

Nerds unite at MIT Swapfest

By *srlinuxx*

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"All Things Nerdy" is the unofficial slogan of the MIT Swapfest, a monthly electronics flea market at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

"That's not meant to be derogatory," said Steve Finberg, who helped found the "Flea at MIT" 21 years ago. "Nerdy is a compliment for most of these people."

Every third Sunday from April through October, hundreds of technophiles gather in a Cambridge parking lot to pick through piles of electronic equipment -- everything from antique computers and ham radios to spectrophotometers and oscilloscopes.

Vendors begin assembling around midnight to secure prime spots in the lot. When the market opens at 9 a.m., buyers scurry inside to scout the choicest bargains.

Mark Peck, 14, spent \$20 to add a banged-up Apple II Plus to his growing collection of old Apple computers.

Mark has more than a dozen computers on display in his family's Newton home. His father, Shel, said his son gives school groups tours of the Apple "museum."

"This one is a find," Shel Peck said of the Apple II Plus. "It's like finding a Rembrandt in a flea market."

The MIT flea market isn't the largest of its kind, but its setting on the campus of an elite technical school makes it a destination for people from around New England.

The flea market is run by the Harvard Wireless Club, the MIT Electronics Research Society, the MIT UHF Repeater Association and the MIT Radio Society, a club for ham radio operators that dates back to 1909.

Finberg, who works as an engineer at a MIT-affiliated laboratory, said school officials initially weren't sold on the flea market.

"One of the deans thought it was much too commercial," he said. "And then that dean went away."

Today, Swapfest is as much a social event as a marketplace for electronics equipment.

Marcellus Stamps, a self-described "high-tech recycler" who sells used office computers at flea markets all over New England, sees many of the same faces wherever he and his wife go.

Stamps, a newly retired computer consultant, isn't in it for the money.

"We cover our costs, and I make enough to take my wife to dinner," he said.

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