

OPUNTIA

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Whole-numbered OPUNTIAs are sercon, x.1 issues are reviewzines, x.2 issues are indexes, x.3 issues are apazines, and x.5 issues are perzines.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

[Editor's remarks in square brackets]

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

2008-04-24

"The price of wheat has soared ... but, unlike oil, the situation will eventually correct itself ... ", you say in your entry for February 19, 2008. That of course was before the issue of food shortages raised its head. It is driven not just by poor harvests in the previous planting cycle but by increased demand for cereals from China and India as their diets become more Western-oriented (more meat and other animal products). Their livestock feeding practices are changing, and there are alternative uses for cereals and other animal feed materials as direct incineration and biofuels. Although it's undoubtedly the case that, in the shorter term, the acreage devoted to cereals will expand and the rains will return, in the longer term soil exhaustion and climate change will once again depress yields.

[The Canadian government is subsidizing a cull of the national hog herd by 150,000 pigs in 2008 because pork prices are too low and feed costs are too high. Yet we are told that the Chinese eat half the pork in the world and want more. Fertilizer factories in

Saskatchewan are now a licence to print money, and the agricultural zones in Alberta are creeping further north each year. It is all economic insanity.]

I'm aware that you don't subscribe to theories of peak oil, but in other quarters there's a developing awareness that the end of cheap oil also means the end of cheap feed and food.

[You've mis-read me. I do believe in Hubbert's peak oil theory but not the addenda of extremists who consider the end is nigh and our civilization will crash within a couple of decades or even just a few years. Cheap oil is gone forever; we now have to get it from offshore rigs, the Arctic, or the Athabasca Tar Sands of northern Alberta, all of which are expensive to produce. The newly-discovered offshore Brazilian oil fields will not be cheap oil, and the Saudis can't produce oil for less than \$50 because they have to pump seawater into their depleted oilfields to keep them pressurized. As the price rises, the American oil shales may become economical, and coal-to-oil conversion will be common around the world. But none of it will be cheap, and that will alter the economics of production and distribution. This bodes well for local economies that had been previously destroyed by centralization of factories in big cities or had their local market gardens destroyed by cheap imports. The next generation will be poorer than us, but it won't be the end times.]

I monitor the agricultural press as part of my job, and have noticed over the past couple of months the closest it's gotten to acknowledging there is a problem is to blame the European Union's protracted approval process for genetically-modified organisms (GMOs). Agriculture wants cheap feed because the supermarkets want to be able to continue selling cheap food, but cheap feed isn't available anymore. It's high time agriculture faced up to that fact, and began to source its livestock feed closer to home rather than relying on commodity imports from halfway round the globe.

[Canadian and American farmers have the advantage that they can graze their cattle on rangeland that won't grow crops, but I don't see where Europe has any space left to increase feed production. Farmers get a small percentage of the retail food price anyway; it is the distributors and retailers who get the lion's share.]

FROM: Franz Zrilich
4004 Granger Road
Medina, Ohio 44256-8602

2008-04-22

If Calgary needs bus drivers and trash workers, why not import unemployed persons from the Maritime provinces or the native nations to the north?

[We do, but the petroleum industry outbids the City of Calgary for qualified workers, and we don't need any more labourers with no training. Fort McMurray, the capital of the Athabasca Tar Sands, is often referred to as the largest Newfoundland city.]

[Re: Calgary Parking Authority surveillance vans in the downtown core] What about smearing mud on licence plates to fool the vans? Also, why not build more parking lots or structures?

[It is illegal to cover a licence plate, so mud would get you a ticket from the first police cruiser that happened to come by. Calgary's downtown core is too built up for any more parking structures, and new skyscrapers only have parking for their staff or shipping/receiving docks. What people such as myself are looking for is a place to park a few minutes while picking up mail from the post office or making a delivery to a business.]

I have read that corn and wheat prices will continue to climb until 2016 because of ethanol as a gasoline substitute. It takes as much diesel to make a unit of ethanol in energy terms. Corn, wheat, soybean, and other grain-like commodities are fungible in other applications such as cattle feed, and with each other, so agricultural prices worldwide are going up. There have been food riots in some countries.

