

'The Flea and Me'

Flea markets

A local beat writer reflects on life at a bargain mecca

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Two decades ago, the Skyview Drive-In Flea Market became what it is today: a way of survival for hundreds of Santa Cruzans. That was when the owners started operating it both Saturday and Sunday. Today, the quirky market is open four days a week — Thursday through Sunday — attracting hundreds of buyers and sellers to a setting where items deemed worthless the day before suddenly have value. One of those sellers, beat writer Jerry Kamstra, has been selling at the flea since the mid-1970s. The author of the beat classic *The Frisco Kid*, the bestseller *Weed: Adventures of a Dope Smuggler*, and a major force behind the Santa Cruz Poetry Festival, Kamstra can be seen regularly at the market, selling everything from books to used furniture to classic comics. In addition to being a literary institution, Kamstra has become a fixture of the flea. As part of our ongoing series of features on parts of the community that began two decades ago, Kamstra wrote "The Flea and Me," which he says is about more than the market. "It's about the Zen of survival," he says.



A satisfied customer at the flea

by Jerry Kamstra

Flea market shoppers can find abandoned guitars, art and more.

The first time I heard about the flea market was when I moved to Rio Del Mar from San Francisco with my family and 16 boxes of used clothes, old toys, kid's books, garters, belts, snakes, snipes, swindles and windles left over in the garage after the move. My brother-in-law, who was

buy at the flea market. Going to the flea market with my ex-wife was like visiting the Boardwalk and riding the roller coaster — fast on the straightaways and hang on at the corners. My ex-wife was a flea market veteran who could roam over the goods with the eyes of an eagle while cruising at 35 knots — always coming to rest on her "doily" before 25 other patrons could spot it. Going to the flea market with my ex-wife was like going to a bargain basement foot race, her pursuit of doilies leading her up and down the aisles of merchandise like a machine in perpetual motion, me trailing dust in her wake, intent as I am not on the merchandise laid out before me, but on the interesting aspects of the various denizens of the quarter.

Snug in my comforter next to my wife, I smirked as they left the house at that early hour, cold and damp and off on a futile mission. I lay back contentedly until 10 that morning before getting up to have breakfast with wife and kids.

Three hours later, at 2 p.m., my brother-in-law and his pretty little lady are back from the flea. I stand nonchalantly aloof in the yard leaning on a rake as he drives up and backs the van into the driveway, gets out and extracts four boxes. He starts taking them inside the garage.

"Where's the other boxes?" I said. "What other boxes?"

"The 16 boxes. You took 16 boxes to the flea."

Brother-in-law stacked the four boxes in a corner, taking an elabo-

Real people

One thing I did notice about the flea market was there were real people there, not the stereopticons one usually sees parading down the avenues in their polyester seersucker sandwich board suits. The people milling and thronging at the flea market had gruff on their faces and rough on their hands — my kind of people, really — those who knew and understood the underside of life.

Of course all this knowledge came later when I got to know the importance of the flea. At that time it was only a vague revelation as I hustled after my wife who was still intent on her doilies.

So there I am standing in my garage in Rio Del Mar with my 16 boxes of leftovers just given to my brother-in-law, my mind inundated with the idea of profits and losses and the fact that my brother-in-law owes me \$200 for his share of the rent. My mind is also completely virginal as to any aspects of actually making money at the flea, since so far my only history is one of money spent.

Thus I watched in bemusement as my brother-in-law and his new young wife disassembled the 16 boxes of throwaways and sorted, washed, ironed, laundered, priced, cleaned, stamped and repacked the array back into the cartons, loading them into my borrowed van and taking them the next 5 a.m. Sunday morning to the flea market where they pay \$5 for a spot and set up their wares.

sharing the house with my family, said "Whattya gonna do with all of that junk?" "It's bound for the Goodwill," I said.

"Can I have it?"

"You? What for?"

"The flea."

"The flea? You mean the flea market?"

