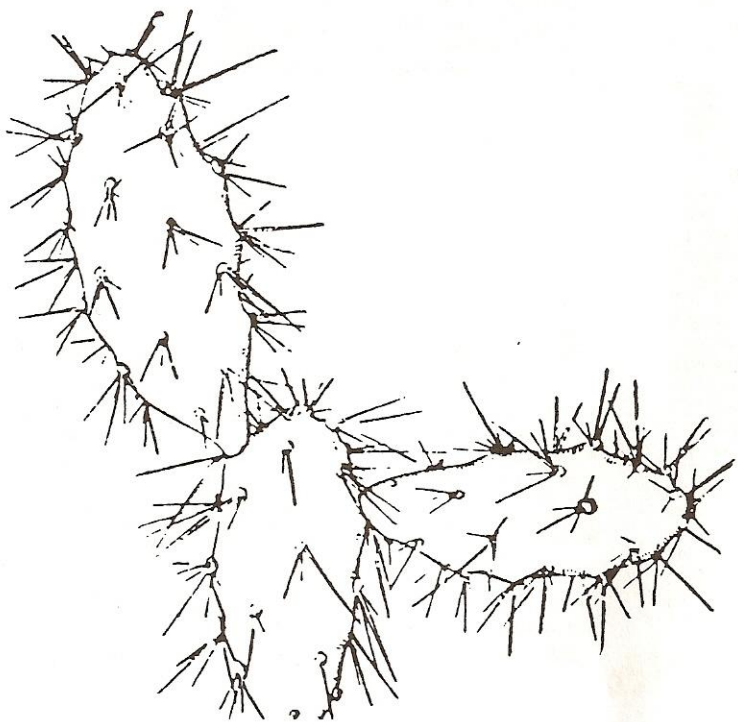


OPUNTIA

39.5



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BOOMTOWN BLUES

Calgary added 29,000 people to its population in the twelvemonth just concluded. Rents have soared to \$750 for a two-bedroom suite, starter homes are \$130,000 if you act fast, morning commutes are now 45 minutes, and there is always at least one downtown street that is blocked by construction. Recent declines in the price of oil have been offset by the falling exchange rate of the loonie. My house is paid off, but I pity those just coming into town with a low-end job. It's always boom or bust, never a steady jog.

I started three weeks vacation this week and have begun by spending each morning and midday in the University of Calgary Library on various research projects. Then I go downtown to pick up my mail, do errands and shopping, and spend evenings reading and writing. I am the despair of travel agents, but find it most relaxing. It has the advantage of letting me feel like a university student again without the bother of final exams.

I happened to see an announcement that the University was sponsoring a free presentation this Wednesday afternoon with the full crew of space shuttle Discovery, flight STS-85, which went for eleven days in August 1997. Five of the crew were Americans and the sixth was Canadian Bjarni Tryggvason. I got there about 15 minutes early and the room was rapidly filling up. So much so, that a partition separating it from the next room was opened up to double the capacity. The panel was late starting. An announcement of apology was made, explaining that the crew had been running late with their school tours in Calgary that morning, and were only just now wolfing down a quick meal of chicken and shrimp before coming to us. But the wait was not much longer. We knew they were here when the hallway outside the seminar room suddenly lit up with multiple camera flashes, then in they came. And so to the panel.

STS-85 was one of the busiest missions launched, most of it test projects for the International Space Station. As a Mission Specialist, Tryggvason ran the microgravity project. The astronauts showed computer video of the mission. The video, exceptionally crisp, was silent. As it played, the astronauts took turns commenting on it. Much of it was humorous, such as: "I didn't like the sun in my eyes during the launch, so I rolled the shuttle and put it in Jan's eyes instead".

The shuttles have a design life of 100 flights, and are mostly about 20 flights currently. It was surprising to hear how old some of the technology was. The shuttles are based on 1970s technology, and the in-board computers are 128K, which is why the astronauts bring along laptops. In answer to the obvious question as to why computers are not upgraded, one of the astronauts mentioned that nothing can be changed on a shuttle unless it is properly configured and certified safe. Bearing in mind all the problems we have just configuring a desktop computer, it is easy to see why NASA moves very slowly and cautiously in upgrading a multi-billion-dollar spaceship. It was remarked that NASA is slowly upgrading the shuttle computers to bring them into the 1980s. That remark almost got by the audience before they realized what he said; there was a good burst of laughter then. The pilot landing a shuttle does not have GPS; instead an X-Y-Z-time signal is uploaded from the ground to keep the shuttle computers aware of where the ship is.

The discussion got around to John Glenn's proposed flight at age 76. One astronaut mentioned that the shuttle is more benign than the early spacecraft, and has lower G-force loads, especially on landing. There is a nice soft touchdown, not a hard smack into the ocean. Someone also mentioned the medical exams are not as rough as they were in the early days.

There was, inevitably for a university student audience, queries on how to become an astronaut. "Wait for us to retire", said Tryggvason. But the serious answer was to have a post-secondary degree in an engineering related discipline, good health, and the ambition to approach the agencies first. Flight crews are usually test pilots from the military. Mission specialists are usually academics or engineers.

All told, an interesting seminar. Almost like an SF convention panel, except no overweight Klingons in the audience.

I've settled into the routine of the University in the morning and thence downtown about 15h00. I take the LRT train from the University station to 7th Avenue downtown and then a short brisk walk to the post office, taking a shortcut through the Scotia Centre skyscraper. After getting my mail, I walk back to the vicinity of 7th Avenue and take either the #7 or the #13 bus route home.

