updated April 18, 2012, accessed April 20, 2012, <http://forums.ebay.com/db1/topic/Building-An-Ebay/Storage-Auctions/5200076866?#msg5201091270>.

that a number of vendors established picking networks and would involve their family and friends in their quest to find good used merchandise.²⁷ Finally, flea market sellers have also acquired used items by purchasing from other market vendors. The vendors at Brimfield and Dalton, highlighted in Chapter 2, conducted a significant amount of business with each other. Some vendors traded before the markets opened to the public and then sold their newly acquired wares to more traditional customers at a great profit. Others would conduct this business and leave before the market even opened to the public, taking their purchases with them to be sold at different markets or venues.

While flea markets tend to be associated with used items, a number of vendors in the 1970s and 1980s shifted to selling primarily new goods. Cooper preferred to sell new items and suggested ways that his readers could find cheap, but high quality new merchandise. He suggested that handicraft fairs were a remarkable, but untapped resource. When he and his wife purchased handicrafts for the market, they would hand select every piece to make sure they reflected the high quality goods he wanted to sell. He also advised that wholesale gift shows offered another avenue for acquiring rare and interesting items inexpensively. He noted that with a business license or a tax number, vendors could purchase these items at the wholesale price, allowing the potential for profitable retail sales. He also felt that buying certain types of items at these gift shows allowed him to create a branded image to his customers. He investigated what other vendors at his usual market sold and then made sure to buy something completely different that would differentiate his booth from those of other sellers. Finally, Cooper suggested buying at close-out sales and auctions. He cautioned that this could be

²⁷ John F. Sherry, Jr., "A Sociocultural Analysis of a Midwestern American Flea Market," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 17 (June 1990): 22.

problematic because vendors would not have a steady supply of the same merchandise. However, if buyers found extremely good deals they could still make a profit by selling the closeout merchandise at below market price.²⁸

Other flea market vendors chose not to sell used or newly manufactured items. Instead, they sold work they produced themselves. Cooper noted that many vendors found success by making their own merchandise. He argued that one of the main advantages to doing this was that it allowed for vendors to keep their expenses low. He also found that selling handcrafted items often appealed to customers because they were unique and distinctive. Handcrafted items also allowed sellers to develop a niche market other vendors would be unable to replicate the handcrafted them.²⁹ Sherry observed this at the Dalton Market: “Dealers are often craftspeople, who must produce their own inventory and source their own materials. Much time is spent researching lines of merchandise and gaining expertise as a sourcer, appraiser, and connoisseur of particular objects.”³⁰ In his 2008 study of the flea market in Washington, DC’s Eastern Market, anthropologist Robert J. Shepherd found people selling handmade ciders and preserves, jewelry, paintings, and photographs.³¹

Throughout the twentieth century flea market sellers employed a variety of strategies to acquire their goods. These strategies required particular characteristics that have been associated with more conventional retailers. Flea marketers had to employ a certain amount of charm to convince people to give them items for free or for a cheap price. They had to have an awareness of the demographics of different neighborhoods to

²⁸ Cooper, 28-30.

²⁹ Cooper, 32.

³⁰ Sherry, “Sociocultural Analysis of a Midwestern American Flea Market,” 22.

³¹ Robert J. Shepherd, *When Culture Goes to Market: Space, Place, and Identity in an Urban Marketplace* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2008), 61-65.

ensure they could find the items they wanted. In order to succeed, they needed knowledge of the products they hoped to sell to make sure they bought at the best price. They had to be willing to take a certain amount of risk by purchasing items that might or might not have been valuable. Some of them invested their own artistic or craft skills into creating the products they sold. They also took the chance of going into a business where they invested a great deal of time in acquiring merchandise while risking the possibility of failure. These strategies mirror the methods employed by other people who have started out in the sales trade or opened a new business and emphasize the professional aspects required of flea market sellers.

Preparing for Market Day

Acquiring merchandise was an important step in preparing to sell at flea markets, but sellers also had to consider other issues, such as business licenses, sales tax, choosing the right location – both in terms of the best market and an ideal space within it – and marketing and displaying their merchandise. Vendors at the Maxwell Street Market in Chicago did not have to obtain a business license to operate, but the city required them follow a number of other regulations. This included paying the market master a fee each day for use of a space and confining themselves to a specific area in the market. State and local regulations on flea markets varied in different areas, but a number of communities required that sellers obtain a business license if they were selling on a regular basis. Some municipalities also required that flea market sellers collect sales tax on any items sold. Writing in the 1970s, Copeland noted that both of these policies were fairly common, but that she rarely saw either enforced. She warned her readers, however, that “[i]n some

areas, it may seem as though nobody is paying attention. But you never know when an inspector will come along and ask to see your resale license (the permit that authorizes you to collect, and obligates you to pass along, sales tax).”³²

Cooper reiterated this sentiment by advising his readers that while some states were lenient about collecting sales tax at small town markets, they usually enforced it at larger markets held within city limits. In these cases, sellers needed to obtain city and state tax licenses.³³ Both authors emphasized the importance of understanding local laws. They also reminded sellers that there could be benefits to working within a tax system, as this would allow sellers to deduct many of their expenses when they filed their yearly taxes.³⁴

In addition to understanding tax and businesses regulations, sellers also needed to choose the market best suited to their type of merchandise. Cooper argued that the only thing more important than choosing the right merchandise was selecting the best market for that merchandise. He claimed that some products might sell well at one market, but do terrible at another. Cooper and Copeland both advised sellers to visit different markets, view the merchandise on display, and talk with both customers and sellers to determine which market might be the best location.³⁵

Finding a market where sellers could obtain a good location for their stall was also important. Cooper suggested locating a booth on the corner or end of a row, near a main entrance, near food stalls, or directly across from a woman’s restroom. His experience suggested that these areas received the highest foot traffic and would enable

³² Copeland, 47-48.

³³ Cooper, 137.

³⁴ Cooper, 135; Copeland, 47.

³⁵ Cooper, 53-54; Copeland, 34.

vendors to attract the most attention from potential buyers.³⁶ In order to obtain the best spot, Copeland suggested that once sellers chose a market, they arrive early because “flea market space is often allotted on a first come, first serve basis.”³⁷ Arriving early was not always enough though, as many flea markets allowed regular sellers to rent the best spaces on a monthly basis. Cooper noted that,

Generally speaking, sales will be better in the larger markets, but not always. Most of the prime spaces will already be occupied by contract vendors. There may even be a waiting list if these spaces ever become available. A new vendor is likely to get stuck in whatever space is left. This may be on the back row which is often far from the snack bar and restrooms – even farther from the foot traffic that is so essential to good sales.³⁸

Cooper’s observation on the difficulty of reserving spaces at larger flea markets was supported in a 1986 interview with Ernie Galloway, the owner of the Orange County Swap Meet and one of the largest swap meets in California at the time. Galloway stated that, “The monthly folks have assigned spaces, but the daily sellers don’t know where they’ll be until they enter and are given a card indicating their space location. Most of the daily sellers end up in rows L and M, which quite honestly don’t get the kind of traffic the other rows get.”³⁹ Galloway noted that the the market featured 1500 spaces, but ninety percent were rented to monthly sellers who kept their spaces as long as they continued to pay their rent and follow market policies. According to Galloway, some of those sellers had occupied their spaces since the market opened in 1968, making it difficult for new sellers to find a prime location. Again, echoing Cooper’s point about the struggle to acquire good spaces at large markets with waiting lists, Galloway stated that, “We’re selective because we can afford to be. I’ve got 350 applications for monthly

³⁶ Cooper, 70-71.

³⁷ Copeland, 35.

³⁸ Cooper, 57.

³⁹ Jerry Holderman, “First Person: Swapping Stories,” *Orange Coast Magazine*, November 1986, 168.

spaces sitting in my office right now. We only have about 10 spaces a month turned back to us.”⁴⁰ Galloway added that placement on the waiting list did not guarantee that a seller would obtain a good spot; he and his staff considered other factors such as how long the vendor had been a daily seller, what type of merchandise they sold, and how that merchandise fit in with other items that were already available at the market.⁴¹

Once a good location was acquired, sellers then considered how to market their wares. Cooper laid out a few guidelines flea marketers needed to follow to make the most money. He noted that sellers should sell merchandise that they found personally interesting, arguing that it was much easier for people to sell products that they really believed in. The enthusiasm would rub off on the customer, making them more likely to buy.⁴² Attractive displays that highlighted the merchandise also contributed to the desirability of different items. This included colors that complemented the products and lighting that emphasized certain items.⁴³

Similarly, Copeland suggested creating attractive, logically organized displays that would bring customers in. She also advised sellers to think about maximizing space and keeping merchandise secure. She stated that, “Shelves or small cabinets on your tables not only add height to display things closer to eye level, but also multiply your space.” She recommended purchasing or building shelving to display items, and even suggested using old wooden boxes with dividers as a way of displaying smaller items. She also advised sellers to keep small, valuable items in lockable glass-topped display

⁴⁰ Holderman, “First Person: Swapping Stories,” 170.

