

Don Lancaster's

RESOURCE BIN

number six

The wondrous world of electronic surplus.

Our usual reminder here that the *Resource Bin* is now a two-way column. You can get tech help, consultant referrals and off-the-wall networking on nearly any electronic, *tinaja* questing, personal publishing, money machine, or computer topic by calling me at (520) 428-4073 weekdays 8-5 Mountain Standard Time.

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Electronic Surplus

This month, I've decided we might explore several of the obscure nooks and crannies in the bizarre world of electronic surplus.

Surplus is just "stuff left over". Very often, it is stuff left over because it is obsolete, broken, worn out, or never worked properly in the first place. Or because it just didn't sell. Sometimes, you can score honest bargains. Other times, surplus can easily become an outright ripoff.

Surplus can range from brand new and first rate materials having a full pedigree and provenance, on down to the most abjectly worthless of floor sweepings that somebody did not want to haul to the dump.

Usually, there is not any warranty or guarantee with most surplus items. Either that the stuff works at all or is in any way suited to your needs.

And the quality of technical help you may get can vary all over the lot. But, more often than not, it will be dead wrong info.

Electronic and computer surplus is

a lot of fun to play with. But the big bucks are only to be made by the lean and mean full time pros who have the contacts and know exactly what they are doing. It is super easy to grossly overvalue something, just because it seems cheap at the time. Or to assume that some major "greater fool" market exists for your new treasures.

And it could end up deadly if you design surplus parts into any product only to have those sources forever vanish. Or to buy a zillion parts and maybe sell seventeen of them. Or to have all your shipping charges eat you alive on raw iron.

Thus forewarned, let's take a fast survey of some of the many different sources of electronic surplus, to find out just where all of this stuff comes from. And how you could go about getting some of it on your own.

We might start with the oldest and most obvious...

Military Surplus

At one time, surplus was nearly all military. Incredible buys were the rule rather than the exception. Whole city blocks were often devoted to long gone "radio row" stores all of which featured military surplus. *Heathkit*

NEXT MONTH: Don details some obscure automotive electronics opportunities.

and similar companies got their start repackaging old military electronic components into their oscilloscope kits at unheard of prices.

Surplus "command set" conversions often led to really useful ham gear for literally pennies on the dollar. One \$2 special formed a "Q-5" instant if strip for high performance homebrew ham communications gear.

My personal ventures into military

surplus first took place many years ago and involved lots of dynamotor power supplies bought at sixty-five cents per. Or aircraft VHF altimeters at four bucks. Some crystals at five cents each; acorn tubes at four. Oh yeah. And bright yellow *Gibson Girl* rescue transmitters that made some really dandy (although highly illegal) college dorm AM broadcasters.

One of my first really big business failures involved converting surplus castings into decorator lamps. I have still got one or two left if you want to get in ahead of the hoarders.

The last few years, though, those military bargains weren't really there. At least not very often. The materials are typically worn out, filthy, trashed, truly obsolete, or highly specialized. Those bidding requirements, certified checks, pickup hassles, and all of the paperwork could end up awesome.

And professional bidders pretty much have things down to a cut and dried process all their own.

There's also the fact that a lot of government surplus gets higraded by a triple filtering. First by the military themselves, then by states, and finally by schools. You are often at the end of a very long line.

But, with the newly emerging peace breakout, military surplus sales just may be on a sharp upswing again. So now may be the time to get back on those bidders lists.

Getting onto any military surplus bidders list has been a major rite of passage for most electronic hackers.

The process is both cheap and very simple: You write or call the *Defense Logistics Supply Agency* and ask them for their surplus sales brochure. Then you fill out a card, giving them your area and material preferences. That's all there is to it. Easy.

After that, you will receive a few bidders notices per your selections. To keep their mailing list size down,

they'll drop you after six or so notices if you do not actively participate. Thus, you may have to repeat your requests every few months.

Needless to say, *you must personally inspect anything and everything before ever submitting any bid*. The military bidders description might sometimes say "Approximate quantity: one". And they mean just that.

Ah yes, all those \$45 jeeps. Vintage military vehicles are sometimes still offered at less than commercial prices. The only tiny gotcha is that it is illegal to drive them on any public roads, so they are cut in half with a torch before you are permitted to accept delivery. These can be great for giant bookends. But do check your local zoning first. There are also obvious restrictions on weapon systems, military aircraft, and on some hazardous materials. Federal employees, or their families, or agents are not allowed to bid.

Note that there is also *non-military* government surplus. This is handled entirely differently, done through the *General Services Agency* listed under US Government in the white pages of your nearest large city phone book.

The process is also free and works pretty near the same way. You contact them, telling them which regions you seem interested in for what types of products. And then you are placed on the bidder lists. At least for a while.