FROM: Phlox Icona
310 Elm Avenue
Easton, Maryland 21601

2007-04-21

[Re: Calgary's labour shortage] Are Americans welcome to apply for any of the open jobs? The economy here is really sucking hard!

[Yes, but foreign workers must have work permits and jobs lined up in advance before arriving. It would probably be better for Americans to go west to their oil-producing states such as North Dakota or the Rockies, where there are better job prospects.]

FROM: Ned Brooks
4817 Dean Lane
Lilburn, Georgia 30047-4720

2008-04-19

I was surprised at the level of cyber-policing you describe for Calgary. There are red-light cameras at a few problem intersections here, but no cyber-parking meters. Sneaky of the drivers to leave their trunk open so the camera can't read the plate! Both my cars are hatchbacks; I would never leave the hatch open or even unlocked. My various utility meters are now read by a system in a little pickup just driving by.

[The newer suburbs of Calgary also have wireless utility meter readers, but it will take decades to retro-fit the older parts of the city. Leaving trunk lids open so the vans can't photograph the licence plates requires of course that nothing valuable be left in the trunk. For a short period of time, it is quite safe whilst dashing inside to do an errand.]

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

2008-05-09

\$80 a barrel for oil? Already that's the good old days, with oil just crossing \$126 today [May 9th]. There are still oil wells taking some oil out of the ground in central western Ontario around Oil Springs and Sarnia. Some can be seen as you drive past on Highway 402. A coincidence of some sort has been noticed by the local media. For several months now, if the price of oil is \$X, the price of gas at the Toronto pump is \$X/100. Today the price of oil is \$126 a barrel and gasoline is \$1.26 a litre. Seems to be fairly steady, too.

[Calgary regular gas is about \$1.33 per litre as of late July 2008. I laugh at the Americans whining because they have to pay \$4 or so per gallon. Canadian prices convert to roughly \$6 per gallon, and Europeans pay about double that.]

The dollars are still around par. At one point, the C\$ hit \$1.10 against the US\$, and life was grand. We purchased what US\$ we could afford, and it served us well for going to Las Vegas. The Canadian economy is still looking good in comparison to many economies around the world, thanks to oil. We seem to have become northern sheiks to some.

[During the last oil boom of 1978 to 1982, Albertans were referred to as the blue-eyed sheiks because it happened that the Premier and the Minister of Energy both had blue eyes.]

Fort McMurray has become the destination of a modern gold rush. Some people I know in the northern USA have not only heard of Fort McMurray but are actively looking to go there to see if they can make some decent money. All want to go but few will succeed.

[They absolutely should not go to the Athabasca Tar Sands unless they have a job lined up ahead of time, a work permit and visa, and their employer has guaranteed them accommodation. The vacancy rate in Fort McMurray is zero, not only for apartments and houses, but even campgrounds. I know of one acquaintance who lived in worker dormitories until he could find a one-bedroom suite at \$2,500 per month plus utilities. Common labourers are not wanted; you must have a useful skill such as welding or diesel mechanics.]

The labour shortages in Calgary are proof. I would imagine that students in the Calgary area are also in high demand, and they may be among the few who will take on the service jobs for the \$12 an hour you write about.

[Shop and fast-food clerks are mostly Filipino or Hindu, those being the largest immigrant groups who already speak English when they arrive. Poor service is standard at any store in Calgary, not out of malice but because the majority of staff are still learning the job. I pity the shop owners.]

I Also Heard From: John Held Jr, Jason Rodgers

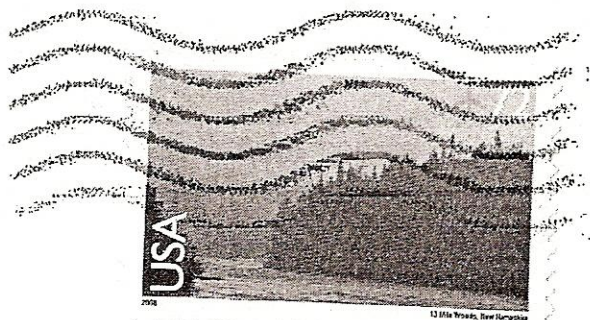
WORLD WIDE PARTY #15

2008-06-21-21h00

Founded by Benoit Girard (Quebec) and Franz Miklis (Austria), the World Wide Party is held on June 21st every year. If you are a zinester, it is a reminder that you are not alone, but a node on the Papernet. At 21h00 local time, everyone is invited to raise a glass and toast fellow members of the Papernet around the world. The idea is to get a wave of fellowship circling the planet. Here in my humble abode at Chez Cowtown, I first faced to the east and saluted those who had already done the WWP in time zones ahead of me. I then faced north and south to salute those in my time zone (Mountain Daylight Time), and finally to the west for those yet to celebrate.