⁴¹ Holderman, 171.

⁴² Cooper, 34.

⁴³ Cooper, 41-45.

cases, noting that these would keep items like jewelry secure, while also creating an attractive display.⁴⁴

Because many markets were held outdoors, sellers also needed to consider how to keep their merchandise safe in the case of foul weather. Cooper noted that “inclement weather will be a factor at virtually *all* outdoor swap meets.” Weather proved problematic for sellers because some types of weather could keep customers away, while other types of weather could damage a seller’s merchandise.⁴⁵ This meant that outdoor markets presented challenges to sellers in certain seasons. It also meant that sellers needed to take precautions to keep their merchandise safe. Cooper noted that many vendors worked under canopies to protect their merchandise from both the sun and the rain. He also recommended that sellers invest in waterproof table covers and plastic tarps. His favorite strategy was to cover his goods with transparent plastic that would keep the items safe, while still allowing customers to view it. Wind could also prove problematic and Cooper suggested that sellers use weights and umbrellas to keep their tarps and canopy covers in place. Additionally, sellers also needed to consider the possibility of damage caused by dust and fog.⁴⁶

Beyond creating displays and protecting merchandise, Cooper also advised sellers to consider other ways to market their merchandise. He noted that brochures or business cards educated customers about the type and quality of products sold and helped create a brand name for regular buyers. These looked professional and saved time for the vendor by answering questions in one place, rather than requiring the seller to spend a lot of time

⁴⁴ Copeland, 39-40.

⁴⁵ Cooper, 108.

⁴⁶ Cooper, 109-113.

explaining his or her products to potential customers.⁴⁷ In Sherry's study at Dalton, he observed a number of sellers using personalized business cards and wrapping materials to advertise their products and create brand images for customers.⁴⁸ Cooper also advised readers that if they sold wearable merchandise, they should display it by wearing it.⁴⁹ Sellers also needed to look professional because they needed to make a good impression on customers.⁵⁰

Playing the Game

Another important point vendors needed to consider involved interactions with customers. Sellers needed to determine the appropriate amount of discussion with potential buyers. Some customers appreciated chatty sellers, while others felt overwhelmed by too much talk from the vendor. Effective selling meant knowing the difference. Vendors also needed to be careful not to offend customers during the haggling process. According to Bohigian, "The customer doesn't care what your merchandise costs you; he cares what it costs him. And he particularly doesn't care to be insulted. A pleasant reply is always the most effective response."⁵¹ She also argued that overly aggressive sales pitches scared customers away. She emphasized that behaving appropriately with potential buyers was very important and noted that "the major complaints of the customers I interviewed always revolved around a dealer action."⁵²

⁴⁷ Cooper, 46-47.

⁴⁸ Sherry, 20.

⁴⁹ Cooper, 47-48.

⁵⁰ Cooper, 89-93.

⁵¹ Bohigian, 221.

⁵² Bohigian, 223.

Ultimately, dealing with customers proved to be the most important issue for sellers to consider in order to make money selling at flea markets. Sherry also remarked on the importance of communicating with customers, noting that many sellers spent a lot of time discussing their products with consumers. “Dealers impart meaning to their goods, providing cultural biographies for objects, which many consumers believe enhance their value. In fact, these ‘stories’ or ‘histories’ are sought by some consumers as avidly as the objects themselves.”⁵³ Sellers needed to be knowledgeable about their merchandise, approach customers with a friendly demeanor, and be willing to come to a mutually agreeable price.

The emphasis on dealing with customers was especially important because many flea market customers, particularly those shopping for antiques or collectibles, developed their own skillset to acquire the best bargains. Regular customers were wise to the game and knew how to play it. Less experienced customers obtained advice from newspaper columns and books about flea markets. As collectibles and second hand fashion grew in popularity, a number of collectors and lifestyle personalities, like Martha Stewart, wrote books advising readers on how to fix or display their flea market finds. These books also included advice on approaching the flea market environment and dealing with sellers. Emelie Tolley and Chris Mead published one of these books, *Flea Market Style*, in 1998. They advised buyers to arrive early to see the best selection of merchandise and shop late to get the best deals. They also recommended keeping an eye out for booths that offered a random selection of merchandise, suggesting that those dealers probably did not know

⁵³ Sherry, 22.

the value of the items they sold.⁵⁴ They also advised readers to educate themselves about the items they wanted to collect. In doing so, they would develop a better eye for spotting bargains on their favorite goods. They suggested visiting museums, reading old magazines, visiting auctions, and talking with dealers to learn more about different collectible or antique pieces.⁵⁵ They also offered advice on dealing with sellers, such as feigning interest in several items before negotiating over the desired item, looking for flaws, and paying cash to receive discounts.⁵⁶

Martha Stewart advised readers to avoid wearing expensive clothes and jewelry. “If you expect to bargain, you will have a hard time convincing sellers that you cannot afford a higher price.” Similarly, she cautioned buyers about showing off the amount of money they had with them: “Don’t flash a wad of \$20 bills and then ask for \$2 off a price. This will likely make the merchant less willing to negotiate.” She cautioned buyers to keep their enthusiasm “in check,” noting that dealers would be far less likely to bargain if they knew a customer was going to buy the item anyway.⁵⁷

Newspapers advised similar strategies. A 1980 *New York Magazine* article on high-end flea markets recommended that readers bring cash to pay and encouraged them to politely ask for discounts.⁵⁸ A 1990 article in *Tampa Bay Magazine* advised readers to learn about prices before attending, inspect items for defects and authenticity, and to carry cash or traveler’s checks. Like Martha Stewart, the author reminded customers that

⁵⁴ Emelie Tolley and Chris Mead, *Flea Market Style: Decorating with a Creative Edge* (New York: Clarkson Potter Publishers, 1998), 17.

⁵⁵ Emelie Tolley and Chris Mead, *Flea Market Style*, 18.

⁵⁶ Tolley and Mead, 19.

⁵⁷ Martha Stewart, *Good Things from Tag Sales and Flea Markets* (New York: Potter Craft, 2002), 9-11.

⁵⁸ Sheila Cole Nilva, “Flea Bargaining,” *New York Magazine*, July 7, 1980, 55.

“making a fashion statement at a flea market is a waste of effort” and to dress casually.⁵⁹

In 1999, a *Black Enterprise* article listed a series of tips that customers needed to keep in mind when flea marketing that included visiting a variety of them to gauge pricing, comparing prices between different markets and sellers, doing background research on desired collectibles, and thoroughly inspecting the item for signs of damage or wear. The inspection process suggested meant more than just visually examining the item. “Touch the piece, smell it, look at it, listen to the ping if it’s glass.” Finally, the article also advised buyers to bring tools like tape measures, batteries, and magnifying glasses and, as many others suggested, small denominations of cash for bartering.⁶⁰

These strategies reflected the behavior of flea market shoppers discussed in Chapter 2. In the 1988 study of the Red Mesa Swap Meet, Belk, Sherry, and Wallendorf found that attendants visited the swap meets for a variety of reasons, but even those who were not serious shoppers still employed specific strategies to obtain deals. One family that attended every weekend looked for part-time sellers who they assumed were just trying to get rid of household items and were less interested in making money. They expected to receive the best deals from these sellers. Another visitor believed that specific days were better for finding deals and sellers in certain parts of the market offered the best prices.⁶¹ In his study of the Dalton Market in 1990, Sherry found that many visitors looking for specific items researched them beforehand.⁶² One buyer prided himself on knowing more than dealers about the instruments he collected.

⁵⁹ Michael Kirk, “Bargains! Bargains! Bargains! Tampa Bay’s Flea Markets,” *Tampa Bay Magazine*, May/June, 1990, 69-70.

⁶⁰ Ann Brown, “Flea market havens,” *Black Enterprise*, September 1999, 195.

⁶¹ Russell W. Belk, John F. Sherry, Jr., and Melanie Wallendorf, “A Naturalistic Inquiry into Buyer and Seller Behavior at a Swap Meet,” *Journal of Consumer Research* 14 (March 1988): 461.

