

Marshall University

## Marshall Digital Scholar

---

0064: Marshall University Oral History  
Collection

Digitized Manuscript Collections

---

1984

### Oral History Interview: Walter Lewis

Walter Lewis

Follow this and additional works at: [https://mds.marshall.edu/oral\\_history](https://mds.marshall.edu/oral_history)

---

#### Recommended Citation

Marshall University Special Collections, OH64-315, Huntington, WV.

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the Digitized Manuscript Collections at Marshall Digital Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in 0064: Marshall University Oral History Collection by an authorized administrator of Marshall Digital Scholar. For more information, please contact [zhangj@marshall.edu](mailto:zhangj@marshall.edu).



ORAL HISTORY

(Flea Market)

GIFT AND RELEASE AGREEMENT

19/1

I, Walter H. Lewis III, the undersigned,  
of Cabell Huntington, County of Cabell, State  
of W. Va, grant, convey, and transfer  
to the James E. Morrow Library Associates, a division of  
The Marshall University Foundation, INC., an educational and  
eleemosynary institution, all my right, title, interest; and  
literary property rights in and to my testimony recorded on  
5-7, 1984, to be used for scholarly  
purposes, including study and rights to reproduction.

- WHL Open and usable immediately.  
(initial)
- \_\_\_\_\_ Open and usable after my review.  
(initial)
- \_\_\_\_\_ Closed for a period of \_\_\_\_\_ years.  
(initial)
- \_\_\_\_\_ Closed for my lifetime.  
(initial)
- \_\_\_\_\_ Closed for my lifetime unless special  
(initial) permission is gained from me or my  
assigns.

DATE 5-7-84

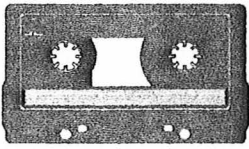
Walter H. Lewis III  
(Signature - Interviewee)

~~1005~~ P.O. Box 1700  
(Address)

Huntington, W. Va 25717

DATE 5-7-84

Walter H. Lewis  
(Signature - Witness)



**AN ORAL INTERVIEW WITH: WALTER LEWIS**

**CONDUCTED BY: WALLACE STOWERS**

**DATE OF INTERVIEW: MAY 7, 1984**

**SUBJECT: TOBACCO AND FLEA MARKETS**

**TRANSCRIBED & TYPED BY: GINA KEHALI KATES**

**WS: . . .interviewing Walter H. Lewis, at the Huntington Pride in Tobacco Flea Market of Huntington, West Virginia, interviewed on May 7<sup>th</sup>, 1984, by Wallace Stowers.**

WL: Okay, I'm Walt Lewis. I'm with the Huntington Pride in Tobacco warehouse, Huntington Pride in Tobacco Flea Market, Housing Services, etc., etc., etc. Today is the 7<sup>th</sup> of May, 1984. And we're here talking about the extended history of the Huntington Pride in Tobacco Market. I believe in previous conversations you've spoken like with [inaudible]...regarding the history of the tobacco warehouse itself. We got into the business approximately four years ago. We felt that there was a use for the building, other than tobacco, seeing that tobacco only took up, occupied the building approximately three months out of the year. I did some casual investigation about three years ago. And a year ago last January we basically decided we're going to do it. Not knowing anything about the flea market business, we kind of felt like the best place to start was to hire a manager, hire someone that had been in the flea market business for some time and knew what they were doing. And we advertised in the newspaper. We got approximately seven applicants for managers position. And we reviewed their credentials. Our first choice was all set to go and he backed out on us. We finally went with our second choice and we interviewed him. He seemed to be a very energetic person. His name was Charles Brace, Jr. Charlie was a very energetic person, he seemed to know what he was talking about. And he got us off to a very good start. He worked hard and we worked hard. We opened a year ago last March. We did a very good April. May was our best, last year May was our best month. We did a tremendous volume in May. We are occupying approximately-, well, pretty much we were filling a 62,000 square foot building with dealers last year in May. It slacked off considerably since then. And