"Yeah. Can I have it?"

"Sure you can have it. Save me the trouble of hauling it to Goodwill."

My only experience with the flea market was with my ex-wife who used to drag me out there on Sunday to buy doilies. Doilies is anything you

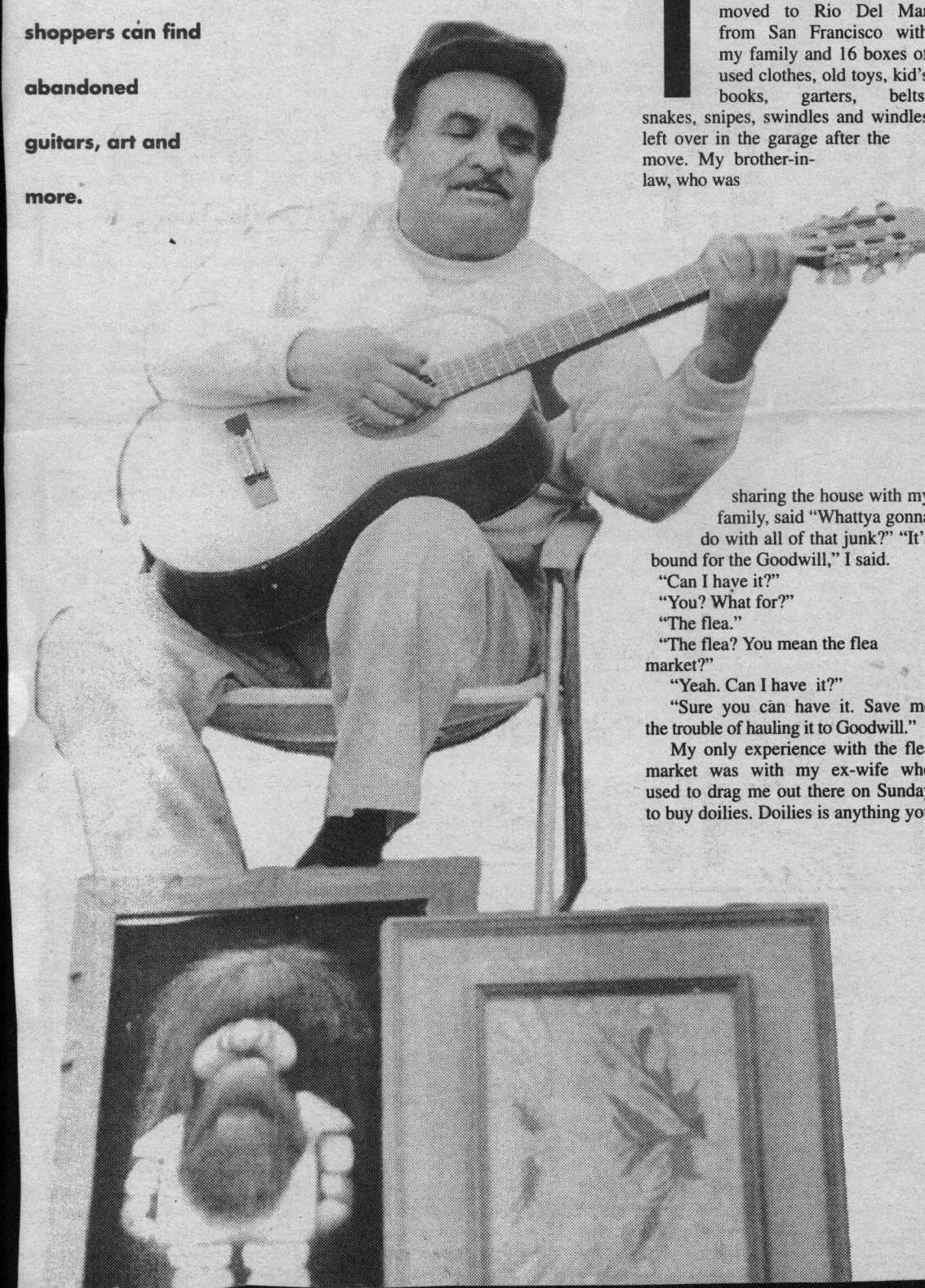
I was living in a throwaway world in a too-fat land.

rately long time of it, I thought, then turned to me. He reached into his pocket, extracted a large roll of bills, and peeled off two hundred dollars and handed it to me. Still in his roll was another \$200, easy. "There are your other boxes," he said.