⁶² Sherry, 23.

This buyer also employed other strategies that illustrate the wide range of methods shoppers used to obtain discounts:

Bill is a methodical and calculating searcher. He always begins his search at the far end of the meadow, since the true “finds” are always “outside.” He then works the “inside” and “middle” of the main midway then finishes with the outside booths at the “top.” He begins early as well, before the “old ladies” can “steal” the “treasure.” He searches for signed pieces among the wares of older dealers whose poor eyesight may have allowed such goods to go undetected. He looks for dealers who have come directly from estate sales and who might not have had time to assess and properly price their goods. He routinely derogates instruments, frequently lamenting the impossibility of their ever being tuned properly. He espouses a philosophy of “let the seller beware” and feels no compunction about “beating dealers” at what he believes to be “their own game.”⁶³

Sherry noted that this buyer sometimes pretended to be a dealer and gave out a false seller number in order to obtain discounts. Some people used different types of group strategies when approaching the market. Groups would split up and scout items for each other, meeting later to let their friends know what they found. Others would visit booths together and assist their friends in the bargaining process by pointing out flaws, criticizing the item, and pretending to talk their friend out of it in front of the seller.⁶⁴

Many of the buyers Sherry observed criticized the goods they wanted to buy as a means of getting a better deal. The prevalence of this behavior could explain why many authors advised sellers to be polite in their interactions with customers. They often dealt with the provocation of customers denigrating their items as a means of obtaining bargains. At the close of the market, the sellers would then either sell to each other or pack up their wares before heading out for the next day of selling.

While outside of traditional business sphere, flea market sellers operated in many of the same ways of more conventional retailers. They needed to acquire merchandise,

⁶³ Sherry, 24.

⁶⁴ Sherry, 23.

scout for locations, design displays, advertise their wares, and develop relationships with customers to sell their goods. Many of their experiences paralleled those who in the more traditional business world. They differed in that they generally did not secure long-term leases for the spaces from which they sold, they often travelled to different markets for selling, and their selling strategies inevitably included negotiating with each customer to reach a fair price.

They also differed because the flea market functioned as a space where the line between buyer and seller was often blurred. In the more traditional retail world, a shop owner would buy supplies from a wholesaler, which they would then sell to their customers. Owners acted as both buyers and sellers, but within a specific context that rarely overlapped. They generally were not buying from their customers. At the flea market, these identities could frequently overlap. Regular vendors often bought from and sold to each other. Shoppers sometimes engaged in part-time selling. A customer at one market might be a vendor at another.. Because of these ambiguous identities, both vendor and customer were wise to the game of buying and selling.

Chapter 4: Ambiguous Spaces

The blurred lines between buyers and sellers rendered the identity of flea market participants ambiguous, but the flea markets themselves also functioned as ambiguous spaces which held a number of different identities. Participants and outsiders – including other merchants, the media, manufacturers, and the government – assigned identities to markets based on their own agendas and experiences. Some of these identities emphasized positive experiences and focused on good deals, the adventure of searching for treasure, and the spectacle and fun of visiting a market. Other identities focused on more negative aspects of the flea market, such as the associations flea markets often had with stolen or counterfeit merchandise, tax evasion, or illegal immigrants. Curiously, both the the positive and negative identities attracted some visitors to flea markets, while repelling others.

A Place of Criminal Activity

From the 1970s onward, the relationship between flea markets and the legal system was often nebulous. Flea markets came under increasing scrutiny from different groups who urged local and state governments to crackdown on flea markets for violating the law. These groups included manufacturers, recording companies, merchants, and neighborhood residents. The groups attacking flea markets for criminal activity were sometimes correct in their claims, but often overstated their cases. They usually couched

their arguments in concern for public interest, but closer examination often revealed that personal or corporate interest was an equally strong motivation.

Counterfeit merchandise became a growing problem for retailers and manufacturers in the 1980s as groups in both the United States and abroad started producing “knock-offs” that were available for sale at flea markets and low-end outlet stores. Merchandisers claimed that the problem with flea markets selling these knock-offs was that they did not offer the same quality as genuine items. They also raised suspicions that the merchandise might not be safe for consumer use. For instance, in 1984, local police “seized 99 imitation Cabbage Patch dolls at a swap meet” in Norwalk, California, because the dolls, which were produced in Taiwan and labeled “Cabbage Kids,” were combustible.¹ Police did not cite the vendors for selling counterfeit items. Instead, they they confiscated the dolls because of potential safety risks.

Two years later, police seized fake 3,000 Rolex and Seiko watches at a flea market in Kentucky.² In this instance, the seizure was explicitly because the watches were counterfeits. When law enforcement busted counterfeit operations, reporters usually associated them with flea markets. A 1987 exposé on counterfeiting noted that flea markets were often the destination of illegal goods. It also cautioned readers that counterfeit products lacked quality, fell apart easily, and could sometimes be a danger to the buyers.³ In the following years, numerous stories covered local, state, and federal crackdowns on counterfeiting operations that included watches, perfume, and shoes.⁴

¹ “Fake Cabbage Patch Dolls Confiscated in California,” *Toledo Blade*, December 10, 1984, 8.

² “3,000 counterfeit watches seized in raid at store,” *Daily News*, June 20, 1986, 20-A.

³ Dan Logan, “The Great Pretenders,” *Orange Coast Magazine*, August 1987, 43-48.

⁴ Associated Press, “Agents put cap on odor imitators,” *Boca Raton News*, October 13, 1988, 7A; Susan Leonard, “Feds give shoe counterfeiters the boot,” *Boca Raton News*, December 30, 1989, 3A.

Without tying the merchandise to any specific flea market, all of the articles suggested that these items would have been sold at them.

Undoubtedly, some of the items may have been a risk to customers in terms of quality or safety. The case of the knock-off Cabbage Patch dolls outlined above suggests that the real issue was concern over safety, not the amount of money manufacturers lost over the sale of fake items. Similarly, concerns over the quality of items were probably genuine, as purchasing low quality items likely was frustrating for a number of consumers. However, quality was also an issue because shoddy knock-offs could impact a company's reputation if consumers believed the imposters were real. The question of quality seemed to be somewhat nebulous even when discussed by the manufacturers themselves.

A lawyer representing Reebok, Vans, and Converse made somewhat conflicting statements regarding the quality of knock-offs of his brands that were found in flea markets in 1989. "On first blush, it's tough to tell the shoes are different... You have a shoe that looks like the real thing, tastes like it and smells like it but it isn't." This statement would seem to suggest that the knockoff shoes were close enough to the real shoes that a customer would not have been able to tell the difference without closer inspection. He continued, "If you look close, you can tell the counterfeits are junk."⁵ It does not follow, however, that just because an item was not "real" in the sense of being brand name, it had no value for the person buying it. Counterfeit shoes may have been "junk" because they were made of shoddy materials, but they may also have been perfectly adequate to the person buying them at a discount price. The article makes no mention of people returning the shoes because of their quality. Instead, it notes that the

⁵ "Feds give shoe counterfeiters the boot," *Boca Raton News*.

people producing the shoes were indicted for \$4.5 million in cash and assets. This suggests that the main concern was more likely the fact that manufacturers lost a significant amount of money on counterfeit goods being sold at flea markets. The emphasis on quality and danger appears to have been a tactic to scare people out of buying counterfeit items at flea markets so that manufacturers would not lose money. These news stories helped to build the image of flea markets as places that were associated with criminal activity, an image that remained with flea markets that sold new items over the years.

These scare tactics, however, seem not to have worked as stories of counterfeit items continued to appear in newspapers through the 1990s, the 2000s, and to the present day. Consumers continued to seek out flea markets for good deals, and some sellers continued to trade in counterfeit items. A 1994 story on counterfeit sales in Tampa Bay found that law enforcement raided multiple flea markets for selling counterfeit goods including fake Rolex watches and designer handbags.⁶ Another article from the same year examined the growing counterfeit business, and like the articles mentioned earlier, tied faked merchandise to flea markets. Again, merchandisers cautioned that counterfeit goods, like fake Rolex watches, hurt unsuspecting customers by tricking them into buying poor quality goods.

Commentary from one of these customers, however, suggested that at least some consumers knew what they were doing when they purchased counterfeit items. “I always buy on the street. It’s a bargain...I figure the battery alone must be worth \$10, so if it lasts a month, two months, I’ve got my 10 bucks worth.”⁷ This man purposely bought a

⁶ Mark Albright, “Flea market boom may be taking powder,” *St. Petersburg Times*, August 1, 1994, 10.