we're, at that point, we were maintaining 1500 people on Saturdays, paid admissions. We don't charge [inaudible].... And between 2200 and 3000 people on a Sunday. It's been doing quite well. As tobacco season approached for the year '83, '84 tobacco season, we felt like we needed a building we were occupying with the flea market for tobacco, but didn't feel like it was a good idea to shut down the flea market. Because we felt...in the spring of '84 we'd have to start from scratch again. And I feel like it's better to get some momentum going, and keep on going. We ended up moving to a building next door, approximately a 40,000 square foot building. Our occupancy of dealers dropped a little bit during the winter. People aren't used to flea markets in the winter. The majority of flea markets are outdoors. East Drive-In Theater here in town has one in the summer only. Proctorville Fairground has one in summer only. The indoor flea market lends itself, of course, to year-round in any weather. As a matter of fact, this past weekend we had tremendous attendance of dealers. It rained on us Sunday and they couldn't set up outdoors. So they came out and set up inside. We did find that we had to put in cooling. We had to put in four, five foot diameter fans to circulate some air in the buildings, since it did get very hot. Which is a probably you don't have to deal with in an outside flea market. And in the winter we had to put some heat in. Now, we didn't feel like we could afford it. But we put heat in, so everybody's walking around in tee shirts. We took the chill off the building. And I think we did an adequate job. We put our heat in in the middle of January, I guess. We suffered through some very, very cold weekends of December. I think at one point we had...one weekend it was zero outside. And I...I don't know what really it was that was keeping our building as warm as it was. But the building inside was forty degrees when it was zero outside. But my dealers still didn't like that. Of course, I didn't have a problem, because my job with the flea market involves me walking

around and talking with my dealers, finding out their gripes and their satisfactions, mingling with our customers to find out, you know, what they want to see in the flea market. Of course, I'm moving around all day long, walking up and down the isles. I don't get as cold walking around like that, as my dealers do, who have to sit in the booth and watch their merchandise and deal with their customers.

WS: Talking about the dealers...do they come to you or do you go to them, or do you kind of...

WL: Well, it's a little bit of both. Of course, when we first started, we advertised heavily. We offered a discount. Our booths right now, a ten by ten booth rents for five dollars a day. When we initially set up, we offered an introductory offer of three dollars a day for one booth, two booths for five dollars a day. Six weeks after that, all booths went to five dollars per ten by ten. I would never do that again. I would never have...if I was opening up a new flea market, I would not have that introductory offer. The dealers did not get it through their head that it was an introductory offer. And they felt like in six weeks I was jacking the prices on them. What I was doing was I was giving them a discount in the beginning. If I was starting a flea market over again, I would establish my price. This is my price, this is what you pay. There's no confusions and no problems that way. We advertised heavily. We, I think one of our most effective advertising [inaudible]....leaflet, a piece of paper printed up with a flyer on it. And we go to other flea markets in the area and distribute them. This past weekend there was a band festival in Huntington. I was downtown during the band festival, leafleting, soliciting [inaudible].... Now, a lot of times a customer will soon turn into a dealer. Flea markets kind of a bug. When it bites you, you get flea market fever. And there's a lot of people I've noticed they come in and they buy and find a good deal on this. They know a little bit about china or glassware and they'll go in

and pick up something that's about \$25 for two dollars. And they end up collecting all this stuff and got a garage full and they bring it in here and they sell it. They enjoy coming in and selling for a weekend and making some money. So it's one of those chicken and the egg situations. The more dealers you have, the more customers you have. The more customers you have, the more dealers you have. So we have to solicit both. At this point, we've been open a year and we have dealers coming to us. There's a publication put out called Clark's Flea Market Guide, and it lists flea markets, swap meets, auctions, etc., throughout the country. We've advertised in there for the past year. And the first eight months we were open we didn't, you know, said, "Well, that was money down the drain." Well, I think I've gotten a dozen dealers, at this point, through the Clark's Guide. I've got one particular dealer who noticed us in the Clark's Guide, who's driving down each weekend from Athens, Ohio, a good two hour drive. It's amazing where people come from. I had last summer, an elderly gentleman come up from Florida every weekend. (WS: Every weekend?) Every weekend. Drove from Florida. I have a fellow, he used to come up on a monthly basis, but I haven't seen him. I'll have to give him a phone call. That's, that's one that I think is kind of important. When you see a dealer, but notice that a dealer hasn't been there in some time, I like to get on the phone and say, "Hey, we've missed you. How come you haven't been here?" I had...this one dealer came from Louisville, Kentucky. I have someone that's been, I'd say, three out of the last four weekends from Pittsburgh. It's amazing. You say, why would they come to Huntington, West Virginia, to a flea market? I guess we're doing something right.

WS: Do they dealers actually update information about how things are going?

WL: Well, they'll come in. We basically, what we try to do is say, hey, we feel like we've got something good to offer you here. Last weekend on Sunday, we had 3,000 paid, whatever, we'll

tell 'em an accurate figure. We don't want to lie to anybody. I'm sure if anybody's been in the flea market for any length of time, they realize you have good weekends and bad weekends. Now, a bunch of them go on the theory, first weekend of the month, great weekend. Everybody's got their paychecks and social security checks and all. They're out spending their money. Other people go on the premise that the last weekend of the month is the best weekend, because everybody's paid their bills, they know they're going to get paid on the first of the month, they've got this money left over, they're gonna go out and spend it. But when a dealer comes in, they come in and say, "I'm interested in space. What do you have here?" And we'll show 'em the spaces we have available. We tell them what kind of attendance we've been having. The weather in our particular situation, is a tremendous influence, in fact. Two weekends ago we had an absolutely beautiful weekend. Seventy, seventy-five degrees, the clouds were out, it was gorgeous. We had 600 people through on Saturday and maybe 1200 on Sunday. This last weekend it was a beautiful Saturday, did about 750 on Saturday, Sunday it rained. Sunday early in the morning it rained. It rained until about noon and was overcast the rest of the day. Sunday we had 2200 people. So for us being indoors, bad weather is good for us. Of course, outdoors is just the opposite.

