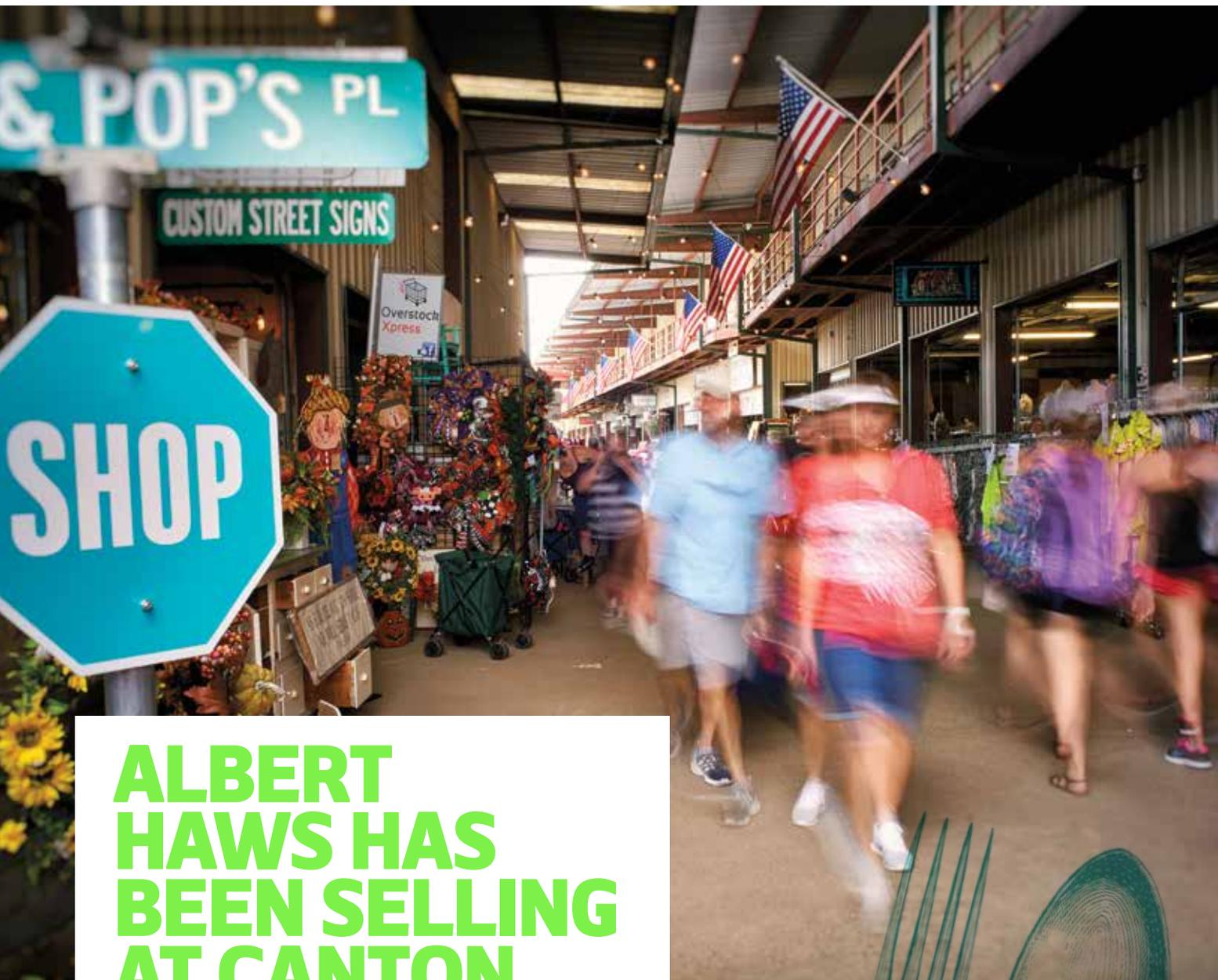


Find it all at First Monday Trade Days, the world's largest public flea market

BY SARAH HEPOLA
PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAVE SHAFER





ALBERT HAWS HAS BEEN SELLING AT CANTON

so long it's hard to remember when he started. He knows it was a couple of years before O. J. Simpson's arrest—he watched that on TV while on the job—so let's just say 1992 or '93. Canton, in East Texas, was easy money in the 1980s and '90s, that ancient era before the internet, before eBay, before Amazon Prime 1-click, before Marie Kondo swept onto bestseller lists by counseling retail-addled Americans in their cluttered condos and red-brick dream homes to toss any item that didn't spark joy. Back then, the joy was acquisition, the thrill of the hunt.

Once a month, Haws hitched a trailer on his Dodge truck and drove the 560 miles from his home in Kansas to converted farm land about 60 miles east of Dallas, where buyers practically swooped in with cash. When I ask what sold best, he struggles to place a finer point on an assortment whose distinguishing factor was its randomness. "Antique doors, glassware, fixtures," Haws says. "You know, stuff."



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Perhaps it could be a new state motto. Texas: We Have the Most Stuff. Anyone who doubts that can drive Ronald Reagan Memorial Highway out to Canton from Dallas, where the four days preceding the first Monday of each month bring a consumer treasure hunt across 400 acres. On a great weekend—nice weather, no rain, perhaps early November—as many as 400,000 folks might wander this labyrinth seeking solutions to problems they didn't even know they had. CBD oil for pets. Squishable hamburger toys. Candles, soaps, peanut brittle.

The market is divided into three sections. The traditional outdoor part is crammed with classic flea-market randomness set up at tables. Elsewhere, the indoor civic center boasts pricier antiques and collectibles. Then there's The Arbors section, an indoor shopping market of pre-fab items, like if Bed Bath & Beyond went all-in on the "Beyond" category. For example: pet-hair removal products, cutesy aprons ("Sip happens," with a wine glass), so many knickknacks. Near one of the many kiosks selling home décor, a middle-aged woman pushes an overflowing shopping cart with a decorative sign on top that reads, "We ain't got sh't try next door."