I felt more than dumb. Hoist on my own leotards. Paid with my own pelt. What was this, my bro, the young punk I taught how to hustle hustling four hundred smackers out of my own backyard while I'm standing in the leaves like a goof? Was I getting so fat I could let four hundred bucks skedaddle out of my own backyard?

I decided I had. I was losing touch with the basics. I was living in a throwaway world in a too-fat land. Later, this was all to change and I would come to know the flea market intimately, personally, completely. I would become a flea market regular, a denizen who waited in my truck at 4 a.m. for a space inside, a person who

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roamed the streets and back alleys and forlorn garage sales looking for items, not to keep — but to resell at the flea for that few extra bucks that would get you through that week, for the rent, for the food and, finally, for the solace.

The 16 boxes of throwaways I gave to my brother-in-law became for me a talisman for all the throw-aways of our society, and I saw, through my bro's actions and his need that precipitated that action, the solution to a lot of my own problems. The flea market would become a solution for me, a final burial ground, as it were, for all the materialistic pretensions I once had — and a way to make a living for

a writer who wasn't making his living writing. From now on I would make my living selling doilies.

The writer

As a person who made up his mind to be an artist at age 10, and a word-artist at age 20, I have always wrestled with the problem of making a living while doing my art. Intuitively I realized early on to separate my money-making activities from my writing activities, assuming always that if I remained true to my art, eventually it would make me my living. In a sense I have always held words sacrosanct, above money, only real

when honest and uncommercialized. So while most of my compatriots became academicians and journalists, (always with that big novel in the back closet), I became a laborer who worked construction six months and then drew unemployment the rest of the year — during which time I would write. In this way, over six years, I completed 400 pages of *Tom Fool*, my first novel, which is still incomplete and unpublished.

From age 18 until 40, when I had my first novel published, I worked in various aspects of the construction industry, either as laborer or carpenter, to survive as a writer. During this time I worked on bridges, high-rises, small houses and large mansions. I laid pipe and dug tunnels, I shoveled ditches and wrecked houses. I dug graves, drove trucks, laid tile and cut down trees for firewood. I picked up stones off roadways and hustled iron at junkyards — all this to keep writing.

I also made money in less orthodox ways. For two years I owned a bookstore, then I became a demolition contractor employing several men, taking down over 80 urban renewal houses before realizing that business is a mess, designed to take up all your time and give you nothing in return but stress. Although lots of money went through my hands, none stuck. So I was always left holding the empty financial bag. My time was worth more than the money I was getting for it. I had to find a way to make more money without spending so much of my time.

So I became a dope smuggler and finally did make enough money in a short period of time to actually spend that saved time writing. Interestingly enough, it was time spent writing about dope smuggling, which eventually became my first major book.

By that time, I am a writer, no longer smuggling dope or working as a carpenter, but a real writer writing film scripts for his own book, writing articles, getting calls from Hollywood (only some of them collect), living in a nice house in Rio Del Mar and drinking a fifth of Meyer's rum every day, and typing away every night, and this is the period of my life when I'm standing there in the leaves with the rake and I realize that I have lost my scamming edge, and I have gotten fat and out of practice. My problem was that I had a couple of books out and had become a writer, a fatal disease. I knew it was time to stop hustling paper and hit the flea market. It would be a year, though, before I could do it. Before I had to do it.

