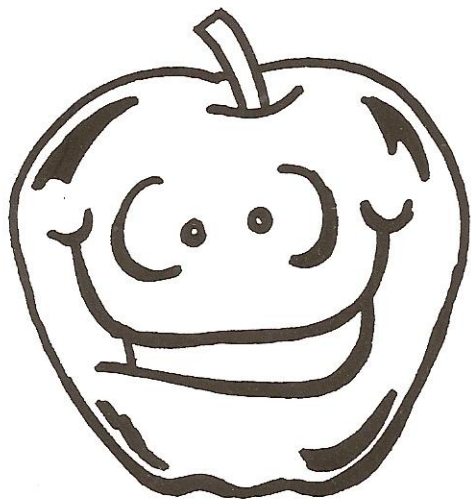
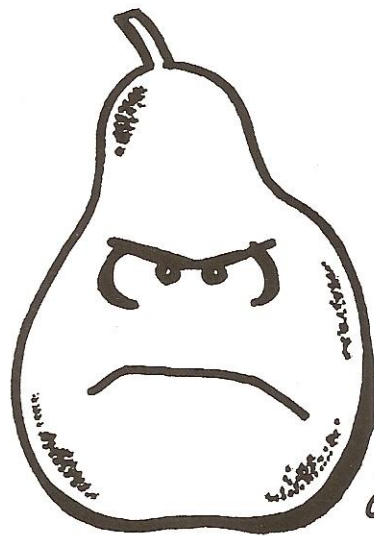


29.5

OPUNTIA



Happy Apple.



don
turn
696

Prickly Pear.

OPUNTIA is published irregularly by Dale Speirs, Box 6830, Calgary, Alberta, Canada, T2P 2E7. It is available for \$3 cash for a one-time sample copy, trade for your zine, or letter of comment on a previous issue.

ART CREDIT: Ian Gunn, Box 567, Blackburn 3130, Australia.

SITTING DUCKS

1996-5-15

Normally our tree planting operations start off with a utility line locate, then marking the spots, then digging the holes (a cubic metre in size), and finally backfilling with loam. The loam gives the tree a good start, preparing it for the time when its roots grow out into the subsoil. Calgary subsoil is never much good. In the valley bottoms it is glacial gravel that drains instantly and won't hold water. Up on the plateau of the prairies, it is clay which dries to the hardness of concrete. The foothills are decomposed sandstone, not too bad really, but exposed to constant gale-force winds which dessicate the tree. Calgary was naturally treeless except along riverbanks when the Mounties arrived in 1875.

Trees do survive naturally along riverbanks and shaded coulees on north or east facing slopes. One such slope is the Bow Bottom Trail slope, overlooking the freeway of the same name. Some shrubs and aspens grow without

help, but a recent grant from the federal government enabled us to revegetate areas damaged by urbanization. We got 700 aspen seedlings to plant on Bow Bottom slope. My crews were a bit awed at the thought of planting 700 trees, but cheered up when told that these were seedlings of the type used by forestry companies to replant clearcuts. There are 300 seedlings in a box, grown in peat plugs from cuttings. One uses a special narrow spade, sticking the spade in the ground, tilting it forward, dropping the seedling in behind it, then tamping the plant in. No backhoes to dig holes, tandems to haul fill out, or pup trailers to haul loam in. The job was done in a morning.

Prior to planting the 700 aspen, I went out with the Natural Areas Foreman and we walked the site, looking for the best coulees or swales to plant them in. As we walked along the slope, a female mallard duck exploded out from under our feet. She had blended in so well to the grass that we almost stepped on her. She had a nest of eight eggs. We left them untouched and went on with our site inspection. The next day, when we planted the seedlings, I checked her nest after the crews had left. She was still there, incubating the eggs, and almost invisible despite looking straight at her.

What surprised us is that she is a considerable distance from the Bow River, about a kilometre at a guess. I had always thought ducks stayed reasonably near water when hatching a brood. Unless she intends keeping her young on the slope until they can fly (which will expose them to urban coyotes) she will have to walk them to water across a freeway, through a suburb, past a sewer plant, and finally across an exposed bottomlands grassland with no cover. I hope she makes it, but I wonder.

It's amazing how much wildlife lives and breeds along freeway boulevards and medians. Roadkill potential is countered by reduced predation from humans and their dogs, there being no pedestrians to bother them.