Stuff brings people together—everywhere in America, but

The story of Canton Flea Market, also known as First Monday Trade Days, is a story about stuff. The comfort of stuff, the nostalgia of stuff, the status of finding stuff that is not like other people's stuff. One-of-a-kind stuff!

Out here on the flat and sprawling fields of the world's largest public flea market, booths of odds and ends stretch into the horizon. A glass case of original railway spikes. A clawfoot tub. Crates of vinyl that release a musty waft of time as you flip from Olivia Newton-John to Merle Haggard. Knives, guns, ammo, mannequin heads, stacks of old J. C. Penney catalogs as thick as the phone book, if you remember those. Icy-blue satin lingerie draping to the floor, like a costume out of *Dynasty*. A largemouth bass frozen in mid-flip and lying on its side, bent like a very odd cereal bowl. Hundreds of enormous green city signs, the kind you find at county lines, for all your enormous green city sign needs.

OPENING SPREAD: Jane and Bill Swafford from Coahoma find a treasure. **FROM LEFT:** The Arbors, full of pre-fab items; Harley from Odessa; sales await those who negotiate.





especially in Texas, where space and a robust economy have given rise to great halls of consumerism. We built some of the best shopping malls, and while malls are now dying, Canton thrives as a place where people can touch stuff, negotiate the price of stuff, and find stuff they didn't know they wanted.

The need to sell and acquire stuff is one of the origin stories of First Monday Trade Days, a Texas tradition that dates back to the middle of the 19th century, when folks would gather at the courthouse once a month to trade horses, crops, and grain. The crowds in Canton grew over the following decades, to the point where the city passed an ordinance hoping to curb its growth, but the opposite happened. Trade Days kept booming.

Throughout the 20th century, the essential items at Canton told the story of a changing landscape. In the 1930s, it was the place to buy a bronc. In the '40s, tractors and hogs. Then a few decades later, it was where you bought a dog. (Over the past few years, Canton's Dog Alley has courted controversy, with an #endpupmills protest billboard positioned on the road leading to the event.) Today, there's just so much stuff—a sign of the times—that it's hard to know what's essential.

