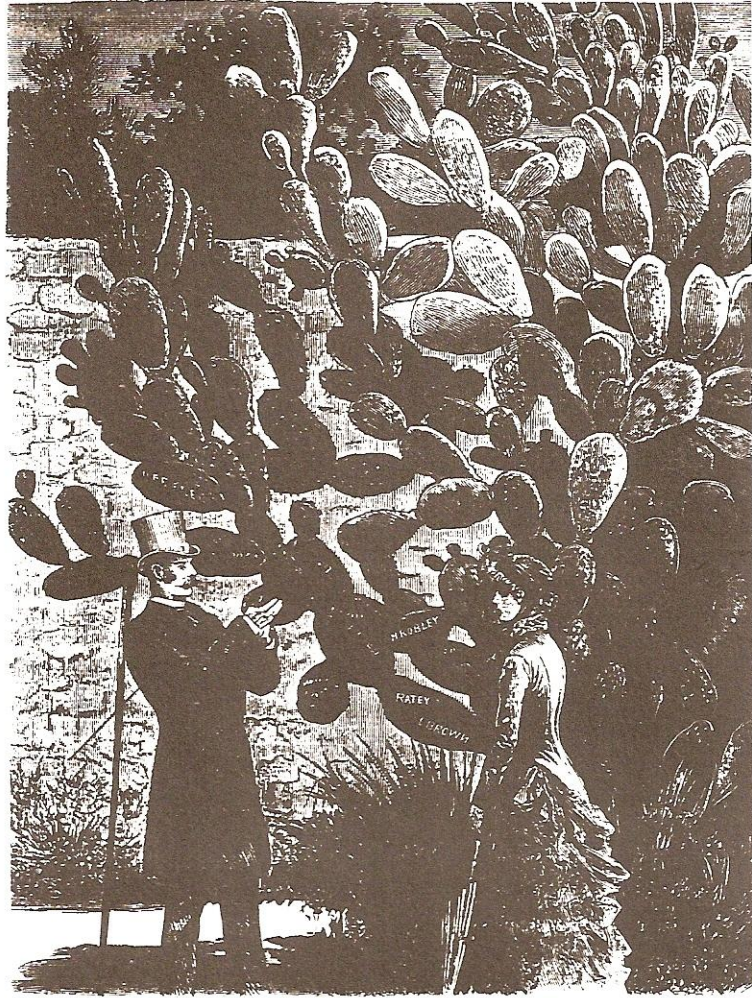


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OPUNTIA



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ART CREDIT: An engraving from THE GRAPHIC, 1883-3-10, page 257, by an unknown artist. It illustrated an article "One Way Of Leaving Visiting Cards at the Cape of Good Hope", and shows a gent carving his name on a opuntia pad while his lady keeps an eye out for the constabulary. See page 12 of this issue for more on the graffiti problem.

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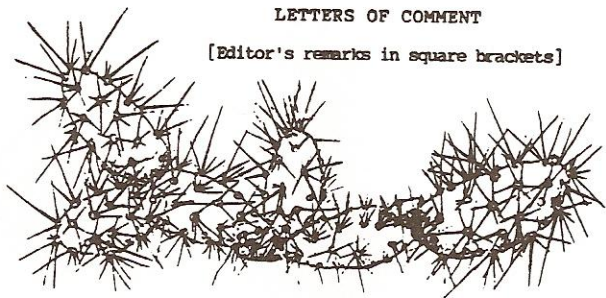
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LETTERS OF COMMENT

[Editor's remarks in square brackets]



FROM: Joseph Nicholas
15 Jansons Road
South Tottenham, London N15 4JU, England

1997-1-20

I offer the tiny correction that David Icke was not a leader of the Green Party but merely a spokesperson. The Party officially considered (and as far as I know still does consider) all members as equals, so there can be no leaders as such but only people elected from time to time to communicate its policies to the outside world. This insistence on equality was thought to be one of the reasons why high-profile Greens such as Sara Parkin and Jonathon Porritt eventually broke with it. Of course they will never admit to as much because that would be to openly concede that they were stomping off in a prima donna-ish huff because they weren't being given the status they thought they were owed.

FROM: Henry Welch
1525 - 16 Avenue
Grafton, Wisconsin 53024-2017

1997-2-2

The letters to your father are interesting in that they show how society has changed in the last half century. Today, I think, most people wouldn't even have answered the letters, a similar phone call, or e-mail.

FROM: Lloyd Penney
1706 - 24 Eva Road
Etobicoke, Ontario M9C 2B2

1997-1-17

As I read how your father started as a vet, I noticed how much help he received along the way to starting a practice. I'm job hunting once again, having been laid off just before New Year's, and I see that one thing many of us could have used in starting our careers is a mentor or an apprenticeship programme. Given the overimportance of today's bottom line, no one trains any more, and that's one reason why there's so much unemployment. A little money put into apprenticeship programmes would direct freshly-graduated kids into the proper jobs.

[I think that one reason why my father got so much help in setting up his veterinary practice in 1951 was that he had carefully studied where to locate and was in a high-demand job. For about the first two decades he was the only farm animal veterinarian between Red Deer and Rocky Mountain House. Other vets who located in more popular areas or who went into dog-and-cat practice had more trouble building up a clientele because of the competition. The problem for new graduates is picking the right field at the right time. All those geology students who entered university in 1978 when the petroleum industry was booming graduated in 1982 just as the boom collapsed. Right now there seems to be a shortage of computer programmers in Calgary, but I suspect they'll be scouring the streets for work in a few years due to oversupply.]

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

1997-1-23

1997 seems an odd time for the world to end [according to David Icke]. But then all the other psychics are predicting either 2000 or 2001, and it pays to be

different. I believe that modern enquiries found that Jesus was actually born in -- was it 4 BC or 6 BC? So if the world was actually to last 2000 years after the birth of Jesus, it should have ended in 1994. Maybe it did and nobody noticed? Maybe the ending is supposed to be 2000 years after the death of Jesus instead.