WS: Do you have any of your customers [inaudible]...come in to look around, do any of these customers show up to watch tobacco markets in action? Do you know?

WL: Well, we held the flea market during tobacco season. Of course, it was in a building right next door. But the auctions for the tobacco are held essentially Monday through Thursday. The flea markets are held Saturday and Sunday. So the tobacco farmers that are coming in on Saturday and Sunday, they're bringing their tobacco in for the Monday or possibly the Tuesday



sale. We did not have that much of a cross. Now, early, let me see, I guess it was early in March, a gentleman-it was right after tobacco season-a gentleman had leased our building from us to hold a farm equipment auction in the building that we normally, where we, last year, held the tobacco auctions in. And of course, he got, he held his auction on Saturday. He got a tremendous amount of tobacco farmers in to buy equipment and to sell equipment. And a lot of those people get tired of the auction. The auction went on from 9 o'clock in the morning until 6 o'clock in the evening. It was a long auction; they had a lot of equipment. People get tired of the auction and they come over and look around at the flea market. That type of spillover I think has helped us. Now, last year, we tried to get our tobacco farmers, you know, most of the tobacco farmers has other crops, as well. We try to get them to come in and tailgate produce. It didn't seem to work. I don't know what we're doing right or doing wrong about getting them in here to sell produce. It's one of those unanswerable questions I've been unable to answer. We also have tried to get outdoor flea market dealers to come to our flea market and set up outside on the nicer days. Because we certainly have the space for it. We have not been able to do it. I don't understand why it is. We have better traffic, better customer count than any other flea market in the Tri-State area. I don't have that documented. But I have it on very reliable sources. We're, we've got twice as many customers coming through our front doors, as most any of the ones in the Tri-State area. We have the space for outdoor flea marketers. Some flea market people refuse to set up indoors. Some refuse to set up outdoors. They're kind of like two different breeds of people. Why we haven't been able to get 'em outdoors, I don't know. We charge the same, if not less, rates for outdoor space, as the other outdoor flea markets. [audio difficulty-inaudible]

WS: These other flea market dealers, are they full-time dealers or is like a side line business? Do

you know?

WL: Some of them, it's a side line. Some of them, it's a profession. And my experience, what it is, I've been a year in the flea market. The trick in the flea market is the source. If you have a good source merchandise, you can make it a profession. Now, if you're well into travel, that's fine. A flea market can operate seven days a week. The majority of them are Saturday and Sunday or Saturday only. The one over in Ashland, I think they're operating Wednesday through Sunday and they're closed on Monday and Tuesday. Some of the people that I've met over there, it's their full-time profession. Some of my, I tend to call them my junk dealers, they've got some antiques and some scrap and some junk and some things that they feel will be considered antiques in the next few years. They sell on Saturday and Sunday here at the flea market. Monday through Friday they're out driving around the back roads, finding all country stores, finding old farmhouses, buying, going to yard sales, buying their merchandise for the weekend.

WS: How do they know where to go to? Just contacts?

WL: [audio difficulties]...yard sales, I happen to know this past weekend, of course, weekends are tough for them, because that's when they're selling. This past weekend there was a hundred and twelve yard sales advertised in the Huntington paper. There's a lot of yard sales during the week. I think the majority of people do them on the weekends. But a lot of sources and stuff are from yard sales. A lot of people don't know what they have in their yard sales. They'll put a quarter price on it. Well, I know one for a fact, at this flea market. Someone didn't know what they had, they had a I call it a [inaudible]...it looks like an Afro comb. It had a 25 cent price on it. Somebody picked it up and gave 'em a quarter and walked away. Didn't say anything. Walked away real quickly. It was a sterling silver handle. Sterling silver handle on this thing.

And they got it for a quarter. It's a matter of knowing what you're looking for. And knowing the right price to pay for it. Like I said before, it's source, is what's really important for a flea market.

WS: Is there any way to gauge [audio difficulties]....

WL: I couldn't begin. We have averaged sixty or seventy dealers, and a hundred and fifty to two hundred ten by ten spaces rented.

WS: The dealers, do they bring their stuff in pickups and vans, cars or what? Anything?

WL: Pickups, vans, cars, big trucks.

WS: Big trucks? How big would you say?

