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THE FLEA MARKET:
LOCAL BOY MAKES GOOD

An Essay

Presented to
the California Pioneers
of Santa Clara County

by

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Introduction

While I was considering several possible topics to research for this essay, many ideas came to light. One topic was ideal because of the controversy that surrounded it, but needed extensive research and demanded more time to its completion than I was able to give. Another idea, although considered an important part of the Santa Clara Valley's history, didn't have enough human interest for me to get involved in. Very soon, I realized that none of these possibilities were what I was searching for.

Exactly what was I searching for? First of all, I wanted a new topic, something that had never been done before, a whole new field for me to conquer. I also didn't want to spend dreary hours in a dusty old library. The area we live in is vibrant and alive, and so is its history.

Most importantly, I wanted to talk to the people who had made history. I wanted to experience through my own eyes part of our heritage, which seems to me the true objective of historical research.

It was in this way that I decided to research the San Jose Flea Market. It's alive, bursting with color and full of every sort of person one could ever meet. It has been called a "spectacle," a parade, a never-ending party. Some call it the San Jose Flea Market, while others prefer the Berryessa Flea Market. Still and all, over the entrance gates of this institution it simply states "The Flea Market". This is nothing short of the truth, for by whatever

token a rose by any other name would be the same, so it is with the Flea Market.

Research is a little like an easter egg hunt; it's not any fun if someone has already informed you where the eggs are. There were times, I'll admit, during the course of this essay, that I wished that George Bumb had never invented the Flea Market, and that I had never heard of it. Still, even when the research was frustrating, I'll say this for it-- it was never dull!

I would like to thank Vicki Holob, Mr. Tim Bumb, Mrs. Kathryn Philp, and the librarians on staff at the California Room at the San Jose Main Branch Library. All of these people have been a tremendous help, and I sincerely appreciate their unflagging support and cooperation on this project.

Heather Menegaux
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SIGHTS, SMELLS AND SOUNDS OF THE FLEA MARKET

For new-comers to the Flea Market, treasures may not be the first thing that comes to mind. When they first enter the market, the primary thing they might notice is the diversity of the crowd. Jabbering enthusiastically, they come from all walks of life to practice talents inherited from the salad days of the Silicon Valley but not widely used in the computer age -- the arts of bargaining and bartering. There are just as many Cadillacs and BMWs resting in the seventy-acre parking lot as there are Jeeps and Chevrolets.

Another thing these newcomers might observe is the great variety of items up for sale. There are wooden toys and patchwork quilts made by creative folks at home. There are all sizes of bike and car tires, and every sort of manual and electrical tool. There's more than enough clothing for anyone to select a complete wardrobe, no matter the size or age of the customer. Also they'll see and smell an international variety of snack foods designed to satisfy the palate of any hungry patron -- nachos, hot Chinese vegetables, popcorn, pizza, hot dogs, ice cream, soft drinks, beer, coffee and tea.

Some of these first-timers, upon surveying the whole situ-

ation, may even start to wonder who began this bargain hunter's paradise, and just how long this place has been here in north-eastern San Jose.

Just to the left of the entrance is the Flea Market business office, presided over by the son of one very clever Mr. George Bumb. Thanks to this father's enterprising mind, his family has made millions. What's the secret?

Part of his secret is human nature itself. Everyone, no matter what age or economic level, often feels the urge to brighten up their life with some new item. This investment in happiness only need be a dollar or so. However, add up all these dollar purchases and you have a business which, believe it or not, pumps 125 million dollars annually into the South Bay's ever-growing economy.¹

GEORGE BUMB AND HIS BRAINCHILD

George Bumb, the "father" of the Flea Market, has lived in San Jose all of his life. He was born in 1924 at San Jose Hospital, and here he chooses to stay.

After his graduation from Bellarmine High School in 1942, Bumb tried his hand at several different jobs. For a while, he worked as a washing machine repairman for Sears-Roebuck and Co. Then he switched his interests and tried to go into business for himself by starting a small roofing company. Finally, 1956 found Bumb working at the trade which would eventually make him a millionaire -- the rubbish business.

