

The First Discon

by Rich Lynch

It is my belief (and to a certain degree, my experience) that Worldcons, like many large events, are labors of love in the minds of their organizing committees. So much so that it often takes significant chunks of the lifetimes of those very dedicated people to make one happen. For instance, this gathering, the third World Science Fiction Convention ever to be held within the borders of the District of Columbia, has been in various planning stages – from original inception to final preparation – for probably the better part of a decade. But, in a much broader sense, the seeds of its creation date back a lot further than that.

Fully three-quarters of a century, in fact. It was back in 1946 that a D.C. science fiction enthusiast, Charles “Chick” Derry, began contacting fans he knew in the immediate metro area with the idea of forming a fan club. Derry eventually met another active Washington fan, Bob Pavlat, at the 1947 Worldcon in Philadelphia and together they were able to generate enough enthusiasm from five other D.C. fans to form what turned out to be a lasting organization. The result was the Washington Science Fiction Society, which changed its name a few months later to the Washington Science-Fiction Association, or WSFA.

By 1950, WSFA had grown enough that more activities were possible than just twice-a-month meetings. It held its first convention that year, a one-day event that drew about 75 fans and was successful enough that it was repeated the next year under the name of ‘Disclave’. By the early 1960s, Disclaves had become multi-day events and were starting to become multi-interest, so WSFA decided to try something *really* interesting: sponsor a World Science Fiction Convention. Its only other serious bid to host a Worldcon (for 1950) had garnered barely enough votes to finish third of the four bids considered by the business meeting of the 1949 Worldcon, but by 1962 things were different. The club had the wherewithal and active membership base to support a bid, and also an influential fan (George Scithers) to act as Chair. The bid won broad support at the Chicon III business meeting and as a result, the city of Washington was host to its first Worldcon, the ‘Discon’, over Labor Day weekend in 1963.

That first Discon was notable for many reasons, not all of which involved science fiction. Just three days prior, an event staged nearby had helped to shape the world of the 1960s – the “I Have a Dream” speech of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. at the Lincoln Memorial, only about a mile from the Statler-Hilton Hotel where the convention was held. Discon’s Guest of Honor was someone who was as respected within the science fiction genre as Dr. King was in the world at large – Will F. Jenkins, who wrote under the pen name of Murray Leinster. He was a great choice for GoH, not only for having won a Hugo Award seven years earlier for his novelette “Exploration Team”, but for all the groundbreaking concepts he had originated and incorporated into his fiction: The first Alternate History story (“Sidewise in Time”, published in 1934). The first story that foresaw a future with extensively interlinked small computers (“A Logic Named Joe”, published in 1946). The first story to include a ‘universal translator’ device (“First Contact”, published in



Will F. Jenkins (right) at the first Discon

1945). And the first story to actually *introduce* the phrase ‘first contact’ (“Proxima Centauri”, published in 1935). At the time of Discon, Murray Leinster was also one of the oldest living science fiction writers, his first story “The Runaway Skyscraper” having been published way back in 1919. He had been rightfully described by *Time* magazine (in 1949) as “the dean of writers in the [science fiction] field”.

Leinster’s Guest of Honor speech, at the convention’s banquet luncheon, was an unscripted anecdotal remembrance of people, places, and events over the span of his long writing career. But also forward-looking: During his remarks he stated that, “I do have one hope I can talk about. It has long been my belief that science fiction is the hope of the nation.” Leinster spoke for about 45 minutes in all, and after that it was time for the Hugo Awards presentation. Discon’s Toastmaster, Isaac Asimov, had charge of the event (as he had been for several previous Worldcons) and he was humorously entertaining with many witticisms and even some back-and-forth banter with other writers who were there. At that point in his writing career, Asimov had not yet been voted a Hugo and so he used his annual Worldcon Toastmaster speaking time to make his introductory comments into an amusing faux-lament: “I have edited an anthology called *The Hugo Winners* [in which] I have bared my heart. I wrote about all the rascals who get Hugos and how they never give it to the one man, who above all others, deserves numerous Hugos – ME!”

