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It's the kraziest flea market in town



George Miller's clocks.



Chuck Pray's rarities.

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by Tom Williams

It's a late Saturday afternoon, and I'm groping my way through the dimly lit fourth floor of the "Surplex Crazy Flea Market," at 410 North Goodman Street. Co-owner Bill Kruse is my guide.

"Now, over here..." he points, absorbed in his thoughts. "Wait a minute, Bill, what's this?" I gasp, turning away from him and nearly falling over an old dusty desk piled high with thick blue volumes that look like books of stamp collections.

I look closer. It is an enormous collection of old political campaign buttons, some dating back into the early part of the century. Roosevelt, Harding, Ike, Goldwater—names jump off hundreds of even thousands of buttons, all neatly mounted in glassine pouches on the book pages.

"Oh, yeah," says Bill nonchalantly. "Well, this guy came in one day and he had this collection and I had had some buttons myself, so..."

To Bill Kruse and his partner, Marty Testardo, a collection of stuffed signers of the Declaration of Independence would not cause a raised eyebrow. Their warehouse deals in the amazing.

The Surplex building—all five floors of it—contains surprises around every corner, in every nook and cranny. You can buy anything from an \$1800 grandfather clock to a set of old theater seats to umpteen gross of 1959 vacuum tubes.

Bill and Marty now have so much stuff that they quite simply don't know what they have. Antiques, collectibles, junk, rusting industrial hardware, odd lots, you name it—it has been fashioned by the hand of man anywhere on earth during the past century and a half. It is probably represented somewhere inside the Surplex building.

Bill likes to call his place "an industrial museum," but he is willing to settle for the promotional title, "World's Kraziest Flea Market."

To imagine what it's like, think of your grandmother's musty, junk-filled attic, where you used to sit and while away the hours just poking through old stuff. Multiply that attic by about a jillion times. That's Surplex.

Over the past five years, Bill and Marty have scoured dozens of warehouses, garage sales, auctions, and

close-outs in the Rochester area.

The Surplex-Flea Market is in what used to be the old J. Hungerford Smith factory, a company which made syrups and supplies for old-fashioned soda fountains. It sits on the short bumpy dead-end section of North Goodman sandwiched between the Penn Central tracks and East Main Street. You can hear the long trains to Syracuse roaring past the back freight dock.

Bill and Marty's business, in its own nutty way, is a reflection of the decline, fall, exit, or disintegration of Northeastern industry. There are tons of furniture, containers, fixtures, and machines from vanished Rochester concerns like Fashion Park Clothing and the Bourgeois Perfume Company.

Bill stands next to a giant speaker he bought from the owner of the Fine Arts Theatre, explaining how he and Marty got into the business.

"We were in the process of getting laid off at General Dynamics about eight years ago," he recalls. "We tried to get jobs at some other companies around here, but they all folded or nearly folded, soon after we joined them. Now I kid my friends, saying that Kodak is paying us \$50 a week not to work for them."

With electronic-technical backgrounds, the partners bought a huge quantity of old vacuum tubes, electronics consoles, and other gizmos, rented the Surplex building and were in business. And then they just kept accumulating, and accumulating, and...

Now, eight years later, they both say they make "enough money to get by."

But the real fun of owning such a large flea market collection, they say, is "just being able to hang around here after it closes and poke through all the junk." The main flea market is open to the public Saturdays and Sundays, with individual vendors open during the week.

What the average browser doesn't see, says Bill, is all the stories associated with the building.

The Bahama Mama Band has used one big corner of the warehouse for practice sessions.

Then there was the time that a dog owned by Mike

Sweeney, a local artist, fell three stories down the freight elevator shaft.

"It was Friday the 13th," Bill says with an impish grin, "but the dog lived."

And Bill adds, "If you hang around this place long enough, you can hear the ghosts of the old Hungerford Smith factory workers, like maybe one of the supervisors trying to make out with an assembly-line girl in one of the ice cream coolers..."

We go down to the second floor of the flea market where several vendors have rented spaces from Bill and Marty. Clearly, the most unusual of the marketeers is Chuck Pray, a large, serious man who look like he ought to be a dockworker.

Chuck sells a lot of crazy things, but his main claim to fame is a gargantuan collection of old records from the 1940's and 1950's, many long out of production.

He points to an album cover on the wall which pictures a very young-looking, crew-cut Simon and Garfunkel.

"They cut those songs in the late 50's when they were still called Tom and Jerry," but this company bootlegged the tapes, so they ordered the company to stop producing the record, and only a very few were ever made. I'd sell you this one for about 40."

Another recording rarity is what Chuck calls "THE FIRST Elvis christmas album," which he won't part with for less than \$100.

Chuck also enjoys the non-salable "museum" aspect of his business, and he produces, out of a well-locked glass cabinet, early 20th-century boxes of Ivory Flakes and Rinsol detergent, and a newspaper front page announcing the death of John Dillinger.

Curios, oddities, secrets, gems, and amazements....

Next door to Chuck is clock repairman George Miller, who points with pride to a 1792 grandfather clock, over nine feet tall, which he has just restored and is selling for \$1800.

Around the corner from George is the husband-wife team of Tom and Joan Cappello, who specialize in antique and collectible furniture.

A laborer with the city's Department of Public Works, Tom views his weekend hobby where he can take pride in restoring,

preserving, and sharing his merchandise. As I talk to him, he sands an old stool that goes with a 1905 parlor organ.

Before I leave the second floor, I can't stifle a laugh as I see a huge box near Chuck Pray's exhibit which contains a number of "one-pound bags of buttons" for a dollar each. Just your average buttons.

If you enjoy flea markets, you'll get a kick out of Bill and Marty's "Rattlesnake Pete" bone exhibit, down on the first floor, or the giant old Wurlitzer juke-box, complete with bubble-lights that really work.

The Rattlesnake Pete display case, by the way, is worth the trip to Surplex all by itself. "Rattlesnake Pete" was actually Pete Gruber, a kind of showman from Rochester, who had his "Rattlesnake Pete's Museum" down on old Mill Street in the early decades of the century.

Pete collected a variety of paraphernalia, including rattlesnake, Indian-artifacts, and the like.

The display case at Surplex comes complete with a tiny box of "dressed Mexican fleas" for that authentic flea market atmosphere. Bill couldn't hide a grin when he showed me the "fleas," which certainly looked real enough.

Not part of the flea market, but equally zany, is Bill and Marty's "corporate headquarters," a dusty old desk piled high with an impossible disarray of bills, receipts, shipping tickets, and catalogues, topped off with an ancient banjo with four out of five strings missing.

What "everybody wants for their apartment," says Bill, is a one-of-a-kind drugstore sign, about eight feet tall, with big lit-up milk-glass letters. "But nobody's come up with the \$900 I think it's worth."

The problem with describing the Surplex flea market is that it never stops, the tables and corners and rooms full of cast-offs from America's first 200 years.

"There's an awful lot of stuff here that I wish I could snap my fingers and get rid of," says Bill with a sigh.

"We have anything and everything," he insists, as I back out the front door, bug-eyed and nodding in amazement. I had spent four hours at the Surplex Flea Market and had not even touched the surface.

Snips and nails and rattlesnakes . . .



The Surplex building, 410 North Goodman Street.

Wanna buy a Wurlitzer? How about a turnstile?



Marty Testardo, at left, and Bill Kruse (above) show off their "corporate headquarters" on the first of the Surplex Flea Market.

Below: part of the "Rattlesnake Pete" display. In old photo at far right is "Chief Thundercloud," a local Indian and contemporary of Pete's who modelled for the original "Indian-head U.S. nickel." Photos by Tom Williams.