WL: Gosh, well, ton-wise I don't know that much about trucks. I know if I go down to U-Haul and rent a truck, of course, it comes in a foot truck. They got a twelve foot box and a thirty foot box. I've seen as big as a 40 foot U-Haul truck coming in. Now, they don't unload all of that stuff and put it in. Somebody might be a professional flea market dealer. Maybe they'll have the whole thing full of socks. I had one guy set up outside here for three or four weeks in a large, like an old bread truck, you know how big those trucks are. All he sold was socks. He must have had forty different kinds of socks. He had baby socks and tube socks and women's socks and Strawberry Shortcake socks and Nike socks. You know...all these kinds of socks...had a table out. Had his socks on his table. His truck was probably still half full. It was his inventory. A lot of these people, their truck is a warehouse on wheels, is exactly what it is. Now, I've been to other outdoor flea markets soliciting dealers. I've seen people selling carpet out of trucks like that, watches, jewelry. Their truck is their inventory or warehouse on wheels. And they'll go to their source, wherever it may be. Buy 20, 30,000 dollars worth of stuff, put it in a truck and start

driving. [inaudible] When they're out, they go back to their source.

WS: Do they have kind of a route?

WL: Some of them do and some of them don't. Some of them [audio difficulties-tape stops] In your smaller communities. Paintsville, Kentucky has one that's been going on for years and years. It grew out of their stock yard. They have a stock yard down there. And they have cattle and horses and pigs, whatever, auctions down there or sales. And I guess at one point, some guy was just going to set up down there [inaudible].... Now, they've got a full-fledged flea market going on. I would call that a fairly rural area. Gallipolis, Ohio has one. That's at their county fairgrounds. That's where you'll find...Lawrence County, Ohio has one at their fairgrounds, over in Proctorville. I associate fairgrounds and stockyards with rural areas. Maybe I'm associating it the wrong way. But that's what I associate. And that's why I would feel you would probably find more in your rural areas. Now, I do know of a fellow from here in Huntington. He's out in Los Angeles, I believe. He sets up and I would tend to call it a condominium flea market. They have a large warehouse out there. Dealer spaces up for rent. Most of them are permanent dealers. He has bought and paid for his space. I don't know what he paid for it, \$12,000, \$24,000, I don't know. For his ten by ten or ten by twenty, whatever his space, he can set up when he wants to and close down when he wants to. It's his space. You know, he can do with it what he wants. If he wants to get out of the flea market business, he sells his space to someone else. So you have those in your larger cities, you have them in your rural areas. There's nothing that I can do that would stop a flea market from coming in at just about any location. Except, too many other flea markets. Actually we had two. The third one was set up just this spring. I felt, when I heard that happening, I said Ashland can't support three flea markets. One of them's

going out of business. I knew it would happen.

WS: [inaudible]...Clark's Flea Market guide, is that a national publication?

WL: A national publication.

WS: Is it a periodical, magazine, pamphlet or....?

WL: A little book. I'd say it's 5 1/2 by 7 book. It's about a half of a, yeah, 5 1/2 by 8 1/2. It's a half of a sheet of paper, about that size of a book. Listings just, you know, by state, by city, and they also sell display ads. You can buy half a page and put in a great big write-up about your flea market. I believe all we do is get our listing put in. I don't know whether the display ads help or not. Something that we have tried to help our flea market business, is [inaudible]...haven't helped us any.... The one that has helped us was the farm auction that I mentioned before. Our gate attendance was up by 50% from the previous weekend, the day we had that farm auction. Now, we tried to hold gun shows and advertised nationally to get gun dealers in here. We had twelve dealers here for the gun and knife show. I had an event, which I was real excited about, a couple weeks ago, we called it a fur and feathers, and we were trying to get rabbits and chickens and goats and pigs and cows, you know, anything with fur or feathers in here for show and sale. I didn't have the attendance or enthusiasm that I thought I would have for that. Planning in June, I'm hoping at this point, to have a musical weekend. If it doesn't turn out to be a total musical weekend, I know...I've definitely got it scheduled for a Sunday afternoon to have a gospel sing and songfest. I plan on advertising on the religious stations here in town. I have advertised on the religious stations here in town in the past, and I feel like it's been some good. I feel like my attendance is up. Like the man said, only ten percent of my advertising budget is affected. If I could figure out what that ten percent was, I'd drop the rest of it. But it's, you know what helps

and what hurts. I feel like I have to advertise every week in the Huntington newspaper in the classified section. I put a small in, Huntington Pride in Tobacco and Flea Market every Saturday and Sunday and a phone number. Well, one weekend, I decided I would take it out of the classified and I'd put a display ad in, I put a business card ad in somewhere in the newspaper. It cost we about four times more to run it than the other ad, and I was amazed at how many dealers came up to me and said, "How come you didn't have an ad in the paper this weekend?" They knew that I normally advertise, they were looking for it, and they were worried that we weren't going to have good attendance, because my ad wasn't where it usually is. So I feel like I have to have an ad in the Huntington paper. I feel like my chief competition is Ashland. There's two indoor flea markets in Ashland. I also advertise every week in Ashland. I have advertised, like I said, on the religious stations, WEMM here in town, and I feel like my attendance is up when I advertise on that station. I can't afford to advertise on the radio every weekend. But when I am able to, I'll do it.

