

# High Times in High Point

I'm of the opinion that practically every small city and town in the United States is home to some relatively obscure roadside attraction. For instance, Gaithersburg, where I live, has one of the six international latitude observatories which were established in 1899 by the International Geodetic Association to precisely measure the wobble of the earth's rotating axis. The building still exists and is a National Historic Landmark. But it's not much of a photo op.

The city of High Point, North Carolina does a lot better. It's known as the "Furniture Capital of the World" – for many decades it has been the center of the North Carolina furniture industry, with the downtown and nearby environs dominated by very large exhibition halls which host major furniture and home furnishings trade shows. So it's not surprising that the most famous roadside attraction in High Point is furniture-themed.

It's the world's largest chest of drawers. The structure dates back to the mid-1920s, commissioned by the local Chamber of Commerce and built as a monument to the city's status in the home furnishings industry. It's absolutely a photo op, made even more so by the pair of socks whimsically dangling from one of the drawers, but it was not the reason that Nicki and I had traveled to central North Carolina. We had come for the 2017 DeepSouthCon.



pondering the world's largest chest of drawers

The origin of the Deep South Science Fiction Convention dates way back to July 1963, when six science fiction fans got together in Huntsville, Alabama at the home Dave and Katya Hulan for what was described as "a very enjoyable party". Ever since then the DeepSouthCon has been a yearly event which has been hosted by different fan groups throughout the southeastern United States. Back in the 1970s and 80s when we lived in Tennessee, DSCs were invariably stand-alone conventions. But that is no longer the case. Nowadays the economics of trying to stage a one-off convention ranges from difficult to impossible – the last time it was tried, three years ago, there was a substantial financial loss which had to be covered by the convention chairman. So the norm has become that the DSCs are almost always combined with existing conventions to take advantage of existing fan bases. And this year's DSC was no exception – it was an add-on to the annual High Point convention, ConGregate.

Last year, when the DSC was combined with an Atlanta-area convention, the results had been less-than-optimal. Instead of integrating the DSC into the convention's overall multi-track program, it was provided just a single room down at the far end of the hotel's function space. And there hadn't seemed to have been a lot of thought for what do to with the DSC in terms of programming. There had been generic titles for what had turned out to be unmemorable panels, which resulted in none of the DSC programming items having more than a handful of people in attendance. And none had added much of any real value about the unique entity that is Southern Fandom. I was really hoping that this year's DSC would be different.

Well, it was and it wasn't. The DSC was not ghettoized this year into its separate space and there was plenty of programming – panels about science fiction and fantasy in print and in the media, and even some panels related to various aspects of science fiction fandom. But I didn't find that any of it was particularly inspired by the presence of the DSC. The only truly DSC event, other than the business meeting, was the presentations of the Phoenix Award (to an editor, author, or artist with connections to the South), the Rebel Award (to a deserving fan for service to Southern Fandom), and the semi-facetious Rubble Award (to a person or entity which has done the most *to* Southern Fandom). This year's there were two winners for each of the service awards: Simon Hawke and Aaron Allston (Phoenix) and Bob Ellis and Mike Pederson (Rebel). As for the Rubble, it's originator and proprietor, Gary Robe, named a Chattanooga hotel as the this year's winner – it had been the venue for many previous science fiction conventions but was no longer viable as such because it was converting many of its rooms into apartments. How dare they!



Gary Robe presents the Rubble

What stood out about this year's DSC, and what made it a DSC at all for that matter, was that it brought together many fans from different places and different eras – people who have been to other DSCs over the past six decades and whose presence make a DSC the special event that it is. George Wells was there, all the way from Arizona. He's been going to DSCs for so many years that he's been adopted into Southern Fandom. Sitting in the lobby and talking to him and his buddy Richard Dengrove (another long-time DSC attendee) is almost a program event in itself – the always entertaining conversation ranges in many, often disparate, directions, and Nicki and I usually feel a bit worn out by the time we finally move on to other activities. And Bill Plott has started coming to DSCs! His fan activity dates back to even before that very first DSC, and, indeed, a published description of that 1963 event indicates he was there! This will be something we'll have to delve into at a future DSC. Assuming we can get some Southern Fandom-specific programs onto the schedule, that is.



Nicki and Bob Burlison at Kepley's

There were many such enjoyable conversations during the three days of ConGregarate, but the most memorable one didn't happen at the convention. For dinner on Saturday evening we went to a highly-recommended barbecue restaurant, Kepley's, and were almost immediately introduced to its owner, Bob Burlison. For the next ¾ hour, while we enjoyed some excellent North Carolina `cue, he regaled us with tales of himself and his business. He's been the owner since 1962, and in that time has come to know practically everybody in the city. Or at least everybody who came in to eat that evening. After more than half a century he's finally kicked back and has become the official greeter. And also the official storyteller – it's something he's good at.

Next year's DSC will be at a date and location too inconvenient for us to attend. But in 2019 it will be back in North Carolina. And most likely, so will we. We had a good time. ☀