Neither one of these agencies are involved in any way with narcs, DEA, or RICO confiscated personal items. Regardless of what all those fine print classified ads say.

Yet another source of unusual (and certainly "surplus") government stuff is the Post Office dead letter office. The main PO in every large city or the regional SCF has one or more yearly auctions in which the undeliverable, unreturnable or mystery packages are sold to the highest bidder. Usually by the hamper full.

A central post office should always end in an 00 zipcode. Several calls might be involved before you can get any straight info.

Hamfests

No, you do not have to be a radio ham to be welcome at any hamfest. Anyone can attend. The admission is often free or nominal.

A hamfest is an annual and often outdoor gathering of radio amateur enthusiasts. The main event is usually a high tech flea market where plenty of electronic bargains can always be

found. There's also prize giveaways, with excellent odds of you winning at least something.

Besides obvious comm gear, the focus is often on military surplus, old computer boards, scanners, and older antique radio electronics. Anything a techie could get off on can and will show up here.

One tip: Always arrive extra early, preferably well before sunup. All the best goodies really go fast.

Here in Arizona, the main hamfests are held in Tucson, Yuma, Apache Junction, Scottsdale, and Prescott. The ultimate primo biggie, though, is the Dayton Hamvention in Ohio. To tune yourself into hamfest activities, check all of the listings right here in *Nuts & Volts*, read the ham magazines, contact an amateur radio BBS, or ask around at your local radio club.

If you don't have the foggiest idea how to contact any radio ham at all, start with the search and rescue group at your local Sheriffs office.

Wholesale Surplus Sources

Much of electronic surplus today is traded by a shadowy and low profile group of highly lean and mean outfits who are collectively called *wholesale surplus distributors*. They operate by buying large lots of stuff and splitting it down into smaller lots. Virtually all the business is done by fax, and they try to turn their inventory over every twelve minutes. Their idea of long term is "outthere before lunch".

There are often very high (\$100 to \$500 line item minimums. And much of it is sold by the lot, which can be anything from 384 to 384,000 pieces. If your needs do not meet those precise quantities available, tough luck.

Typical wholesale prices can be two cents for a light emitting diode or a nickel for most jelly bean integrated circuits. On the other hand, if some very critical component gets scarce or suddenly has longer delivery times, they might charge you several times list and then some. Any production manager will gladly pay ten bucks for a nickel part if it is the only barrier item standing between his products and the shipping dock.

Your first and foremost rule when dealing with any of these people is *no screwing around*. You can expect zero handholding or technical assistance.

The assumption is made that you do know exactly what you've ordered and specifically what you are getting into. You fax them and tell them what

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VISA/MC

SYNERGETICS
Box 809-NV
Thatcher, AZ 85552
(520) 428-4073

FREE Catalog: <http://www.tinaja.com>

SOME WHOLESALE SURPLUS DISTRIBUTORS

Ace Electronics
3210 Antoine
Houston, TX 77092
(713) 688-8114

ACP Components
1317 East Edinger
Santa Ana CA 92705
(714) 558-8822

All Components
5999 Summerside Pl #208
Dallas, TX 75252
(800) 334-4637

Am Design Components
Box 2601
Secaucus, NJ 07094
(800) 776-3800

Braniff Industries
91 South Ottawa
Dixon, IL 61021
(815) 288-4500

Calcera
PO Box 489
Belmont, CA 94002
(800) 257-5549

Derf Electronics
1 Biehn Street
New Rochelle, NY 10801
(800) 431-2912

H&R Enterprises
21521 Blythe Street
Canoga Park, CA 91304
(818) 703-8892

Japan Electronics
15138 Valley Blvd
City of Industry, CA 91744
(818) 369-5000

J&C Electronics
Box 630
Salem, MA 01970
(800) 447-7014

Leo Electronics
22353 S Western Ave #201
Torrance, CA 90501
(310) 212-6133

LJ Enterprises
2377 Yorktown Street
Oceanside, NY 11572
(516) 766-2304

Micro-C
11085 Sorrento Court
San Diego, CA 92121
(619) 552-1213

New England Circuit Sls
292 Cabot Street
Beverly, MA 01915
(800) 922-NECS

Search Electronics
228 East Atara
Monrovia, CA 91016
(818) 359-3350

Southwest Memory
3330 Earhart, Ste 213
Carrollton, TX 75006
(214) 484-1595

Surplus Traders
Winters Lane Box 276
Alburt, VT 05440
(514) 739-9328

Synergetics
Box 809
Thatcher AZ 85552
(520) 428-4073

World Wide
18 Stern Avenue
Springfield, NJ 07081
(800) 222-6268

you want. If they have it, you buy it.
Right now. Period.