[Let's not even mention calendar reform, or the calendars used by other religions. I'm too busy arguing with our Parks Dept. person in charge of the Festival 2000 about when it should actually be held. But it will be fun collecting the literature of the lunatic fringe.]

FROM: Sheryl Birkhead
23629 Woodfield Road
Gaithersburg, Maryland 20882

1997-4-30

Curious about Canadian [veterinary] licensing. Here we have to take an exam in each state we wish to practice, ie., no reciprocity. There have been a lot of comments lately on this since we all have to pass the National Boards.

[Each Canadian province has a self-regulating professional association. I don't know the rules now, but in my father's time there was only one anglophone veterinary college in Canada, so licensing was a moot point. Today there are four colleges (one is francophone) but I believe there are no qualifying exams for recent graduates.]

I ALSO HEARD FROM: Peter Stinson, Teddy Harvia, Murray Moore, Harry Andruschak, Chester Cuthbert, Harry Warner Jr, Carolyn Clowes

Every winter, my maintenance depot is afflicted with field mice moving into the garage bays. There are no rats in Alberta, but the mice do an admirable job of filling that ecological niche. The depot building was built next to a golf course, and one of the tee-off greens is immediately back of the garage. This gives some of the more sadistic mower operators pleasure in waiting for just the right moment and then suddenly revving up the motor as a golfer starts his downswing. But turnabout is fairplay, and the golf green, like every other green in the world, is overwatered. That surplus water infiltrates down the embankment into our depot compound and settles under the building foundations. In winter, as soon as we get a week of -20° C weather, the water freezes and heaves the foundation. The back door jams shut for the winter, forcing us to go round by the side door, and the three overhead bay doors have gaps of varying size. The mice then have an easy entry inside, and promptly start nesting in the many nooks and crannies of the garage, feeding off crumbs dropped by sloppy eaters in the lunchroom and eating the lube grease off the machines.

As I came in to work the other morning, I was not surprised to see a quick brown object scurrying under the mechanic's computer as I walked by. And so, later in the day I stopped by the Pest Control Foreman's office and borrowed a pair of mousetraps. Years of practice have taught us that the old-fashioned snap trap is the best. The traps were set out along the baseboard of the wall, behind the computer stand, as mice don't go out into open spaces. Normally I bait the traps with peanut butter, as for some reason Calgary mice won't respond to cheese, whether the Applewood smoked English cheddar that I like, or the processed slices the mechanics use on their hamburgers. But there was no peanut butter handy, so I used ketchup.

The first night the traps were laid did not prove to be a success. The mice carefully licked off the ketchup without springing the traps. No one was about to buy a jar of peanut butter just to catch a mouse, so instead one of the mechanics donated a thick sugar icing from his doughnut. (We're not much for nutritious meals at Southland Depot.) I loaded each trap with a chunk of icing. Even if we didn't succeed in catching a mouse, at least we might give it diabetes.

The next morning I checked the first trap. No icing, no mouse. But the next trap was sprung, and the dead mouse crushed therein still had a chunk of icing in its paws. With gloved hands (to avoid hantavirus), I took the defunct rodent outside and deposited it on top of a snowbank. It is our policy to recycle as much as possible, and dead critters make excellent bird food. Since this has been another snowy winter, I felt sure that it would soon disappear, and so it did. It was gone about an hour later; my assistant pruner said he saw a raven get it.

CAR HUNTING

1997-1-8

Off to a safety course out at the City Training Centre, in a remote industrial area of east Calgary, where all departments share the grounds. Wrecked cars littered the back forty, where firefighters practiced rescuing people out of cars. The building where my course was is located immediately adjacent to the police race track, where they learn the fine art of high-speed pursuit and laying down spike belts. Today they were doing the latter, and as a blizzard was here all day they certainly had more than enough realism. With sirens wailing and lights flashing, two pursuit cruisers would take off after a quarry vehicle, a white Bronco. During our coffee breaks we watched out the windows and made O.J. jokes. The cars would disappear into the whiteout and vanish, re-emerging from the other side, occasionally flushing out a jackrabbit or raven.

Alberta Premier Ralph Klein visited the Lieutenant-Governor late yesterday afternoon to ask for dissolution of the provincial legislature. The election will be held March 11, and as the call was an open secret, the ads are already out in today's newspapers. I have generally been ignoring the papers and politics, as it is much easier on my peace of mind not to bother with the 'news', 99% of which is manufactured and is of no consequence. But I was raised in a political household, my father having stood as a Social Credit candidate several times in the early 1970s, and there is still lingering interest. As the twig is bent, so grows the tree. So for the duration of the campaign I will start following the comedy that is politics.

The election campaign lasts thirty days, all of which will be dominated by the smugness of the Klein Tories, who are predicted to win an easy majority. The Tories ran up a huge provincial debt during the 1980s, then about-faced when the bills came due and the piper had to be paid. They initiated massive budget cuts and privatized various services. This did not solve the problem, but by incredible luck oil prices went back up. As the provincial government gets royalties on oil and gas pumped out of the ground (In Right Of Her Majesty The Queen Of Canada), this gave them a budget surplus which not only cleared the annual deficit but put them on track to paying off the accumulated debt by 2002.

Ralph Klein is a populist. He ran for party leader on a platform of cheap beer and the right to smoke in a public place. As Mayor of Calgary prior to entering provincial politics, he spent most of his time in a tavern located behind City Hall, and was re-elected at municipal elections with about 91% of the vote. Since he has never made any effort to hide his sins, it is impossible for his opponents to smear him. Allegations are shrugged off by the public as just Ralph being himself, and the opposition just a bunch of humourless prigs.