WS: Do your advertisements ever reach surrounding counties, Putnam County, Lincoln County and all those?

WL: Well, there's a publication put out called the Putnam County Post. It's a weekly paper, whatever publishing company, I forget the name of it. Putnam County Post, The Cabell Record, and a couple other smaller weekly papers. I like advertising in the rural papers like that. A lot of, maybe I'm stereotyping people and I shouldn't do it. But I feel like a lot of your rural people, when they do come "to the big cities", they want to spend time here. And I feel like the tobacco market can, can prove me out on that point. Because when they come to sell their tobacco, they come and stay here all day and they'll go to a restaurant or they'll go out to the Mall, shopping.

My dentist tells me there's this one fellow, that he brings his crop of tobacco in, that's when he comes to the dentist. And he'll never come back to the dentist until he brings his next crop of tobacco in. When they come to the big city, they want to spend some time.....

**END OF SIDE 1 - BEGIN SIDE 2**

**WL:** . . . people don't come to Huntington just to sell their tobacco. They've got other leads. Souther States Co-op's here in town. If they need some farm supplies, feed, seed, whatever, they may come in to Southern States. While they're in, why not go to the flea market. It's a good source, a tremendous bargain. IF you know what you're looking for. I hate to say it, but you can ripped off at a flea market just as well as you can get ripped off anywhere else. But I like my rural papers. I advertise in Portsmouth, I advertise in Gallipolis, I have advertised sporadically in Charleston. Charleston's newspaper is very expensive newspaper to advertise in. And there's two or three radio stations that I use. Simply because they get a tremendous amount of coverage. I personally don't get the newspaper. All I get is the Sunday paper. But I listen to the radio every second I'm in the car. Almost every second, unless I've got a tape in. I've got a tape player. I'm always listening to the radio. Maybe I'm not the typical person. But I kind of hope that everybody else listens to their radio in their car. And I feel like that's a good source of reaching people.

**WS:** As far as advertising in surrounding areas, did you ever try to set up a kind of experimental small markets in different areas to see....

**WL:** It's...advertising is kind of like throwing a pebble into a pond. You know, it shoots out ripples. The further away from where that pebble hit the water, the smaller those ripples get. Advertising the same way. I'm throwing that pebble in the pond here in Huntington. [interruption

to answer phone]

WS: The advertising?

WL: Oh, Huntington's where I throw that pebble in the pond. I'm going to get my greatest response from the Huntington area. I did, I don't think it was much of a survey. But what I tried when I first opened, was a coupon thing. Two for one admission with this coupon. Bring this coupon, one person gets in free with one paid admission. I got more coupons from Huntington, less from Ashland, less from Grayson, you know, etc., etc. The further away from Huntington you get, the less response and less effective your advertising is. You know, I could spend a thousand dollars on Logan in one weekend, and I wouldn't get a thousand people from Logan here. I spend a thousand dollars in Huntington in one weekend, I sure better get a thousand people from Huntington come in. I do try, like I said, my radio I feel like is one of my better means of advertising, and leaflets, like I mentioned before. Because my radio reaches, you know, that big audience. You can hear WGNT all the way down in Grayson. Probably hear it, possibly hear down in Williamson. I know you can hear it out into Hurricane.

WS: Is it possible to set any kind of branches in the flea market [inaudible]....or does it have to be....?

WL: If I had the property or a vacant warehouse in Logan, I would, you know, I'd consider doing it. As a matter of fact, we have considered doing it. Relatives of ours own property in Ashland. The flea market opened up there. The relatives did not open it up themselves, they leased it to a flea market operator. We had, they have some other vacant warehouse facilities elsewhere in the state. It's been looked into, to put a flea market there. I can't guarantee attention. I can't be, well, we've got a building in downtown Beckley. We have attempted, on