Now it is that year later, and I am living in Felton and Hollywood has stopped calling and my marriage has stopped balling and my career has stopped climbing and is falling. I am still a writer but now I am a broke writer, my editor dead of breast cancer and so my voice lost with my publisher. So I decide to become a carpenter again and almost fall off a building, my mind elsewhere, lost in the pages of a book. I have to find another way to make a living. Not spend all my time ... it is then I am driving down River Street on my way home to Felton for the thousandth time and I see the truck, I have already seen it a hundred times and it has not registered, but now I see the truck.



Fernando Gonzalez and friend mug for the camera.

The truck

There is something magical about a truck. As kids we are taught to play with them and so push our Tonkas up and down sand hills; then we get big and get inside real rigs and climb those same sand hills. They were a lot smaller when we were kids.

A good truck is the modern-day equivalent of what a good horse was in the old days, and when you buy one you better know what you're doing. Although truckless at the moment, I was not a virgin when it came to trucks, having owned quite a few over my mixed history in the deconstruction business.

A man showed up. I asked him if it's for sale.

"Could be. Like to hear her run?" Simon said. That was his name, Simon.

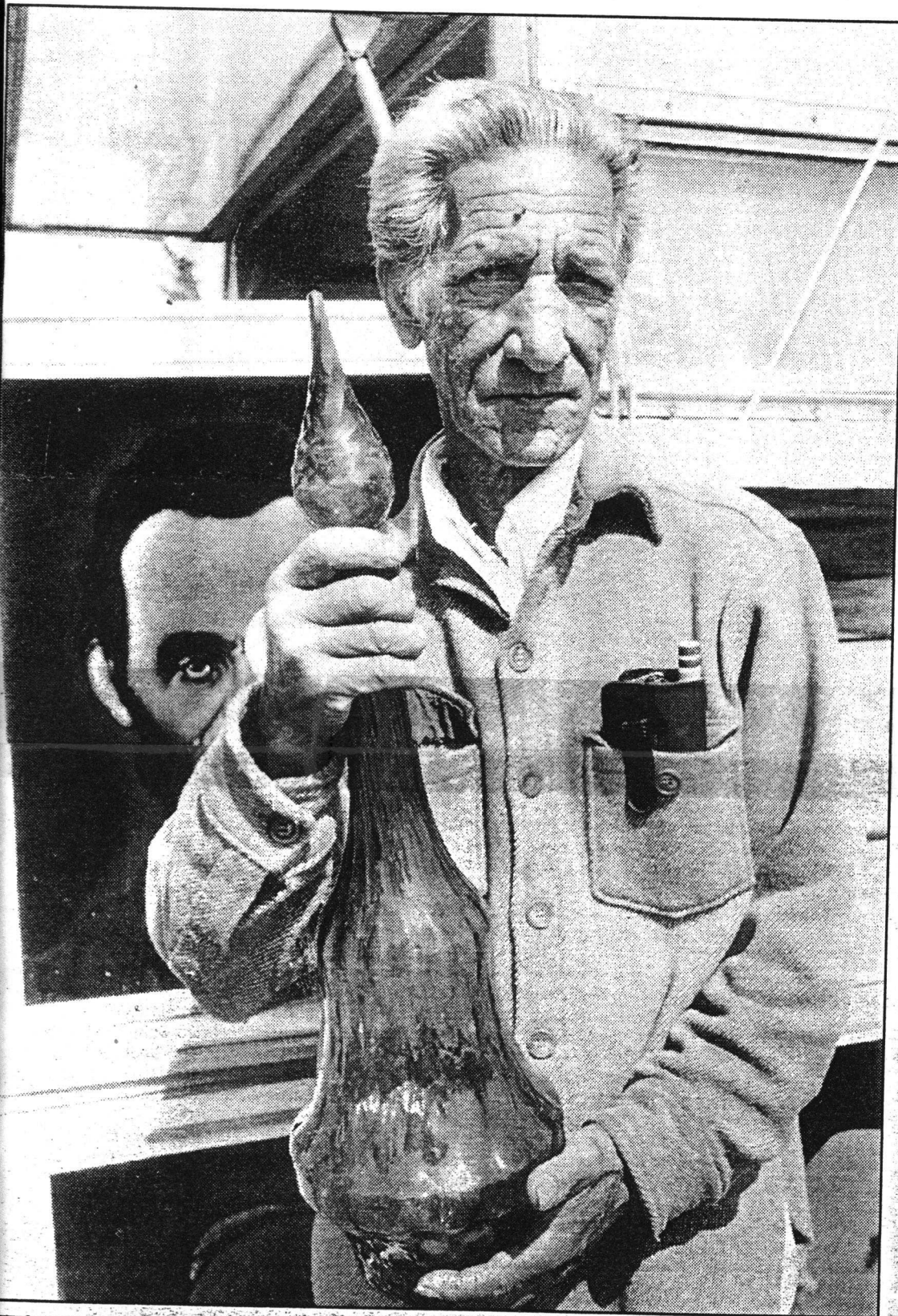
"Could I?"