This has left the Liberals and NDP grinding their teeth in frustration. If they advocate budget cuts, they are only imitating the Tories, and if they campaign for increased budgets they come off as wastrels and reckless spenders. Matters are not helped that Alberta's economy is booming. Petroleum prices, especially natural gas, are high. Unemployment is down to about 6%, wages are good for skilled people, and housing starts are up. What has particularly impressed voters is that Alberta is finally getting its economy diversified away from petroleum and agriculture; light manufacturing and warehouse distribution are booming.

OH WHAT A TANGLED WEB ...

1997-2-13

All three major parties have Web sites. The NDP seems to be the best designed, although I had a heck of a time finding the provincial site (the federal wing was easy). In what has to be the worst mismatch I've ever had when I used a search engine, I asked Webcrawler for 'Alberta New Democratic Party' and it gave me the first choice as 'Republican Party of Duval County, Florida'. Which is why I normally use Yahoo or Alta Vista. The NDP site is well organized, with neatly arranged menu to take a visitor to party policies, lists, and info about Pam Barrett, their leader. The site is at www.junctionnet.com/~ndpab

The Progressive Conservatives had the next best site at www.albertapc.ab.ca, updated daily and straightforward indexing of candidates and ridings. The Liberal party was a lengthy list of policy statements, to be seen at www.altaliberals.ab.ca

This first day of campaigning was mostly parties slagging each other about VLTs (Video Lottery Terminals), a type of electronic slot machine that is popular in taverns because it is a good moneymaker, but is very destructive of people who can easily become addicted to them.

BLACK GOLD IN THEM THAR REEFS

1997-2-13

The election campaign only got minor attention today though, because today is the 50th anniversary of Leduc #1, the oil well that was Alberta's first gusher and founded the province's prosperity. The first oil well in North America was drilled in Ontario in 1857, and while Alberta had the Turner Valley wells in 1914, it was never of much account. On February 13, 1947, the well at Leduc drilled by Imperial Oil blew in a gusher and immediately made Alberta the second wealthiest of the provinces in western Canada. Leduc #2 was brought in a day or two later and confirmed that the mother lode had been hit in the Devonian coral reefs of Alberta's bedrock.

JUST GRIT YOUR TEETH AND BEAR IT

1997-2-16

The Liberals are discovering one hazard of campaigning in winter: most sewage disposal sites are closed since there is no tourist traffic in motorhomes or trailers. Since the Liberals are using a hired bus, nicknamed as the Grit Express, use of the bus toilet has been restricted to emergencies. One can well imagine a party flunky counting heads as the bus prepares to leave for the next stop, then asking "Has everyone visited the washroom?". To make matters worse, the deodorizer is not working either. Grit Express indeed.

(I should add that the Liberal party in Canada has the nickname of Grits because when they were first formed in the early 1800s, they were initially known as the Clear Grit party, that being the best grade of sand to make mortar out of.)

THE BARBER OF SURREAL

1997-2-21

The riding of Calgary West is immediately adjacent to Premier Klein's riding, but historically was Liberal. The Tory candidate winning the nomination was Mike

Nasser, a community activist and Klein's barber. Nasser was a family friend of the Kleins. Colleen, Ralph's wife, is active in children's charities and halfway houses for street people; Nasser worked with her quite a bit on those projects.

Alas, Nasser had to resign as the Tory candidate yesterday. Despite a candidate school that told Tories not to try to hide their past, and despite a screening process that was subsequently admitted to be faulty, he was found out. Nasser runs a variety of businesses and sits on a number of charity boards. It turned out that many of them were suing him, he was suing them, or there was some other kind of hoorah. He was on a Board of Directors of a community association that went bankrupt and now owed the City of Calgary unpaid taxes. No criminal offenses, but litigation all over the place.

So Ralph had a quiet chat with his barber, and Nasser is gone. The replacement candidate is Karen Kryczka, who finished second in the riding nomination race last November. Trouble was, she was in Mexico, having gone off on a vacation at the beginning of February. She was unaware that Ralph had called the election, so it must have been quite a shock to find out she was suddenly a candidate with only 17 campaigning days to go. She has terminated her vacation and is flying back home. While they await her return, the Tory riding workers race madly about the riding replacing all the "Elect Nasser, Part Of Ralph's Team" signs with "Elect Kryczka, Part Of Ralph's Team" signs.

WOULD YOU LIKE FRIES WITH YOUR VOTE?

Klein was out with the riding candidate in the Banff riding all day. Wending his way back to Cochrane, a small town just outside Calgary, he got hungry, but the Trans-Canada Highway doesn't have much in the way of restaurants. So Ralph and the crew used the carphone and called ahead to Cochrane to pick up hamburgers at a

[continued next page]

local Humpty's. Having bought the burgers, he began to leave, but the sight of all those voters sitting in their booths was too much temptation to resist. So he worked the crowd, gladhanding his way around the room while holding a burger in the other hand and munching on it from time to time.

STEALTH POLITICS

1997-2-26

By all accounts this has been the most boring election in Alberta history, as the Tories amble toward an easy victory. For a moment it looked like another scandal when the Tory candidate for Calgary Fort was revealed to be a communist, but he explained that away and the fuss died down. The big headlines in the newspapers are about the Toronto Maple Leafs trading star hockey player Doug Gilmour down to New Jersey. The papers came out with extra supplements on this, while campaign coverage has dwindled to a few paragraphs buried inside the paper.

Meanwhile, Mayor Al Duerr is off on a world tour to promote Calgary's bid for Expo 2005. The Japanese are the main competitors against Calgary. Duerr is going to South Africa and then across southeast Asia to drum up support. Although we know he will be gone March 1 to 15, his exact route is top secret. Inquiring minds in the news media were told that the trip would be a secret to avoid giving Japanese spies any advantage. Reporters might have made a big issue about this but fortunately for the mayor the Toronto hockey trade has distracted them at just the right time.