several occasions, to set up a flea market. You can't run a flea market in Beckley from Huntington. We have an employee that goes, he spent a week or so in Beckley, getting his, trying to get this flea market set up, found a manager, a bank account set up, it was a flop. We tried it two or three other times..... With him here in Huntington, and a hired hand in Beckley, it doesn't work. My grandfather, during The Depression, had an opportunity to buy several, I think, thousand beachfront, ten thousand feet of beachfront property in Miami Beach, Florida. Pennies a foot. And he said, "I'm not interested. You can't manage property from a thousand miles away." Now, I wish he would have bought it, personally, because it would have been worth Lord knows what today. But he's absolutely right. Unless you're there to manage and look after..... I really feel like owner involvement is the key to any business. If it's a flea market, I'm here from seven in the morning until sometime seven at night, Saturday's and Sunday. Constantly talking to my dealers and customers, or going to another flea market and leafleting. I've got a manager, sure I've got a manager to make sure that if I'm not here, if I'm out leafleting, or I just had a baby and I'm at the hospital with my wife she's having the baby, he makes sure things runs smoothly. He does a very good job. But I feel like I personally have to be involved. I make my own assignments. I personally call dealers that have not been here. They appreciate that. The owner of this flea market's calling to say why haven't I been there. They appreciate that. I don't think we can set up a flea market elsewhere.

WS: I guess that about having specialized events, you know, singing or whatever, is there a performing stage area at the market for this?

WL: What we will do the weekend we have our gospel songfest, as I mentioned in the very beginning of this conversation, your also in the warehousing business, you deal with several

trucking firms in the area. And I feel that probably the easiest thing for me to do is see if one of the firms will loan us, for a weekend, a flatbed semi trailer. Pull that right inside my building.

I've got my stage.

WS: Is any of these flea market activities, did anyone do this before you took over the business?

WL: Well, flea markets were not held here, as far as I know ever in the past. Now, fur and feathers event, I understand has been in the past. The previous owners of the tobacco warehouse, at one point, when the automotive industry was really booming, several of the car dealers stored their excess inventory in these tobacco buildings. Flea market-wise....[tape skipping]....

I have not found one other.....[tape skips].....up at Washington Courthouse, Ohio, they have a monthly flea market. It originally started as a knife and Indian relics show that grew into probably the largest or one of the largest flea markets in the area. The flea market is the event up there.

It's a monthly thing, it's not a weekly thing. And they uh, it's a tremendous show. I don't know if I saw it all, the last time I was up there. I go up there and solicit dealers. I've been to Hartville, Ohio, soliciting dealers. I go anywhere. This coming weekend Fox Fire Campgrounds has a bluegrass festival. I plan to be there soliciting dealers. And customers, this weekend. I plan to leaflet. I'm going to all Fox Fire, get their permission to hand out leaflets. And see what I can do.

WS: You mentioned [inaudible]....lay the groundwork for the flea market business, what, about three years ago? You opened up in March of '83. But how did you know what avenues to pursue, how to go about setting....?

WL: That's why I handled, I hired a manager. I hired someone that had been in the flea market business several years. The guy, first man that I hired, we had some conflict of personalities, etc. I had to fire the gentleman. The first man I hired had been in the flea market business essentially a

business or profession for approximately seven years. He told us that he had some prior management skills, experience. And we sat down with him and said, "What do we got to do to get this thing off the ground?" And he started laying the groundwork. You have to mark off, you know, lay out your building, where are you booths gonna be, where are you isles gonna be. You want to have nice wide isles, you want to have, you don't want to have 400 feet of dealer with no isles cutting across them. People want to be able to go all the way around. But they don't want to have to walk all the way to one end and all the way back. He told us about advertising, about press releases, he told us that we may have some problems with the City wanting to license these dealers, we may have some problems with accounting, collecting B & O taxes or city collecting B & O taxes, or even the state collecting B & O taxes. He pointed out several of the hurdles that we had to clear. We had to pen down what the state, city and counties position would be. WE had to get out advertising together. The first guy that we originally were going to hire as our manager uh, came in on Monday and he said we can start on flea market on Saturday. Or actually he told us two weeks. Because he had a commitment the following Saturday. After the following weekend, he said, "I can't do it." We had to hire a new manager. The second gentleman that I finally ended up hiring, we said, "Can we open it up this weekend?" He said, "Are you nuts?" Six weeks down the line we opened it up. There was that much that we needed to do. I can't remember all that we had to do to get it started. But for anybody else, you get a warehouse, a building, a lot, a field, I don't care...you could set up a flea market about anywhere, that doesn't know anything about it, that has not been intimately involved with flea market business or industry for at least a year, my advice to them is you hire someone, you hire the best person you can possibly get.

WS: How do you decide upon, for these special events and such, what type of event? Does your manager kind of get the feel of what's best?

WL: We get a bunch of people together and "chew the fat", so to speak. Just kick out ideas.

You know, what do you think we can do? One of the events, I haven't done it yet. After holding several events in the last couple to three months, I don't know if I want to have any more events.

Because it cost me money and it don't make me any. They haven't in the past so far. And antique car show. I'd love to hold an antique car show in here. You know, I got the space for it. It...the potential is there. An antique show, our flea market is basically built as a Pride in Tobacco Antique and Flea Market. We feel by, or our original manager felt, and I'm inclined to agree, by inserting the word antique and flea market, it brings in a higher class of merchandise. We do have our antique dealers. We don't have as many as we once did. Our clientele does not seem to want to buy antiques. We've got, the majority of our stuff is new stuff. New merchandise is what the majority of our dealers is selling. Some of it is, like I said, yard sale type of thing.