⁷ Associated Press, “Counterfeit Luxuries a booming industry,” *Toledo Blade*, July 24, 1994, D-1.

knockoff because it offered him what he wanted – an inexpensive watch that would last him for a few months. Aware of the risks associated with counterfeit goods, he wanted them anyway. Numerous articles from the first decade of the twenty-first century continued to report on the problem of counterfeit goods at flea markets. In 2003, the local government sued vendors in San Bernardino, California for selling pirated music – a longstanding problem in California flea markets.⁸ In 2008, government authorities raided multiple flea markets in Chesterfield County, Virginia and confiscated hundreds of counterfeit items.⁹ In 2009, federal agents seized thousands of counterfeit DVDs and thousands of dollars’ worth of other knock-off items like shoes, purses, hats, and clothing.¹⁰

Government responses toward the sale of counterfeit merchandise varied. They arrested some sellers, sued others, and sometimes simply seized their merchandise. Manufacturers often played a critical role in helping to identify knock-offs of their items at different markets and alerting authorities. They sometimes pursued their claims against flea market sellers in court, but would more often try to go after the producers of the counterfeit goods. Regardless of the punishment, these raids often received attention in local and, occasionally even, national news sources. This attention helped identify flea markets with criminal activity. Clearly, some vendors did deal in illegal counterfeit items, but even when no evidence linked counterfeit merchandise with a flea market, the media

⁸ Bloomberg News Service, “Swap Meet Feels Heat,” *Daily Variety*, December 24, 2003, 3.

⁹ Linda Dunham, “Chesterfield flea market raided,” *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, December 6, 2008, accessed October 1, 2013, http://www.timesdispatch.com/news/chesterfield-flea-market-raided/article_d06a38e3-ca63-5659-aa0d-b0fa4a39a239.html?mode=jqm.

¹⁰ Nolan Clay, “No charges filed in seizure; how fakes got sellers in some real trouble,” *The Oklahoman*, April 6, 2009, 1A.

still connected them. While some vendors broke the law, certain flea markets were made guilty by association in the eyes of many members of the public.

As discussed in Chapter 1, law enforcement and the media also targeted flea markets for selling other types of illegal items, such as stolen goods or items banned by local governments. For instance, in 1976 the federal government oversaw raids of flea markets and gun shows in eight states that resulted in seizures of over “1,000 illegal handguns and other firearms.”¹¹ Nearly twenty years later, law enforcement continued to express concern over the availability of guns at flea markets. As a spokesman for the federal bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms told a reporter, “Every weekend, in effect, in the United States there’s a giant firearms bazaar...If you are a criminal and you want to get firearms that can’t be traced, that’s where you go.”¹² His statement tied flea markets with criminals and illegal firearms.

Another story from 1999 tied a flea market in Stone Mountain, Georgia, to rampant crime. “Between 1997 and 1999, police were called to the market nearly 100 times for crimes that included robberies, stolen vehicles, drug possession, assaults, and thefts.” Undercover police officers raided the market and found that some vendors sold marijuana. Law enforcement expressed concern that the market attracted criminals from outside of the state and contributed to a drug culture in their community. An officer interviewed for the story stated, “We’ve got whole families who would pull up and send mama in for a half-pound of marijuana.” Law enforcement blamed the flea market for

¹¹ Associated Press, “1,000 Guns Seized in Raids in 8 States,” *Milwaukee Sentinel*, November 19, 1976, 2.

¹² Allen G. Breed, “Flea market guns: Criminals’ choice?” *Ocala Star Banner*, January 16, 1995, 1A.

bringing crime into the community. Later that year, the property owners revoked the market's lease and it shut down.¹³

State and local governments also passed laws to ban the selling of goods like cosmetics and medications at flea markets. In 1998, the governor of New Jersey passed a law that prevented flea markets from selling cosmetics, non-prescription drugs, and baby food. The governor assumed that these items must have been obtained through theft and believed the law would cut down on shoplifting. The New Jersey Retail Merchants Association supported the law, claiming "Flea markets have become a major outlet for the sale of stolen merchandise....Many of our members have reported instances where products, which have been damaged or whose shelf-life has expired, are being resold at flea markets." Lawmakers also suggested that the law would protect consumers from purchasing out of date or damaged products, arguing that "the purpose of the law is public safety."¹⁴ The takeaway from this article was essentially that if a consumer bought any of the aforementioned products at a New Jersey flea market, they were not only probably stolen, but also likely harmful because they were expired or defective.

Merchant associations often went after flea markets and identified them with unlawful behavior. In this case, their concerns rarely stemmed from illegal items and focused more on the fact that some flea market vendors did not pay sales taxes or acquire business licenses to sell their goods. They also expressed concern over competition generated by flea markets, but this was often couched in legal concerns over taxes and

¹³ R. Robin McDonald, "Flea market a hangout for criminals, cops say; Raids and arrests don't stop Stone Mountain business that attracts thieves, drug dealers," *The Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, May 13, 1999, 5JA; R. Robin McDonald, "Flea market lease pulled; police say drugs rampant, Stone Mountain store allegedly a crime hotbed," *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, May 29, 1999, G2.

¹⁴ Douglas A. Campbell, "Flea Market Vendors Don't Buy New Law – It Bans Sales of Cosmetics, Nonprescription Drugs and Baby Food at Markets. The Idea was to Prevent Theft," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, February 12, 1998, B03.

licensing. In 1980, a group of merchants opposed the installation of a flea market in their neighborhood because they saw it as an unfair competitive force. One merchant argued, “We don’t want to speak for or against any flea market. We just want to make sure that sales tax is collected. We don’t mind the competition as long as everyone plays by the rules.”¹⁵

Another article from 1980 noted that the growth of flea markets worried many conventional retailers because they were often able to sell without obtaining a business license or paying taxes. The article quoted a New York businessman who “deplored the fact that the city and state were losing considerable tax dollars because flea-market merchants allegedly do not charge sales taxes.” The major concern, again, was the unfair advantage flea markets had over traditional businesses by not paying or charging sales tax. These complaints prompted the New York State Department of Taxation to monitor local flea markets and ensure that taxes were being collected.¹⁶

Further action was encouraged two years later when New York retailers estimated that flea markets were eating up 11% of retail sales, while less than 10% of vendors were paying sales taxes. The retailers unsuccessfully lobbied for local governments to pass stricter laws regulating taxes and licenses of flea market retailers. They also suggested that flea markets had an unfair advantage because they often purchased their wares through unknown sources that were probably illegal and enjoyed low overhead costs because they did not have to maintain cash registers, keep records of their sales, or comply with building or sanitary codes. One person interviewed also questioned whether or not flea market vendors paid into Social Security. The merchants had the support of a

¹⁵ Robin Young Roe, “Flea Market Fought,” *The New York Times*, November 2, 1980, 11-2.

¹⁶ Isadore Badmash, “Flea Markets: New Retail Force,” *The New York Times*, November 24, 1980, D1.

deputy town attorney who also worried that the markets violated town and city zoning ordinances and wanted the city to control “their sanitary systems, their litter, and their traffic.”¹⁷

Merchants in New York State attacked intermittent flea markets held at local schools for the purpose of fundraising, again citing unfair competition that included avoiding tax laws. In 1985, one merchant argued that a school sponsored flea market on the Upper East Side of New York hurt his business because “They don’t pay rent or taxes, so we have a very hard time competing.” The story noted that merchants in Greenwich Village had launched similar complaints about a local school sponsored flea market that was eventually forced to close.¹⁸ Six years later, another school-sponsored flea market in New York came under attack by merchants who argued that such markets posed an unfair competition to traditional merchants because they did not have to pay overhead costs and taxes. The merchants blamed the flea market, which was held seven times a year, for the closure of three area businesses.¹⁹

To combat the perceived loss of tax revenue, many states passed laws to ensure that flea market vendors charged and paid appropriate sales tax and acquired business licenses. By 1988, New York State had passed a tax law requiring vendors to charge and pay taxes on their sales. That year, undercover agents raided the Yonkers Raceway Flea Market to ensure that vendors paid their taxes as part of a statewide crackdown known as Operation Flea Collar. The results of the raid suggest that concerns about vendors ignoring tax laws were overblown. The agents only issued 21 citations out of around 300

¹⁷ Ellen Mitchell, “Flea Markets Set Critics Hopping,” *The New York Times*, December 12, 1982, 11-16.