WHEN HAWS STARTED SELLING

his wares in the mid-'90s, the must-have items in his trailer were Victorian doors. Oh, how people wanted those Victorian doors, made of solid mahogany with ornate woodwork and a stained-glass inlay. Customers were no longer farmers taming the land, but instead homeowners gussying up their property and all those rooms that needed filling. Walnut dressers, a buffet table, an Underwood typewriter. Canton was an antique dealers' dream.

Many of Haws' customers were sellers who repurposed the things he scavenged from teardowns in the middle of the country for new products to hawk elsewhere, creating a conveyor belt of entrepreneurialism. For example, some clunky metal machine he pulled from a lodge in Kansas could become a one-of-a-kind coffee table sold to a discriminating buyer in the arts districts of Houston or Dallas. The beauty of the past reinvented by the present. These days, a lot of people just paint an old door purple or green, call it a renovation.

Canton is changing because Americans' relationship to stuff

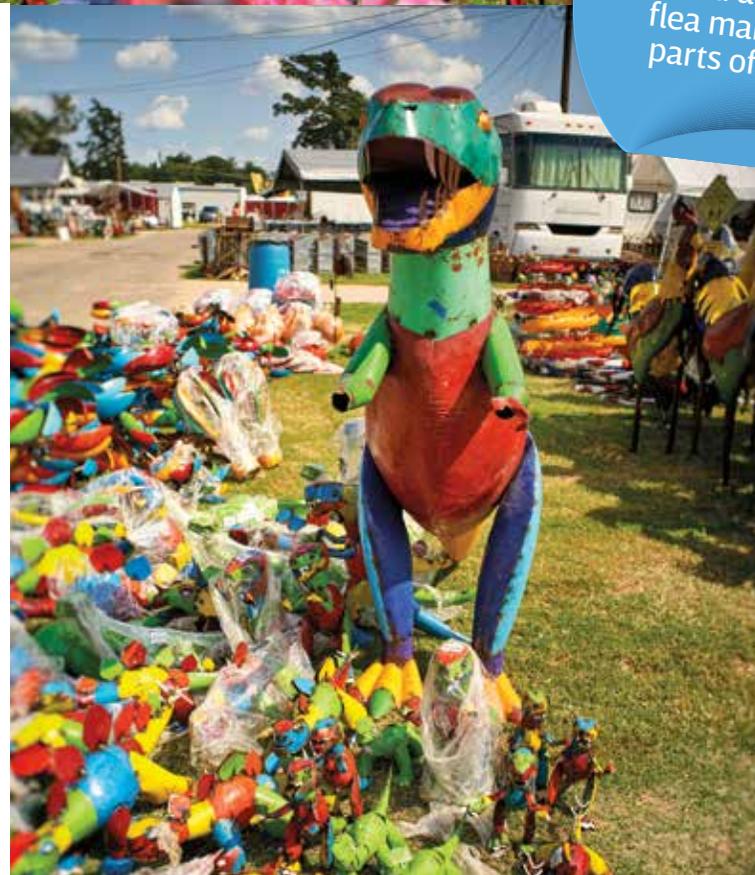
FROM TOP: Metal art salesman Pedro Reyes flaunts his flamingos; resurrect the Jurassic period with a metal T. rex or stegosaurus of varying sizes and colors.



Funnily enough, it is this millennial aversion to stuff that fueled a resurgence of flea markets in other parts of the country.

is changing. This comes in an era defined by technology, online commerce, and virtual communication. You can especially sense this among young people, who don't have the desire to acquire that defined earlier generations. They don't have interest in interacting with humans in general and are mortified about haggling over prices. Many of the young people I do see at Canton are lounging around on benches and couches, staring at their phones. As I stand in Haws' booth, speaking across a table cluttered with rusted doorknobs and glass beakers, we jaw over this cultural shift.