Bumb bought three dump sites: The first one was located in Alviso, another one was adjoining the land where the Pruneyard Shopping Center now stands, and the third one was on Story Road in East San Jose.

"Twenty-five years ago you could live like a king selling other peoples' junk," one newspaper quoted him as saying.² And he did just that. He happily ruled over his kingdom of throw-aways.

While observing how people would sift through piles of trash, looking for hidden or forgotten 'treasures' at his dump sites, an idea came to him. If these people would spend hours hunting for items through heaps of rubble, then maybe they would spend even more hours rummaging at an open air market...a market where people could come and pay him a small fee to sell goods they no longer wanted or had use for! It was in this way that the idea for the Flea Market was born.

George Bumb, together with business partners Larry Headrick and Joe Kokes, made an attempt to buy a drive-in movie theatre that could accommodate a flea market during the day. This first attempt met with failure. However, their second attempt went well. The three men leased forty acres of what used to be a cattle-feed lot off Berryessa Road in northeastern San Jose -- and so it began.³

THE FLEA MARKET --PAST TO PRESENT

On March 1, 1960, the Flea Market opened its gates for the first time. The twenty vendors who each paid a dollar to sell their wares were mostly close friends of the owners. One hundred patrons came to bargain and haggle in the dusty lot. Refreshments were provided by the owners' wives who made sandwiches for all of the patrons and vendors.

While the Flea Market's first patrons were snacking on their sandwiches, they may have thought that "things go better with Coke"... but they didn't have their wish that day. In an interview given to the San Jose Mercury News in 1980, George Bumb recalls that Coca-Cola refused to accept the Flea Market as a vendor because of an unproven credit rating. Ironically, enough, 1987 statistics show that the Flea Market purchased 260,000 gallons of Coke and Seven-Up in that year alone, making the Flea Market one of Coca-Cola's largest accounts on the West Coast!⁴

According to Joe Kokes, treasurer of the Flea Market, by 1962 the owners were quite certain of success. The new business was growing twenty percent each year. While the owners may have been certain they wouldn't fail back in 1962, they really had no idea that George Bumb's scheme would take them so very far.

Today the Flea Market is the largest open air market in the nation.⁵ It is California's third largest attraction, rivaling only Disneyland and Knott's Berry Farm.⁶ In twenty-eight years, it went from handling twenty vendors to two thousand vendors each weekend -- and from one hundred patrons to eighty thousand patrons every weekend!

According to Tim Bumb, son of George Bumb and the Market's current manager, much of the two million dollars made annually is from the sale of food. In 1987 for instance, 430,000 pounds of french fries, 110,000 pounds of hot dogs, 60,000 pounds of hamburger and 260,000 gallons of Coke and Seven-Up were sold.⁷

One concern about having a large business such as the Flea Market is the constant demand for more land to accommodate its growth. When George Bumb, Larry Headrick and Joe Kokes began the enterprise back in 1960, the Flea Market consisted of forty acres. That may seem like a lot of space, but by 1964 they already needed more. The demand for land was so pressing that the Flea Market purchased thirty-three more acres of land valued at 236,000 dollars from Pacific Industries, Inc. Then in 1972, five additional acres were bought from Southern Pacific railroad. After buying forty-four more acres from private land-owners in 1978, the Flea Market had accumulated a total of 125 acres which was worth an estimated four million dollars.⁸

Not all of this land is used for vendors, however. For every acre of merchandise, two acres are demanded for parking. Statistics from 1980 show that annual revenues collected from vendors were estimated at two million dollars. Add to that the 1980 gate receipts from parking, estimated at nearly half that amount, and here is yet another reason why the Flea Market is making profits in the millions.⁹

MANAGEMENT-- A FAMILY AFFAIR

Another important fact which has made the Flea Market a success right from the first day is a close-knit family. George Bumb has always incorporated family and close friends to help him handle the Flea Market and to keep things running smoothly and efficiently year after year. George Bumb is the President of the Flea Market, Inc. His youngest brother, John, is Vice-president, and his longstanding friend and business partner, Joe Kokes, holds the position of Secretary-Treasurer.