All well and good and too boring to be telling you that if there was nothing further to add. But today, as I de-trained at the 3rd Street station on 7th Avenue, I heard sirens. I paid no mind; probably just an ambulance called out to a business executive's heart attack or the police responding to an injury car accident. The crowd on the sidewalk at the station was thicker than could be accounted for by the afternoon rush hour, and the sirens and flashing lights continued to multiply. I looked up as everyone else was doing, and saw smoke climbing the side of the Scotia Centre, just across the intersection from the station. Just then the loudspeakers announced that the train would go no further, not that it could as the way was blocked by fire trucks and ambulances.

I jaywalked across 7th Avenue as did everyone else, and joined in the general rubbernecking. The lower floors of Scotia Centre have been under renovation for several months, and wrapped in scaffolding reaching up four floors. With the arrival of winter, the scaffolding was in turn wrapped with giant sheets of translucent plastic so the construction workers could carry on without exposure to the cold. It was not now cold inside. I could see slabs of orange flames inside the scaffolds, trying to break out and up into the main skyscraper. The smoke flowed smoothly upward as a thick quilt wrapping the west side of the tower, staying within a metre or two of the glass curtain wall as it rose 42 stories. The smoke was mostly yellow-brown, occasionally dusty grey. It clung to the building as it climbed, but at the roof it bent 90° and travelled horizontally westward through the glass canyons of the downtown core.

I couldn't help but think what an experience it must have been for Scotia Centre office workers to look out their windows and see the smoke going by. I turned to look at the other skyscrapers in the vicinity. All their windows were lined with occupants watching the fire. One can imagine how many "There but for the grace of God ..." conversations were going on.

I turned back to look at the Scotia Centre. The smoke was thinning as the firefighters got at the flames, and it appeared that only the lower floors would be damaged. The outer curtain wall of the building will definitely need a good scrubbing; a huge tobacco stain ran up the tower. There was no sign of occupants inside the tower, in contrast to its neighbours. Further down 7th Avenue, I could see people streaming out of the Scotia Centre even still, more than fifteen minutes after the alarm must have sounded. Emptying a 42-story building quickly is a logistical nightmare at best. It is bad enough for a physically-fit person to walk down 30 or 40 flights of stairs, but worse yet for overweight executives or secretaries in high heels. There seemed to be no panic though, and half the refugees were gabbing away into cellphones. Still they kept flowing out the building, by the hundreds.

As the fire seemed under control, I walked around the long way to the post office. In addition to picking up my mail, I had to buy some stamps. The postie had to write down the purchase on a piece of scrap paper, as the fire had knocked out the computer system. Mind you, the post office was two blocks away, but it is easy to visualize all the utility conduits running through the downtown core and vulnerable to a fire.

I knew any bus I might want to take homeward would be far behind schedule, so from the post office I went to the Hudson's Bay Company building, adjacent to the Scotia Centre, and had supper in the Bay's cafeteria. From there, I just missed catching the #13 bus by a

minute, and the #7 by 30 seconds, so I decided to walk west about a kilometre to the other side of downtown and intercept the next #13 as it entered the core. The LRT trains were running again, but the platforms were solid shoulder-to-shoulder with humanity, listening to continuous announcements from the loudspeakers apologizing for the delays. The fire was out and only a few trucks remained for the cleanup. Since all LRT lines run through 7th Avenue downtown, the fire had shut down the entire system. I could visualize lonely commuters standing on platforms out in the far distant suburbs, waiting and waiting and waiting. It could have been me had I left the University Library a half-hour later than I did.

#13 finally came, inching its way through the massive traffic jams. And so to home, a one-story bungalow where, if a fire should start, I can just throw a chair through a window and step out onto the lawn.

IMAGINE

1998-4-17

One of the shopping malls was having a display of John Lennon's artwork, so being a baby boomer who grew up with the Beatles and has most of their music on cassette, I drove up to see the exhibit. What it turned out to be was a San Diego music store owner selling off part of his collection of Lennon lithographs and handwritten song lyrics. Prices started in the middle hundreds and went up to the thousands. The art was fair to middling, what you would see in any North American art college. As it happened, Lennon did attend art school before joining a local band. ("What band is that?", said the Gen-Xer.) There is no doubt that any value is due more to Lennon's celebrity status, not artistic merit.

A Calgary gallery had thought of bringing in Yoko Ono for her installation art. She wanted \$75,000, so Cowtown will make do without her. She was an artist before she met Lennon, but if she had never done so, she'd be yet another cultural-grant freeloader at a community college.

A cliché of SF fandom is the fan wearing a propeller beanie at a convention. Actually I've never seen such a sight, although I'm sure there must be a few about. Klingon headpieces seem to be the favoured headgear at SF cons these days. But what brought me to this subject was that today while I was up in the industrial district of northeast Calgary, I saw a man about twentyish in age wearing one. It was not a beanie, though. The chap was wearing a baseball cap made of denim cloth, with a cherry red propeller. It was spinning away merrily in the breeze as the man walked across the intersection. He was going away from me so I couldn't tell if there was a manufacturer's brand name on the cap. Probably a giveaway at some trade show, and definitely not SFish.

BRING BACK MY BONNIE TO ME

1998-06-10

Out to the monthly meeting of BNAPSers, a specialist group of stamp collectors dealing only in Canada and pre-Confederation provinces. This is a small group of a dozen or so, not like the main club, the Calgary Philatelic Society, which has 225 members. In addition to the usual business session and programme, there is a show-and-tell. Members bring along their latest acquisitions or items related to the programme, explain them, and pass them around for viewing.

