



The Oklahoma Land-rush in miniature: bargain hunters storm the gates at Goodwill Industries.
Photography/Bob Marshak



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One Man's Junk

12:00 NOON. I HAPPEN BY THE Goodwill Bargain Barn and discover a long line of cars waiting to go in. "What's going on at Goodwill?" I shout to one of the drivers.

"A lot of good bargains in those bins," he answers. "Get in line."

I park my car and walk to the front of the line. I find an empty parking lot and several people standing around the first car in line. "What are we waiting for?" I ask a bearded youth.

"We're waiting for that truck to leave." He points to a Goodwill truck parked by the barn's entrance. "They're unloading."

"Ahh," I say knowingly. "And how often do they re-stock?"

"Every day at eight and noon."

"Every day? Do you mean to tell me that there is this kind of a line twice a day at Goodwill's Barn?"

"Yup."

I am nonplussed. Here is a slice of Santa Cruz life I never knew existed.

My informant enters into a conversation with an elderly lady in the lead car. It turns out that he buys and sells used stereos and televisions. They discuss sellers permits, turning in sales tax, and a ring of thieves that was caught selling stolen items at the flea market.

I wave an arm at the line of cars. "Are all these people flea market regulars or dealers in used stuff?"

"Most of them," says the woman. "I do it because I like working with people and I like the finds."

Finds. I look at the Bargain Barn with renewed respect. Who knows what treasures may lie within?

"It's not as easy as it sounds," the woman says, correctly interpreting my glazed eyes. "A lot of stuff needs to be repaired or cleaned up."

"There it goes," someone shouts. The truck pulls out. Cars start their motors, and we trot towards the barn. Infused with a treasure hunter's spirit, I keep close to the expert I befriended. The small crowd on foot stops at the edge of a concrete pad by the door. "What are we waiting for now?" I ask.

"For the people to get out of their cars. Charlie likes to give everyone a fair chance."

"Charlie?"

"That's Charlie." He points out a grey haired man. "Be nice to Charlie. He sets the prices and it's pretty much according to whim. Charlie is moody," he adds and in his tone I hear tales of excellent bargains followed by some disappointments.

The crowd swells as everyone gets out of his car. Some people elbow their way to the front. "Don't get trampled," says my informant.

I laugh. The air is thick with an intense competitive energy, but surely...

Someone moves to the door. In an instant the crowd is rushing forward. I have to run with the pack or get trampled. Inside people dash to various sections of the barn. A woman snatches a pair of cowboy boots off a pile of shoes and then attacks one of the bins. I stand and watch amazed. Everyone rummages through staked out territory with fierce speed. Clearly I am out of my league. A man hauls three orange frying pans out of a bin. I wonder fleetingly if they would match the set I have at home. Then I remember that I was supposed to be home ten minutes ago to relieve my babysitter. I can't join the battle today. With a last look at the frenetic activity, I turn to leave.

On the way out, I smile at Charlie. ■