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Brant Kresovich of Getzville, New York, mailed me his zine in an envelope that was suitably dated for the WWP.

BOOMTOWN DAYS.

by Dale Speirs

I Consider How My Light Is Spent.

2008-04-10

I work the weekend shift Friday to Sunday (plus statutory holidays) 12 hours per day as the Parks Dept. Trouble Calls Supervisor. Today is a Thursday. During the early morning hours whilst still abed I heard the furnace running continuously at high stage. I sleepily thought to myself that this didn't seem right since the weather forecast was only for a few degrees below zero. As I do on my days off, I sleep in until 08h38, that being when the morning business report is aired on CHQR 660 AM radio. I lie in bed and listen for the current price of oil, which today remained above \$110 per barrel. Calgary, the petroleum capital of Canada, lives and dies on the price of oil. Canadian banks never loaned for sub-prime mortgages, so we don't have the economic crisis that the Americans do, but let the price of oil drop to \$10 again and Calgary will make Cleveland look like a boomtown.

Then came the traffic report. Accidents everywhere, hills closed, freeways become parking lots, and inclined off-ramps turned into skating rinks. An articulated Calgary Transit bus jack-knifed on the Glenmore Reservoir causeway, effectively cutting off east-west traffic in south Calgary. 20 cm of snow had fallen and white-out conditions continued. In eastern Canada where 100-cm

snowfalls are common, this would be laughable, but Alberta is in the rain shadow of the Rocky Mountains and we get very little snow compared to Ontario or Québec. If we ever had a big snowfall like they do, Calgary would be a disaster area.

Environment Canada's meteorologists were caught completely by surprise, as the weather system suddenly assembled itself early in the morning just before the rush hour traffic began. To be fair to them, Calgary weather is always difficult to predict because this is where the systems collide with each other with chaotic effects. Polar highs coming down from the Arctic meet Pacific lows coming across the Rockies and moist maritime systems traveling up from Washington State.

The wet snow was freezing as it touched the ground. The Roads Dept. crews weren't able to keep up with ploughing and sanding because the snow didn't start until just as the rush hour was underway. The snowploughs were stuck in the traffic, and sanding doesn't work well if it is immediately covered in more snow. Whenever something like this happens my first reaction is always the same; thank God it happened on my day off. Fortunately the trees haven't leafed out yet, otherwise Parks would be swamped with broken branch calls. I am sure, however, that the weekday Urban Forestry crews are getting lots of calls about trees run over as commuters slide off the roads.

Today is the Friday of the Victoria Day long weekend, traditionally the first weekend of the year for decent camping in the adjacent Rockies and the last weekend for decent skiing. Half of Calgary is on the Trans-Canada Highway by mid-afternoon, and the other half will be lolling around in the city parks the rest of the weekend. Us Parks workers prayed for rain, but alas, the weather forecast was for hot and sunny all weekend, so the parks will be full.

The Victoria Day weekend is also when the Parks seasonal weekend shifts start up. This year got off on the wrong foot due to a shortage of staff, and I was missing a half-dozen workers. Parks pays \$15 an hour plus benefits for seasonal labourers, but the better type of worker can get \$20 to start in the oilfields. Oil, not so incidently, closed today at \$126.

Making things more hectic was that today was the funeral of a Calgary soldier killed in action in Afghanistan earlier this week. All city flags were to be lowered at sunrise to half-mast for the day. I managed to delegate most of the flags to other workers, but had to make a quick run first thing to Confederation Park, which has a massive display of the ten provincial, three territorial, the federal, and the Centennial flags. The funeral was held at the Stampede grounds, followed by a funeral procession through

afternoon rush hour with the streets blocked off by police escorts and lined by thousand of spectators. Fortunately this was in another supervisor's territory, but unfortunately the traffic was diverted through my territory. Not that it bothers me anymore; all roads in Calgary have at least one lane closure for construction. No matter where you drive in Calgary, your lane is closed 50 metres ahead.