Ed brought some United Nations covers, sent by Canadian observers with the 1948 mission to India during the independence and breakup of that country. Ed mentioned that he bought them from another club member, Sid, who recently passed away at 96. Ed noticed that the letters were mailed to Bonnie R., a woman he had met up with back in the 1960s when he was living in Flin Flon, Manitoba. Sid was surprised to hear that; he had gotten the covers from her when she was working for him in Calgary, so it

was a bit of coincidence. She was an unforgettable type of woman. In Flin Flon, Ed and his wife Kay lived directly across the street from Ed's boss. The boss had advertised for a new secretary, and Ed and Kay happened to be looking out the window when she arrived. Driving a bright red sports car, she screeched to a stop in front of the boss' place. Out she came from the car; she was wearing a clinging leopardskin leotard, short dress, and high heels. Long flaming red hair, lots of cleavage, in short the very epitome of a shameless hussy. The boss came out to meet her, and in full public view she gave him a bear hug embrace. Kay turned to Ed and told him he was to have as little to do with her as possible and that's an order. In a small town in the 1960s, Bonnie was a sensation and a gossip's delight.

Years passed. After working her way through much of the menfolk in Flin Flon, Bonnie disappeared to Calgary, and wound up working for Sid. Her current husband (she went through several) was a Canadian Armed Forces major on duty with the UN forces in India. She knew Sid collected stamps, and so gave him the envelopes she got from her soon-to-be-ex-husband.

After Ed told that story, Jim spoke up. That must be the same Bonnie that worked for my company after she left Sid's employer. "The most oversexed woman I ever heard of", said Jim. Jim went on to say that her reputation was so notorious that word got back to the head office in Los Angeles, whose manager issued an order that she was not to be re-hired by any branch anywhere. Bonnie then went on to work a private secretarial office in the Palliser Hotel in Calgary, sort of a public scribe. She provided commercial travellers staying at the hotel with secretarial services by day and other services by night.

And people think that stamp collecting is boring. Every cover has a story behind it.

NOAH POPLAR FLUFF HERE, PLEASE

1998-06-10

The dandelion season has just concluded, which means the poplar fluff season has now started. (And after the fluff comes foxtail barley.) Parks Dept. is now receiving the usual complaints about the fluff floating through the air. At times the fluff is thick as a snowstorm. It is the seeding season for balsam and cottonwood poplars, and the stuff piles up in drifts along fencelines and swales. Part of nature, and the complainants get no relief because Parks will not cut down trees just because they are inconvenient for a week or two.

However, one complaint (officially they are citizen concerns) came from the television star Tony Danza, who is in town to film a Disney television movie. The show is titled NOAH, and you might want to check your TV listings for it if you want to see what Calgary looks like. Danza was on location at a house where the cottonwoods were in full force, and threw a hissy fit about the fluff. Bystanders said it was quite amusing to watch his temper tantrum: "My health is too important for this ... I don't care who hears me." Danza complained that "Everywhere you turn the stuff is flying around my head.", a very banal statement of the obvious. Calgarians took it all as a rather hilarious episode.

CANADA DAY

1998-07-01

The 131st anniversary of Confederation today. There are Canada Day events throughout the city but most of Calgary's celebrants come downtown where there are three venues in close proximity. Prince's Island is in the Bow River on the north side of the downtown core, Olympic Plaza is in east central downtown, and Fort Calgary is at the east end of the core on the junction of the Bow and Elbow rivers.

I dithered as to whether to walk downtown from my house, which takes about an hour, or else drive over to a train station and take the LRT in. The weather forecast said 60% chance of afternoon showers, so I chickened out and took the train; if it did rain, I wouldn't have to go more than a couple of blocks to a station downtown.

Arriving downtown, I disembarked and walked to Prince's Island first. I was early, arriving at 09h30, and the first events wouldn't start until 11h00. Even so, pedestrian traffic thickened as I approached, and there were no available parking stalls, which was why I took the train. The rivers are at flood stage as meltwater from the nearby Rocky Mountains comes downstream. The channel separating Prince's Island from the mainland has a weir at each end, and the water was roaring over. I sat down on a bench and watched a huge flock of Canada geese sunning themselves on the concrete plaza beside the channel, while a half-dozen mallards trolled the water. An armada of geese came floating down the channel but I paid no attention to them until I heard people on the island cheering. I turned to look, and saw the geese sliding down the weir to the lower channel. Those that floated over the weir on their bellies went smoothly. Those that tried to slide on their feet took pratfalls as they hit the bottom of the weir. There are few things funnier than a Canada goose trying to retain its dignity while rolling head over tail feathers down a weir.

I strolled onto the island over the pedestrian bridge. A busman's holiday, as I kept meeting fellow Parks Dept. employees on shift that day, while I had the holiday. In the early morning hours there had been a heavy thunderstorm, and some areas of the islands were spongy, with water standing on the turf here and there. Exhibitors and concessionaires were still setting up, so I walked around the perimeter of the island to kill time.

