

SMOFs in Snow

My flight to Colorado Springs for SMOFcon started out with my recognizing local fan Michael Siladi getting on the plane, and he and former Bay Area fan Craig Howlett finding Bay Area fan Dave Clark and LA fan Bruce Pelz at our connecting flight's gate. I had packed multiple layers and sweaters but when we landed on Friday afternoon, it was nearly 70 degrees! Luckily, as the weekend turned out, my packing according to the Weather Channel was smarter than it looked on the ride to the hotel.

Friday, December 4

On opening the drapes in my room, I discovered that my window was about 6 inches from the large elevated teddy-bear Christmas tree in the hotel lobby. Shame it couldn't have gone to someone more appreciative of the holiday spirit! I quickly checked my voice mail and email, since my boss had agreed not to count Friday as a vacation day if I kept in touch with the office, and then headed down to the con suite to register and get some food for a much-delayed lunch.

Besides shmoozing in the con suite and wolfing down a pseudo-bagel and shmear, I slipped Portland fan Ruth Sachter some cash to pay for my dinner later on that night. She and her husband John Lorentz, and practically local Denver fan Candace Larue, and I ended up eating dinner at Cap'n Somebody's Crab Shack. It featured inexpensive seafood and tacky waitron entertainment, including dancing to YMCA and forcing reluctant patrons to stand on their chairs and sing.

Back at the hotel, we headed up to the traditional ice-breaker, which this year was supposed to be an entertaining game on parliamentary procedure. (Not *quite* the oxymoron it sounds, but close...) Unfortunately, the person whose main project it was, Bay Area fan Kevin Standlee, had called to say he was having airline troubles and wouldn't be in until after midnight. A rumor was going around that this was because of a Bay Area earthquake, which gave me a moment's pause until I realized this was probably based on the small 3.1 that had rumbled through the area early that morning, causing no damage or injuries.

The game was a bit complicated and the silliness factor was enhanced by a coup putting Bruce in as meeting chair and having Seattle fan Tom Whitmore pop up every few minutes, announcing himself in true business-meeting form as "Fred Flintstone, Bedrock." However, there's only so much rollicking humor on parliamentary procedure I can stand, so I went back downstairs to the con suite to see what new arrivals had shown up and tastefully arrange on the freebie table the DUFF ballots I'd brought with me. I also discovered that Boston fan Priscilla Olson had been just as upset as I was that our two panels had been scheduled opposite each other on Sunday morning, as we were both interested in the other person's topic. She went off to find chair Kent Bloom and convinced him to switch my panel to a Saturday afternoon TBA slot.

Saturday, December 5

After eating from the well-stocked free hotel breakfast buffet, it was off to John Lorentz's panel on managing volunteers. Given the people in attendance, I suppose it shouldn't have been a surprise that the discussion gradually morphed from area head use of and planning for volunteers, and then to good division head requirements. This inspired the suggestion, eventually carried out, to do a "Special Topic" session on division heads on Sunday.

The con suite provided both food and gossip for lunch, and then it was time for Peggy Rae Pavlat's 1 p.m. panel on "Dealing with the Unpleasant: Defining, Encouraging, and Enforcing Acceptable Behavior on the Con Comm." Tom Whitmore served as whiteboard amanuensis, and the discussion ranged from dealing with difficult con comm members who are competent but annoying to

discouraging the willing but incompetent.

My panel on "Communications for Distributed Committees" followed, and I started the discussion by passing out a previously prepared handout on "The Ten Commandments of Electronic Communication." I had to yank the conversation back a few times from getting hopelessly technogeeky, and I was guilty myself of concentrating too much on method and not enough on philosophy, but overall I thought the session went pretty well. (One embarrassing moment came when, in trying to make sure he was heard, I told Michael Siladi to take his hand from in front of his mouth, not thinking about how the abrupt instruction would sound. Priscilla's immediate addition "And sit up straight, too" was quickly rejoined by Michael's saying, "Why Priscilla, I didn't know you cared!")