The most heavily used park in Calgary is Bowness Park, a river island park popular with rafters, dog walkers, family picnics, and church outings, all of whom expect to drive into the park and find a parking spot. Last year Bowness Park had gridlock several times in weather like this, and we had to close the entrance gates until traffic thinned out. Bowness Park's internal road system is a figure-eight pattern that easily brings traffic to a complete stop, with no one able to move. The park was built in 1911 and was never intended for the automobile. It has only one narrow entrance road and no way of building another down the steep riverbank. In 1911, it was expected that park visitors would walk, cycle, or ride the bus. It was originally owned by Calgary Transit, back when it was a long streetcar ride out into the country. CT made their money on the fares. The streetcars are long gone but to this day the #1 crosstown bus route terminates at the park.

I spent this afternoon meeting with the park attendants and reviewing the gridlock procedures with them.

We never had gridlock until about three years ago. The new suburbs being built around Bowness Park have added 100,000 people in the last decade, many of whom will drive to the park on a hot day to cool off in the Bow River.

I also did a vehicle count at the main gate. This is on my own initiative to provide factual data for management about Bowness Park's over-capacity. I sit in my crewcab on the street outside the gate and count the number of vehicles entering for 15 minutes, then multiply by four to get the hourly use. This afternoon was quiet, with 80 vehicles an hour entering the park, which has about 400 legal parking spaces.

From there I departed on a trouble call. Driving up Bowfort Road, which goes up a narrow coulee, I saw a coyote trot across the street in front of me.

Q. "Why did the coyote cross the road?"

A. "To get to the chicken."

This Dark World And Wide.

2008-05-17

Saturday morning as I came into the Parks depot, Walter was patiently waiting for me. He is a grey shorthair cat who lives in one of the houses across the street from the depot. He starts his morning route with us, because we are open first, then goes up the hill to the Roads depot, and then makes the round of houses where

sympathetic housewives can be relied upon to slip him some nibbles. Walter is a champion moocher and is a fat cat indeed. Seen head-on, he looks like he is bringing a keg to the party. I checked my e-mail with one hand and gave him a back scratch with my other hand as he twined himself around my legs.

The day out in the field started with a trip to Confederation Park to raise the flags. It would be dark in Afghanistan as I raised the flags, and the squaddies would be out on patrol. There will be other dark days in Calgary when Parks employees, perhaps me again, will lower the flags. The world is wide but not so wide that we can always run away and pretend the problems don't exist.

Then a trouble call to an inner city suburb for a tree branch pruned by a moving van trying to unload at a house. The driver had torn off an upper corner of the van trying to free the truck from where he had wedged it up against the branch. Once he was clear, I polesawed off the damaged branch. Final score: Truck 1, Tree 1. No further action required.

In the afternoon, I did another vehicle count for Bowness Park, at about the same time of day as yesterday. The count worked out to 324 vehicles per hour, but no sign of gridlock. One thing that struck me as peculiar, and I had noticed it in previous years' counts as well, was that cars seemed to arrive in batches of three

or five. Seldom one at a time, and never two or four at a time. The nearest main-drag intersection is a four-way stop sign, so it can't be that a traffic light is letting cars through in threes or fives. Perhaps there is some obscure statistical law at work here.

Lodged With Me.

2008-05-18

Sunday began with a call for a spruce tree in a park fallen over. This sounded puzzling because in 27 years with Parks, I can count the number of fallen spruces on one hand. The conical shape of spruces is very wind resistant, and they have a wide root plate. The fallen spruces I have seen all had their root plates cut by landscapers renovating the yard or housebuilders. The trouble call turned out to have snapped off at head height for no apparent reason; the other spruces surrounding it looked okay. I cut it up and stacked the branches for the Urban Forestry chipper truck. No further action required.

