

SPECIAL ISSUE: FLEA MARKET CHIC

THE SCENE

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Every third Sunday of the month, it's the mother of all moving days in Long Beach. More than 800 vendors and 8,000 shoppers gather at the Outdoor Antique & Collectible Market. Writer Jeff Spurrier tracks the action, from the unloading of trucks in the early morning to the frenetic price-slashing at the end of the day.

[HOME EDITION]

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5:21 a.m.

It's barely dawn, but the cars, pickups, vans, trailers and U-Haul trucks are lined up around all four sides of Veterans Stadium's parking lot, each vehicle filled with the detritus of American consumer culture. The engines are off, and vendors stand around sipping coffee, waiting for the gates to open. At the shoppers entrance, early birds wait patiently too, empty bags slung over shoulders and flashlights in hand.

5:40 a.m.

The gates open and shoppers spill in quickly, some sprinting. They push granny carts toward the far side of the parking lot, where the first dealers are starting to unload.

A mariachi hat, antique oil cans, costume jewelry, American flag memorabilia, dressers, used cowboy boots, Beanie Babies, Raggedy Ann and Andy dolls, cast-iron skillet ...

5:51 a.m.

A dealer has barely unloaded two boxes of chandeliers from his beat-up van when a woman begins dickering over the price. He says \$300. She offers \$200. "You know how much this would cost in a store? \$250 -- I'm giving it away," he says testily.

"It's Venetian style," she says when asked why she's interested.

"It's made in Italy," he adds with a nod before turning to shout at a passing dealer: "I've got two things for you. Come back."

The shopper digs through the box, making sure all the glass cups for the chandelier are there.

"Sweetheart, it's all there," the vendor says, annoyed.

A 1930s tricycle, a stand-up bass, sheet music from "Strawberry Fields Forever," lawn figurines, surfboards, quilts, a spittoon, Persian rugs, cradles, a clarinet ...

6 a.m.

Linda Keene and daughter Emily Cox of Oceanside arrive to shop. "I've been

going to that market for 20 years," Keene says in a later interview. "I know my way around." Her purchases include an 1867 handmade scrapbook, which features birds on the cover and pages made of homespun linen graced with beautiful etchings. "For \$25, it was a total steal." For Emily: an antique "Sunday toy," a wooden Noah's ark carved in Italy. Price: \$5.

6:41 a.m.

A man walks by wearing an electronic message board around his neck with a red crawl that says, "I buy old fountain pens." Walking in the other direction is an older gentleman asking everyone and no one, "Violins? Violins? Violins?" They pass each other, eyes scanning the growing crowd, neither paying attention to the Gen Y kid standing at a pile of used clothes, sniffing the armpits of an embroidered jean jacket.

Street signs, more clarinets, 45s, LPs, 78s, bobbleheads, napkins, croquet sets, G.I. Joe, Barbie, Mr. T, beads from Nigeria ...

7:20 a.m.

Bob and Rhonda Heintz pull their van into their space marked "56 Blue." Their biggest piece is a Hap Jacobs 9-foot-6 surfboard. They set up the tables and begin unpacking boxes, laying out old matchbooks, books, flower pots, Hawaiian shirts and a Raggedy Ann waste basket, among other things.

8:10 a.m.

On the other side of the stadium, Ramon Rojas sets out fuentes de agua bendita, holy water basins commonly found at large churches in Mexico. Sometimes they're made of marble, but these are a smudged bronze. They're several hundred years old, he says, going for \$300 each. Rojas admits he doesn't make a killing as a vendor. "But I do all right. I started collecting when I was 8. This is in me. I don't sell like hot cakes, but I'm proud to show things our people do."

8:20 a.m.

Back at 56 Blue, the surfboard is gone, sold for \$300. The buyer now has it for sale for \$500 at the other end of the parking lot. "It's been a good morning so far," Rhonda Heintz says, smiling.

8:30 a.m.

Ruben Luna of Ontario, a veteran shopper of the Long Beach and Pasadena City College flea markets, knows the best merchandise gets snapped up early. He has been shopping for more than an hour when he comes upon his best deal of the day: a mounted deer head priced at \$35. "I was surprised it was still there," he says.

8:45 a.m.

Next door to the Heintzes, vendor Patricia Vandehey has a feeding frenzy. Her mother, a collector, died last year. For the last nine months, Vandehey has been unloading pieces from her mother's Azusa home, antique store and half a dozen storage lockers -- thousands of boxes in all. Unlike the Heintzes, she doesn't attempt attractive displays but instead lets buyers sort through the boxes themselves. Her family history is well-known at the flea market, so the stream of people is constant. They dig through the boxes like ants on a dropped piece of candy.

