

TEXAS HIGHWAYS--CANTON TRADE DAYS--MALLORY

Story and photographs by Randy Mallory

First Monday Trade Days in Canton

Shopper's Safari

OR

Buyer's Bazaar

OR

Fantastic Finds

Smoke rises from meat sizzling on an open spit. Fresh ears of corn roast in their husks. And a concessionaire shakes up fresh lemonade with the vigor of a barkeep.

As shoppers hustle by--many with bundles of merchandise in tow, many still on the hunt--it's not the smell of food, that quickens their pace. It's the smell of bargains!

If not kitchen collectibles, then cowboy kitsch. If not antique armoires, then fine-toothed combs. If not tea sets, then t-shirts. If not wagon wheels and dog collars, then Tibetan temple bells and sterling silver flatware...or Tex-Mex hot sauce, video games, Indian jewelry, scented candles, grandfather clocks, bars of soap, Christmas tinsel, and old tools--not to mention a pick-up load of department store mannequins.

If not the flotsam of American life, then fantastic finds...just what you need for that corner of the living room.

For decades, Canton has touted First Monday Trade Days as "the world's oldest and largest flea market." (Most folks call it "First Monday," though it's held on the weekend preceding each first Monday.)

Today, with new merchandise and handicrafts racked right beside antiques and flea-market fare, the shop-fest feels more like the mother of all bazaars.

Visitors meander down 15 miles of walkways past 4,500 vendors hawking goods in open-air booths and covered pavilions. And that's just the 100-acre, city-owned trading grounds. To accommodate the 200,000 people who pack this hamlet of 3,000 on a busy weekend, several privately-owned markets opened in the last few years. Total shopping: 7,000 vendors on some 300 acres.

Good Hunting

Many visitors simply browse this merchandising mecca, especially first-timers. "It's so huge, it's an eye-opening experience," says Dean Alberty of Kansas City, Missouri, accompanying his parents who are buying decorations for their bed and breakfast. "It's pretty crowded, but everybody's really friendly."

Seasoned bargain hunters, however, approach First Monday as if on shopping safari. In this jungle of junk and tangle of treasures, it's Jane's world, not Tarzan's. (Some 75 percent of shoppers are women, says Al Campbell, First Monday manager for the city.)

These legions of women shoppers, such as Lennis Richardson and Mary Ann Schulte, typically travel in troops. Attached this trip to a group of 10 women, the Brenham residents agree they're "addicted to Canton." They come several times a year. Their husbands call it an "affliction" not an "addiction," they joke. "We're searching for quilts today," says Mary Ann, "but whatever it is, we always make this a fun party."

Another self-confessed shop-a-holic, Vicki Nix of Frisco, comes twice a year with her "girl's group." They bivouac one night in a hotel in Canton or a nearby town, allowing two days to bag big bargains.

First maneuver: divide and conquer. "It's hard to mix first-timers with veterans," Vicki says. "Veterans come looking for specific things, and first-timers are overwhelmed and just wander. We split up our group and set a time and place to meet for lunch and at the end of the day."

Joan Batts, up from Austin with a group of six, goes further: “Don’t try to stick together, but also don’t bring your kids...or your husbands, unless they’re real shoppers. It’ll slow you down.”

A “real” shopper stands out in a crowd of mere browsers. She carries a map (available at most entrances) to navigate the maze of booths and pavilions. She dresses casually, wears a hat or sun visor, and walks in comfortable shoes. And she pulls along a beast of burden--typically a two-wheeled cart or a four-wheeled wagon (available for rent)--to haul off the loot.

Such shoppers also start early and stay late. And, in the unreserved section on the west side of the original trading grounds, they haggle with vendors.

“It’s the old flea-market tradition,” says vendor Ches Johnson of Marion, South Dakota, a First Monday regular for 10 years. “In the pavilions you tend to have set prices. Here, nothing’s cast in stone. One woman overheard me bargaining back and forth with a customer and said, ‘This is like watching a tennis match.’ It is sort of a sport.”

Another vendor game is location, says Ike Clay of Coffeeville, Mississippi, whose L&M Wholesale Reproduction Antiques fills the space at the end of Row 84. “Over time you move up to better spaces, ones with more traffic,” Ike notes. “Then the chore’s to get people into your space. We display unique items prominently, things you don’t find just anywhere.”

‘Horse Monday’

The tradition of First Monday Trade Days began in the mid-19th Century when circuit judges held court in Canton on the first Monday of the month. That’s also when wranglers brought in stray horses for sale at public auction. Locals took advantage of “Horse Monday” throngs by offering produce, grain, and cane syrup for sale or trade along the streets.

Tractors replaced horses in the 1940s, so traders turned to pigs and dogs as commodities. (Traders still sell animals, mostly dogs, near the original trading grounds.) By the 1950s, increasing crowds clogged streets to capacity. A few homeowners rented spaces in their yards or vacant lots at a handsome profit. Other landowners followed suit. To grab top spaces, vendors began arriving on Sunday, congesting Canton even further.

In 1965 city officials took action. They bought six and one-half acres for a trading grounds and added more land as the flea-market phenomenon grew. To fit modern lifestyles, shopping days gravitated to Thursday through Sunday and away from Monday.