Another trouble call was from a citizen in an upper-class suburb, advising that vandals had dragged a soccer goal post into his back yard overnight. Anything that happens in the early morning hours of Sunday has alcohol involved, and I'm sure the vandals thought it great fun or logical to drag a goal post 200 metres and lift it over a fence into a yard. I managed to get the goal post out and onto the back of my crewcab, then dumped it back on the far side of the park where it came from. I sent an e-mail to the playfields

foreman to fix it up on Tuesday. No further action required.

And so to Bowness Park in the early afternoon, by which time the temperature was 27° C. I did a vehicle count and tracked 101 vehicles entering the park in fifteen minutes, or 404 per hour. Even as I finished the count, I could see traffic backing up, so I contacted the park attendants and put one of them at the front gate. We closed the entrance gate completely for five minutes to flush out enough vehicles, after which it was "one car out, one car in". I had to put a second man on the exit gate because some drivers attempted an end run around us. They were indignant that their constitutional rights were being trampled upon by not being able to drive or park anywhere they pleased. Punk-rock anarchists who throw stones at a Chinese consulate during Free Tibet rallies are nothing compared to a yuppie couple in an SUV who refuse to walk more than ten metres from their vehicle. For the next three hours, traffic was backed up two blocks as vehicles waited their turn to enter.

To Serve Therewith.

2008-05-19

Today is the holiday Monday, Victoria Day, traditionally the Monday closest to May 24, Queen Victoria's birthday. No one can explain why Canada celebrates her birthday still, but any excuse for a party. It would be political suicide for a premier to propose abolishing a statutory holiday, so there it is. -9-



Walter the cat sits on the roof of a Parks Dept. pickup truck.

In the background is the crewcab that I drive.

My first trouble call of the day was to Panorama Hills Mews NW, in a new suburb way up north. The mews is actually a traffic island surrounded by McMansions, and the trouble was that the automatic sprinkler system had been stuck on since yesterday, flooding the park and the street. The homeowners were not amused. The sprinklers were spraying overtop the DCV box, which is the double-check valve, the main control for the system. I plopped traffic cones over two of the sprinklers so I wouldn't get soaked while opening the DCV box and shutting off the valves. Sprinklers continuously running are usually due to a stuck solenoid in the timer control or a corroded electrical wire somewhere underground. I never do irrigation repairs because they take too much time. I just shut off the system and send an e-mail to the Irrigation Foreman. The grass isn't going to die just because it went a few days without water. No further action required.

From there I went to the next trouble call, in the Mount Royal district of the inner city. This is where the old money (inherited from Papa, who was in the oil business back in the 1960s) and new money (earned by the husband, in the oil business today) live in real mansions. A \$1.5 million house is considered a starter home in Mount Royal. The trouble call was a tree trunk lying on the boulevard. I determined it was from a private tree, and since no one was home, dragged it into their driveway for them to deal with. We don't do private trees excepting that if they fall out onto

the road, we cut them back to the property line and throw the branches on the front lawn for the homeowner to dispose. No further action required.

In the afternoon, I was once more back at my accustomed berth by the front gates of Bowness Park. The temperature had cooled a bit to 20° C, so the flow of traffic was down to 240 vehicles per hour and no gridlock. I almost have it down to a science where I can predict the number of vehicles by the temperature.

The Canadian markets were closed today while the brokers celebrated Queen Victoria's birthday, but in the American markets oil closed above \$127. The general consensus among Albertans is that the fair market value of oil is somewhere between \$80 to \$100, and anything above that is because of the devaluation of the American dollar. But we're not complaining.

At the end of the shift I e-mailed all the other foremen and managers a list of what I had done on the weekend to justify the tax dollars spent on my wages. And so to home, where I mowed the front yard to keep the property looking respectable. The back yard is behind a solid board fence, so I only mow it when the thistles head into bloom.

Oil closed today at \$134.30 and even the most optimistic Calgarians were wondering where it will all end. In tears, no doubt, as these things usually do. Out of curiosity, I checked the price for exactly one year ago today, May 21, 2007. It was \$66.25, just slightly less than half of what it is now.

The peak oil enthusiasts celebrate Daniel Yergin Day every July 13 with their best champagne and by lighting Roman candles in the backyard. Yergin is a commentator in the petroleum industry notorious for his consistently wrong predictions, worse than random chance. This event was proposed by peak oil writer Jeffrey J. Brown in honour of Yergin's prediction that oil would stabilize at \$38 in 2005. It instead doubled to \$76 by July 13, 2006, so that date is now the peak oil equivalent of the World Wide Party that zinesters celebrate on June 21.