But this time it was different. The very last award presented, one that had been kept secret by the convention committee, was a Special Award – to him! It was inscribed “For Adding Science to Science Fiction. Isaac Asimov” in honor for all of the science popularizing essays and articles he had written over the years. It only took a few seconds for Asimov to realize that his annual schtick at the Hugo Awards ceremony was finished. He turned to Scithers and exclaimed, “You killed the whole bit!”

It didn’t quite overshadow all the Hugos that had been given out prior to that, and there had been some very worthy winners. Philip K. Dick won what would be his only Hugo Award for his novel *The Man in the High Castle*. Jack Vance won in the Short Fiction category for “The Dragon Masters”. Roy Krenkel won in the Best Professional Artist category, *Fantasy & Science Fiction* won for Best Professional Magazine, and *Xero* for Best Amateur Magazine. There was also another special committee award, to P. Schuyler Miller in recognition of his many thoughtful and informative book reviews. And in a separate ceremony later that day, the venerable E.E. “Doc” Smith was honored with the inaugural First Fandom Hall of Fame Award.

There was a lot more memorable moments at that first Discon than just the awards ceremonies, of course. One of them happened right after the gavel fell at the Opening Ceremonies, when Fritz Leiber and L. Sprague de Camp yelled mock insults at each other in Old English and Persian that soon escalated into a clanging sword duel, each of them brandishing an old Argentine Navy cutlass. Which was followed by a robed wizard reading an incantation from a book of spells. Once the theatrics had concluded, Scithers introduced James Blish who gave an incisive speech about literary criticism as it pertains to science fiction and how British reviewers



Doc Smith with his First Fandom Hall of Fame Award

seemed to be much better at it. After that there were panels and lectures on topics as diverse as fiction writing, comic book art, and the mysteries of astronomy. There was also a costume ball and even a poetry slam. And that was just the first day.

There were two more days of Discon and each had a similarly eclectic mix of panels and speeches. In addition to the awards ceremonies and banquet, Day 2 was partially given over to special interest group meetings: the Burroughs Bibliophiles, the Fantasy Amateur Press Association, and the Hyborian Legion. And the third day featured an editors' panel, moderated by Fred Pohl, which had as its panelists several of the most prominent and respected science fiction editors of that time: Donald A. Wollheim, Cele Goldsmith, A.J. Budrys, and John W. Campbell, Jr. In all, the Discon program had something for everybody, all packed into one single, content-rich track of programming. Most of it was recorded on audio, and the result was a Proceedings that was put into print by Advent Publishers.

The 1963 Discon had an attendance of about 600 fans and professionals, very small by today's standards. But that provided it a degree of intimacy in terms of creating opportunities for meeting people, and those present were happy to partake. One of them was Mike Resnick who, with his wife Carol, were attending their first Worldcon. It was all gosh-wow to him, which caused him to be noticed by a much more seasoned Worldcon attendee. As Resnick later described it:

"There was a sweet old guy in a white suit who saw that we were new to all this, and moseyed over and spent half an hour with us, making us feel at home and telling us about how we were all one big family and inviting us to come to all the parties at night. Then he wandered off to accept the first-ever Hall of Fame Award from First Fandom. When they asked if he was working on anything at present, he replied that he had just delivered the manuscript to Skylark DuQuesne, and only then did we realize that he was the fabled E.E. 'Doc' Smith."

It's now been nearly 60 years since that first Discon. There probably aren't very many people left who were there, but a few of them may be attending this third edition of the convention and it wouldn't at all be surprising if there is a programming panel featuring some of those fans. Worldcons are timebinding events, where old memories become new again. That's almost certainly going to be true concerning the first Discon and it's now up to you, Discon III members, to create the memories which will begin this process all over again. Those of us attending Discon IV, whenever it is, will be looking forward to timebind with you.

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