"Millennials don't want stuff," he says. Haws has gray hair, a red shirt, and a hearty chuckle. Two of his kids are grown men, both carrying college debt, and both disinterested in the antiques game that was their father's unlikely career. His sons like actual games: Call of Duty, Dungeons & Dragons. Gaming isn't



some teenage rite of passage to them; it's a part of life, and it requires no stuff aside from consoles.

The vendor beside Haws, a retired firefighter from Rockwall, wanders over to tell us his son wants to buy an Airstream trailer. If the American dream of the 20th century was putting down roots—the white picket fence, the two-car garage—perhaps the 21st-century American dream is the opposite: rootlessness.

Funnily enough, it is this millennial aversion to stuff—as in, mall-bought consumer goods shipped from overseas, emblematic of a disposable plastic economy—that fueled a resurgence of flea markets in other parts of the country. Places like the Brooklyn Flea in Brooklyn, New York, and the Rose Bowl Flea Market in Pasadena, California, are beacons for chic, discerning women in floppy hats and jangly jewelry who comb through endless boxes and shelves for items that just can't be found at Anthropologie and Forever 21. They are searching for cute sundresses and Bakelite jewelry and antler candelabras.

In Dallas, an hour west, entrepreneur Brittany Cobb has



Canton is an old-school flea market, not a hipster flea market, with vendors boasting ironic handlebar mustaches. Any facial hair here is utterly sincere.

was the equivalent of six Chevy Impalas.

And then, as in all stories—things changed. “Canton kept getting bigger and bigger, and trashier and trashier,” he tells me later, when I call him on the phone to discuss his nearly half-century as a dealer. The biggest collectors died or quit. The premium buyers moved on to Round Top, a collection of high-end wares that brings customers from Europe and Japan. It’s not that young people don’t have a connection to their past. It’s that the connection isn’t to artifacts of human progress like railways or machine parts or housing wares; it’s to *Star Wars* memorabilia, or ‘90s comic books. What would the artifacts of today’s culture even be? A Snapchat filter? A BuzzFeed headline?

Over the years, Davis has sold telephones and ceiling fans, but his specialty is dismantling cattle bridges, some dating from as far back as 1880. When bridges get taken down, Davis shows up with a 4-foot blow torch. “I’ll cut 16 inches through steel,” he tells me. Never been injured, either, not more than a finger banged. When I ask him what kind of personality type gets drawn to antiques dealing, he laughs. “Crazy,” he says. “I think that’s the type.”

He means that with love. These are his people. They are part scavenger, part fixer-upper, part gambler, part traveling salesman. This is his home away from home, though he has a family of his own in Lawrence, and the boom years of the Canton Flea Market kept them in designer duds. Davis can’t complain. “Eighty-five percent of these vendors are great folks,” he says. “The other 15 percent? Eh, well. You can’t like everyone.”

It’s hard to know what the future might

brought this aesthetic to Flea Style, her store in Deep Ellum, which boasts cool finds pulled from the stacks of Canton. She has made a pilgrimage there, with her Handi Wipes and comfortable shoes, each month for the past decade. Glossy magazines have featured her tips on how to “do the flea”—park near the civic center, keep to the fields, go on Thursdays (the lowest traffic days)—but the Canton consumer base remains stubbornly country, not urban. Older, not younger.

“A new generation wants to buy things how I offer them,” Cobb says, as she sweeps her hand across an urban loft of soothing white and pink far removed from the bonanza out in East Texas. Her store is populated by fashionable 20-something women whom I imagine to all be named some variation of Brittany—Britney, Brittani, Brittni. These women have a strong connection to stuff, just not stuff as it’s presented at Canton.