The minute sunset hit, I went off to my room to watch the Kansas State/Texas A&M Big 12 playoff game. Unfortunately, the game went into double-overtime, and I had to leave before the end to meet Mark and Priscilla and Florida fans Joe Siclari and Edie Stern for a scheduled dinner run to a Moroccan restaurant. Our ability to get a reservation so easily on a Saturday night was immediately explained by the fact that between our route from the hotel and the restaurant was a large street, which was blocked off for several blocks for a Christmas parade. We managed to find a parking space about a block from that street, and wended our way to the sidewalk (where we were passed at one point by a woman accompanied by a large Dalmatian over which she'd placed a blanket to which blinking lights were attached!) Eventually we spotted a break between a marching band and a float dedicated to Rudolph and sprinted across the street. Heaven knows what the parade-watchers thought!

The restaurant turned out to have both excellent food and an amazing atmosphere. (To add to the fun, we were seated next to a large party of fellow fans.) It was designed to resemble a tent, and as with many Moroccan restaurants, you ate with your hands while reclining on pillows at low tables. Unlike other Moroccan restaurants I'd been to, this one had a vegetarian entree and made a special effort to accommodate me when I mentioned I'd pass on the soup because I was a vegetarian. They served me a different soup and made a vegetarian version of a standard course. As an added treat, there was a professional belly dancer, and I could swear that one of the songs they played was the same music as to an Israeli dance I know!

Stuffed and in a mideastern mood, we emerged from the restaurant only to find **snow!** Poor Priscilla was wearing open-toed shoes without socks and I had a recalcitrant hood on my coat, but eventually we sloshed back to the car. At the hotel, I went to my room to put my wet coat away and check out the final football scores. I was pleased to find out that not only had Texas A&M won its game with Kansas State, but other teams had also been upset, throwing the whole bowl picture into chaos. (I love underdogs!) I got to visit some with Nebraska fan Randy Smith, who had driven five hours to get to the con for the day, and was facing a five-hour drive back and an early arising for his duties Sunday morning as minister. Talk about dedication! After some more SMOFFing, I got to contribute some of my fabled collection of JAP jokes. After watching Craige make bizarre shapes out of a click-toy, it was off to bed.

Sunday, December 6

Priscilla's morning panel on "The Art and Philosophy of Convention Programming" was just as interesting as I had anticipated. I caused some expected controversy with my neanderthal views on what I consider appropriate panel topics for a science fiction convention. Mostly, though, the discussion provided a lot of helpful tips on developing the program, refining it, and dealing with difficult participants. The con suite provided a treat for lunch: NY fan Zev Sero had brought leftovers from his kosher food stash! Then Boston fan Gay Ellen Dennett kindly provided me with a ride to a nearby mall so I could get some warm gloves, not an easy commodity to find in California.

The rest of the afternoon was spent watching some important professional football games. I also got some background on "Buffy, the Vampire Slayer" from Dave Clark when he found out I'd never seen the show. My dinner plans were moved up when the other people on the evening shuttle convinced me that we needed to allow more time to get to the airport because of the continuing show. My companions--NY fan Ben Yalow, British fan Kim Campbell, and Texas fans David and Diana Thayer--graciously agreed to eat earlier, and we had a nice time at a local Chicago pizza place, which also featured an array of beers to choose from.

We got back to the hotel just in time for me to pick up my luggage and get the shuttle. At the airport, we watched as Kevin and companion Cheryl Morgan barely made it to our United plane, having once again had airline scheduling problems with Reno Air. Once we landed in Denver, I checked out the departure board, only to find that my scheduled 9:35 departure had been moved to 11! Luckily, I noticed that a flight originally scheduled to leave at 8 was now leaving at 9:20 at a gate once removed from the one where I had landed. Even though I was sure that other refugees from my flight would have already taken all the standby slots, I decided to give it a try and was astounded when they gave me a boarding pass right away! I ended up landing 5 minutes earlier than my scheduled arrival, and the relatively cold weather in San Jose seemed balmy after the Colorado chill.

Summary

I found the panels at this SMOFcon more involving than at other SMOFcons in the past thanks to an innovative participatory design. (I think one-and-a-half hour slots would have worked better than two hours, though.) As usual, I was pleased at the opportunity to spend some non-frantic time with my fellow con runners :->

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