

Flea Markets

Merriam-Webster's Dictionary defines a flea market as an "open-air market for secondhand articles and antiques." Although its origin is nearly impossible to trace, it is commonly believed that the flea market first appeared during the 1960s, in Paris, France. The term itself is translated from the French phrase, *marché aux puces*. [Wikipedia indicates that the term may have originally come from the fleas that infested the clothing being sold]

A second explanation is printed in the book *Flea Markets in Europe*. In the Introduction, the author writes, "In the time of Emperor Napoleon III, the imperial architect Haussmann made plans for the broad, straight boulevards with rows of square houses in the center of Paris, along which army divisions could march with much pompous noise. The plans forced many dealers in second-hand goods to flee their old dwellings; the alleys and slums were demolished. These dislodged merchants were, however, allowed to continue selling their wares undisturbed right in the north of Paris, just outside of the former fort, in front of the gate *Porte de Clignancourt*. The first stalls were erected in about 1860. The gathering together of all these exiles from the slums of Paris was soon given the name "*Marché aux Puces*", meaning "flee market", later translation. [<http://www.findafleamarket.com/page7.htm>]

Generally, a flea market has been described as a venue renting "space to anyone [offering for sale to the public] merchandise, products, items, services and all other legal needs of the buying public." Individuals renting space and selling within these venues are known as vendors. Flea markets are truly much more than the above description suggests, however; today, flea markets have become a multi-billion dollar worldwide industry that seems to defy precise definition.

As a phenomenon, flea markets are often thought to be the "incubators and breeding grounds of entrepreneurs" that are so representative of our free enterprise system. At one time, many believed that selling items at a flea market was the only way one could start a business without making a long-term commitment and without access to a large amount of capital. In 2000, it was estimated that at least 5,000 "flea markets, swap meets, open-air, farmers, antique and collectible markets and special events" existed within this country, with more than a million vendors catering to over a hundred million customers each year.

Now, "the world has gone digital" and these flea markets, swap meets, and auctions are being conducted on-line, as well as off-line. You can find these on-line flea markets, swap meets and auctions at Internet sites such as: ebay.com, traderonline.com, napster.com, morpheus.com, as well as numerous others. There are so many of these on-line markets that it is virtually impossible to keep up with all the websites. [http://www.smu.edu/csr/articles/2005/Winter/smc_9-2.pdf]

The San Jose Flea Market [cover shown here], was founded by George Bumb Sr. in March 1960. While working in the solid waste and landfill business, he witnessed an abundance of treasures thrown away every day and realized he could make a profit. After visiting swap meets in Los Angeles and Paris' Thieves Market for inspiration, he started the famous flea market in California on 120 acres of an old meat-processing plant and remodeled it. Now, the San Jose Flea Market is the largest open-air market in the U.S. and has become a California landmark with over four million visitors each year.