A YOUNG MAN GOES WEST

After my father died, cleaning up his estate was major work, for he was a packrat who never threw anything away. His filing system consisted of throwing everything on a pile. When the pile was too big or toppled over, he'd start a new pile beside it. The basement at home was a sea of paper. Dad built two clinics on the farm. The first was too small, and soon filled beyond capacity. The second barely managed to last to his death; it was three rooms for the clinic proper and the rest filled to head-height with stuff. There is a family legend about the time National Revenue decided to audit Dad's veterinary practice in the late 1980s. A bright-eyed accountant showed up at the clinic with a laptop and asked to see Dad's computer records. He was shocked to discover that Dad did not have a computer system. Dad was planning to retire in a few years and saw no sense in spending money or time on something he could not recover the investment in before he retired. Undaunted, the taxman decided to do it the old-fashioned way, and asked how Dad's files were arranged. Dad told him that the piles were arranged in rough chronological order. The office cats may have rearranged some of the piles over the years; I know at least one cat used a desk drawer full of papers for a nest to have her kittens in. The taxman was subdued, and I never heard that much came of that audit.

After Dad's death, Mom passed on to me some letters to him written in 1951 when he was in his final year of veterinary school and looking for a place to set up his practice. As a student, Dad had interned in Calgary with Dr. Greenaway, who recommended to him the Eckville district. Dad wrote to a cattle auctioneer in nearby Evarts to ask him for an opinion of Eckville, and it was those letters Mom found. All my life I only heard my father called 'Doctor', so it was strange to see

the letters addressed to "Mr. C.J. Speirs, Ontario Veterinary College, Guelph, Ontario". But of course he was not yet 'Doctor' and wouldn't be until a month after the letters were written.

Eckville and the nearby hamlets of Evarts, Benalto, and Leslieville were settled just before World War One, with homesteading as late as the Great Depression. Alberta's oil boom began in 1947, and in 1951 there was optimism among the farmers. The Eckville district began to develop in the 1950s and 1960s, with proper gravel roads and commercial services. I remember going with Dad on his farm calls in the early 1960s and seeing new rural roads and bridges under construction everywhere.

A GOOD START FOR THE RIGHT KIND OF MAN

The cattle auctioneer Dad wrote to for advice was Clyde Stauffer, whose letterhead proclaimed him "Breeder of Quality Registered Herefords" and gave his address as "Five miles south of Benalto corner on gravel in the Heart of Hereford Heaven". Stauffer's first letter to Dad was dated May 6th, 1951, and read as follows.

"Dear Mr. Speirs: Replying to your letter of May 2nd. First I would like to say that I just as soon you would have written to another for information instead of me (no doubt you have), not that I don't want to take the time to write you, or that I don't want to give you advice, but I realize you are a reasonably young man starting out in business for yourself. If you get a bumstart might be your downfall. Where if you get a good start, well you will just be away and no hard luck can stop you, if you are the right kind of a man. I hope you get a good start regardless if it be in this district or not."

[continued next page]

"Yes, Eckville is a very prosperous district and if any district in Alberta receives a good crop in poor years it's this district. I moved in from The Prairie 16 yrs ago. One year we were quite badly hailed. One year very dry and frosty. But 14 out of the 16 were to me very good years, even the two years I speak of as bad. I had lots of feed and kept the wolf away with hogs and cattle. Nearly everyone has cattle and hogs, with quite a number of purebred herds in the district. Red Deer is the closest vet, Dr. Walton, who is a very nice chap and I believe a good vet. I call him an average of twice a year and it costs real money to call a vet 30 miles nowadays. I would of course patronize a local vet instead providing he was a good vet and tended to business. Also the most people are only starting to vaccinate their heifer calves against Bangs. This alone is going to grow and will take in many days every fall and spring."

[Editor's note: Bang's disease or brucellosis, causes contagious abortion in cattle.]