The first event on the island was the band of HMCS Tecumseh, a stone frigate (inland training base) of the Royal Canadian Navy. One could hear the tuba player warming up from the opposite side of the island. The first order of business was an introduction by the MC, who was accompanied by a sign language interpreter. I'm not sure why a music stand needs a sign language man, but maybe he volunteered and they had no idea of where else to put him. The band then played O Canada!, which few in the audience or on the stage sang. This is a problem everywhere, as there are multiple versions of our national anthem, and it sometimes seems that no two Canadians in a roomful of people learned the same version. The sign language man was absolutely spectacular though. Watching him act out the lyrics of the anthem (which version I couldn't say) was the highlight of the day. His arms would sweep out wide and circular to match the tempo of the music, while his hands fluttered back and forth between his face, chest, and elbows. He looked like an orchestra conductor playing charades while simultaneously conducting the Blue Danube Waltz.

Once we finished mumbling O Canada!, the speeches started, with a Senator, the Mayor, an MLA, and the Captain of HMCS Calgary (a real frigate) all lined up in order of rank. I wandered a short distance away to the riverbank, and sat down there. A voyageur canoe was tied up to the dock below, with no one in sight save a few mallards. The canoe had a large maple leaf flag flying from the stern. As pedestrians came by, they would pose for the cameras by the flag. Finally the speeches ended, and I went back to hear the band programme. I was disappointed to see the sign language man standing idly by the stage, but I suppose that any deaf people in the audience could follow the conductor's baton. After listening for a while, I left the island back to the downtown core, first with a quick stop at the Eau Claire Farmers Market for a bite to eat.

Turning downstream along the Bow River, I started to go past Chinatown on my way to Fort Calgary. En route, I was diverted by a dragon parade, and followed it into Chinatown. The parade terminated in front of a podium, where dignitaries began making speeches. Cantonese were no more interesting to me than the anglophones, so I resumed my eastward stroll to the Fort.

Fort Calgary is on the original location of the city and specializes in historical and native events. Like the island, it was crowded with booths and bands. I listened to a native group playing a mixture of electric guitars and tribal drums, half the performers in feathered costume and the other half in street clothes. I didn't stay long, as not much seemed to be happening, and so back west to the Olympic Plaza.

The Olympic Plaza was where the medal presentations were made each night during the 1988 Calgary Olympic Winter Games. The plaza now alternates between a skating rink in winter and a wading pool in summer, with a bandstand. The band there was doing a sound check. Along with a few thousand people, I sat there listening to the lead man counting 1,2,3,4 for what bid to be the world's longest sound check. After a half hour, they seemed no closer to playing, and as anvil clouds were building up over the downtown core, I decided to head home.

YE LONG WALKS OF COOL AND SHADE

1998-07-11

To the Calgary Stampede today, the world's largest rodeo. The weather forecast was reasonably favourable, so this time I walked, taking about an hour. First straight ten blocks east from my house to the Elbow River, then down a high cliff to the left bank of the river. The path cut through aspen woodland as it went down the slope, and I walked through long narrow green tunnels just wide for two people and hardly tall enough for me.

Wild roses were in the final stages of bloom. As the path bottomed out into the river valley the aspen was succeeded by water hemlock. The green tunnel opened out onto the floodplain. I walked over the pedestrian suspension bridge to the other side of the river. At the middle of the bridge I stopped to look up at the cliffs, from where I had been looking down five minutes before. The bridge bounced and swayed as other pedestrians made their way across. As I do whenever I cross any pedestrian bridge of this style, I thought of my paternal grandparents, both dead 15 years now. When I was a young lad, whenever we came down to Calgary in the summer, they would take me to see the Zoo. The main entrance at that time was over a bouncing bridge (the Zoo is on an island in the Bow River). I always had great fun bounding across. The memory lingers and will stay with me to my grave, being re-activated each time I go across such a bridge.

And so I walked across the bridge into another, but much narrower, green tunnel. Puddles on the path and humidity left over from recent thunderstorms. There was silence but for the occasional chirping of birds and the footfalls of joggers. The joggers did not listen to the birds but instead all had headsets. Nor did they admire the beauty of the surrounding woods; their eyes were fixed grimly ahead on the path. Nature called out to them but went unheard; the lost souls might as well have been jogging on a downtown path.

I passed out of the park into the Britannia neighbourhood, where a starter home begins at \$500,000 and teenagers feel hard done by because they only got a BMW for their 16th birthday. The Elbow River winds about quite a bit, so over two more swinging bridges before I reached the south edge of the central core of the city. Geese may safely graze on the banks. A flock of Canada geese came over to where I stopped to rest on a park bench, obviously hopeful of mooching food. No such luck though, so they gave up and went back to grazing the grass.

The Stampede grounds are southeast of the central core just a few blocks from the Elbow River pathway where I came out of Britannia. And so into the event.

It doesn't change much from year to year. The dog act had been displaced by Cirque Eloize, a group of acrobats, jugglers, and rope dancers. The big hit for kids was the virtual reality hockey game. But the livestock displays were still there, with milking demonstrations twice daily, draft horses on the hour, and rabbits and poultry in a free-run barn. The Stampede began this year to stage displays on where milk comes from and why beef is not the sin that vegetarians would have people think. It used to be that the majority of Albertans were like myself, either directly from a farm or only one generation removed. But recent demographics show that now the majority of Albertans are second or third generation urbanites, or are immigrants. Thus it cannot be assumed that people understand the problems of agriculture. The farmers' organizations are taking proactive measures to ensure that dumb laws aren't passed in the legislature that would sabotage agriculture.