Bumb's sons deal with the actual management and caretaking of the Flea Market. Jeff, the oldest son, acts as head of planning. George Jr., next-to-oldest, is the maintenance supervisor. The two youngest sons, Tim and Brian, act as general manager and head of hot dog concessions, respectively. In addition, John De Tar, Bumb's son-in-law, runs the San Jose Auction which is incorporated with the Flea Market, and his wife Susan, is one of the firm's secretaries.

The Flea Market is not the Bumb family's only business interest. They own three gold bullion stores in different locations. The Toyon Gold and Silver store is located in San Jose. Another store, called the Gold Coast, is situated in Santa Clara. Their newest store, the Gold Store, was opened in January of 1981 and is located in Sparks, Nevada. In addition, they are the backing behind a board game entitled "Flea Market", which has been out on the market for about two years.

THE BRUZZONE LAWSUIT

Although there has been enormous financial success, it hasn't been roses all the way for the near thirty-year existence of the Flea Market. There have been plenty of headaches, including a firey lawsuit over a land dispute.

Isabella Bruzzone and her husband, Giacomo, lived across the street from the Flea Market their entire lives. They owned twenty acres of land on which they grew vegetables for commercial use. When Mr. Bruzzone died in 1971, his wife was unable to keep their farming business going. During a five-year period, the Flea Market made several offers to purchase or lease Mrs. Bruzzone's land. She always declined. Finally in 1976, she decided to accept their offer. She would lease them twenty acres of her land at a rate of 25,000 dollars for five years. The lease also had an option written into it. The Flea Market could either terminate the lease in 1981, after the five-year contract was up, or they could purchase the twenty acres of land.¹⁰

"When these people came along and offered Mrs. Bruzzone 2,000 dollars a month, she thought it was all the money in the world. What she didn't know was that the value of the land was a half-million dollars, and that there was an option included with the lease," stated James Boccardo, her attorney.¹¹

The real conflict in this case was that Mrs. Bruzzone could not speak, write or read English, and that the terms of the lease were confused when translated by Mrs. Bruzzone's son-in-law.

John Linhart, George Bumb's attorney, attested that Mr.

Boccardo represented his client before the lease was signed.¹² However, Mr. Boccardo denies ever having seen Bumb or Linhart before.

"If you look at that lease, you'll see it was prepared by a layman; it's not a lawyer's lease. I never saw that lease before it was executed. That's all I can tell you."¹³ In addition to the above statement, Boccardo claimed that in 1976, he didn't represent Mrs. Bruzzone either -- at the time the lease was signed.¹⁴

The lawsuit, which was filed in the Santa Clara Superior Court in 1979, states that Mrs. Bruzzone was taken advantage of by Flea Market representatives.

After a series of long, drawn-out hearings, which stretched over nearly two years, the owners of the Flea Market gave into the lawsuit because court expenses were costing them more money than the actual lawsuit was worth. Both parties agreed to pay Mrs. Bruzzone half a million dollars for the middle lot of land, where her house was and which she refused to lease. Mrs. Bruzzone accepted the terms of the deal, and they all lived "happily ever after."

This not quite the picture on another front. The Flea Market owners still have other problems to contend with ... one big one in particular.

CRIMINAL ACTIVITIES

The Flea Market has always been a good cover for criminal operations. Since it is a open air market with little supervision, 'hot goods' could be quickly and efficiently disposed of.