¹⁸ Larry Rother, “P.T.A.’s are Protesting Closing of Flea Markets,” *The New York Times*, November 4, 1985, B3.

¹⁹ Robert Hanley, “Flea Markets Pit School Against Merchants,” *The New York Times*, July 5, 1991, B1.

merchants. Tax agents seized the merchandise of offending vendors, who also faced \$1000 fines and jail terms. Most vendors complied with the law and one tax agent implied that raiding the flea market was not the best use of their time, noting that they usually went after bigger targets for tax evasion like millionaires or stockbrokers. He felt embarrassed about the name of their operation and about wasting time going after the small number of tax evaders at the flea market. Customers also disapproved of the raid, arguing that seizing merchandise seemed unfair.²⁰ In 1989, a city in Florida required vendors and owners to obtain occupational licenses to ensure that flea market vendors were in compliance with local regulations and to generate revenue for the community. Again, most vendors complied with these regulations, although they did not always approve of them.²¹

Merchants also accused flea markets of ignoring local zoning and sanitation laws and ordinances. They suggested that flea market merchandise was illegal and that flea markets contributed to traffic congestion, parking problems, and unsightly streets covered in litter. Like the manufacturers that attacked flea markets as hotbeds of counterfeit merchandise, the merchants sometimes had a point and city and state officials and law enforcement often agreed with them. For instance, the Star-Lite swap meet mentioned in Chapter 1 received multiple citations from the local health department for violating sanitation codes. Neighbors also complained about traffic and litter in the area around the market.²² Law enforcement also other markets for not paying taxes, violating zoning

²⁰ Sarah Lyall, "Taxing Lessons at Yonkers Market," *The New York Times*, May 23, 1988, B2.

²¹ Craig Pittman, "The cost of doing business – flea market vendors spring for licenses," *St. Petersburg Times*, November 28, 1989, 3.

²² Christian Hill, "Complaints lead to inspection at Star Lite Swap Meet in Lakewood," *The News Tribune*, September 29, 2010, accessed February 19, 2013, <http://www.thenewstribune.com/2010/09/29/1360663/swap-meet-complaints-lead-to-inspection.html>; Christian Hill, "Lakewood swap meet owner will pay \$8,000 to settle lawsuit by tenant," *The News*

laws, poor sanitation, and illegal merchandise, although the number of vendors cited often paled when compared with the number of vendors found to be obeying local laws.

All of this culminated in creating an impression in the media that flea markets were places of criminal activity. These critiques implied widespread criminal behavior at flea markets, while minimizing the fact that usually only a small percentage of vendors actually took part in any illegal activity. They also often failed to take into account the fact that regulation of flea markets often differed from community to community and that law enforcement was often ill equipped to deal with the problems that did exist at flea markets because vendors varied from market to market.

The stories associating flea markets with criminal behavior, and some of the laws passed to overcome it, also neglected to account for consumers making informed decisions when purchasing at the markets. Each story about counterfeit or stolen items at flea markets gave the impression that the reporting revealed unknown dangers to the unsuspecting public. Starting in the 1970s, these stories were published every year in nearly every region of the United States. At some point, consumers had to be aware of these issues and chose to go to flea markets anyway. This is evidenced by the fact that with each year, the number of booths and and customers at a number of flea markets grew.

In fact, some people were attracted to the flea markets precisely because of their association with illegal practices. As noted in Chapter 1, some people enjoyed the idea of escaping their middle-class existence and slumming it for a day at the flea market. They

Tribune, April 6, 2011, accessed February 19, 2013,
<http://www.thenewtribune.com/2011/04/06/1614680/star-lite-swap-meet-owner-will.html#storylink=misearch>.

found the flea markets to be seedy and risky places, but that provided added excitement to the experience for them. Other customers went to flea markets looking for counterfeit merchandise like knockoff purses because they appreciated the cheaper prices on popular items. One study showed that a number of wealthier women who purchased knockoff handbags made informed choices when doing so. They sought them out because they were trendy and they wanted to own a larger number of bags than they could afford if they bought only legitimate branded merchandise.²³

In *The Real Thing*, English professor Miles Orvell argued that between 1880 and 1940, Americans shifted from a culture of imitation to a culture of authenticity. In the 1880s and 1890s, middle-class Americans sought out reproductions of European goods to furnish their homes. In doing so, they aped the tastes of wealthier Americans, who themselves parroted the styles of Europe. Technological advancements allowed manufacturers to build furniture made of inferior materials that looked similar to European originals. These advancements helped reduce prices, which put many of these items within the reach of middle-class families. This contributed to a developing culture of mass consumption. Orvell argued “The result was a factitious world in which the sham thing was proudly promoted by the manufacturer, and easily accepted by the consumer, as a valid substitute for authenticity.”²⁴ At the turn of the twentieth, leading architects and designers strove to produce a more authentically American material culture that moved beyond these European replicas. Orvell argues that by 1940, these ideas were accepted in the world of high arts.

²³ Veronica Manlow, *Designing Clothes: Culture and Organization of the Fashion Industry* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 2009), 12-13.

²⁴ Miles Orvell, *The Real Thing: Imitation and Authenticity in American Culture, 1880-1940* (Chapel Hill & London: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 49.

Orvell states that the late nineteenth century was a culture of imitation, the first part of the twentieth a culture of authenticity, and the present a culture of the factitious. He notes that Americans strive for the real, but are often satisfied and amused by the artificial.²⁵ He produced his work in 1989, an era that saw a rise in news coverage about counterfeit production. This certainly adds weight to his theory that another shift from demanding authenticity to an acceptance of imitation took place between 1940 and 1989. Stories of counterfeit merchandise at flea markets also confirm that some Americans of the 1980s felt perfectly satisfied with buying imitation items. However, Orvell's study primarily focuses on the arts and high culture. With the exception of furniture, he does not really examine consumer goods. A story from a former conman and vendor on Maxwell Street suggests that some people continued to seek out reproductions after Orvell's shift to authenticity took place and before the media started covering stories about counterfeit products in the 1980s. Former Maxwell Street resident and conman Joseph Rene "Yellow Kid" Weil recalled that as a young man, he and his friends sold fake gold watches on the street. Weil was born in 1875. He does not provide the dates for when he sold, but it seems reasonable to assume that Weil was selling imitation watches in the midst of the Orvell's culture of authenticity.²⁶

A 2013 article about fake vs. luxury brand watches in Forbes noted that most counterfeit items like watches, sunglasses, and handbags are sold to people who actively seek them out. The author, Ariel Adams, identifies himself as a "luxury wrist-watch expert." According to Adams, "15-30% of internet searches on watches involve people looking for replicas." He also suggested that unknowingly purchasing counterfeit items is

²⁵ Orvell, *The Real Thing*, xxiii.

²⁶ Ira Berkow, *Maxwell Street: Survival in a Bazaar* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1977), 352.

difficult because “[f]ake watches are found in places where you expect to find a fake watch.” On top of that, he stated that most people selling fakes are open about it with their customers because they know that is what the customers are looking for.²⁷ This suggests that most people who purchased counterfeit goods at flea markets were well aware of what they were doing. People wanting fake high-end items probably sought flea markets out because of the strong associations between the markets and counterfeit goods. Others may also have been attracted to purchasing at flea markets because of the perception that stolen items would be cheaper. One vendor commented in 2013, “...here’s a little tip. Want things to sell faster. Make them look stolen. People think they are getting a deal. Had a friend that sold used car audio equipment at swap. His sales went way up when he started throwing away the boxes and cutting the wires short so they looked stolen.”²⁸

The people who organized flea markets and their supporters challenged claims of illegal behavior by noting that accusations were often made without proof. They countered that flea markets were often inspected by state tax-collection agencies, that markets required vendors to obtain tax licenses, and that much of the merchandise assumed to be stolen or counterfeit was purchased at auctions or from wholesalers. They argued that flea markets actually brought tax revenues into communities, attracted more customers to neighborhoods, created jobs, and helped foster a sense of community spirit that championed old fashioned “mom and pop”-like businesses. Supporters attached other

²⁷ Ariel Adams, “The Truth About Replica Watches,” *Forbes*, May 30, 2013, accessed October 1, 2013, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/arieladams/2013/05/30/the-truth-about-replica-watches/>.