Inside the cab is even better than I expected, all the upholstery intact, the dashboard clean, the instruments registering, the headliner still crisp and the overhead lamp working, all the handles, the door knobs, the finishing touches an already sold buyer relishes and minces over as he counts his shekels. I'll be able to turn the window down with this nickel-plated handle;

at night the instrument panel will glow blue; KUSP will be on the radio and I'll be true.

After a successful test drive in which my intuitive truck knowledge is confirmed, we are parked again in Simon's driveway discussing the price. "So how much do you want, Simon, from me, a true truck lover, an artist, someone who will put this truck to good use and therefore fulfill its destiny?" I sometimes use words like this to make a sale.

The real deals at the flea, regulars know, come from the amateurs like me



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Simon pondered my question while I reminded him of potential problems with the truck, the sticky clutch he had mentioned and how it had been sitting eight years now and probably all the interior rubber fixtures were about to give way, and we both noticed the cracks in the tires which are of a special size because of the custom bed and so will cost more to replace, and, of course, we also know this truck is 18 years old, a grandfather truck, really, and we also have to consider the fact that . . ."

This is all used horse talk designed to harangue Simon down to the last bo-diddy dollar. I knew the truck was worth easy \$1,500, but I wanted it for \$500, a sum I didn't have but could borrow maybe, but first I had to get Simon to want to give the truck to me. I was doing him a favor getting it out of his back yard, I was saving the truck.

I am intoning this into his head like a litany when I hear him say I can have the truck for \$500 if I agree to also take a shedful of useless objects he has in the back, doilies I think I hear him say, old things left over, lamps and jars and bolts and nuts.

So it is agreed that I will buy the truck for \$500 and take also as a goodwill gesture the quite large shed full of general rural rubbish Simon was going to take to the dump but has not got round to — old lawnmowers and baskets, empty glass bottles of strange hues and augers with reverse hand screws for left-handed people, hoes with worn-out edges and picks and wooden boxes, glass lamps from another era and brass screws in the original boxes. In this drawer I find a bunch of old maps, on that shelf an old radio. All in all, I have a complete

load stacked up in back of the '59 Ford, which I do pay for the next Saturday with \$500 borrowed from a carpenter friend.

The flea market

Now it is Sunday, 4 a.m., and I am in the flea line in my new truck, enjoying the warmth of the heater and the wonder of jazz on the radio, reflecting on the good fortune that has befallen me, that I stopped and knocked for, and settle back in the comfort of the truck that is to become the tool that will lead me through the next decade of my life, through the '80s, the decade when everybody got rich except the poor people, the decade in which I will go inward and live off the flea.

Now it is 5 a.m. and the line is moving. We are entering the outdoor cinema parking lot, directed into a space by men wielding flashlights.