I've listed a few wholesale surplus distributors in the first of our two sidebars. While I double checked this list just before our column deadline, you'll find that these firms come and go with astonishing speed. And some of them can be rather picky over who they allow for customers.

A few of these wholesale only firms advertise regularly in the *Electronic News* and the *Electronic Buyers News* trade journals. Both of these are free to qualified requests. Otherwise, these outfits may be hard to find.

Some Personal Favorites

Naturally, you'll find hundreds of ads for lots of small quantity surplus electronics right here in *Nuts & Volts*. And we would hope this would be your best place to start.

Over the years, though, I've found a few sources that clearly and obviously stand out above the crowd. Here's a few favorites that I've often used and personally recommend...

The first and foremost, of course, is *JerryCo*, who have recently renamed themselves as *American Science and Surplus*. If your entire universe were reduced to only one surplus store, this would clearly be it. In fact, the entire should now get calibrated in *JerryCo* units. An exceptionally good store might be 0.02 of a *JerryCo*, a poor one 0.0015, and so on.

While not very strong in electronic components, their coverage of optics, small motors, materials, and weird gizmos that cry "use me" is genuinely exceptional.

The most obvious surplus house is *Edmund Scientific*, who have long been

the ad leader in optics and scientific stuff. They are also very big in small motors, magnets, and compasses.

Still at their same old stall after all these years is *Fair Radio Sales*. They remain by far the leading place to go for any and all of the genuine military surplus electronics. Clear on back to WWII vintage transmitters, receivers, test gear, antennas, meters, and even electromechanical items. All usually featured in their free flyers.

For any "big mutha" raw iron, my favorite remains *C&H Sales*. Although the *Burdens Surplus Center* is certainly a useful second choice. Both outfits specialize in medium through larger hydraulics, generators, pneumatics, strange servos, and motors. Their free catalogs are essential if you are at all thinking of going into robotics.

While I've often felt their prices a tad high, *Herbach and Rademan* tend to offer a quality assembly of unusual electronics gear. Their infrared people detectors for only \$12 seem to be a genuine bargain.

Ultra cheapo parts have long been offered by *B & F Sales*, who seem to have cut way back on their fat and free catalogs, but are still in business at their old location. Speakers and radio chassis assemblies are typical listings. Plus bunches more.

As a good example of a wholesale surplus distributor who sometimes sells retail, my first choice is Marvin Bierbaum of *Surplus Traders*. He offers outstanding large quantity pricing on everything from wall power supplies to solar panels to laser printers to VCR front ends. Freebie catalogs are offered, plus co-op mailings where you can advertise your own products.

While not really surplus, I would

have to include *Archie McPhee* here. For they are the world's preeminent supplier of rubber iguanas and are a "must have" for any serious catalog collector. No *Nuts & Volts* reader can possibly afford to be without Archie's free catalog.

Attention K-Mart Shoppers

While not nearly as common (or as profitable) as they once were, you'll still find a scant few retail electronic surplus stores scrounging around the marginal neighborhoods in larger cities. Many of these regional stores flat out can not afford to send any catalogs to non-buyers. With others, their stock moves too fast or is too weird, in too small lots, or too cheap to properly itemize.

Yet others don't have the slightest idea what they've got in stock. And there is some sort of a continuum from "real stores" on down (way on down) to rusting junk piles in some otherwise overgrown empty lot.

For instance, I'd guess there are about twenty or so regional electronic surplus stores here in Arizona, with the lion's share of these in or around Phoenix. The most well known one is *Apache Reclamation & Electronics*, that started out as a *Honeywell* sponsored self-help ghetto project.

These days, there's still tons of stock and great prices here, but the quality is down markedly and some of the stuff is clearly getting rather long in the tooth. Sigh.

To find these unadvertised regional surplus stores, start off with the yellow pages of your largest city. Don't be surprised if half of them are closed, have strange hours or are simply not there. The other obvious

