



# *flea market* **MEMORIES**

By Lisa M. Schmelz | Photos by Jennifer Bronenkant

PROVIDING A NEW HOME FOR OLD THINGS, FLEA MARKETS ARE A PLACE WHERE THE PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE INTERSECT.



## MY EARLIEST FLEA MARKET MEMORY IS A HAPPY ONE.

I was probably six years old and with my maternal grandparents somewhere in California's Central Valley. I don't recall much about that day, but if it were a photograph, it would reveal my grandparents standing behind card tables of assorted items they were trying to hock.

The ground wasn't paved on that treeless lot, and the dust was thick. My grandmother was wearing an off-white dress and a blue cardigan. My grandfather, as always, was a ruffled mess, his white short-sleeved shirt a mass of wrinkles and not fully tucked into his brown trousers.

Hard times were a near-constant for my grandparents. They fled the Dust Bowl during the Depression and worked for next to nothing in the fields of California, living in whatever structures they could afford, including a pump house one harvest season. Even after they found other work and achieved the American dream of homeownership, money was always in short supply.

Very little of what they had was bought new; almost always, it came secondhand. So it made perfect sense that people who grew accustomed to making do with the discards of others would ultimately earn extra cash as flea market vendors themselves.

While I remember being at the flea market that day and hearing my grandparents haggle with customers, I couldn't tell you what they were selling. What I do recall, with absolute clarity, is the hope I felt in learning a great truth about my mother's people.

"We're junk dealers," my grandmother explained to me. "We sell the junk other people don't want anymore."

The idea that there was a new home for old things intrigued me. In my young brain, it meant that just like good little girls would one day go to heaven, there was also an afterlife for all our stuff. Nothing had to die. Not people and not our things. For me, that felt very hopeful.

Nearly four decades later, I am still filled with that hope any time I happen on a flea market. Seeing those acres and acres of junk, as my grandmother would have called it, reminds me that the past, present and future really do intersect. And sometimes, if you're really lucky, it happens right in front of you.

### WHAT:

Elkhorn Antique Flea Market

### WHEN:

May 15, June 26, Aug. 14, Sept. 25

### WHERE:

Walworth County Fairgrounds,  
411 East Court St., Elkhorn, WI

### ADMISSION:

\$5

### FOR MORE INFORMATION:

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Locally, the seasonal Elkhorn Antique Flea Market is a sort of mecca for people who believe as I do.

More than an opportunity to shop for something old and offbeat, it's a chance to tap into the past, present and the future all at once. When I saw a black patent leather Barbie wardrobe case at the flea market in Elkhorn, I didn't want to buy it because I needed a place to keep Barbie's clothes. I wanted to buy it because once upon a time, when my parents were alive and providing me with food, clothing and shelter, I had one just like it. And \$16.50 is a small price for a 44-year-old orphan to pay to bring her parents back to life.

I didn't buy it, but I didn't need to. Just holding it brought back memories I'd long forgotten.

And so it goes, table after table. Crave a pneumatic foghorn? It's yours for \$1,295. "The brass alone is worth more than that," says the seller.

What can you tell me about the ship's cannon? "\$1,500. It shoots rope. One ship would shoot a line to another," he says. "I can make you a deal on the horn and the cannon."

Not today, thank you.

Ahead, an impeccably dressed woman is examining a '60s era dresser. "What did we say this was, 56 inches?" she asks the vendor of its length. He nods his head in agreement.

What drew her to this eight-drawer Kroehler dresser? "I'm looking for my granddaughter. She's in college and just moved into a small house and needs a dresser," she explains as she reaches for her cell phone and begins dialing.

"I found one that's 56 inches long," she tells her granddaughter on the phone. Will that work?"

There is a pause.

"Well, then measure the space. We'll be here a while, but I'd rather get it now because there isn't anything else like it."



A few booths down, a group of women speaking Japanese are clearly in awe of an orange Pyrex bowl. Only one woman in the group speaks English. "I like to buy the Pyrex, Corningware, Fire King in all the colors," she says slowly and in halting English.

As she speaks, her friends cross the aisle to another booth. When they squeal, no translation is needed. The glassware-loving Japanese woman abandons me to see what her friends have discovered. The happiness is palatable when she hands over cash to the vendor, one of her friends clutching an

orange bowl with a sunburst pattern as though it's a newborn baby.

Beyond the born-again Pyrex, an older man in denim carpenter overalls is carrying a large metal pot that looks like something Hansel and Gretel would run from.

"I'm just going to boil water in it," he says. "I'm going to wash small car parts in the

boiling water. They wanted \$10, but I got 'em down to \$6," he says, smiling.

Leaving an exhibit hall, a well-dressed man is carrying a large clear plastic bag of '70s holiday ornaments. "This will fill out the tree quite nice," he announces.

"Which one?" asks his shopping partner, raising his eyebrows and tilting his head to the side. "You have over 30."

"The new one I'm putting up this year," snaps back the Christmas-loving man.

They both laugh as they walk away.

Near the exit, a husband and wife in matching NASCAR jackets are examining a Philco television. A canvas Coke totebag, filled with their finds, hangs from his belt loop.

The Philco has definitely caught their eye. A Briefcase 19, it is brown and cream, sports a handle on top for easy transport and offers 13 channels of viewing pleasure. A single retractable antenna can be pulled from its side. The asking price is \$25.

As the seller talks about its history, a small crowd forms. It is all I can do to keep my wallet in my purse. My grandparents owned a similar set and passed it on to my parents.

Admiring the Philco, I picture my grandparents behind the vendor's table. Inside, I feel a sense of peace that, on most days, is just out of reach. And it turns out, that was all I needed on this flea market trip.

But next time, I'm getting the Barbie wardrobe case. ♠



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