JASON BUT NO ARGONAUTS

At the last couple of meetings of the Calgary Philatelic Society, our club Secretary Jason Ness has been absent, as he is out campaigning as an NDP candidate. Jason is a 22-year-old university student. During the

1993 election, he stood as the NDP candidate in Calgary Shaw, an affluent suburb which not surprisingly only gave him 522 votes. This time he is running in Calgary North Hill (where the University of Calgary is located) and hopes to do better by way of the student vote. However, there may be a snag. The Liberal candidate is an instructor at the Southern Alberta Institute of Technology nearby, which may split the student vote. The Tory incumbent seems confident.

WHICH REMINDS ME ...

1997-3-11

I almost forgot to vote today, which shows how boring the campaign has been. Politics has been pushed right off the front pages of the newspapers by The Briar, the Canadian national curling championship, which is being held in Calgary this year. Curling is the second sport of Canada, just after hockey and ahead of constitutional amendments.

In and out of the polling booth in a moment. I held my nose and voted Liberal by process of elimination. I was certainly not going to vote Tory. The NDP and Social Credit candidates were both young university students running as sacrifice candidates. I was tempted for a second to vote Natural Law, but only for a second. That group spent their time during the election demonstrating how to levitate by bouncing cross-legged on a mattress. Klein finished his campaign by going back to the tavern that made him famous and had a few beers.

AND THE WINNER ...

1997-3-12

After voting, I made a quick trip home for a shower and a change, then off to the monthly meeting of the Calgary Aquarium Society. A good turnout for the meeting, in spite of the election, the Briar (the Alberta team is in the lead), and a blizzard that arrived early evening. I meant to listen to the radio when I got back home but I forgot and went to sleep. I meant to buy the paper

on the way to work the next morning but forgot. I went the whole day without the official news. Finally, on the commute home from work, I stopped off at a fast food outlet for a bite. Someone left a newspaper on the table, and so I learned that the Tories had been returned to office with an increased majority. I was underwhelmed.

The Tories went from 54 seats in the last government to 63 seats. The Liberals dropped from 29 to 18, and the NDP, obliterated last time, got 2 seats. As usual, Calgary remained solid Tory, Edmonton lived up to its nickname of Redmonton by going Liberal and NDP, and the rural ridings went Tory. Since Calgary and Edmonton, Alberta's major cities, cancelled each other out, this means that the country folk will once again hold the balance of power. Turnout for the vote slumped badly to 50% of those eligible to cast a ballot, one of the lowest yet recorded.

In Calgary West, Kryczka was easily elected despite a last-minute campaign. The Tories could have run a stuffed animal in that riding and still won. My riding of Calgary Currie went Tory as it ever was. Our Jason from the stamp club finished last in Calgary North Hill with 1,174 votes; the Tory went in by 2,000 votes. The newspaper put the Briar on the front page above the election results.

Alberta has always had a one-party system, with a party staying in for decades with strong majorities. Only Québec can beat us when it comes to hive minds. This province was formed out of the Northwest Territories in 1905. From 1905 to 1921, the Liberals held power. The United Farmers ruled 1921 to 1935, Social Credit from 1935 to 1971, and the Progressive Conservatives from 1971 to the present (and to 2001 if they go their full term).

STAR GAZING

1997-3-30

Like most large cities, star gazing is not much good in Calgary because of the city lights. My astronomy has historically been confined to looking up at the Orion constellation as I go out the door every morning to work at 06h00. Orion hangs in the south as I come out the door and seems a familiar and sentimental landmark in my life. Fifteen years since I bought the house, which faces due south, and for fifteen years I've locked the door, then turned around and looked up at Orion.

Lunar eclipses are usually quite reliable for viewing in Calgary. Comets are not; the last several comets of the century were too faint to see in Calgary or clouded out. Comet Hale-Bopp has been the exception though. I see it in the evening, halfway up the northwest sky and looking exactly as a comet should. Indeed, several nights ago I got a double-bill, as the moon was partially eclipsed in the southeast quadrant while Hale-Bopp glowed in the northwest.

Up to Red Deer this Easter weekend, to visit my mother. Uncle Norman also came up from Calgary and arrived a few minutes before I did. Tonight the three of us went out into the backyard and watched the comet. Red Deer skies are darker than in Calgary, so I saw stars I had not seen in decades. The comet moved me emotionally. I thought of all those who had seen comets and felt the link to them in history, and to all those of future generations who would stand and watch as we did tonight. Hale-Bopp glowed high above the house across from Mom's where once lived Mrs. Blanche McCullough, long since deceased. When Halley's Comet came by in 1986, Blanche mentioned that it didn't seem as bright as it was back in 1910 when she had first seen it as a young girl. I think she would have been delighted with Hale-Bopp.

OLD MRS. POMERLEAU HAD A FARM ...

Our own farm not being large enough to sustain the herd, Dad rented pasture at various locations, one of which was Mrs. Pomerleau's place about 4 km east of us. Mrs. Pomerleau was an elderly widow; her middle-aged sons stopped by to help with the heavy work but she kept poultry, pigs, and a garden on her own account. Her pasture was along the Red Deer River, her hayfield on the opposite side of her farm along Highway 2A, and my father rented both.

... AND ON HER FARM WE HAD OUR COWS

Spring was the busy season for Dad's veterinary practice, so the cows were trucked out to the pasture. They were shipped pregnant, and calved out on the range. Once a day, Dad, the hired hand George, or my brother Neil and I would drive out to check the herd.