"There is no vet west of here except a handyman near Leslieville who does a lot of work and is good, I hear, I have never used him. I have given you the bright side, but Eckville is a very strong Finlander and Estonian town and I hear they don't use a Dr. or vet unless it's really necessary. A Dr. Gaunt went in partnership with Dr. Walton last summer in Red Deer. He came here instead of Walton on one of my calls, seemed a fine fellow, and really done his stuff while here. He told me he liked this district and intended to stay. He advertised and was in Eckville every Wed. afternoon, but he only went there about 8 weeks and left. He even left Red Deer. I heard he went up Edmonton way. If I could talk to him I'd soon find out but he had a taste of Eckville. Where the trouble was I don't know, just heard the report that those guys around Eckville won't hire a vet. He may have had trouble with Walton. I don't know. If I were you I'd write

him, tell him your intentions, ask his opinion, address him Dr. Gaunt, V.S., Red Deer, put 'Personal and Please Forward' on the letter, I believe he will get it."

"Now I have told you what I think. I'd like you to come to this district but I'd like to see you make good so watch your step. If you land anywhere around here, call and see me."

QUITE A NICE LOT OF WORK

One of our family friends is Dr. Harold Spencer, for many decades a veterinarian with the federal Ministry of Agriculture. How Dad first met him may be surmised in a followup letter Clyde Stauffer wrote a couple of days later on May 8th. (Canada is officially The Dominion of Canada, hence the reference in this letter.)

"Dear Sir: Further to my letter of a few days ago. I just had a talk with the local Dominion Veterinary Dr. Spencer, V.S., Red Deer. I mentioned the fact that you had wrote me for information (but I gave no name). He said if a vet started at Eckville and made application to the Dominion as a part-time veterinarian, he was almost sure to get the job and that meant quite a nice lot of work for at least the next 3 yrs. as they are now testing all the Municipal Districts' herds for T.B. free areas. I just thought you would like to know this."

Well, one thing I do remember of Dad's farm calls when we lived in Eckville was that he did a lot of vaccinating. He used a vaccination gun that held multiple doses of vaccine, straddled the squeeze chute in the corral, and dosed each animal as it passed under him. Stauffer's remark about Finlanders in the previous letter made me laugh when I first read it, for Dad married one of them, and my mother's relatives were mostly farmers.

LIFE IN THE CLOVER

With the Stauffer letters was one from Dad's mentor, Dr. Greenaway. His letter, dated May 11th, 1951, was as follows.

"Dear Mr. Speirs: Your letter was received and the information you wished is now ready."

"I have no doubt but you would make a go of practice in Eckville. The price of animal life has risen very high and as a result your knowledge is much more valuable. There is a V.S. located 15 miles from Eckville but he is a coronary heart case and should not constitute any difficulty for you."

"With good bulls selling from \$1500 to \$15000 in Alberta you should find out that you graduated in a seed clover field."

"Let me know if you decide to come to Eckville or Rocky and I'll do all I can to help you along."

And so it was that a Saskatchewan farm boy ended up in central Alberta after graduating from an Ontario college.

WHAT'S BECOME OF TIGGER?

Out on patrol at work, I noticed an orange cat stalking down a sidewalk rather arrogantly, even for a cat. It immediately reminded me of Tigger, a friend's cat who was one of the strangest cats I've met. Tigger was a marmalade longhair; her mother lived next door and her father was unknown save that he must have been from somewhere in the neighbourhood.

Tigger was dangerous, and her reputation preceded her. She would be friendly and gentle 95% of the time. Then, for no apparent reason, she would slash out at an ankle or bite a hand. The subsequent screams of pain from the victim always startled her into dashing out of the room. She would return a moment later, casually walk back to her previous spot, and resume as if nothing had happened. Had she been uniformly vicious, everyone could have acted accordingly, but since she was mostly quite friendly, it was like sitting next to a time bomb with a defective clock.

I didn't realize at first the danger. Tigger preferred to stay at floor level, and seemed to have a particular taste for ankles. As I wear only cowboy boots, she was rather frustrated in attacking me, not being able to do much against the thick leather. I got my comeuppance in due time though. I was petting her as I had done many times before, when she turned and sank her teeth deeply into the back of my hand. My host got out the first-aid kit from under the coffee table, and I barely had time to start bleeding before the wound was bandaged. Tigger resumed her place by my feet, and from time to time she would nuzzle my boot with what I had previously thought was affection or scent marking, but which I now knew was a hopelessly optimistic attempt to bite through the leather.

There was much speculation about why she behaved the way she did. It was not because she had a sore spot on her back that she didn't like to have touched, for she would attack even when she wasn't being petted. Some thought her genetically faulty, but this was not widely accepted since her litter mates were all perfectly normal. The prevailing belief was that she must not have got enough oxygen at birth.