WS: Do you have any retail businesses in Huntington? Do they sell any of their new stuff there, or is it...?

WL: When we first started, the Bazaar had set up. They had a twenty by twenty booth and were selling their mark down goods. Apparently it was not working out for them. They pulled out.

Blenko Glass was in here for two or three weeks. A couple...two or three of the local businesses have set up. They've come and gone. We've been opened approximately a year. On our first year anniversary, there were three dealers out of sixty that were there on the first day that we set up the year before. Now, there, I'd say, thirty, forty, maybe fifty, maybe even more, percent of what I have over there now, have been with me for six months or longer. They set up over there

and it's a permanent booth. It's a permanent setup. They don't even take their stuff away during the week. They cover it up, the building's locked, the merchandise stays in there. We've got a security system, electronic security system on, so everything's pretty much safe in here. And we charge them \$5 a week to store their merchandise.

**WS:** Each of these booths, what, physically what type of booth are they?

**WL:** Lines on the floor. That's all it is, is lines on the floor. They're basically their limitations is the tables that they place in the booths themselves. Now, we happen to have been in the retail business for awhile, and had some tables that we did not have a use for. I now put them in my flea market and I rent them for a dollar a day. I've also got some clothing racks. Some people cleaning out their attic, they've got a bunch of clothes, they want to hang it. They don't want to pile it on a table. I rent those also, for a dollar a day. We don't require people to rent our tables. They're more than welcome to bring in their own, or build their own. But pretty much that's the physical limitations of their booths. Basically all we have is a line on the floor. We show, at the corners, four corners of a ten by ten space, that's your booth. You end up getting a few squabbles, you get two dealers next to each other, "Oh, that person's into my booth, my table leg's here right on the line. You have the table edge sticking over four inches into my booth." We have to calm down squabbles like that constantly. Sometimes I feel like running a flea market's like being a third grade teacher. You know, you get this, "I'm going to tell the teacher," or "This person did that person, this person did this, or this person did that," and it's like a third grade classroom, at times. But generally, people are well-behaved. When I first got into the flea market business, I felt like, I said, "Oh, boy, I'm going to be dealing with some scum and some criminals, and I'm going to be dealing with some stolen merchandise constantly." Categorically, I

have never met a more honest bunch of people in my life, than these regular flea market people. They have been using their own tables and they forgot to bring it this weekend. So they get one our tables. And we go by and we're used to charging them so much rent, and we go up and [inaudible]...and I say, "I've got two extra tables this weekend I didn't have last weekend." It restores my faith in mankind, it really, really does. They're an honest bunch of people. They're hard-working. They're hustlers. They're out there hustling. A lot of people well, I had two gentlemen over there that came down from oh, where did they come down from? Parkersburg. They'd both been out of work for nine months. They said, "We've got to do something." They spent a little bit of money on a little bit of merchandise, they bought some cheap earrings, maybe they'd pay a dollar for a pair of earrings, they'd sell 'em for three dollars. Markup is tremendous in the flea markets. Depending on the item. I have one gentleman over there, he sells living room suits. It's an eight piece suit for \$449. Four hundred forty-nine for an eight piece living room suit. I don't think his markup is tremendous. And you go over there and you buy a watch or a pair of earrings, something like that, the markup is, or cowboy hat, the markup is two, three hundred percent markup from what the person's paid on it.

**WS:** How do they know what price to mark up to?

**WL:** A feeling. Generally...it's like I said, it depends on what they pay for it. You pay a dollar for an item, you probably can sell it for two dollars, maybe three, depends on how you display it and how you merchandise it. You pay a hundred dollars for something, you're not going to sell it for two hundred. You might sell it for a hundred and a quarter. Well, it depends on what price range you're into. The big movers are quarter and dollar items. Something that costs a quarter, people will buy. Some costs a dollar, people will buy it, a lot quicker than they will if it's five or