About noon, I went to a concession and bought barbecued chicken on a bun, then sat down to consume it. Halfway through it, I heard my name called. I looked over to see my brother and his family; I hadn't known they were coming down for the show. So for the next few hours, we travelled together, saw the Cirque Eloize and looking at the animals. People walked about in funny clothes, as if they were at an SF convention, excepting that they were dressed western instead of wearing a Klingon headpiece. The dealer bourse had sales tables plugging food processors instead of crystals and Star Trek. Multi-track programming meant that you had to decide between the pig races and the sheep shearing, both on at the same time at opposite ends of the Stampede grounds, just as an SF con gives you a conflict between two panels you wanted to see.

On my own, I went off to the arts and crafts display, much like an art show at an SF con, except that instead of badly-rendered dragons and clichéd planets in impossible orbital configurations, there were badly rendered paintings of cattle drives and clichéd portraits of cowboys with weather-lined faces.

I sat down to rest by the cookery demonstrations. The one going on at the time was on genuine cowboy cooking of a century ago. The cowboy cuisine demo was actually very well done. It was evident that the presenters had done quite an amount of research on the topic. As they talked about the history of cowboy food, they prepared biscuits and other types of food using only the ingredients that would have been used back when.

The cattle drives of yore were in charge of a trail boss, who had a cook, about a dozen cowboys, and a wrangler (who looked after the horses), all to move a thousand cattle or so from the pasture to the rail-head or auction mart. The cook was the second-highest paid employee. Trail bosses made about \$60 per month, the cook \$30/\$40, the cowboys about \$20, and the wrangler, usually a teenager, about \$15. A cook had to be good. He got up first early in the morning to have a hot breakfast ready for the cowboys and make them sandwiches or biscuits to eat midday from the saddle. While the herd moved out, he would clean up, load the chuckwagon, overtake the herd, and stake out a campsite ahead of the drive for that night, at which time he had to have a hot meal ready for the cowboys when the herd arrived. Cooking had to take into account alkaline water, lack of fuel on treeless plains, and spoilage in the heat.

I was most interested to learn that cowboys were more likely to eat Chinese food a century ago than they do today. Many chuckwagon cooks on the Canadian prairies were Chinese, ex-coolies from the Canadian Pacific Railway transcontinental line construction. The food

may have included delicacies such as moose nose or bison tongue, taken from the native tribes. But the grub also included bannock bread, introduced by Scottish fur traders in the 1600s, and so thoroughly accepted by tribes that the cowboys of the late 1800s thought it was a native dish. Bison tongue is still available today, but the cowboy cuisine presenters lamented the complete lack of wholesale quantities of moose noses for their cookery school.

So the next time you order in Chinese food, remember that you are eating western. And the twain shall meet.



CONVERSION 15

Calgary's annual SF convention is ConVersion, which, like the Calgary economy, began an upswing a couple of years ago and hopefully will outlast the next bust. ConVersion 15 was held at the Coast Plaza Hotel (formerly the Marlborough Inn) from July 17 to 19, 1998.

The Special Guest of Honour was J. Michael Straczynski, creator of the television show BABYLON 5, and undoubtedly the biggest draw at the show. While the ConVersion committee pays travel and accommodation for GoHs, its constitution prohibits paying honourariums. Therefore a group of really, really committed fans chipped in to pay his appearance fee. One can't visualize many literary SF fans doing the same for their favourite author. As a reward, the fans who paid for Straczynski's appearance got to schmooze with him at his birthday party July 17, the Friday of the con.

The regular GoH was author Joe Haldeman, who showed up a couple of days early to lead a writers' workshop just prior to the con. Canadian GoHs were J. Brian Clarke and Dave Duncan, both local writers who have been faithful workhorses at ConVersions for many years. Science GoHs were Bridget Landry of the Mars Pathfinder mission team, and Dr. Phil Currie, of the Royal Tyrrell Museum of Palaeontology in nearby Drumheller. Currie makes headlines for his dinosaur research (the Tyrrell is the largest fossil museum in the world), but he is also an SF fan, having published a zine in his younger days, with a particular interest in Edgar Rice Burroughs.

So much for all the details. As I do each year, I set out copies of OPUNTIA on the freebie table. As I will start to do each year beginning this year, I set out posters for the Toronto bid to host the 2003 World SF Convention. And as in past years, I produced an unofficial newszine for ConVersion, typed up and then run off at a 24-hour copy shop in the off hours.

Registration took about 30 seconds for those like me who pre-registered. The lumpen who bought memberships at the door had quite a lineup though. And so to the Opening Ceremonies. The guests each said a few brief words (saving their speeches for Sunday). Straczynski said it was his first Canadian SF con (cheers from audience) and an interesting way to celebrate his birthday. J. Brian Clarke said that he agreed to be a GoH if the convention would pay his travel expenses. Since he lives in Calgary, the concom agreed, not knowing that he meant by way of London, Paris, and Tokyo (laughter). Bridget Landry was introduced as two GoHs for the price of one. Besides giving talks in her capacity as an uplink systems engineer for Mars Pathfinder, she is an active costuming fan. For the Opening Ceremonies she wore a shiny silver jacket that glittered even under the dim ballroom lights. Fingering the material delicately, she turned to the rest of the GoHs and said she wore it since she was in such illustrious company.