²⁸ Alias300, February 5, 2013 (9:02 a.m.), comment on MovieMan, “This California Flea might be a hotbed of hot products,” *Storage Auction Forums*, February 4, 2013, accessed October 10, 2013, <http://storageauctionforums.com/flea-markets/this-california-flea-might-be-a-hotbed-of-hot-products/>.

identities to flea markets that focused on issues like free enterprise, good deals, community, adventure, and entertainment.

As discussed in Chapter 2, flea markets provided many people with employment opportunities that were otherwise unavailable to them. Supporters of flea markets emphasized this by acknowledging that flea markets created jobs for people, while shutting them down removed those opportunities. The lack of overhead emphasized by worried merchants allowed flea market vendors to do their business. Owners of the markets took care of property taxes, insurance, proper sanitary conditions, and the like. Vendors paid toward those costs by paying for the privilege to sell on the market owner's property. In doing so, they were able to become small business owners, work for themselves, and engage in trade with their customers mostly on their own terms. Thus, for some, the flea markets were not just places of commerce, but also of opportunity and free enterprise.

Treasure Hunts

Beyond commerce, journalists also identified flea markets as places to find unexpected treasures. Many writers equated flea market shopping with treasure hunting. The experience of shopping at the flea market went beyond just purchasing items. It was an activity that also included the thrill of seeing a plethora of different things and meeting different kinds of people. As discussed in Chapter 2, the flea market provided a different setting for shopping that was more informal and unconventional than traditional retail stores or malls. People did not know exactly what to expect at the flea market. They

might find antiques, collectibles, or junk. Flea markets were known by the phrase, “One man’s junk is another man’s treasure,” and visitors embraced this idea.

In a 1984 Canadian newspaper article describing various attractions in Maine, the author encouraged travelers to visit area flea markets. He emphasized the possibility of finding an unexpected gem: “Many of the so-called antiques are of questionable variety, but the people are friendly and – who knows? – you just might unearth some treasure at a bargain price.”²⁹ The unpredictable nature of what would be available gave the flea market the feeling of a treasure hunt where people could pick through the various items found in different stalls and engage in a shared nostalgia over pieces remembered from their youth or excitement over finding the perfect piece of junk.

The lure of the treasure hunt attracted countless people to flea markets. By 1961, newspaper articles often referred to flea markets as places where people could find treasure.³⁰ Many articles even referred to flea markets as treasure hunts in the titles. An article entitled, “Great Garage Sale and Flea Market Treasure Hunt,” noted that people could enjoy a cheap day of fun “and bring home a treasure to boot” by attending a local flea market.³¹ Another article entitled, “Regional Guide to the Treasures at Flea Markets,” detailed the plethora of different treasures hunters could find visiting in the Tri-State area.³² An article from 1989 noted that flea market shopping was about more

²⁹ Sid Fassler, “Maine without the summer bustle,” *The Globe and Mail*, October 13, 1984.

³⁰ “One-Day Rural Flea Market Attracts Antiques Lover: Wares Are Sold From the Tailboards of Station Wagons,” *The New York Times*, September 6, 1961, 32.

³¹ Virginia Devine, “Great Garage Sale and Flea Market Treasure Hunt,” *The Washington Post*, July 22, 1982, 9.

³² Douglas C. McGill, “Regional Guide to the Treasures at Flea Markets,” *The New York Times*, June 27, 1986, C1.

than just acquiring good deals. “They are a treasure hunt and adventure – a voyage into an uncharted, chaotic sea of merchandise.”³³

Television news shows also identified flea markets with treasure hunts. In 1998 CNN featured a story on American flea markets. The reporters all associated flea markets with treasure hunting. One noted that “many people find flea markets a land of treasure,” while another covering the flea markets of Hawaii referred to flea market finds as “a pirate’s treasure” and suggested that some visitors would travel across an ocean to dig for “island treasure.” The main broadcaster also referred to the story itself as a treasure hunt. This association in the media of flea markets with treasure hunts helped to reinforce what many longtime market shoppers already felt. The flea market offered them a chance to engage in shopping that went beyond just finding good deals. It was also about the unexpected and exciting hunt for untold treasures.³⁴

Books that celebrated flea markets and advised shoppers on how to find the best deals also commented on this association. Authors often referred to the search for deals as “hunting.” Approaching the market was sometimes seen as preparing for battle. One author, writing of her love for flea markets, stated that “Going to flea markets is the only sport that interests me, a form of urban hunt that combines the illusion of freedom with the need for stealth.”³⁵ These publications often referred to visiting the flea market as hunting for treasure or bargains. In describing the numerous advantages of shopping at flea markets, collectors Emelie Tolley and Chris Mead described attending the flea

³³ Andrew L. Yarrow, “...And a Country Passion,” *The New York Times*, June 9, 1989, C1.

³⁴ “Lakewood Antiques Market,” CNN, accessed October 8, 2013, www.lexisnexis.com/hottopics/Inacademic.

³⁵ Mary Randolph Carter, *American Junk* (New York: Penguin Books, 1994), 6.

market as a “national pastime.” Their description of attending the flea market emphasizes the excitement of hunting for flea market finds:

New devotees are discovering the exhilaration, sociability, and pleasure of the chase each week. Since entrance fees are modest or nonexistent and the markets are generally in the open air, they offer an inexpensive way to spend the day outdoors. And more than likely, you’ll have the added diversion of chatting with friends and favorite dealers. But above all, there is the lure of the hunt, the possibility that right up until the very last minute, you might uncover that special treasure.³⁶

Their advice to flea market shoppers also included language that emphasized treasure hunting. They entitled a chapter devoted to strategizing one’s flea market visit “The Chase.” A section outlining how to physically move through the flea market was named “Plan of Attack.”³⁷ Similarly, Mary Randolph Carter’s *American Junk* included sections titled “For the Junk Hunt: Essential Tools” and “Junking Survival Kit.” She referred to the devoted flea market shopper as a “hardcore hunter” unfazed by the physical surroundings.³⁸

Tourist Destinations

Beyond the hunt for treasure, authors also marketed flea markets as destinations to visit when exploring a new city. Many of the stories discussed above were featured in travel sections of newspapers. As early as the 1980s, travel guide books featured flea markets and touted them as a way to experience local culture and find good buys.³⁹ A

³⁶ Emelie Todd and Chris Mead, *Flea Market Style: Decorating with a Creative Edge* (New York: Clarkson Potter Publishers, 1998), 10-11.

³⁷ Emelie Todd and Chris Mead, *Flea Market Style*, 14,16.

³⁸ Mary Randolph Carter, *American Junk*, 6.

³⁹ David K. Fremon, *Chicago Politics, Ward by Ward* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1988), 24; Roulhac Toledano, *The National Trust Guide to New Orleans: The Definitive Guide to Architectural and Cultural Treasures* (New York: Wiley, 1996), 196; Mary Fonseca, *Weekend Getaways in Louisiana* (Gretna, Louisiana: Pelican Publishing, 1998), 50, 52, 312, 313, 325; Robert Sietsema, *Secret*

1980 *New York Times* article about New Jersey attractions included flea markets as part of the cultural scene that visitors should experience.⁴⁰ Another article from the same year covered area flea markets in New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut and encouraged readers to “explore a fantasy world where nostalgia blooms.”⁴¹ An article from 1989 on tourism in Florida similarly noted that visiting the Webster Flea Market offered visitors a cheap day of fun.⁴² These stories recommended flea markets to readers as an enjoyable way to spend their time. In doing so, they identified the flea markets as destinations linked to the cultural scene of their communities. They advised readers to visit flea markets in their own cities and to explore them in other cities as a way to connect with local culture and have a good time.

As early as the 1960s, news stories and local events sections of newspapers also promoted local flea markets. These stories often noted that for some people the primary motive was not to shop, but just to browse and enjoy a fun day.⁴³ “Whatever is sought, the flea market is a bounty-filled bazaar for the budget conscious – fun to visit and browse in.”⁴⁴ These stories promoted flea markets as a good way to spend the day, enjoy the weather, and meet new people. One visitor to a flea market in 1981 claimed that

New York: The Unique Guidebook to New York's Hidden Sites, Sounds, & Tastes (Toronto: ECW Press, 1999), 37; Sharyn Alden, *Up North Wisconsin, A Region for All Seasons: A Wisconsin Trails Guide* (Madison, Wisconsin: Wisconsin Trails, 1999), 57; Don Philpott, *Landmark Visitor's Guide: Orlando & Central Florida* (Ashbourne, UK: Landmark, 1999), 137, 146, 173, 176, 212; “Miscellaneous,” *New York Magazine*, September 9, 1968, 12; “Happenings,” *New York Magazine*, June 7, 1982, 94; Patricia Sharpe and Helen Thompson, “Around the State,” *Texas Monthly*, June 1986, 76; Texas Department of Commerce, “Discover Texas,” *Texas Monthly*, June 1988, 138.