"Buy by the box load," she calls out, her voice already starting to go hoarse.

"Please pay, don't walk away."

Vandehey says her mother was in the antiques business for 45 years and bought pieces every day all her life. "If it doesn't sell here, it's going to Goodwill," she says. "After 1 o'clock, I just start giving it away."

A life-sized American Indian doll, tools, fans, klieg lights, a surveyor's box, a mandolin, princess telephones, postcards from the 1920s ...

9 a.m.

Scott Nelson and Shannon Stewart of Palm Desert stumble upon another vendor looking to unload merchandise fast. "Everything at this table is \$20," the dealer says. Nelson walks up with a glazed porcelain vase in his hands. "That one is \$18," the dealer says. Sold. Stewart buys a decorative figurine from the same stall for \$4.

Nelson says the Long Beach market is good, but he still prefers the Rose Bowl. "There's such a different array of items," he says. "It's almost overwhelming, but once you get the hang of it, it's fantastic."

9:17 a.m.

Down at Russell George's stand, in front of the food concessions, an argument begins. A buyer has sifted through George's impressive sterling silver collection and presented an insultingly low offer. The customer may have thought that he was simply starting negotiations, but to George the customer has broken flea market etiquette. "I don't need customers like you," he says. "I don't want to sell it to you."

The man backpedals, arguing, but George turns away. "I don't want to sell it to you. I don't care if you have \$1,000. That's it."

After the shopper has left, George announces that silver is valued at more than \$12 an ounce and that the pieces in question were his best. "This is Shreve & Co., second only to Tiffany," he says. "I offered it to him for \$9 an ounce, and then he offered me a third of that."

A woman comes up with a silver box and asks how much.

"That's \$60," he says.

"Would you take \$50?"

"Sure."

"You've got a sale," she says

"I like that," he replies.

10:20 a.m.

Bob and Rhonda Heintz are playing Jerry Lee Lewis on their boombox. Music helps draw people in, she says. "You want to create a party atmosphere.

Nobody wants to miss a party."

She's relaxing in a lawn chair watching Bob sort and re-sort their stock.

"I'm constantly working it," he says. "Rhonda sets up the bulk, and then I rework it. We used to put our colored glass on a dark cloth, and now we use white so it pops more."

Rhonda chimes in: "You want to make little vignettes, even a small section of a table, things that relate to one another to create a whole look."

She ambles off and returns 15 minutes later with three Mexican serapes, one

from the 1940s that she picked up for \$20. "I'm keeping that one," she says.

10:30 a.m.

Dee Bruno, a Lake Forest collector of primitive art, leaves the market. Her find of the day: a figurine of St. Michael the archangel, hand-carved and hand-painted in Xilitla, Mexico. Price: \$45.

11:14 a.m.

The sun is starting to break through the fog, and the crowd has increased substantially, though the morning frenzy of sales has abated. The dealers have stopped shopping, so it's just the regular folk -- those who will pay retail without excessive haggling.

11:40 a.m.

Ramon Rojas is arranging his retablos, positioning the altar pieces next to a sweet Huichol embroidered violin. The holy water fonts are gone. "I had a better offer from a dealer, but somebody came over and they had a shrine, and they asked me if I would sell it to them for less. If you buy something from me and you're not a dealer, I want you to enjoy it."

12:30 a.m.

At the Heintzes' stall, the action cools down as the sun gets hotter. The crowds are denser and the music -- Dave Alvin followed by the Pogues -- continues to draw people. More strollers, fewer sales.

Next door, Patricia Vandehey's voice is totally gone, and only about 10 of her 30-plus boxes have anything in them. She's starting to give things away, almost begging people to take items so she doesn't have to lug them home.

1 p.m.

Bob Heintz slowly starts to pack up, even though the couple can't officially leave until 3. Rhonda goes through her sales book, totaling up the sales tax. Next week is Santa Monica, and the week after that is the Rose Bowl.

Has it been a good day?

"A good day is having nothing left and tumbleweeds blowing through."

A stuffed deer's head, a stuffed moose head, school clocks, desk clocks, grandfather clocks, potted palms, flowering plumeria, a surveyor's tripod, half of a bicycle, a 1940s machete, a classic Eames plywood chair, a dog's water dish with the name "Charlie" written in red lipstick, more clarinets ...

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