... AND ON HER FARM SHE HAD SOME GEESE

To get to the pasture, one had to drive through Mrs. Pomerleau's farmyard, open up a corral gate, drive into the corral, close the gate and open another on the far side, drive out the corral onto a railway crossing, close the corral gate, open the railway gate, drive into the pasture, and close the railway gate. All of this was repeated in reverse on the way back out. A tiresome procedure even in sunny weather, and worse in rain when there was the added possibility of the truck getting stuck in the corral muck.

Mrs. Pomerleau's poultry were free-ranging in the farm yard. The chickens we hardly noticed, but the geese were another matter. We never got out of the pickup truck unless a long stick was in hand, for these were

attack geese. Opening the corral gate with only one hand was complicated, while swinging the stick at the geese with the other hand. A trick that usually worked was to stop at the entrance to the farmyard, open the truck door as if getting out, and wait for the flock to come hustling up on the attack. Just as the geese reached the truck, we would slam the door shut, accelerate at full speed across the farmyard, slew to a stop in front of the corral gate, leap out and frantically open the gate, drive through, and hope to get the gate closed before the flock turned and made it across the yard.

I didn't mind the frontal attacks so much. By swinging a stick in a broad arc, one could clear a path through the flock. What made me nervous were the attacks from the rear. They would nip at the inside of the knee or the private parts, and a painful nip it was.

WITH A MOO, MOO HERE, AND A MOO, MOO THERE ...

The cows and calves grazed peacefully during the summer. A Charolais bull was kept with the herd to breed any heifers that might go into heat. One summer's night our herd passed along the fence adjacent to Mrs. Pomerleau's neighbour. They met the neighbour's Angus herd coming the other way down their side. The Angus bull and the Charolais bull began fighting through the fence. I can't remember who won but the result was we lost; the fence was ripped up along most of its length. Untangling the two herds was easy compared to untangling the barb wire ripped up by two head-butting bulls. We ended up tying one end of the barb wire to the pintle hitch of the truck and driving it out into the pasture to straighten the wire.

When the herd was trucked out to the pasture, the grass was waist-high. At the end of the season, it was mowed closer than a golf course putting green.

E, I, E, I, O

The hayfield along Highway 2A was where the crop came from that was used to overwinter the herd on our land. This was in the days before round bales or automatic stackers; we baled the traditional rectangular bale. George, the hired hand, swathed the hay ahead of time. Come the appointed day it was baled using a tractor, a baler, and a flatdeck wagon. George's father-in-law Bob drove the tractor, an elderly Case about the same age as Bob. I won't exaggerate and claim it was the first tractor the Case company built, but it probably came off the assembly line that same week. The tractor towed the baler, which picked up the swathed hay and packed it into a bale. The bale was tied off with twine, then pushed up a chute to the rear, where the flatdeck was hitched. Neil and I rode the flatdeck, stacking the bales. It was a noisy, monotonous job. I wore earplugs against the roar of the tractor engine, the clank-clank of the baler, the rattle of the discharge chute, and the squeaking axles of the flatdeck. At night, I would see the baler in my dreams.

Starting off round the field from the outside working in, the first layer or two of bales was easy. I'd toss a bale back to Neil, then admire the scenery a moment while waiting for the next bale to pull off the chute. As the layers built up, the pace quickened. The bales were still being produced at the same rate, but instead of just slinging them back, I had to lift them up as well. By the seventh layer, I would be dripping with sweat from lifting them straight up an arm's length above my head.

The only surcease would be if a shear pin broke in the baler flywheel. There would be a loud bang, and the baler would spin its shaft uselessly. Bob would come down from the tractor and put a new shear pin in the flywheel, while Neil and I sat on the flatdeck and cooled off.

The flywheel on a baler is two very heavy discs pressed together and bolted into one piece by a shear pin. The pin was simply a bolt made of soft iron. One side of the flywheel was driven by the tractor power takeoff, and the other was the shaft of the baler mechanism. If the baler jams, the shear pin breaks first, saving the shaft. We could count on at least one broken shear pin a day, and more if we were baling heavy swath and Bob didn't slow down.

The flatdeck was loaded about eight layers high straight sided, then a pyramid of three or four layers on top of that. The traditional method of checking for overloads was to look under the flatdeck and see if the tires were rubbing against the underside. George would then haul the flatdeck back to the main farm and unload it himself while we continued on with the next flatdeck. He hauled it with a pickup truck grossly inadequate for the job, but then so did all the other farmers, and the Mounties paid no mind.

One year the hayfield was badly infested with thistles. I wore two pair of pants, one overtop the other, wearing out one pair a week from the abrasion of the thistles in the bales. In stacking hay, I had a hook wrapped around one hand to snag the bale off the chute. I then boosted the bale up with my knee to shoulder height, put my other hand underneath the bale, and straightened up to my full height while pushing up on the bale. Neil, standing on top of the stack, would grab it with his hand hook and pull it up the rest of the way to the top. By the time I turned around, the next bale was about to topple off the back of the chute. No rest for the wicked.

THOMAS WOLFE TIME

Mrs. Pomerleau died in the 1980s aged 90+ years. The hayfield is now a mobile home lot; I haven't driven back into the farmstead to see what's become of it for fear of what I might find.

When my father died in March 1996, his cremated remains were placed in an urn niche rented from the funeral home for a year. My mother had time to think what to do with them, and has decided to have them interred in his parents' grave at Queen's Park cemetery here in Calgary. I arranged the grave marker last week, which has room for two extra names in addition to his for family members who might want to be interred in the family plot. I put in dibs for one of those spaces. As a scientific rationalist, I know graves are a waste of land, but some selfish ego within me wants at least my name to survive should any future Speirs' come ancestor hunting. Yes, copies of OPUNTIA are preserved in libraries, but they will probably go the way of all zines into obscurity at best, and the garbage can at worst.