It is still dark. My truck is somewhat big and I have to maneuver it carefully into my space, along the south wall, a good spot I learn later, because it gets traffic from both directions. As I work my way into my spot, I see other people scurrying around like worker ants, lifting tables off car tops, untying ropes, motors humming, little girls driving big trucks, old men driving little trucks.

Safe inside my space undoing my tailgate, already eager shoppers are rushing toward me with flashlights: "Got any old clothes, really old, like in the '40s?" "Got any books on Chippewa arrowheads?" "Got a black silk vest?" "A size 38 tuxedo?" "Lavender blue is the color, sweet is the taste of my honey's hair."

Before you can even begin to unload, people are circulating with flashlights, poking into your bins, asking prices of this and that, and you're thinking, gee, business is really good right off the bat, yes, you can have that for \$10; you wanted \$20 but you'll let it go for \$10; yeah, the brass bed? Uh, er, \$75? Ah, you can have it for \$40.

The real deals at the flea, regulars know, come from the amateurs like me just come in, or the once or twice a year family cleaning out the garage, or the students leaving town and getting rid of their leftovers: hardcover books for a quarter; a new pair of Levis for \$2. A nice flashlight with just a little glitch for a dime. A \$300 banjo for \$75.

Lots of flea market pros specialize, running from space to space looking for manual typewriters, or books on Southwest American Indians, or hand-pushed lawnmowers, or bamboo bird cages. These are then taken to their own booths where the prices are marked up for people who come later.

Serious shopping

All serious flea market shopping — by pros looking for those unwarily cast-off gems — is done by 8 a.m., long before the devil-may-care citizen arrives at 10 a.m. looking for a used Walkman. By 12 and 1 p.m. some vendors are already leaving. Maybe they sold out, or didn't sell anything, and so are gone.

That first Sunday at the flea I sold most of the goodies Simon had given me, made enough to pay back my carpenter friend, and so sailed home free that afternoon. Simon actually came

out to the flea that morning (he'd never visited it before) and hung around my space, gazing wistfully at his ex-truck, watching as I sold off his old crates, his old tin spoons and cracked plates, for dimes and nickels and quarters and dollars.

Sometimes it's just a quarter at a time, people pausing over your table, you knowing there's not a dime's worth of stuff on it, but by the time the long day's over you have a couple of hundred dollars in your pocket — all nickel and dime stuff, all throwaway stuff, all stuff you don't need and they don't need, all stuff that nobody needs but everybody needs.

While selling Simon's stuff, one old gentleman stood in front of my table fingering nuts, bolts, pulling quarters out of his overalls one at a time, hanging over my display like a post-mechanical undertaker whose mayonnaise jars of bolts at home were getting empty. For over an hour he stood over my stuff, picking up and inspecting every item, like a 1910 carburetor off an old International tractor, saying, "That'd give me lots of happy hours cleaning and polishing at my kitchen table," and me immediately flashing on him scrubbing and

rubbing the old carburetor until it gleams, then him setting it on his mantle next to the old kerosene lantern he'd bought and fixed up, alongside the brass doorknobs and old gear he found all covered with grease and took home and washed off and spit-polished until every tooth gleamed like it was some weird mechanical artifact left over from the Pleistocene period of tractor development.

After an hour, I had ten dollars in

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Odd items that you couldn't find in most stores are at the flea market.

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quarters from the old man and he had six cans of old bolts and nuts and dingles, traded squarely, quarter by quarter, items of great use designed to fill empty cans, some for tightening, some for loosening, some for fixing fix-its, some just for fondling between long thin fingers that while fondling pot metal now, once fondled flesh.

Simon's rough-gruff expression never changed as he watched my pile of dollars go up and the stack of doilies go down. Driving home that afternoon, I reflected it had taken me exactly 12 hours to make the \$500, excluding the loading the day before. That was more like it. A much better use of my time than carpentry, where it would have taken me 40 hours to make \$500.