Or, life in the holy city of Calgary. David Icke was a British soccer player. Like many washed-up jocks, he found work as a television sportscaster. From there he drifted into politics, not a long jump in this day and age, and eventually wound up as leader of the Green Party in Britain. He later resigned and drifted into the lunatic fringe, snaring the humble petroleum city of Calgary in the process.

But before that, this. Calgary is on the contact between the Rocky Mountains and the prairies. Eastern suburbs are on the treeless prairie, western suburbs sprawl up into the foothills of the Rockies. One such foothill is Nose Hill, a bald-headed hill that is now mostly preserved as a natural grasslands park. It is completely surrounded by houses, but looms 300 m above the prairie plateau and is one of the most distinctive landmarks of the city. The Parks Dept. does controlled burns on a different part of the hill each year to keep the grassland natural. It hardly seems necessary though, as the early spring is usually dry. Easter school vacation leaves a lot of kids with time on the hands, and what better way to pass the time than to light fires on the hill and watch the blazes. Prairie grass fires send up a broad wall of creamy white smoke that almost seems alive, waiting to move into the city and destroy it. Nose Hill is 1092 hectares in size, and while it has never completely burned over, some of the blazes are quite sizeable. Grassland fires are a predictable part of life in Calgary.

In March 1990, David Icke met a British psychic Betty Shine. He later said, "I was gob-smacked. She told me things only I should have known.". He took up native spiritualism and visited western Canada in October of that year, spent time in Calgary and on a number of tribal Reserves in southern Alberta. Somewhere along the way he met a British woman living in Calgary, Mari

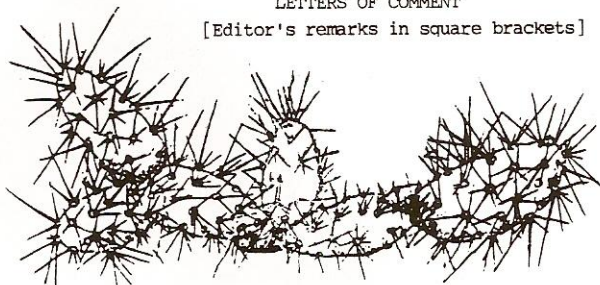
Shawsun. On a trip to the Peigan Reserve near Lethbridge, he collected thirteen diamond-shaped stones, as apparently predicted to him, whether by Shine or someone else I don't know. Metaphysical forces then compelled him to take the stones to Nose Hill to cleanse it. Icke and Shawsun arranged the stones in the shape of a medicine wheel to channel the positive forces of the universe into the hill. Nose Hill, according to Icke, is one of the seven power points of this planet, two others by way of example being the Egyptian pyramids and the Inca ruins in Peru.

In March 1991 he announced he was "Son of the Spirit of God", his wife Linda was "Spirit of the Angel of God" and Mari Shawsun was the "Daughter of God". In April 1991, the largest fire recorded in Calgary scorched about half of Nose Hill. Icke said, "The recent fire is final confirmation that the hill has been cleansed.". This was a no-lose prediction, considering that Nose Hill has had fires every year in human memory.

Icke predicted the Apocalypse for 1997, not so funny now as it was then. He and company wear turquoise track suits, that colour being the colour of "love and wisdom". They intended to wrestle the world away from the forces of evil by securing each of the seven power points, and funneling positive energy into them. As good a reason as any to go travelling. Tourism broadens the mind, as the saying goes.

A few weeks after Icke left Calgary, Jimmy Swaggart was in Calgary for a rather unsuccessful crusade, the main problem being that Billy Graham was in town a few months prior and pretty much cleaned out the faithful. Swaggart said Satan was fighting hard against him coming to Calgary; evidently no one told him that Icke had cleansed the city already. These people should really all get together and co-ordinate their travels so they aren't tripping each other up all the time. But anyways, here comes 1997. Maybe you should sell your long-term bonds.

[Editor's remarks in square brackets]



FROM: Harry Andruschak
Box 5309
Torrance, California 90510-5309

1996-9-5

I wouldn't be surprised if there really was a Bookaholics Anonymous group or Compulsive Collectors Anonymous group in some cities. Truth is, a lot of groups have ripped off the AA 12-steps for problems that would seem to have little to do with the original purpose of the 12 steps. Alcoholics have vomited blood into the toilet bowl. Is there a physical equivalent for bookaholics?