⁴⁰ “New Jersey Guide,” *The New York Times*, August 24, 1980, 11-1.

⁴¹ Reif, “It's Bazaar Season in 3-State Region Can be Found at a Flea Market”.

⁴² Mary Evertz, “Cheap Thrills, Bargain Attractions Await on Suncoast,” *St. Petersburg Times*, October 4, 1989, 18.

⁴³ Ann Barry, “Three State Guide to the Summer Flea Market Season,” *The New York Times*, June 18, 1982, C1.

⁴⁴ Rita Reif, “Its Bazaar Season in 3-State Region Can be Found at a Flea Market,” *The New York Times*, June 6, 1980, C1.

“[I]t’s fun even if you don’t find anything. It’s like a county fair.”⁴⁵ Another visitor, commenting in 1995, noted that “part of the flea market allure is they’re fun and amount to family entertainment.”⁴⁶

These stories reinforce the findings of John F. Sherry, Jr., discussed in Chapter 2. They also reflect the findings of historian Ted Ownby, who writes about the experiences of the poor in *American Dreams in Mississippi: Consumers, Poverty, & Culture, 1830-1998*. He argues, “The whole experience celebrates the fascinations of shopping and the potential mysteries of goods, but does so in ways that emphasize experiences other than the goods themselves.”⁴⁷ Most people attended flea markets because they wanted to shop, but many of them also did so because they found them to be a fun and different experience that they could not find elsewhere. They browsed through the interesting merchandise as they caught up with friends, enjoyed the weather, and met new people.

Flea markets also became fun destinations because they increasingly offered visitors other amenities such as live music, food, and other forms of entertainment. These extra attractions contributed to a carnival-like atmosphere at many flea markets. Maxwell Street Market became famous for its musicians and food. Other flea markets also offered these types of attractions. In 1984, a flea market in Houston featured live entertainment and a talent show that featured “singers, dancers, bands, and novelty acts.” Winners of the talent show received contracts to perform during the flea market’s regular hours. The owner of the flea market explained his decision to include entertainment. “Flea markets

⁴⁵ Jura Koncius, “the Flea Market Mania; Swap Meets are Thriving on Curiosity and Nostalgia,” *The Washington Post*, July 9, 1981, 1.

⁴⁶ Debra Hale, “Flea Market Boom Built on America's Eclectic Tastes,” *The Associated Press*, January 8, 1995, accessed October 9, 2013, www.lexisnexis.com/hotttopics/lnacademic.

⁴⁷ Ted Ownby, *American Dreams in Mississippi: Consumers, Poverty, & Culture, 1830-1998* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 167.

have grown to be not only a source of interesting and bargain merchandise, but a weekend outing for families and a tourist attraction.” The flea market also featured a restaurant and a bar and had plans to host bingo games and other community oriented events.⁴⁸ A number of flea markets marketed themselves as local attractions by adding amenities like those just described. In the third edition of his *U.S. Flea Market Directory*, Albert LaFarge noted that flea markets became popular vacation destinations in the 1990s as they started to offer “improved merchandise and entertainment options, food concessions, and other amenities.”⁴⁹

This was especially true of Hispanic flea markets. A 2003 article covering an Atlanta-area Hispanic market found that customers went to the market to shop, listen to Latino music, and eat Hispanic foods. The majority of customers came from Latino backgrounds and went to the market as a way of participating in a familiar cultural community. Non-Latino customers also enjoyed sharing in the community atmosphere and the exposure to Latino culture. The reporter observed, “The air is filled with horns and guitars of recorded Latino music, the chatter of Latino people meeting and mingling during a day of shopping. The air smells of tacos cooking in food stands.”⁵⁰

Two years later, another story on a Houston-area Latino market made similar observations. “Shoppers can fortify themselves with traditional dishes such as gorditas, tamales, and huaraches before continuing to make purchases. Or they can take a break

⁴⁸ “Area Performers Hope to Cash in on Rainbow Pot O’Gold Talent Search,” *Southwest Newswire*, March 20, 1984, accessed October 10, 2013, www.lexisnexis.com/hottopic/Inacademic.

⁴⁹ Albert LaFarge, *U.S. Flea Market Directory: A Guide to the Best Flea Markets in all 50 States, 3rd Ed.* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000), xi.

⁵⁰ Craig Schneider, “Flea market thrives amid retail giants; Adapting: Latino music and food are abundant and antiques are a thing of the past. But the north Cobb marketplace could disappear,” *The Atlanta Journal Constitution*, April 12, 2003, 1H.

from shopping by watching soccer games on television or listening to a live band.”⁵¹ This flea market was popular with the Hispanic community because it served as something more than just a shopping center – it functioned like a community center where people from Hispanic backgrounds could share in their common culture. It also attracted non-Hispanic people who enjoyed being exposed to a different culture. In this sense, flea markets also acted as a cultural portal for immigrants. They sought out flea markets to find opportunities that would allow them to participate in the larger community, but also engaged in them because they offered the comforts and familiarities their home cultures.

Third Places

Because flea markets brought people with shared interests together – whether that shared interest was collecting car memorabilia, browsing antiques and collectibles, or sharing in a common culture – they also helped to build communities. For this reason, the flea market should also be identified as a “third place.” Ray Oldenburg introduced the concept of this in his 1989 book *The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons, and Other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community*.⁵² In it, he explains that a “third place” is a place outside of one’s home (the first place) or work (the second place) where a person spends time and engages with their community. A third place is where people go to socialize and relax on a regular basis. It is also a place where people know each other and build a community. Oldenburg argues that modern urban development is problematic because it discourages walking and talking:

⁵¹ Jenalia Moreno, “Hispanic flea markets offer culture in parallel economy,” *The Houston Chronicle*, December 18, 2005, accessed October 10, 2013, www.lexisnexis.com/hottopics/lnacademic.

⁵² Ray Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons, and Other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community* (New York: Marlowe & Company, 1999).

In walking, people become part of their terrain; they meet others; they become custodians of their neighborhoods. In talking, people get to know one another; they find and create their common interests and realize the collective abilities essential to community and democracy.⁵³

Oldenburg suggests that third places unite neighborhoods and serve as an entry point for people new to a community.

As discussed above, flea markets often served as sources of division in some neighborhoods. Thus, it may seem contradictory to identify them as third places. However, many flea markets functioned, if not as their own neighborhoods, then at least as their own communities. Flea markets brought together a fairly regular group of sellers who sold to a fairly regular group of customers. Participation in the market was such that the identifying line between customer and seller was often blurred. These people came together on a regular basis to do business, exchange pleasantries, and engage in common interests. For many groups of people, flea markets offered opportunities to participate in economic exchanges when they were otherwise excluded because of their race, ethnicity, or economic status.

The flea market brought these people together and also brought them into contact with people outside of their race, ethnicity, or economic status for the purpose of doing business. This regular contact created a sense of community among participants, as attested to at length in Chapter 2. Regular flea market participants, whether buyers or sellers, viewed the flea market as a source of community. The flea market also offered the opportunities for walking and talking that Oldenburg identified as important. Many customers spoke of the thrills of hunting for treasure, but they also spoke to the

⁵³Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place*, xiv.

enjoyment of walking around and enjoying the weather or meeting up with friends and chatting with vendors as they browsed through the market.

Oldenburg followed up on the idea of third places in 2009 with the book *Celebrating the Third Place: Inspiring Stories about the “Great Good Place” at the Heart of Our Communities*. This book featured a collection of works dedicated to telling the stories of specific third places. One such place was the Maxwell Street Market. Steve Balkin and Brian Mier, the authors of the piece, argued that it was a third place because “Maxwell Street was the model, par excellence, of what an urban, open-air market should be in a multi-ethnic, democratic society. It was a living and vibrant example of that harmonious diversity to which politicians and educators give lip service. It was an American dream realized.”⁵⁴ Belkin and Mier argue that Maxwell Street succeeded as a third place because it offered the poor and working-class people of Chicago a place where they “could find good cheap food and affordable merchandise, and listen to free live music. It was successful because it was convenient to get to, it had goods and services at modest prices, it acquired a tradition as a weekend destination – meeting place, and it was authentic.”⁵⁵ They also found that the market allowed people to build business relationships over decades of interaction, relationships that often developed into a sense of community and friendship.