My brother brought the urn with Dad's ashes down from Red Deer last weekend, and I went over to pick it up tonight. I will be taking them to the cemetery this Friday. Driving home tonight, with the urn on the front passenger seat beside me, I felt considerably spooked, thinking of what was in it. I suddenly thought of all the times I had ridden with him as a young lad when he went out on farm calls to treat sick animals. Now his final ride would be with me. When I rode with him back then, we argued politics and discussed life in general. Now the silence deafened me.

Spring has finally arrived, and at work I have bobcats with power brooms sweeping off the salt and gravel of the winter from the boulevards. The bobcats are preceded by water trucks spraying the boulevards to keep the dust down, and followed by arrowboard trucks to keep the commuters down (the "assertive" drivers who weave in and out of traffic above the speed limit).

As the snow melts away, the damage of the long, bitter winter is revealed. Normally trees are seldom girdled by jackrabbits or deer, but the length and harshness of this winter meant far more destruction than usual. What is surprising is the mouse damage; everywhere are trails and cul-de-sacs cut into the turf where the mice fed on the grass. The jackrabbits preferred to browse on younger trees and shrubs. The shrub beds are not a problem as they will resprout from the roots and soon grow back. The trees will be an expensive replacement cost, however.

Prime Minister Jean Chretien was in southern Manitoba touring the flooded province, the Red River part of which is now an inland sea. Compulsory orders to evacuate have been given, 6700 soldiers are helping to reinforce the dikes and patrol the evacuated towns, and visiting politicians are outnumbered only by the news media. The Red Sea, as the Red River area is being called, gave Chretien a chance to look prime ministerial as he got ready to call an election.

Chretien visited the Governor-General today to ask for dissolution of the House of Commons. The vote will be held June 2, and as it was anticipated weeks ago, the parties are already off and running (or wading, as the case may be in southern Manitoba). The Liberals had a strong majority and were only 3½ years into their five-year mandate. Now is the time to strike though, as the right-wing vote is split between the Tories and Reform, the Bloc Québécois is fading, and the NDP are hopeless.

Calgary has not elected a federal Liberal in 30 years, but the Grits are optimistic. In the 1993 election, Calgary went 100% Reform, but the Tories are reviving after their success in the provincial election (Reform is a federal party only) and may split their vote.

"THE TIME HAS COME", THE WALRUS SAID

Since Confederation, federal elections have been required to be completed within 47 days from dissolution, but in this modern day and age communications and transportation no longer require such a long campaign. Recently new legislation was passed shortening the campaign period to 36 days, a blessed relief to the citizenry. One perennial problem, extended waits to hear from the final polls countrywide, has been dealt with by staggering voting times across the six time zones of this country so that they all open and close at approximately the same time. Alberta polls will now run 07h30 to 19h30, instead of the traditional 20h00 closing time. Not that this really makes much difference; the election will continue to be decided in Québec and Ontario.

THE WRITING ON THE WALL

1997-4-30

I attended a police seminar on graffiti today. Parks Dept. has relatively mild problems with graffiti, although Streets Dept. has to clean up a fair bit on the overpasses and abutments. The seminar was quite interesting, and I now look at graffiti in a new way. We have historically considered it in isolation, but Inspector Jim Macdonnell, who gave the seminar, showed a series of slides demonstrating that taggers leave a trail that can often be followed right back to their houses.

Art is legal but graffiti is not; the difference, as Macdonnell pointed out, is permission. Graffiti artists are known as taggers. They are motivated partly by the thrill of doing an unlawful act and partly by the need for recognition by their peers, which is why they sign their work. Taggers also like to photograph themselves next to their work and keep the photos in albums, which makes it handy for the Crown Prosecutor when police raid the taggers' homes. Calgary police photograph and categorize graffiti, then map the sites

onto their GIS computer system. Taggers have individual styles, although Calgary taggers are not original in picking their names. Some local taggers are MLS, Ker, Sweet, Convict, and Neuro (who paints in my Parks Maintenance District). Los Angeles gangstap is a popular source of tagger names for Calgary kids, it being an exotic faraway place with a cool reputation. A newbie or neo in tagger parlance is a 'toy'.

We've always had the policy to cover or remove graffiti as fast as possible, although practice may be slower than theory. Graffiti breeds more graffiti, as taggers will assume the property owner doesn't care and thus take that apathy as a go-ahead to bigger and better art. Additionally, taggers do it for recognition, and if the recognition is denied by quickly covering up their work then they will go elsewhere. If graffiti is relatively rare, as it is in most Calgary suburbs, it will not give other kids ideas.

Mural walls are usually untouched by taggers, who have respect for other artwork. It depends on the type of mural though. Macdonnell showed examples of 'regular' murals that had no graffiti even after several years. A graffiti-style mural nearby also had no graffiti but there were lots spreading out up and down the alley on other surfaces. Since taggers spray on a route, not an isolated point, a locus of graffiti will spread tentacles in all directions, so it is important to suppress the inspirational source.

Calgary police have been targeting graffiti because if it is left unchecked then it develops into greater and more expensive problems. Taggers roaming unchecked can link up into 'crews', which eventually turn into gangs. Studies showed that graffitied buildings are more likely to be vandalized or broken into. Macdonnell mentioned that an American study traced the development of some ghettos to an original outburst of graffiti, then vandalism and B&E, then abandonment of the neighbourhood by better tenants and landlords.

Reform Party leader Preston Manning has always taken heat about his inability to speak French. Bilingualism is a necessity for anyone who wants to be Prime Minister someday. In response to yet another query about his unilingual status, Manning replied that if someone could create a half-million jobs in Québec then it wouldn't matter if he spoke Kipsikis. This sent Canadians everywhere to their encyclopaedias to discover what Kipsikis was. Not an aboriginal language in Canada as most of us would have guessed, but rather a Kenyan tribal group.