"There were reports of thieves breaking into homes on their way to the Flea Market and selling all the goods before the owners even knew they had been ripped off," said Carm J. Grande a San Jose Police officer, back in 1980.¹⁵

Now Flea Market owners, in an attempt to cut down on criminal activity, pay twenty-five plain-clothes policemen and two undercover detectives to stroll about the Flea Market and observe anything suspicious. Crime is also down today at the Flea Market because of state laws that force vendors to register a lot of their merchandise. However, the magnitude of the Flea Market makes it impossible to hunt down all illegal activities and find all stolen goods; so it's a pretty fair guess that many of the eighty thousand people who scrounge for bargains everyweekend at the Flea Market are buying stolen goods, whether they choose to be aware of it or not.

The most commonly sold stolen goods at the Flea Market seem to be tires, wheels, bicycles, stereos, guns, typewriters and power hand tools. However, these aren't the only things investigators are searching for.

There is also an attempt to regulate merchants who try to earn a lot of tax-free money and vendors who give alcoholic beverages to minors. Many of the people who flock to the Flea Market every week are plainclothes officers from the California Alcoholic Beverage Commission and the San Jose Police Department,

Internal Revenue Service workers, and agents from the Federal Bureau of Investigations.

One example of people abusing the Flea Market for criminal activities took place in November of 1980. Two vendors were reported of selling dimethyl sulfoxide, commonly known as DMSO, in eight-ounce bottles going for \$18.95 apiece. DMSO, an industrial grease solvent, is claimed by many to be a "miracle cure," healing joint problems and afflictions such as arthritis. Even though a great many patrons believe in its powers, the Food and Drug Administration does not approve of it -- terming medicinal use of the product as "risky."

When the two merchants selling DMSO were approached and questioned, they attested that they were not offering it for medicinal purposes -- that it was their intention that their customers use DMSO as a solvent.

"I don't know of any household use of DMSO for a solvent of any sort," Lewis Edmondson, FDA compliance officer for San Francisco in 1980, is quoted as saying.¹⁶

Edmondson also said that these vendors are earning a seventeen thousand dollar profit for a fifty-five gallon drum of DMSO. When asked what action was being taken, he stated that not much could really be done in a legal sense of action. The vendors could not be taken to court because no implications to the use of DMSO for medicinal purposes had been made.

THE FLEA MARKET'S SECRET OF SUCCESS

Despite the drawbacks of crime at the Flea Market, the threat of stolen goods doesn't do too much to stop the hordes of people each weekend.

"A two dollar parking fee is all that stands between the throngs of people and one of the best outdoor spectacles this side of Times Square," wrote one journalist.¹⁷

In fact, for many people, the fun of going to the Flea Market is in the air of energy and excitement, the anticipation of what they'll see or what they'll go back home with.

"Spectacle," as that one journalist described it, is probably the most adept word to categorize the Flea Market. In days gone by, the Flea Market often had a bad reputation because of the gypsies, gamblers and other disreputables who lingered about on weekends causing trouble. Some of this distrust and mockery still is present today. For many people living in the suburbs, going to the Flea Market is taboo, like wearing last year's "in" label or having the wrong hairstyle. This is an attitude which begs understanding. For many patrons, people-watching is worth braving the crowds each Saturday and Sunday, rain or shine.

When George Bumb fostered the idea of an eternal garage sale, he knew that times would change. Trends come and go, as nearly everything that is material does eventually. But the real secret that keeps the Flea Market such a success is the fact that even when fads and labels change, people themselves never go out of style -- nor does the desire for the ultimate shopping bargain.

Notes

1. Glenn Bunting, "The Greatest Sale On Earth," (The San Jose Mercury News, California Today, Dec. 14, 1980), p. 24.
2. Ibid.
3. Bumb, Tim, interviewed by Heather Menegaux, April 5, 1988.
4. Ibid.
5. Bunting, Op. Cit.
6. Ibid.
7. Bumb, Tim, Op. Cit.
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10. Bumb, Tim, Op. Cit.
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12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
17. Linda Goldston, "A King-Size Flea Market," (The San Jose Mercury News, July 19, 1984), p. 9.

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