

Denver 2008

Prolog: A Mile High!

It had been two years since the last time Nicki and I had been to a worldcon. Last year, instead of going to Nippon 2007 we had spent ten days in Italy, and it was such a pleasant experience we had just about decided to go back to Europe again as our big trip of the year. But that was before the dollar tanked against the euro.

So instead, there we were in Denver for Denvention 3, not all that sure we'd be having a good time. I'd been there once before, back in 1995, but the closest Nicki had ever been to the city was when we changed planes at the Denver airport on the way home from the 2002 worldcon.



on the steps of the Colorado State Capitol building

The trip to Denver from Baltimore wasn't especially pleasant, so we were looking for some kind of good luck omen on the taxi ride in to the city from the airport. And we found one. We were idly looking out the cab's side window at some of the cars we were passing, and there was a car from Indiana with a license plate that read "XERPS". It was Frank Kalisz, who we see every year at Midwestcon. He and his wife Millie have been throwing "Xerps in 2010" alien-themed bid parties at conventions for years. It was such a surprise that it broke the mood and by the time the cab dropped us off at our hotel we were both feeling ...quite literally... a mile high.

The Conventions of August

Like any worldcon, there were fans from around the globe at Denvention 3, but it was not nearly the largest convention that Denver would host in August, of course. There was that rather large political one at the end of the month, and to get out of its way, several other events scheduled for later in August moved their dates to earlier in the month. This made for a near-continuous stream of



Nicki and friend Pat Molloy, with signage

conventioners of various flavors coming into and out of the Colorado Convention Center. The first few days of Denvention overlapped the end of a big meeting of the Institute of Statistical Mathematics. By the end of the convention, the John Deere people and the International Association of Fire Chiefs had begun their conferences. But Denver wanted us all, and there were even small signs in the windows of many businesses that welcomed each convention to the city.

Of these, the ISM conference was the one that most closely resembled the Denvention. Many of their attendees seemed interested in the science fiction event just down the concourse, and some of them looked like fans. The ISM conference even had a sales area with coffee mugs, tee-shirts and the like. (My favorite was a child's size tee shirt that read "Dependent Variable".)

And the convention center itself was science fictional and even whimsical. The main lobby features hanging fixtures that look a bit like stylized UFOs from some 1950s movie and just outside, peering in through the glass facade, is a 40-foot tall blue bear. The big beast was created by a Denver-area sculptor, Lawrence Argent, as part of a public arts project and installed outside the convention center in 2005. Its official name is "I See What You Mean", though I'm not really sure that I do.



"I See What You Mean"

The People of Denvention 3

One thing that I *am* sure of is that my memories of Denvention 3 will be highlighted by all the reunions with friends that I don't get to see all that often. One of them is Australian fan Robin Johnson, who was selected by the 2010 Australia worldcon to be its Fan Guest of Honor, of which he is greatly deserving. Robin likes to travel and he has been to many of the places that I've been, including Cape Point in South Africa. Nicki and I had a pleasant dinner with him the evening of the Hugo Awards, with far-ranging conversation on dozens of topics including, of course, Australia. But there was never even a hint from him of what the entire convention would find out the next day, when Aussiecon 4 announced its invited guests.



in the Dealers Room with Erle Korshak

Robin's fan activity dates back several decades, but there were fans at Denvention whose activity dates back much further than that. There are now only seven people left who attended the very first worldcon, back in 1939 and two of them, Art Widner and Erle Korshak, were in Denver for this year's convention. Widner was looking a bit creaky and was a little slow in getting around, but Korshak looked in better shape than I was! He's now living in Florida and has restarted Shasta Publishers.