"Being Your Own Grandpa" was the first panel I attended. The subject was time travel, the physics of which veered into quantum mechanics and parallel universes. A comment from the audience was that if time travel was possible, then subatomic particles could travel back in time as well, thus disrupting our universe. Therefore, since we have well-behaved particles, time travel is impossible. Deja vu and prophecies were also discussed qua time travel. From there, the conversation switched from the technicalities of time travel to writing about it. Older examples of time travel stories were considered, not only H.G. Wells but stories like "A Christmas Carol". In the latter discussion, the comment was made that one can observe via the ghosts but not influence, thus avoiding paradoxes. Dave Duncan entered the conversation here by mentioning that the novel he is currently writing is about people who not only can raise the spirits of the dead and communicate with them, but raise the spirits of the dead of the future and get prophecies from them.

"Technology and Democracy" discussed the question of whether the future will be more free or less so. Joe Haldeman remarked that while finances presently divide the population into information haves and have-nots, with respect to things like Internet access and credit reports, there would still be such a division even if all information was available with equal access. This is because many people do not have the intellect to search out and use information, or do not choose to do so from laziness. Edward Willett suggested information technology will help politicians do a better job if they can get more accurate information about what people want or are actually doing. And in the converse, he pointed out that such technology helps people co-ordinate mass movements, not only the overthrow of dictatorships but things as current as the Canadian blood bank scandal. Another point was then raised, that politics is mostly image now, and the leaders merely window-dressing while the bureaucrats and technocrats who really run the country get on with the job. My thought was that some people say that multinational megacorporations are making political nation-states irrelevant, but I feel that Internet and Papernet access, combined with local action, is making multinationals irrelevant. From the audience was a remark that technology forced more people to become literate in order to keep jobs, thus there was a greater chance of literate people noticing or contesting things that an illiterate wouldn't. With one exception, the panel felt that technology would not make life any worse than before; every pro would be balanced by a con, and there would always be people subverting the system. Haldeman was the pessimist, who felt that there would be a worsening gap between the technological haves and have-nots.

Back out into the hallway to the next panel, I passed an on-going robotics demonstration. The children were delighted with the robot Scotty dog roaming about. It wagged its tail if petted and weaved about pedestrian traffic quite well.

"Alien Abductions" was a panel I came in late to, just as a panelist was asking another: "Were the ancient incubi actually aliens, or are modern aliens incubi?" Very humorous panel that kept the audience in stitches, but as all the panelists were skeptics and so was the audience, this was preaching to the choir. The moderator asked the audience if anyone here had been abducted or felt they had been abducted by an alien. No response but laughter.

"Engineering Ourselves" asked how far can we alter human genetics before we are no longer human? Vigorous discussion among the audience, at times almost a shouting match. The panelists were mostly quiet while the debate raged on the floor. One danger of human recombinants argued was that side effects or unexpected damage may not show up until the next few generations. Natural human genes were fine-tuned by evolution over millennia, and we haven't the capability to predict what the long-term effects of our changes may be. Also, it is not possible to separate effects of the environment from genetics. At this point the debate shifted to the nature vs. nurture balance.

"Near Earth Objects" was a timely slide show, what with NEOs being in the news recently. The talk was given by Mike ?? (I didn't catch his last name), a graduate student at the University of Calgary who specializes in NEOs. He first gave an introduction to stellar system evolution, comets, asteroids, and impact craters. From there he went into NEOs proper. About 200 civilization killers are known to be orbiting the sun but there are probably around 10,000 of them. The physical effects of such impacts are regional, but the disruption would badly damage civilization, since most key cities are coastal and would be swamped by tsunamis. Calgary and Denver would be unharmed but their financial and socio-politics would be damaged. The global catastrophe threshold is an asteroid 1 km diameter, which would be about 100,000 megatonnes.

Mike then went on to discuss mini-impacts; there have been many sites through the years, such as the car that was hit by a meteorite. The car was an old rust bucket, but the owner sold it for several thousand dollars after its hood was crushed by the impact. I noted a few incidents in Mike's list, such as a 1931 meteorite that went through a house roof in Hagers-town, Maryland, or the 1977 meteorite storm that took out three buildings and a car in Louisville, Kentucky. Mike also reviewed the two asteroid movies that came out this year. He thought that "Deep Impact" was not too bad, save for the unbelievable software the professional astronomers had ("I'd love to have that stuff") and the improbability of a kid spotting the distant NEO with a 6" telescope. As for "Armageddon" Mike was merciless: "Technically speaking this movie sucked".

Bridget Landry gave her talk on the Mars Pathfinder mission. I had seen her earlier in the morning when she was wearing a fluorescent pink Elvira wig and spandex jumpsuit, so was a bit surprised when she came to this session in a two-piece, very revealing costume that effectively distracted the male portion of the audience. I've never seen a genuine rocket scientist with bare midriff and micro-mini give a talk on space probes.

There was a panel "Star Trek, Star Wars, Babylon 5, and Real SF", where the literary and media SFers were to slug it out. As Joe Stracynski was on the panel, the room was packed, and I could only find a spot at the back. Since it was a long narrow ballroom with no microphones, the panelists were inaudible, so I left after a few minutes.

There was a NonCon meeting in a secluded portion of the hotel lobby. Cath Jackal was chairperson. The upshot of the discussion was that NonCon '98 will be a relaxacon in Fairmount Hot Springs, British Columbia, this coming October 10 and 11.

NonCon originally started out as an Alberta regional con and became a western Canadian con a couple of years ago when no Alberta bids were received. Now it seems to have gone from a sercon to a relaxacon, although oddly enough, Onocon, a Calgary relaxacon will become sercon next year if I read their flyers correctly.