The authors are specifically interested in Maxwell Street as a third place, but their description could just as easily apply to the many weekly flea markets that were found across America for the past sixty years. Maxwell Street was a very special third place for many Chicagoans, particularly because of its century long history and its importance to

⁵⁴ Steve Balkin and Brian Mier, “Maxwell Street,” in *Celebrating the Third Place: Inspiring Stories about the Great Good Places at the Heart of our Communities* ed. Ray Oldenburg, 193.

⁵⁵ Balkin and Mier, “Maxewll Street,” 195.

the America blues scene, but less known flea markets have also acted as special third places to countless Americans in other communities. They offered poor and marginalized people opportunities to buy and sell at prices they could afford while also building communities. They also allowed for people who did not suffer any economic or social hardship the opportunities to build communities around shared interests and hobbies. Flea markets were third places because they were communities.

However, flea markets did not function as third places for all. They held a number of different identities and these were often reported on simultaneously. These identities often overlapped. A flea market associated with criminal behavior – like the Star Lite in Lakewood, Washington – could also serve as a third place for community members. Similarly, a market that served as a third place for locals could also attract tourists interested in hunting for treasure. The type of coverage flea markets received sometimes depended on the type of market it was and what type of customers it catered to. Thus, flea markets that catered to poorer communities tended to be more associated with negative behaviors than flea markets that catered specifically to collectors. However, this was not always the case. The Hispanic markets described above catered to poor immigrant communities, but were still celebrated in the coverage of them as being cultural community centers for the Hispanic community. Just as roles of flea market participants could often be blurred, and people could simultaneously occupy identity of buyer and seller, so too could the markets themselves.

Conclusion

The flea market, as an institution, has been part of American culture for over a century. In the first half of the twentieth century, it was not always viewed as American. It was often associated with foreigners, because it was primarily immigrants who started and participated in the country's first flea markets. Immigrants brought market culture with them from their own home countries and adapted them to surviving in the United States. They bartered and traded used and new items that they needed to survive. In doing so, they also built relationships within and outside of their communities, providing spaces of economic inclusion to people excluded from mainstream consumption. American commentators and reporters often looked down on these early flea markets as places of criminal behavior and filth, but they also allowed for immigrants and their children to get an economic start in a country that did not always provide them with an easy road to success.

In the 1950s, antiques dealers reimagined them for middle- and upper-class shoppers as a recent import from Europe. These new flea markets were associated with antiques and collectibles and catered to more affluent customers. Journalists, hobbyists, and academics alike accepted the story that flea markets were a novelty to the American public, which quickly embraced flea market culture. Flea markets took off in the 1960s and were soon to be found in cities and towns across America. Large numbers of Americans flocked to the flea markets to find their favorite collectibles toys, comic

books, or fashions from their youth. Flea markets became increasingly popular as alternatives to traditional shopping. They offered individuality and authenticity to customers who wanted a more holistic and personal shopping experience. To meet customer demand, vendors took to the streets collecting others castoffs. They also attended auctions, combed thrift stores, and found other creative ways to find free or cheap items that appealed to the collecting public. Meanwhile, other swap meets and flea markets continued to serve less affluent communities, although these markets rarely received the same level of acclaim in the media.

The 1970s saw the rise of flea markets that carried more and more new items. At the same time, newspapers began to publish stories that tied flea markets to illegal merchandise. Flea markets became associated with pirated music and counterfeit clothes and household items. Newspapers and manufacturers warned apparently unsuspecting customers of the dangers of these counterfeit goods, but it is reasonable to assume that many customers were buying what they wanted when they purchased knockoff goods. In the following decade, flea markets also came under increasing attacks from merchants who saw the markets as unfair competition. They argued that flea markets did not pay the same taxes or overhead costs and that their merchandise must have been obtained through questionable sources. What they rarely argued, but what was invariably true, was that flea markets also offered a different *form* of competition. Flea markets offered a different type of experience for shoppers that was less formal, offered unexpected merchandise, and the opportunity to participate in a community of shoppers. They also increasingly turned shopping into an experience of entertainment by offering amenities like live music and food.

Supporters of flea markets argued that the markets were important to communities because they offered opportunities for marginalized groups to gain an economic footing in American society. Markets catering to immigrants, people of color, and the unemployed or working poor continued to thrive, although they sometimes faced threats from local government and law enforcement. They faced raids, criminal charges, and the possibility of being forced to shut down. Maxwell Street was one such market. Even with over a hundred years of history that included providing generations of immigrants and marginalized citizens economic opportunity, the market was shut down and replaced by student housing and upscale retailers. Less well-known markets faced similar threats. In spite of these threats, other markets continued to create places where people could get their start in operating a business while also participating in a safe community where they could share their culture and their shared experiences.

Flea markets continue to receive the same praise and criticisms to this day. Some markets are continually targeted by groups looking for counterfeit or stolen merchandise. Markets that cater to immigrant groups often fall under the watchful eye of immigration authorities who look to flea markets as areas where illegal immigrants congregate. The markets targeted are those that continue to serve immigrant groups, the poor, and people of color. Merchant groups and neighborhood associations continue to identify flea markets as criminal and unsightly blights on their communities. At the same time, flea markets also continue to be celebrated for the unique shopping experiences they provide. More affluent people still seek out flea markets to find collectibles and antiques, while more environmentally conscious people seek out flea markets as a way to participate in a

form of consumption that reflects their values. Flea markets are still touted as must-see destinations in the pages of newspapers and travel books.

Flea markets have been a part of American culture for generations, and yet they still do not carry a unifying identity. They cater to the poor and the rich, in-groups and out-groups. This pattern has been part of their history since they were reinvented in the 1950s by antiques dealers. This contradictory history, however, is not really present in the academic work currently available. Academic studies of flea markets have largely focused on the markets that catered to the rich, while ignoring the markets that catered to the poor. This could be because many of the people who study flea markets in their own right tend to be those who study business or consumer culture and their interests lie more with “mass” culture. It does seem suspect, however, that other types of flea markets are usually not even mentioned in their writing. This suggests that academics have had a blind spot when it comes to studying flea markets. They seem to be suffering from the same myopic view that 1960s journalists suffered from in imagining that flea markets were created by and for middle- and upper-class Americans who just wanted to trade in collectibles and antiques.

They seem blind to the experiences of the other groups who have participated in flea markets, just like early journalists did when they first reported on American flea markets in the early twentieth century. Flea markets provide interesting spaces for studying intersectionality of race, class, and even gender, and some of this has been alluded to by academics who study immigrant experiences, poverty, and people of color. This thesis has attempted to give a voice to the experiences of immigrants, women, people of color, and the economically disadvantaged who have participated in flea

markets over the course of generations. It has strived to recognize the ways in which flea markets provided these people with areas of inclusion, areas in which they could participate in American consumption to meet their daily needs and their occasional wants, while also building communities. So many different groups of people have participated in flea markets throughout the years – from homeless people to immigrants to people of color to the under-employed to the part-time middle class seller to the antiques dealer – that a comprehensive study of flea markets provides a more nuanced view of second-hand consumption and alternative retail chains. As such, this thesis recognized the experiences of people who participated in more affluent markets and placed their stories in the context of other groups who have a much longer history of trading at the market.

Flea markets offer a host of opportunities for further scholarship. They have long been associated with second hand consumption and giving new life to old goods. Recently they have increasingly been linked to environmental causes and promoted as a form of “green consumption.” Research should be done to uncover the historical relationship between environmentalists and flea markets and how they fit into conceptions of sustainability, of “reduce, reuse, recycle.” However, the markets have also given new life to many physical spaces, and this could be another avenue of study. For instance, many flea markets have been held on the grounds of drive-in movie theaters and old shopping centers. Examining the location and spaces of flea markets can provide opportunities for understanding how spaces have been reimagined and given new life through the markets.

Newspaper coverage of flea markets has rarely provided much insight into the economic motivations of shoppers from any class. Most coverage of lower-end markets has focused on crime, while that of higher-end markets emphasized collecting and fun. This minimalizes the likelihood that all participants shopped at flea markets because they offered cheaper options than what was available at traditional retail outlets. The economic motivations of shoppers would be more easily understood if scholars conducted oral history interviews with participants. This would provide a more balanced view of second-hand consumption at flea markets that takes into account experiential, as well as economic drives. Future scholarship could also include case studies of specific flea markets, examinations of local laws and regulations regarding markets, and in-depth studies on successes and failures of individual markets.

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