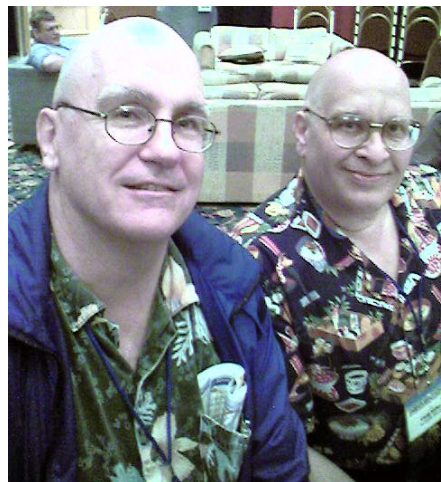
Denvention seemed smaller in size than the last few North American worldcons Nicki and I have been to, but that made it easier to find people. One of the easiest seemed to be Guy Lillian, who I crossed paths

with many times during the convention. I had been saving Coca-Cola bottle tops for him (apparently it's possible to use them to pay for movie rentals and the like), and he and his wife Rosie were surprised to receive a bagful of them. Jeff and Liz Copeland were also attending, and it was the first time I had seen them in many years. In fact, there were so many people from SFPA at



Teapots for Genny

Denvention that there was an ad hoc SFPA party the final day of the convention. (And I managed once again to avoid the inevitable and dreaded one-shot partyzine.)



Rich and Craig Miller compare their hair styles

Besides Guy, there were people I most definitely *did not* want to avoid, because I had brought more giveaways than just a bag of bottle tops. Moshe Feder is also a collector of Coca-Cola stuff, but not to use for trade-in. He has an actual collection of Coca-Cola related items of all sorts, and I had brought four Coke cans from my various travels, including two featuring Chinese Olympic mascots that I brought back from last year's trip to Beijing. The most fragile giveaways of the trip were two small ceramic teapots for Genny Dazzo, each themed with a cat sleeping on a couch. Nicki and I had found them at a thrift store and a yard sale, and knew Genny would want them for her large and ever-growing collection of themed teapots. (I'm guessing she must have the better part

of a thousand of them by now.) She was happy to get them, though not really surprised. (We bring a teapot of some kind every time we know we'll see her.) The big surprise was seeing her husband Craig Miller. As you can see by the photo, it turns out that he and I now have matching hair styles.

Of Blogs and Black Holes

The Denvention itself seemed more or less like most other worldcons. Have I become jaded by the big convention experience? Maybe, but I guess I could say the same thing about many of the smaller regional conventions I've been to. I was not on any program items at Denvention but I did find a few of interest to attend. One of them was Nicki's only panel, titled "Have Blogs and Listservs Replaced Fanzines?" The consensus was that the answer is still probably no, but that may not be true a few years from now. Many if not most fanzines are now web-only, and some fanzines that started out as print-only, including Guy Lillian's Hugo-nominated *Challenger*, are



Panel on Fannish Blogs with Guy Lillian, Janice Gelb, Nicki, David Levine, and Jed Hartman

now most easily obtained in an electronic version. At any rate, the proliferation of blogs over the past decade or so has pretty much placed a death sentence on the personalzine, but there is still a niche for the staid old genzine that blogs and listservs cannot easily fill. (So Guy should keep doing what he's doing.)

The panel I was looking forward to the most happened on the last day of the convention. Its title was "Mini Black Holes and the Politics of Fear". The subtitle of the panel should have been "How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the LHC" because that seemed to be the opinion by the two panelists (writers David Friedman and Gerald Nordley) on what we should do. The LHC is the "Large Hadron Collider", the largest, most powerful, and perhaps (as some people fear) the most dangerous physics experiment ever devised. It's an atom-smasher that the high-energy physics crowd is hoping will, among other things, shed some light on what the universe was like nanoseconds after the big bang. It could very possibly create some very exotic and (hopefully) extremely short-lived subatomic particles (such as micro black holes) that could lead to validation of certain theories and genesis of some new ones. The fear is that some of these exotic particles, if they are indeed produced, may not be as short-lived as predicted, which in the very, very worst case could lead to something way beyond a global catastrophe. It could be the very end of existence.

The two panelists seemed to be of the opinion that anybody who thought that was below contempt. I now believe the machine is safe, but back in August (before I read all the technical papers about LHC safety) I wasn't so sure. There was a somewhat testy exchange when, after I questioned the risk analysis of the machine (I expressed my opinion any potentially infinitely bad outcome should have exactly zero risk, and nobody to my knowledge had said the risk from operation of the LHC was exactly zero), I got back a "don't strain your brain cells about this" type of response. At the end of the panel, I left the room thinking the same thing that NBC News anchor Brian Williams would later say about the LHC: "I hope they know what they're doing!"