[How about sneezing jags from the dust on old books?]

You mention that both the loonie and doubloon circulate without trouble. Really? I seem to remember reading about discontent with the fact that Canadians had no choice; the paper bills were withdrawn from circulation, right? That is what the USA should have done with the \$1 coin.

[The kicking about the loonie soon died down once it

became obvious that it was here to stay. Much like the metric system and the maple leaf flag, actually. There wasn't as much opposition to the doubloon, partly since people were already used to the loonie, and also because the early defective doubloons that broke into two pieces when dropped distracted attention.]

FROM: Harry Warner Jr
423 Summit Avenue
Hagerstown, Maryland 21740

1996-9-28

I'm sorry to learn about the loss of your father. Mine died 36 years ago, and to this day, every time something goes wrong, I feel a moment of panic because I know I can't turn to him for advice or assistance.

[Those are my sentiments exactly. I've been out on my own for twenty years and looking after my own problems, but it was always comforting to know that my father was there to help if I asked.]

By some wild coincidence I read about your first doubloon just minutes after reading Jim Caughran's latest FAPA-zine which contains a similar description of the coinage change. Neither of you mentioned one disadvantage of coins to replace small denomination paper currency. They are hard on pants pockets, more so than small change because they're heavier and create holes in pockets more rapidly. I imagine this is one reason why the Susan Anthony dollar coin failed in the United States.

[I've had people talk about the weight of such coins and always challenge them on the spot to empty out their pockets and see how many bills they have. Usually they only have two or three; few people carry a thick wad of \$1 bills. Strangely enough, many people objected to the \$2 bill, so I can't see why they would complain about doubloons.]

FROM: Rodney Leighton
R.R. 3
Pugwash, Nova Scotia BOK 1LO

1996-9-1

Funny about that \$2 coin. I hated the idea when it was announced but rapidly accepted it. I never bothered trying to break them though.

When I was in Alberta, there were some wicked hail storms, although I can't recall anything quite like you describe. I remember the first time I was there, in 1969, and was told that if I was out in a field and it started to hail, to get underneath the tractor. I thought they were crazy but soon found out when one hit. The farm was 14 miles from Calgary then. I wonder if it is part of the city now.

[Probably the farm is inside the city now. The popular belief about hail storms is that they have gotten so bad in recent years because the heat island effect of the city intensifies the convection currents that cause hail.]

FROM: Bridget Hardcastle
13 Lindfield Gardens
Hampstead, London NW3 6PX

1996-8-28

It seems the person who wields the most power in a village is the local store owner. Want to brighten up the village? Just stock canary yellow paint. Before television, I guess the local store could be influential on the news side.

[Gossip intensifies in a small village, of course. I suspect the arrival of television to Eckville in the 1960s reduced it somewhat, but just the same, many reputations were made or destroyed at the luncheon counter of the Co-op store.]

FROM: Buck Coulson
2677W-500N
Hartford City, Indiana 47348

1996-8-29

[Re: ConVersion report] I wonder about all these panels on writing. Even now there aren't enough markets to provide for all the present writers plus all the fans who want to become writers. I'll admit that the way I learned, writing for fanzines, isn't enough now because there aren't enough fanzines around anymore. And writing, receiving rejections, and writing more is the slow way. The easily discouraged will drop out. It doesn't really matter what you write when you're learning; the idea is to learn to put words together in an interesting manner so people will read what you wrote. Subject matter is secondary. Editors have already seen all the ideas and are looking for something to keep the reader's attention.

[One thing I've noticed about the ConVersion writer workshops is that the same people are on them year after year without graduating into prodrom. They list credits in fanzines for poetry and short stories, and talk of their novel-in-progress, which never seems to be completed. In short, their outlet for their work is not periodicals, but the workshops themselves. There are lots of zines looking for copy though; GLOBAL MAIL has a lengthy column "Zines Requesting Contributors". Not the traditional SF fanzines, but here is an opportunity to spread the gospel of SF into punkzines or mailartzines.]

I ALSO HEARD FROM: Joseph Nicholas, Chester Cuthbert, Henry Welch, Robert Lichtman, Mark Plummer, the Gunns, Bruce Barbarash, Kevin Welch, Andrea Ovcinnicoff