Back at ConVersion, meanwhile, was that favourite trash sport, Writers At The Improv, staged by the Imaginative Fiction Writers' Association (IFWA). This involves three teams of IFWA writers seated at the dais. Members of the audience suggest a word, and each team has one minute to write a sentence using that word. When time is called, the sentences are read out loud, the audience votes on a favourite, and the process is repeated. By this method, a short story is built up, with results as follows. The underlined words were the ones suggested by the audience.

"I don't care", said Wendel. "I still think it's a stupid rule, er,* regulation, er, whatever we're calling it now."

"They don't care what cadets like us think", steamed Power.** "It's a case of the golden rule; them with the gold makes the rules."

"But really", said Wendel, "I don't mind serving with aliens that look like broccoli but I ain't having sex with them". Wendel knew that his normal habit of using broccoli as a contraceptive could cause an incident". Power pointed the bidirectional gender diverter at Wendel and said: "Why? Don't you want broccoli babies?"

"On the contrary, I love dwarf broccoli babies. They taste just like chicken."

"Only if the chicken is plucked and flummoxed first", ejaculated Power. Just then the sax-o-phone rang, forcing Wendel and Power to put on their standard issue lingerie. "My God, Power", sighed Wendel, "you look so fetching in that maroon chemise. I could nestle away a

few light years in your strong and hairy arms."

"Sorry Wendel", answered Power, "but I already gave my heart to an artichoke from Tau Ceti."

[* actual word suggested was 'ruler'

** actual word suggested was 'steampower']

The masquerade at ConVersion was of reasonably good quality, including the sole Klingon seen at the con. Star Trek is dying in Calgary; USS Equulus held a de-commissioning party at the con. Star Trek was absent from the panels and video rooms save as incidentals. Babylon 5 is the new king. At the masquerade, one of the judges was Bridget Landry, appearing in a blue sequined gown, her third change of the day.

Sunday I started off the panels at "Will The Future Be More Or Less Free?", which was basically a continuation of yesterday's "Technology and Democracy" panel. Janis Svilpis started off challenging the audience to define what 'free' means. Someone in the audience suggested that freedom is equal opportunity to share limited resources. Most of the discussion centered on the balance between freedoms and obligations. We have to accept airport security measures to travel, but we can travel far more than anyone ever did centuries ago. Svilpis considered that the future will give us increasing freedom of choice but increasing regulation. Phil Currie, who has done a lot of work excavating dinosaurs in China, noted that their bureaucracy may help the government enforce its laws, but at the expense of dead weight, waste, and slowed response. In Canada, one has to balance freedom of action against environmental protection, universal health care against lower income tax, etcetera. Dave Duncan pointed out that China should have discovered Europe, not the other way around, but didn't because the mandarins pulled back fleets to keep tighter control. An audience member noted increasing freedoms since the 1960s when U.S. Steel was forced to roll

back prices; now governments are powerless against the multinationals. It was mentioned that freedoms also impose responsibility and willingness to accept societal obligations.

"World Building" was a panel dominated by Robert Sawyer. He said he uses the six-degrees-of-separation to find experts on obscure technical matters needed to design an alien world. There are two ways to build such a world. One can think up an alien lifeform and then figure out what type of planet would support them. Sawyer used this method when he wrote a story on aliens who moved themselves around with wheels. Conversely, one could start with the world and imagine what life forms consequently would evolve. It is not necessary to be that accurate though. Most readers or movie viewers never consider the impossibility of a world covered entirely by a rain forest (Star Wars), and the few nitpickers can safely be ignored.

For the Guest of Honour speeches, Joe Straczynski came up to the lectern under the blinding strobes of flash cameras. Rather than give a speech, he said he would instead answer any questions as long as math was not involved. Among other things, he mentioned that he writes ten pages a day. Next up was Joe Haldeman, discussing why SF readers connect with pros far more than other genres such as romances or westerns. He said fandom helped him re-adjust after his return from the Vietnam War. Like Straczynski, he said he has been writing continuously since he was a teenager. In a more humorous vein, he mentioned how the best time to sell a story is after a publisher has changed editors. Simply subscribe to LOCUS and every time you see a note about an editor being fired/downsized/quit, send your story and a cover letter to the new editor but addressed to the old editor saying "Here is the revised story as you requested in our telephone conversation". J. Brian Clarke told a few John W. Campbell Jr stories, and then went on to talk of secondary marketing of his books. He once got a cheque for \$10 for the Chinese translation rights to a short

story. His agent generously waived the 10% commission and told him not to spend it all in one place. Bridget Landry, wearing yet another costume (she must have paid extra for overweight luggage on the flight up from California) spoke briefly, saying that SF makes people think outside boxes. Dave Duncan, who writes under a variety of pseudonyms, was introduced as a multi-name author. He got a big laugh when he started his speech: "We are honoured to be here."

What with J. Michael Straczynski (commonly known as Joe), Joe Haldeman, and J. Brian Clarke all sitting next to each other, it was not surprising when the M.C. inadvertently introduced the TV producer as J. Brian Straczynski, getting one of the biggest laughs. Less troublesome was Phil Currie, who got his picture on the front cover of TIME magazine a couple of weeks ago. Currie talked about being inspired by Roy Chapman Andrews and Edgar Rice Burroughs.

For the first time in several years, the Art Show was of good quality. Further evidence of the death of Star Trek was that there were no parodies of Spock or bad pencil sketches of Picard and Data. There were lots of Babylon 5 parodies instead.