The Things We Did In Denver

I would like to think that Nicki and I did know what we were doing for the time we had in Denver away from the convention. One of the first places we went was the Downtown Aquarium. It's a bit mis-named – it's not really in the downtown area, but it's easy to get there by bus or cab. I had thought it would specialize in the fresh water fish that populate the Rocky Mountain's rivers and lakes, but it went way beyond that – there were many salt-water tanks including a very large one that had on display one of



at the Downtown Aquarium



the Colorado Capitol rotunda

the most popular aquatic creatures, as least as far as the viewers were concerned – two scuba divers. The aquarium is making a bit of money by selling "tank time" for people who want to swim among the fishes. Not something for the faint of heart to do, as there were sharks in there.

Something worth seeing that *was* located in the downtown area is the State Capitol. The golden dome is spectacular from the outside and the rotunda created by the dome equally so on the inside. And there are guided tours, which we found to be both interesting and informative.

We never once left the city limits, but there was enough to do and see that we didn't feel we needed to. For instance, we happened across an early afternoon free concert by western music singer Bill Barwick, who had won the Will Rogers Cowboy Award back in 2005 from the Academy of Western Artists. We were in an indoor food court getting something to drink when we saw him and his sideman setting up on a small stage. We later found out that the city of Denver sponsors a series of these small concerts at that stage once a week, and we lucky enough to be there at exactly the right time.

Luck didn't always work in our favor, though. We had pre-purchased two tickets to the August 5th baseball



rainy Coors Field

game at Coors Field between the Colorado Rockies and the Washington Nationals. I had really been looking forward to seeing the inside of that stadium and it lived up to my expectations. It's one of the newer generation of fan-friendly "retro" ballparks designed specifically for baseball. The seats we had would have been great, beyond the left field fence but close to the playing field. But that turned out to be the only night all week there was bad weather. A stationary front had parked over Denver and the game was rained out.



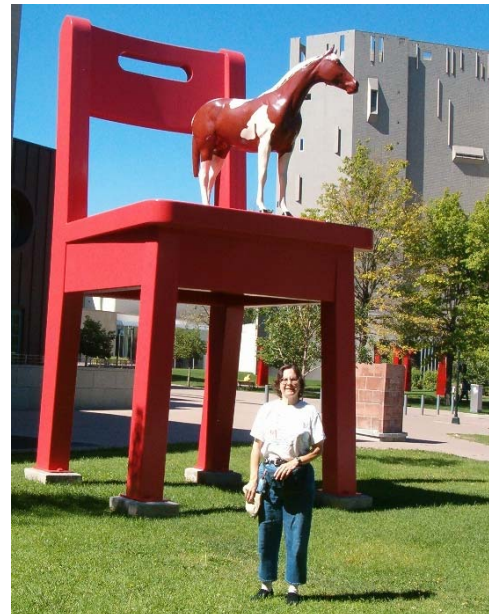
Western music singer Bill Barwick

Epilog: Reflections on the Contraction of Time

You know, there's one thing about growing older that's as puzzling as hell to me. My subjective sense of time is starting to get distorted, and each succeeding year seems noticeably shorter than the one before. I expect that if this continues, the years will eventually seem to have zero length, and then even move into negative durations – I'll be able to fondly remember the year 2020 five years before it arrives!

The same seems true about worldcons. One thing I've come to understand is that the passage of time is not linear at these events. The first two days of the convention subjectively seem to last a month. But then something happens to the flow of time and the second half of the convention seems to pass by in the blink of an eye. That's the way Denvention 3 turned out, and all too soon it was time to come home.

If we ever come back to Denver, there are other things we'd like to do. Next time we'd spend some time outside the city up in the mountains. Next time we'd try to find out more about musical events in the city, of which there are many. And next time we'd save some time for the Denver Art Museum...and go there on a day when it was open!



outside the Denver Art Museum