Meanwhile, back at the asylum, the Natural Law party took time out from bouncing around on mattresses and calling it levitation, to announce that the problem with Canada is that the Parliament building has doors on the south side. Apparently east-facing doors are best, south-facing doors are worst, and as the House of Commons doors face south our national problems can thus be explained. Party leader Neil Paterson, who must be on a day pass from an institute, was quoted as saying: "It is no surprise that the members of Parliament are constantly quarreling. The cost to the nation of not closing the south entrances is very great ... the very life and future of the nation itself is being threatened".

MEANWHILE, BACK AT THE LIQUOR STORE

1997-5-3

Preston Manning gave a pancake breakfast today at his constituency office in a shopping plaza. He got the attention from the news media but not the feel-good sound bite he was hoping for. Renegade ex-Reformer Jan Brown, now running as a Tory against him, crashed the breakfast, cameras in tow, ostensibly to promise a clean campaign and may the best candidate win. She stole the show and left him looking awkward when he had to shake her hand and be polite about it.

Reporters then noticed the signage of his office, which occupied the space of a bankrupt liquor store. The old sign was still there, and whoever ordered the Manning sign neglected to tell the plaza management that the new sign should be visibly different. Instead it had identical font and colours, resulting in a sign that appeared to read "Preston Manning Cold Beer and Wine/Campaign Office Open 7 Days a Week".

ON GUARD FOR THEE

1997-5-8

In every other country, the government leader has bodyguards to protect him against the people. In Canada it is the other way around, as Jean Chretien can give as good as he gets. In February 1996, the Prime Minister was accosted by a Québec separatist while on walkabout in Hull, Québec. Chretien greeted the protestor warmly by the throat, and the Mounties had to pull the two away from each other. Yesterday the P.M. was in Edmonton where a man grabbed his arm, but before another slugfest could develop the Mounties intervened. This protestor was on about the Manitoba floods.

The Calgary ridings were redistributed for this election, and I couldn't tell from the blobby maps in the newspaper whether I was in Calgary Southwest or Calgary West. The former is the slugfest between Manning and Brown. The latter is perhaps not the most boring riding in Canada but certainly is in the top ten of ridings to be ignored by news media on election night. Tonight I was over at my brother Neil's place, and as his wife Pam just got Internet access on her computer, we called up the Chief Electoral Officer's Web page to verify the riding boundaries. It turns out that the boundary runs one block south of my house and turns north three blocks to the east. Alas, I am on the wrong side, and am in Calgary West.

Jason Ness barely had time to catch his breath from the provincial election before he was off again representing the NDP in Calgary Southeast.

The election coverage over the past fortnight has to compete with the Bre-X scandal, which more often than not has been elbowing the politicians off the front page. Bre-X's gold deposits in Indonesia, supposedly the largest in the world, were revealed to have been salted in what is definitely the largest mining fraud in history. Billions vanished overnight when the \$30 stock melted down to 6¢. One of the company's geologists committed suicide just before the scandal broke, by diving out of a helicopter into the Busang jungle. Every shyster in Canada and USA is filing class-action lawsuits, police from Indonesia and Canada are investigating, and the Bre-X headquarters in Calgary is under siege. The Indonesian government had been trying to muscle out Bre-X and get the gold for itself, but now has piously vowed to get at the people responsible for the salting of the drill samples. In Calgary, the company is now referred to as Broke-X.

One disadvantage of living in a bilingual country is that during an election there are two sets of debates on television between the party leaders. This keeps the pundits busy analyzing two sets of shouting, evasions, and half-truths. Each party, of course, claims victory for their leader, and reading through the newspapers the next day makes one wonder if the reporters had not already written their stories before the debate began and only delayed filing the copy. In the English debate, Alexa McDonough, NDP party leader, claimed the Liberals had eliminated 400,000 jobs in the federal government. As there are only about 200,000 employees in the first place, this means that the staff turnover must be something fierce. Preston Manning, being a Calgarian, couldn't resist comparing the Liberal policy manual to the Bre-X prospectus.

The French debate was a wowser though. Just as the Québec separatism issue came up, the moderator fainted, bringing the debate to a premature end (it will be rescheduled). She had a medical history of fainting over the past few years; nothing to do with the passions of the debate.

Got my annual pension fund statement today. February 2011 and I'm out of here. With the statement came a letter stating that the pension fund had not lost money on the Bre-X scandal. Every mutual fund and pension fund in Canada has been besieged with people calling to find out if their fund had lost anything on Bre-X.

Got a campaign brochure in my mailbox from the Calgary West Reform candidate Rob Anders. 25 years old, founded the Laissez-Faire Club of Calgary, opposed to pork-barreling but also opposed to shutting down CFB Calgary (which should have closed in 1946), would cut taxes and government spending while simultaneously boosting medicare by \$4 billion. I'll vote someone else.

BLACK AND WHITE

1997-5-8

I keep seeing the same raven in the Parks office each time I drive into the parking lot first thing in the morning. It is always perched on top of one of the snowbanks not yet melted away, busy eating snow. One would think it could get water from the nearby river, and in a city there should be lots of food to scavenge from garbage cans. Despite my crewcab passing by it only a metre away, the raven stands its ground (or snow, rather) with only a suspicious look and no attempt to fly away. No cawing or quothing "Nevermore".

Premier Klein has been placed hors-concours from any campaigning on behalf of federal Tories. Klein was getting out of a hot tub when he slipped and fell, breaking two ribs.

The Natural Law Party finally got around to putting up their election signs, only to have them downed by a spring snowfall today. About 15 cm of heavy wet slush. Fortunately the green ash trees haven't leafed out yet, the elms have only just opened buds, and spruces are not bothered in the least. Unfortunately the poplars have leafed out, and as a consequence the Parks crews have been busy clearing up fallen branches. Natural Law signs feature a rainbow descending to earth and the slogan "Natural Law for a perfect government". Strangely enough, the signs faced to the south.