Canton is an old-school flea market, by which I mean it is not a hipster flea market, with groovy young vendors boasting ironic handlebar mustaches. Any facial hair here is utterly sincere. Take George Davis, for instance, a 67-year-old man with gray mutton chops that remind me of my Maine coon cat. Davis lives in Lawrence, Kansas (many of the vendors come from the Midwest and Rust Belt states), and he’s been working this flea market since 1971. He wears camo pants and a white T-shirt whose pocket sags with a pack of Seneca menthols. As we stand beside his table, covered with scrap metal, he explains that he used to return from Canton with paper bags of money. He made up to \$30,000 per trip. May not sound like much, he explains, but that

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: James Kibodeaux’ kettle corn is something to smile about; blacksmith Bill Epps teaches the finer points of making tongs; flat bread from Blazin Pizza Company.



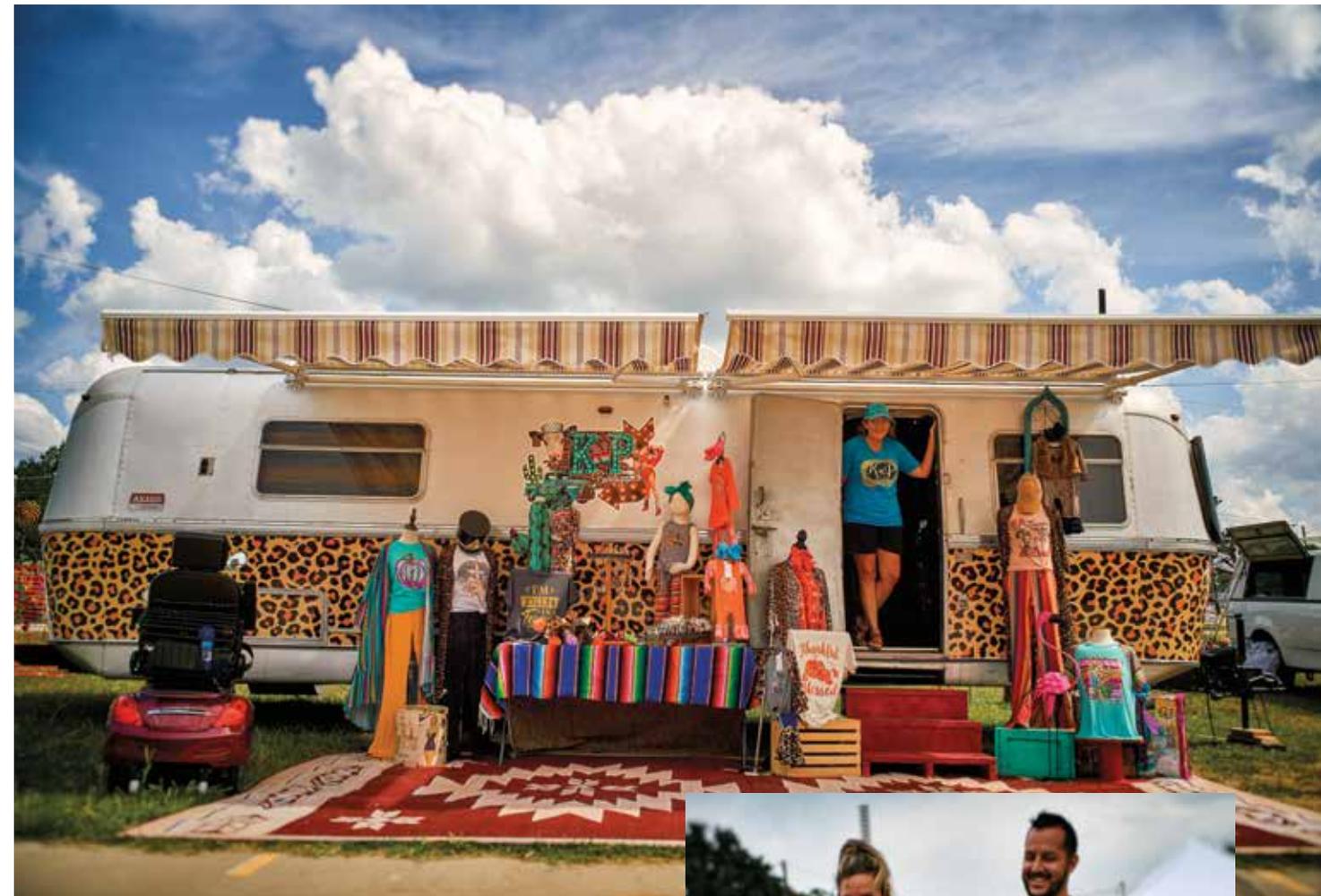
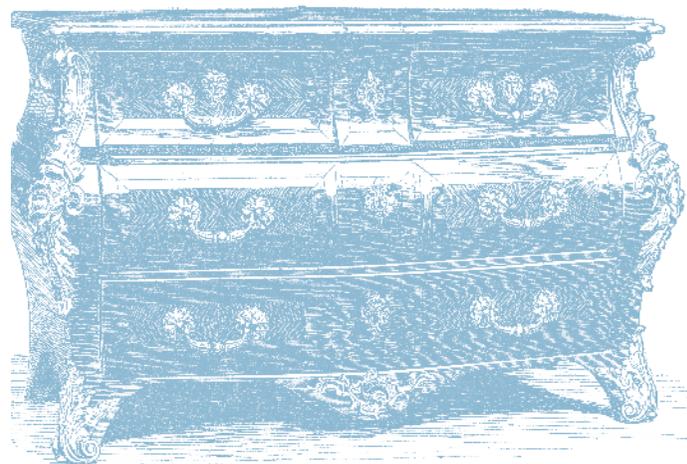
hold for Canton, since so much of its appeal seems to be a preservation of the past. The civic center is an emporium of collectibles just waiting to tug passerby back to their childhoods. Beanie Babies, a Ziggy Stardust album, a Strawberry Shortcake doll, a Nancy Drew paperback.