Real joy

This first experience at the flea was to be repeated many times, twice a month on average for the next several years, and I would come to know the flea market intimately. And once I discovered the real joy at the flea (for me) was in the selling of stuff, not in the buying, then I started making my daily bread there. I sold my books there. I bought my books there.

Books are a popular item at the

flea and most definitely usually a good bargain. As an author, I found the flea to be an especially good place to connect personally with readers, and I have actually sold over 1,000 copies of my *WEED* at the flea.

The most popular authors at the flea mirror America's reading habits: Stephen King and Danielle Steele. No book table is without at least 22 copies of each of these authors' work. Won't these two ever stop destroying whole forests with their minds?

One time a famous author (for Santa Cruz) ambled by my spot and saw me standing there. "What are you doing out here?" he said.

He could see what I was doing. I had my books stacked up. I had my pot and my pans stacked up. "I am communicating with the hoi polloi," I said. "I am cutting out the mister in-between. I am dealing with the reader direct, one on one, \$5 a copy, 50 percent off retail, all the money going to the author instead of the other." He did not buy a copy of my book.

The flea market has been a great inspiration for my writing and many mornings I have sat in my truck, heater on, waiting for dawn, writing on my clipboard. It was at the flea that I came up with one of my better children's stories, inspired again, by the lady of the quickened pace, who sailed down flea market aisles like a shot off a shovel looking for her doilies. This time it was an old doll, a Raggedy Ann, very old, with a sweet smile, with stuffing coming out of its arms and legs, \$25 the lady behind the table said, and my lady paused, set the doll back down and departed.

That week, away from the flea, it

was nothing but misery as she pined for the doll she hadn't bought, and I cursed myself for not having bought it for her, her little wishes, her little pleasantries that keep her world going on an even keel. So the following Sunday we return to the flea, she's



The flea market is a way of life for both young and old.

intent on finding the same booth, the same doll and so dutifully around the flea I follow, she ten yards in front of me. But my eyes were on her, not

looking at the other people, honing in on her quest which is really quite remarkable and organized and stepped off like in scientific investigation and suddenly, there on a table . . . I see her stop. Her arms are lifted a little from her sides. She takes one step, two . . . this is the slowest I have ever seen her move, then swoop! Off the bundle of bindles she sweeps the Raggedy Ann doll up in her arms and turns to me and I see her face, the look of delight and joy and laughter and . . . at once into my mind jumps a story: "Raggedy Ann Rose — The Doll Who Came Back" — and in that moment I see the whole story before me, I see a young girl who loses her doll early on, her favorite and how the little girl changes into a young woman and the doll itself starts out on its own odyssey of being lost, and how eventually over the years through many adventures and lifetimes and pitfalls we are again at the flea. The girl is a mature woman now, she is weaving slowly in and out of the booths, she spots a doll, the doll who came back.

Art and the market

Such are the inspirations for art. I have found myself remarkably blessed with many such epiphanies, usually coming at the moment least expected, and have been able to turn many of them into art. I have also seen déjà vu revisited at the flea, seeing myself looking down on myself and not recognizing myself.

One day not long after my brother-in-law's 16-box illumination, I visited the flea with my wife, married then nine years, two kids, two books, living in the nice home in Rio Del Mar, sass and fatty as it were up, up-and-coming author accompanying his wife on one of her perpetual motion sweeps of the outdoor cinema parking lot, clear the aisles and pass the ammunition, and suddenly she stops. I bump into her rump. There, resplendent on a Navajo rug, jewels and bangles spread about, with small paper paintings and exotic-looking clay pipes, is her ex-husband. Looking somewhat scruffy, an artist, like me, only visual, a painter, now selling his wares here on the tarmac. With polite acknowledgments we thus pass by, me feeling somewhat sheepish and reflective, feeling myself to be in such a better position (seemingly) than he, with his ex-wife, who has turned out to be one of the best women in the world, on my arm.