OTHER MENTIONED RESOURCES

American Sci & Surp
601 Linden Place
Evanston, IL 60202
(708) 475-8440

Burdens Surplus Center
PO Box 82209
Lincoln, NE 68501
(800) 488-3407

Edmund Scientific
101 East Gloucester Pike
Barrington, NJ 08007
(609) 573-6250

Fair Radio Sales
PO Box 1105
Lima, OH 45802
(419) 227-6573

Archie McPhee
PO Box 30852
Seattle, WA 98103
(206) 547-2467

Apache Reclamation
313 West Apache
Phoenix, AZ 85003
(602) 254-0613

C&H Sales
PO Box 5356
Pasadena, CA 91107
(800) 325-9465

Electronic Buyer's News
600 Community Drive
Manhasset, NY 11030
(516) 562-5000

GSA Personal Property
Box 25506 DFC B41 R223
Denver, CO 80225
(303) 979-0361

Synergetics
Box 809
Thatcher, AZ 85552
(602) 428-4073

BNF Enterprises
119 Foster Street
Peabody, MA 01961
(508) 531-5774

Defense Logistics Agency
PO Box 1370
Battle Creek, MI 49016
(616) 961-4000

Electronic News
Box 1051
Southeastern, PA 19398
(215) 630-0951

Herbach & Rademan
401 East Erie Avenue
Philadelphia, PA 19134
(215) 426-1700

Used Equipment Dir.
1100 Superior Avenue
Cleveland, OH 44144
(216) 696-7000

ways to pin down these stores are all your local computer clubs and the regional BBS systems. Plus, of course, those same amateur radio resources that got you to the hamfests.

My Ultimate And Top Secret Surplus Source

I have recently discovered several absolutely incredible places to go for my surplus electronic and computer goodies. At totally astonishing prices. Very sadly, many community colleges are either eliminating their electronics programs outright, or else are sharply cutting way back on them. Typical schools now have surplus materials auctions open to the public and held once a year or more.

The big secret: The outlying schools (those a two hour's drive from any large city) will often end up literally giving the stuff away. Mostly because all their auctions are not advertised heavily. And because the few locals that do manage to attend are flat out broke. Or don't know tech values.

There is also the minor fact that these sales are sometimes held in a furnace room between 2:13 AM and 2:46 AM on a Tuesday morning. With twenty milliseconds advance notice sent only to four long time friends of the auctioneer.

Some examples: A \$35,000 theater lighting system has sold for eighteen dollars. An almost new \$1800 printed circuit benchtop etcher for twelve. An antique gas pump for twenty. Clean Selectric typewriters for five. A mint tube caddy chock full of new vacuum tubes for ten. A Tektronix scope cart for twelve. An entire dino mainframe computer for \$3.50.

On the other hand, if the popular perceived value of whatever is getting dumped ends up too high, you could get ripped off badly. After a spirited bidding, worn out lathes and ancient

broken personal computers often go for ten times what any sane person would pay for them.

With many of these auctions, your personal checks are accepted and advanced registration isn't needed. To tune yourself into these very useful school auctions, get a list of all those community colleges in your state and figure out which ones are not in a high tech and big bucks locale. Then call the school's public information office and find out when and where these events are held.

Industrial Auctions

Major sources of electronic surplus include industrial auctions. Some of these involve bankruptcies. Others are perfectly healthy firms that use auctions for their routine ongoing and orderly disposal of excess materials.

Now, down in Silicon Valley, you just pick any local paper and you will have a long list of industrial auctions to select from. The real biggies will advertise in *Electronic Buyers News* or even *The Wall Street Journal*.

But it may not be obvious who is auctioning what to whom in your part of the country. And it probably didn't occur to them that you might want an invitation.

One obvious ploy is to find all the names of all those auction houses and the contract auctioneers in your area. Then call them all and tell them you do want to be notified of upcoming events. Or otherwise find out where and how they advertise.

Now, there positively must be some really great auctioneers insider trade journals, bidder's magazines, or odd newsletters which cover this sort of thing. Sadly, I just don't know about them. With the single exception of Pentons *Used Equipment Directory*, which is mostly into heavy machine shop stuff. Sorry about that.

But, why don't you tell me instead?

For the first of this month's two contests, just tell me about any insider publication that compiles national or regional industrial auctions. If you can, send along a sample copy or get me on their mailing list.

A Second Contest

On second thought, let's extend this to make it even easier. Just tell me about any surplus resource I don't know about that may be of interest to all *Nuts & Volts* readers. Electronic or otherwise. Or else, give me some specific GSA or other local auction information for your home turf. There will be a dozen of my newly revised *Incredible Secret Money Machine II* book prizes going to the best, along with an all expense paid (FOB Thatcher, AZ) *tinaja quest* for two going to the best.

Oh yes. One last chance and utterly stupendous surplus offer: What am I bid for a surplus DEC Micro PDP-11? More or less all there.

Approximate quantity one. ♦

UPDATE: Military surplus is now online and much easier to deal with. Search www.tinaja.com for the latest info. Also check our [surplus bargains](#)

Microcomputer pioneer and guru Don Lancaster is the author of 35 books and countless tech articles. Don maintains his no-charge US tech helpline found at (520) 428-4073, besides offering all of his own books, reprints, and consulting services. Don also offers a free catalog full of his unique products and resource secrets. The best calling times are 8-5 on weekdays, Mountain Standard Time.

Don is the webmaster of his Guru's Lair found at <http://www.tinaja.com>

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