I hadn't realized how tight the election was in Calgary. In fifteen years previous, I've never had any phone messages left on my answering machine by party workers, but this time around I'm getting a message a day or so. Mostly the Liberal candidate; the city is expected to go Reform in a walkover but Calgary West is one of two ridings where the Grit is given an outside chance.

Besides the main political parties of Reform, Liberal, Progressive Conservative, and New Democratic, I also have the choice in my riding of Natural Law and the Greens. In some of the other Calgary ridings are the Christian Heritage party and Marxist-Leninist, plus one independent. Only one candidate in my riding is over 40, and it is impressive how many 20s and 30s in other ridings there are. Not just the usual sacrifice candidates like Jason Ness. The Reformers and Tories tend to have the youngest candidates, while the leftists and centrists are mostly in their late 40s and 50s. One NDP candidate gives his occupation as Education Officer for the Calgary Birth Control Association, and goes on to mention that he has four children.

And so to vote, Liberal again but not so grudgingly as last time, as their candidate in my riding has done well as a city alderman.

And will continue to do well as an alderman, as Reform swept all the Calgary ridings. Some flaws in the new voting hours revealed themselves. No one realized that Saskatchewan does not have Daylight Saving Time, which produced the odd result of that province being the last to close its polls despite its intermediate position in Canada's geography.

The Liberals formed a majority government of 155 seats, down about 20 from the last Parliament. What worried everyone was the pronounced regionalization of all the political parties. Reform is now the official opposition party, having bumped out Bloc Québécois as Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition (the separatists went down to 44 seats). But almost all of the Liberal seats are in Ontario and Québec, while Reform is entirely a western party. The Tories recovered from 2 seats to 20, all in eastern Canada. The NDP recovered from 8 seats to 21, thinly scattered across the country but hardly a vote of confidence. There was also one Independent, who is a renegade Liberal kicked out of the party last term.

Jason Ness picked up 1230 votes in Calgary Southeast; the Reform candidate won by 14,000 votes over his nearest rival, the Tory. Prime Minister Chretien almost got knocked off by the Bloc Québécois candidate, only holding his seat by 500 votes out of about 29,000 cast. The Liberals lost half their seats in Manitoba, still drying out after the floods.

With a majority of only 4 seats, the Liberals will have to be a bit more careful of their backbenchers in order to avoid losing any non-confidence votes.

Almost forgotten in the hoorah over two elections was Calgary's bid for Expo 2005. Other news finally have slowed down enough to allow Calgary news media to put on a barrage of publicity about the Expo bid, with extra supplements and end-of-the-world headlines. The bid was voted on today in Monaco, and the result was Nagoda, Japan with 52 votes to Calgary's 27. Gloom barely had a chance to make a brief appearance in our city before bid committee survivors immediately put out a proposal for 2010. Covering all bets, Calgary will be bidding for both the 2010 Winter Olympics and Expo 2010. God help us if we get both, but that will probably not come to pass. The Olympic bid has to be approved by the Canadian Olympic committee, but since other cities are bidding, the odds may be against us. Québec City and Vancouver are two places who want a turn at the pot of gold.

A couple of weeks from now, Calgary will be hosting the World Police & Fire Games, which are actually bigger than the Summer Olympics, with 10,000 athletes from around the world. I haven't been paying much attention, although at work we are trying to get all the freeways mowed and trimmed before the Games. The management want everything tidy before then. I am irresistably reminded of the time the Queen came to Cowtown. It was decided to spruce up the freeway she was to drive down by covering up the dead grass along the curb (killed by road salt) with red shale. The freeway looked nice for about a week before mud and sublimating salt began to turn it gray, and within a year the curbside was back to what it was. We doubt the Queen would have even noticed. I can't picture her turning to Charles in the limo and remarking on the pretty red boulevards. (Prince Phillip is persona non grata in Calgary for making rude remarks about white cowboy hats, thus he did not accompany her on the trip. The white cowboy hat is Calgary's official emblem, and honoured visitors receive one when they arrive.)

The World Wide Party was originated by Benoit Girard of Québec and popularized by Franz Miklis of Austria. The idea is to raise a toast to fans around the world at 21h00 and get a wave of celebration circling the planet.

As there was a hail storm going on at the appointed hour on the day, I did my toasting in the living room. First I faced the approximate direction of Toronto and saluted fandom there for their bid to get the WorldCon in 2003. I then turned about and again to salute the WorldCons of San Antonio (1997), Baltimore (1998), and Australia (1999).

Last but certainly not least, I faced towards the state of Indiana, and gave my most cheerful toast to Buck Coulson. Who, in response to an earlier announcement of the World Wide Party in OPUNTIA, replied as follows in a letter dated 1997-2-16:

"I don't think much of anonymous group gestures such as the World Wide Party. You handle your friends and I'll take care of mine. Symbolism is essentially stupid. Popular enough, and occasionally influencing great numbers of people, of course, if it's done in a permanent form such as art or architecture, and there are convenient explanations of what it's supposed to represent. Ephemeral 'feel-good' gestures are essentially meaningless. The person making the gesture feels self-satisfied; nobody else benefits. So I won't contribute to the amount of smugness prevalent in humanity."

IF A TREE FALLS AND NOBODY HEARS IT ...

At work, I was at a Defensive Driver course and the instructor posed the question: "If you are on the treeless prairie of southern Saskatchewan, and drive up to a stop sign, should you stop even though you can see there is no other traffic in sight? No inhabitants to the horizon, no police, no cross-traffic?". The answer is yes, you do stop, because safety, like feeling good, is a habit.