ten. They mark it up to what they feel people will pay for it. The manager that I have over there, the gentleman's name is Tom Irwin. Tom's been in the flea market business about four years. He's been in the retail business in the past, he's taxi cab dispatcher. Tom's done quite a bit of everything. Last year he did a lot of fairs and county fairs and festivals, like the Apple Festival and things like that. He puts a price on his merchandise that he feels is a fair price and makes him some money. If he goes to a fair and he's selling hat pins for two dollars, and he sees someone else selling hat pins, he'll go over and say, "What are you selling your hat pins for?" "Three dollars." Tom says, "Okay, I'll raise my to three dollars." He feels that way, they're both going to get the best price and they're not going to get involved with cutting each other's throat. Now, other dealers will go over and if they're selling your hat pins for two dollars, I'm going to sell mine for a dollar and a half. They feel like they'll get more business that way. And they'll make up their mark down in volume. I personally think I'd be inclined to go with Tom's school of thought, I'll raise mine so the price is equal. Everybody, if you want a hat pin, it's gonna cost you three dollars, I don't care where you go. I'm going to get some business and the other guy's going to get some business. I think that's, you know, it's an individual choice, as to how you mark your prices. I think every dealer, without question, at a flea market builds what I call chiseled into every price. He's got an axe marked ten dollars. He knows some guy's going to come along and say, "Will you take six for it?" He'll say, "No, but I'll take eight." You know, if a guy wants to get eight out of it, he puts ten on it. Because he knows somebody's going to come along and say, "Here's ten dollars." But the majority of people, that's...it's part of the game. That's why I think a lot of people enjoy it because they can go and dicker and barter and go back and look at it, nope, you want too much for it and then walk away. And then, "Wait a

minute, come back here.” It’s a game. And it’s fun. There’s that and like I said, there’s finding the bargain that the person who’s selling it doesn’t know what they’ve got. Flea marketing is a different breed or class of people. No, I don’t want to use the word class. It’s just a different breed of people. They’re hustlers. They’re not criminals. They’re willing to hustle to make their money. And that’s what they’re out there doing.

WS: [inaudible]...types of flea markets per type of area, like the agricultural or industrial oriented type markets?

WL: Well, I don’t know whether you can type them down that way or not. I know down in Paintsville, Kentucky, the majority of what goes on there is gun trading. I was amazed at how many they had. They had one whole area set up, guys in the back of their pickup trucks or their fans or their cars, trunk full of guns. Selling, buying, trading guns. If I had one gun a weekend over here, I’d be surprised. I don’t get the guns. Other areas or other flea markets, well, Washington Courthouse. You go up there, it’s tremendous amount of antiques up there. I’d like to have more antiques in my market and I don’t. The buying public determines what’s successful. If a man comes here to sell guns and he doesn’t sell any guns, he’s not going to come back. If a man comes here to sell apples and he’s got five cases of apples and he sells out all his apples before the day’s over, he’s going to come back the next weekend with more apples. You have peaks and valley’s. They’re seasonal items. The man with the furniture, left here January and February. He came back, well, no, he left here in the month of January, came back about the middle of February. He didn’t feel like he had the merchandise to sell in January. January was a slack month retail-wise. Traditionally. You get seasonal items. Some things go. I’ve got a lot of people selling plants. Garden plants.....



WS: The seasonal aspect, you ever get anyone selling from the farm, selling canned goods or homemade this or that, or something, as well as ....

WL: Well, I get a lot of crafts over there, as far as homemade. A lot of people sell leather work, crocheted things, all kinds of things like that. I have not had too many...I don't think I've had any farmers coming in selling their crops. I'd like to introduce you to....[interruption]....we charge a quarter admission at the flea market. I think it's purpose is two-fold. It keeps the rif-raf out. it's keeps the family who can't afford to spend anything with a zillion kids and the kids might steal things, they might knock glassware off the tables and break them and they're just going to let their kids run wild, it keeps them out. They can't afford to pay the quarter per person to get in. It also gives me a very accurate means of judging how many people came through the door for the weekend. Sunday, I said we did 2000. I don't charge admission for children under twelve. I had 2200 people through, that's paid adults. There's probably a good 700 to 1000 kids in here in addition that came through. And in a flea market, a child is a customer, every bit as much a customer as an adult, where in a retail store that's not necessarily the case. There's always a quarter item at the flea market. There's a balloon or homemade candy that a child would want, that an adult wouldn't. And it makes them a very viable customer.

WS: Your dealers, do they kind of specialize or do they have like fashion goods and on the same table selling homemade goods and ....

WL: Well, I have one dealer that came in this weekend, he sells Amish cheese, made by the Amish people. He also sells fishing tackle. There's some manufactured goods here, homemade stuff. Yes, generally, they, well, generally they specialize in one type of merchandise. I have one gentleman that his speciality is homemade candy. He's got some of the best candies going. In

addition to that, he sells a little bit of glassware, and candy making supplies and other things. But his primary concern is his candy. These dealers will buy what they...if they can buy something that's totally unrelated to what they normally sell and at a good price, they'll buy it. If they can get something they know they can sell for five dollars for a dollar, they'll buy it. No matter what's it's category is.....

**WS:** You mentioned earlier about the, why your customers become dealers. Are there trades or give aways, so you can tell when this person's become a dealer or just kind of....

**WL:** You start seeing them every weekend. And they're always going out with an armload of stuff. You kind of get this feeling.....

**END OF INTERVIEW**