Now it is 10 years later and I am no longer married to that woman, and here I am spread out at the flea market with my dingles and dangles and doilies, and I have the last of my rare book collection on the carpet, and the last of my first editions, and I have a used mop and an old bucket, and I have a pair of used hauraches and

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some chipped cups. All this stuff sells at the flea market — believe me!

And suddenly down the aisle comes this lady, rushing quickly, reminding me . . . and behind her trying to keep up is this guy, and . . . yes, it is *her*, now unmarried to me and married to *him*, an old . . . friend. They see. They stop. And I am instantly déjà vuing back to how I too clung once to her arm and looked down on — was I looking down on myself? Yes I was. I was he. He was me. She was now with another he. It was all getting very confusing.

I saw them. I acknowledged them. I watched them pass. Past lives don't mix merrily — he a successful businessman and she prancing like a top-line thoroughbred — and I could not help at the moment, after her perfume and her . . . after his after . . . to look down on my mat and see the remains of my life spread out like junk on the floor. I saw pieces of old books and toys and shattered picture frames. I saw faded photographs and I saw small gravel accumulating on my blanket. I saw holes in my jeans and I saw double. In this way I got rid of my \$200 Mont Blanc pen for \$2.50. In this way I got rid of the gorilla costume with which I climbed the Golden Gate bridge when my first novel came out. In this way I got rid of my Gorey collection and my Miller collection and my collection. In this way I got rid of everything until my life was honed down to a few pages and a few pencils.

Thus I came to sit on Sundays after the war in a kind of commercial zazen, comfortable seat in the sun watching humanity pass by: pale pubescent — teenagers in bikinis,

grave Chicano Mickey Mouse T-shirted youths who pause to poke and gander, snake oil salesmen with a piece of hardwood from Kentucky, a bird's beak from Peru, an old shovel — gleaners and disassemblers of garages unpacking and unwrapping their leftover detritus and spreading it out here on the asphalt, turning the drive-in movie parking lot into a once-a-week oasis for the not-quite-finished and disarticulated odds and ends of our lives.

Freedom and the flea

When the author I spoke of earlier saw me with my doilies spread out about me, I saw that he saw in me what I had first seen in my ex's ex so

*. . . what appears
to be failure is
really freedom.*

long before — before I was enlightened — he saw a diminution, a slackening of intent, a penultimate step downward toward failure. Such is the substance of ourselves that we fail to see that what appears to be failure is really freedom. And this space here on this asphalt, paid for with my \$20 (prices have gone up), allowed me to gather and sort and stack and sell my doilies.

And if my doilies happen to be novels and memoirs and works of art,

intermixed with chipped cups and bent bicycle frames — so much the better! Many authors have trouble getting out of the “in” house and into the “out” house, which is where the actual people they are writing for live. Almost always at the flea, if I can look at a person directly, see into their eyes, I can sell them a copy of my book. Why? Because I believe in it, and they believe in that. The fact that the book may turn out to be a good book, an honest book, even one that may change their lives, is only icing on the cake of truth. Truth and honesty are elemental qualities understood by everyone, and the flea market is a playing field where the shimmering facades of commerce are stripped away and you have the truth: Four chipped teacups are worth \$1.

And who would want a chipped teacup? What's wrong with a chip? If all the chips in the world would unite they could make a big crack and give birth to a revolution where everything is revealed as eventual loss. I wish somebody would invent a commercial system based on loss, then we could get rid of all this stuff surrounding us, lose it in the course of our investments and so be rid of it, free at last to commune with nature, with what's left of nature, after we have lost it. Until then, it could be a worse world than one of buying and selling doilies.

The Skyview Drive-In Flea Market is open 7 a.m.-4 p.m., Thursday and Friday, 6 a.m.-4 p.m. Saturday and 5:30 a.m.-4 p.m., Sunday. There is no cover charge on Thursday. The cover charge is 25 cents Friday, 75 cents Saturday, and \$1.50 Sunday. For more information call 462-4200.