The art auction got good prices. Cliff Samuels and John Mansfield were auctioneers. Both were good at working the crowd for money and laughs. Celtic knot paintings went for up to \$365, glass paperweights to the \$30 range, and paintings in general up to \$100. A disturbing new trend was the sale of computer prints. In past years people had been vexed by photoprints of original artwork, but now computer printouts were selling for up to \$55. This suggests that artists would be foolish to put their work on the Internet, when instead they can run it off on a colour printer and sell paper copies for a good price.

As for me, I bought a \$10 postcard, but it was an original watercolour.

In summing up ConVersion 15, the time went by too fast for me; it was over all too soon. The quality of this con has picked up remarkably in the past two years. The panels had good turnouts, especially the science ones. Straczynski, it hardly seems necessary to state, packed ballrooms to overflowing. But none of the panels ever had the panelists outnumbering the audience.

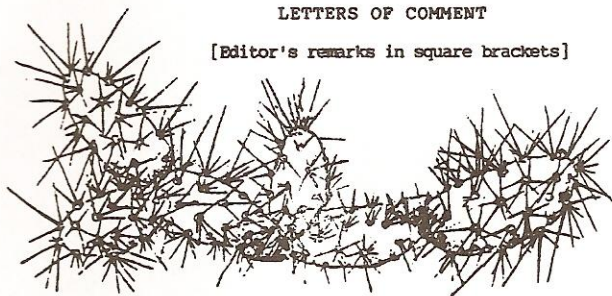
The hotel didn't have any wedding parties this weekend, but there was a family reunion. I wondered where the traditional Baptist group was, but on late Saturday a busload of Christian tourists (as said the logo) pulled in from North Carolina, so that time-honoured tradition was saved. Their badges resembled ConVersion badges, so anyone in ordinary street clothes such as myself got friendly hellos from the Christians until they looked closer and saw the difference.

Paid attendance was about 550. Next year ConVersion is back at the Carriage House Inn.

At the freebie table, there were a few more chapbooks from authors up for an Aurora Award. This is a trend to be encouraged. There is no shame in trying to ensure that voters will actually read what is nominated.

One impression I came away with from ConVersion is that Calgary fandom is shifting ground but overall is on an upswing. Trekkies are an endangered species but they are changing their alliance to newer shows like Babylon 5. Convention fandom is on the upswing. I saw flyers for Onocon 99, next February 19 to 21, at the Highlander Hotel, a new venue for SF cons in Calgary. Cost is \$23 payable to Bonnie Liesemer, 407 Blackthorn Road NE, Calgary, T2K 4X7. Costume Con 19 will be in Calgary in May 2001. Still no genzines that I know of other than this one, OPUNTIA; just the various clubzines.

[Editor's remarks in square brackets]



FROM: Ned Brooks

1998-02-16

4817 Dean Lane

Lilburn, Georgia 30047-4720

As a physicist I should point out, in connection with your article on what the pruners wear, that body heat lost at a point of contact with a cold object is not lost by radiation but by conduction. The two processes have entirely different heat balance equations. Radiation is proportional to the 4th power of the absolute temperature of the radiating body, with the constant of proportionality being an empirical number that is a maximum of 1 for the perfect black body. A stack of razor blades simulates a black body well, in the edge-on direction. On the other hand, conduction is proportional to the temperature difference, with a constant of proportionality representing the conductivity of the intervening material. The same amount of body heat is radiated out of a naked head whether it is summer or winter, but in the summer all the surrounding objects are radiating back much more energetically. The other big difference between radiation and conduction is the time constant. Radiated energy departs at the speed of light, whereas conduction through an insulator is relatively slow.



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

1998-02-13

Postal strike? I am amazed that the postal workers in Canada are allowed to get away with it. Here in the USA, we are forbidden by law to strike [Harry is a postie] and we have to sign an agreement about that when first hired. The unions do negotiate for pay and benefits, but most of the time we wind up in binding arbitration.

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

1998-02-16

The Toronto in 2003 bid progresses. A successful party in Detroit bounced our pre-registered numbers up to the 570 mark. We are planning a few more bid parties in places like Minneapolis (Minicon) and at the WorldCon in Baltimore.

Yes, the postal strike was inconvenient, but with the Net, it's not as inconvenient as it used to be. I decided to just keep loccing fanzines as best as I could and let the mail pile up. Some locs were e-mailed and the rest formed a large pile, ready for mailing once the strike was settled.

FROM: Randall Tin-ear
Box 3478
Hollywood, California 90078

1998-02-20

[Re: World Wide Party] ... out of the L.A. WEEKLY, an advert that may well have nicked the completely un-commercial communal cheers that the World Wide Party portrays and, like any good corporation, reduced it to the lowest common denomination fodder that serves to only sell their brand of beer.

[Included with this loc was a tearsheet from the February 13-19 issue of L.A. WEEKLY, page 122, showing a large ad from the Guinness Company headlined "The Great Guinness Toast". The rest of the ad reads: "Friday night, February 27, 1998, set a new world record. Come be a part of history! Stop by your favourite pub and raise a pint of Guinness to help break the record for the world's largest simultaneous toast."]

WORLD WIDE PARTY: Speaking of which, I'd like to have accounts of how everybody out there celebrated it this past June 21st. Lloyd Penney advises that the founder of the WWP, Benoit Girard, is fafiated due to divorce. I haven't had any response from him at his last address, so I can only hope that he is getting his life back together and will be able to celebrate future WWPs.

I ALSO HEARD FROM: Henry Welch, Sean McLachlan, Candi Strecker, Buck Coulson, Chester Cuthbert, Harry Warner Jr, Teddy Harvia