I linger at a booth run by an older married couple. She sells fine jewelry while wearing spectacular Dior glasses and a snowy white bob, and he sells knives at the booth beside her. What a duo. Diamond earrings on one side, buck knives on the other side. Her parents owned a 100-acre farm in Madisonville, but she and her husband worked in the oil industry. Theirs is a 20th-century Texas journey: from farmlands to petroleum, and now to a comfortable retirement that places them around the good people of East Texas.

You have to like people to work Canton. People are ultimately what make this place different than the endless online retailers where many of these products can be found. Anyone can trawl eBay and Etsy and Bonanza from their bed, disappearing down rabbit holes of recommended products and algorithms

FROM LEFT: Kandy Smith scores a piece of art; K-n-P Boutique operates out of a trailer; Tenley Chappell exudes the thrill of the hunt.

First Monday Trade Days
800 First Monday Lane,
Canton. 903-567-6556;
firstmondaycanton.com
The next flea market
is Nov. 28-Dec. 1.



designed to give you more of what you already have. The draw of a place like Canton is its uncanny discoveries and human interactions. Touching stuff with your hands. Locking eyes with your fellow travelers. Hearing about other people and how they got here. Canton has the bustling feel of a county fair, with its lemonade and homemade ice cream and corny dogs and brisket sandwiches. It is a reminder that we live alongside each other, even in our isolated iPhone-centric times.

You never know what you might find. I'm walking through The Arbors when my attention gets snagged. Sweet potato cheesecake in a cup. Hmm, I'll bite. I buy a jar, and as I stand there shoveling delicious spoonfuls into my mouth, I chat with the woman behind Ms. Penny's Kitchen. Penny Curry, who has another kind of Texas tale. She grew up in Fort Worth, got recruited to play college basketball in Colorado, missed home cooking, and started making barbecue sauces and desserts from back home. She lives in McKinney now.

"This stuff is insane!" says a woman, picking up a jar of Ms. Penny's sugar-free BBQ sauce. Curry laughs, assuring me she didn't pay that woman to say that. I bought a jar, and indeed, it was great. Who would have thought anyone could make good barbecue sauce without sugar? But there it was, another invention from the world's largest public flea market, a reminder that our past is still being reinvented in our present all the time. 🐾