These days, First Monday's appeal comes not only from its bargains but also from its foods. (There are 200 food concessionaires on the original trading grounds alone.)

Hungry shoppers sample a smorgasbord of carnival-style fare--funnel cakes, baked spuds, smoked turkey legs, snow cones, and sausage on a stick. They also find homemade grub such as fudge, ice cream, pretzels, and fried pies. There are sit-down cafes, as well, offering soups and sandwiches, fried catfish, steaks, barbecue, burgers, and gourmet coffees. A few concessionaires even serve breakfast.

For five years, Betty and Doyle Ray have served grilled, honey-glazed "Pork-kabobs" at their Bear Country booth. "It's really fun to see people from all over the country--such a great place to meet and talk," Betty says. Doyle adds, "I'd have done this all my life, if I'd have known it'd be such fun!"

Not far away, Veta and Jerry Toombs crank out 32-ounce, fresh-squeezed fruit drinks for parched purchasers lined up at their Twister City booth. Choose from strawberry, orange, coconut, citrus, or banana. Or try the F-5 Super Twister with all five fruits. Customers make their own change from a plastic cash bucket. "In three years here, we never had trouble," says Veta. "People are basically honest."

Old Mill Marketplace

One of the largest privately-owned First Monday markets is Old Mill Marketplace. The 100-acre development hosts 800 vendors, bed & breakfast lodgings, and an RV park.

“We’re not a flea market,” says Bruce Davis who, along with Debbie Davis and her mother Mary King, own the complex. “We’ve brought together high-caliber vendors selling the old and the new in a permanent environment. We cater to artisans who make their own work.” A number of these artisans craft their products right in their shops—including sculpture, blacksmithing, jewelry, pottery, art, leathercraft, and broom-making.

One section of Old Mill Marketplace sports seven covered pavilions chocked full of handicrafts, home decorations, and antiques. The Village section exudes a casual country atmosphere with merchandise displayed on an eight-foot covered porch in front of each shop.

The Mountain section looks like a pioneer village. Set on a high, wooded hill, architectural styles of the individually-owned, permanent shops range from log cabin to Victorian. The Mountain features a wide array of merchandise, but much of it fits the Old West theme--wrought-iron furniture, Native American crafts, buckskin clothing, and Western art. Mel and Dee Reichert’s Frontier Gallery even sells framed replicas of historic Texas Ranger badges licensed by the Texas Rangers Hall of Fame and Museum in Waco.

Some shopkeepers dress in period costumes. A hillbilly look-alike called Teton Ken lets youngsters prospect for hidden treasures in his underground Lost Dutchman Mine. He also operates a working 1890s rotary oil drilling rig.

Every weekend cowboys stage a shoot-out on the streets of The Mountain and country and gospel music performers hold a free Saturday evening concert.

“When the shops shut down in old Canton, we’re still hoppin’ on The Mountain,” says Vickie Williams, a Canton vendor for nine years. “Shops up here sometimes stay open until 9 or 10 o’clock.” Vickie and husband Steve run Hooked on Country, a boutique packed with Western-themed furnishings and lakehouse decorations. “In three days, we sell what some big-city stores sell in a month. We thrive on repeat customers.”

So do Sally and Lonnie Cook of Cook’s Wood and Craft Supply. They sell wood cut-outs and craft supplies, as well as Western signature art prints. “The best part is getting to know our customers like friends,” says Sally.

Entering their shop, a fun-loving group of four women from the McAllen area wear funky hats and pull a wagon. These mad-hatters travel the 500 miles to Canton two or three times a year to buy supplies which they resell in their own craft shops. Mary Ellen Miller says proudly, “So far, we’ve gone to the car 18 times with our wagon full of stuff.”

As the sun sets across First Monday’s vast marketplaces, spent shoppers--those weary warriors of commerce--bag the day’s final trophies. In parking lots and walkways, people admire each other’s acquisitions. “That’s cute, where did you find it?” one woman asks a passing stranger, noting the booth’s location for tomorrow’s outing.

Lynda Allen of Baytown stands beside a huge bus that her employer, ExxonMobil, charts each fall for an employee shopping spree. “I got a few things for my house and a few gifts. It’s very tiring,” she says, “but I’ll be back.”

Nearby, Tammy Roberts of Yukon, Oklahoma huffs to the parking lot with a grin on her face. “This is the third round-trip I’ve made to the car. I’m feeling good, because I’m ahead of the game, and it’s only Saturday.” Tammy, who comes to Canton each fall with three or four friends to Christmas shop, adds “I’m buying for three kids!”

Were it possible to freeze First Monday in ice for a millennium, some future archeological dig might uncover relics that would define our culture. These hypothetical scientists would discover fish art and Beanie Babies, hand-hooked Afghans and Amish baskets, camouflage jackets and local honey, oak swings and espresso makers. They'd come across a few barbecue pits, a poodle skirt or two, reading glasses, and emu oil--plus a plethora of car parts and myriad Pokémon cards.

And I wouldn't be surprised, given First Monday's pulling power, if a bevy of bargain hunters would still be standing by, eager for one last fantastic find!