On my way back home from the University of Calgary Library via the #20 bus, I had time to observe the rush hour traffic going the opposite direction on Memorial Drive NW. Excluding commercial vehicles, I visually estimated the traffic flowing by as about half compact cars, one-quarter SUVs, and one-quarter pickup trucks. I didn't see any Smart cars, of which I know there are many around town, but the drivers of those cars generally know enough to stay off the freeways.

Another Friday and back to work. Nothing to report about my weekdays; the highlight was when I mowed the lawn a second time. I share my office with two weekday equipment supervisors, Wes and Brian, one of whom had previously told me we were all getting new furniture to replace the three desks jammed into a room about the size of a walk-in closet. I came back to find we now had a Bauhaus modern style sectional desk that ran the length of the wall but had no storage shelves. Whereas before we only had two chairs, we now had three, all of them executive-style recliners that would do any oil company CEO proud.

What Brian did with all the stationery I don't know, but I do need the large internal envelopes to mail in inspection documents. We don't have laptops, so when I do park inspections, I print off blank forms, fill them in out in the field, and send them in via real mail. I tramped next door to the weekend golf course supervisor, but he didn't have anything other than a routing slip. I keep most of my stuff in a storage closet just outside the office, to which I am the only one who has a key, but I never worried about the stationery.

It suddenly occurred to me that I am probably the only one left in this office who still needs to mail in documents. The weekday shift just hand carries their documents into the main office, but I don't have that option since it is closed weekends.

We all use e-mail and store our files on the H or S drives, do our timesheets on-line, and send purchase orders through the PeopleSoft system. All my trouble calls are documented through the 3-1-1 computer system. I never print hard copies of photos taken with my digital camera; they are attached to the 3-1-1 service requests, e-mailed to someone, or put on my H drive. Every foreman's office had three or four file cabinets when I first started with Parks Dept. in 1979; nowadays few have even a single file cabinet. As I wandered about looking for an envelope, I realized that the future had crept up on me while I wasn't looking. It was a gradual transition, almost complete but for the lack of a scanner in our office (not in the budget), with which I would no longer even have to mail my inspection reports.

Alberta gets half its annual precipitation between Victoria Day and the Stampede rodeo (second week in July). Today we were getting thunderstorms and fast-moving showers. A half-hour before quitting time today I got a trouble call about a gusher in a park. I drove out and was in the middle of the field dealing with the broken irrigation sprinkler when the hail storm suddenly hit. I wear a cowboy hat on the job, but they are not intended as substitutes for umbrellas, and I was soaked through in seconds. Because I need work clothes that will stand up to heavy physical use, I wear long-sleeved denim shirts and jeans. The wet denim weighed about the same as me, and it was a long tramp back to the truck. I see lots of hail storms every year, but always from inside

a building or vehicle. This was the first time in my life I had ever been caught outside in hail, and I discovered that cowboy hats are as noisy as a tin roof under hail. Fortunately it was the end of my shift, and so to home, dry clothes, and bed.

Man's Work.

2008-06-27

Wheee! Oil closed today at a new record high of \$140.21 per barrel. Exactly a year ago it was \$68.98, just under half today's price. In a not entirely unrelated matter, traffic on 9th Avenue SW through Calgary's downtown core is at times almost at a standstill due to all the skyscraper construction. Five years ago, it was common enough to drive across the core in ten minutes, assuming not too many red lights. Now there is a new skyscraper going up every other block, and in between the utility companies are digging up 9th Avenue to install bigger lines to handle all those new buildings. The normal five lanes of one-way traffic are down to one or two, and worse yet, different lanes are closed at different spots, forcing traffic to merge back and forth.

Other roads aren't much better. 6th Avenue SE is blocked completely as the new Encana Petroleum building goes up, a \$1 billion tower that will be the tallest in Canada west of Toronto. As the economic boom roars on, it is difficult to find a freeway that isn't being detoured for a new interchange. -13-

Calgary has now started building three-level interchanges (we had none until a year ago). The new LRT extension to the west will be elevated, not ground level like the rest of the system, due to a shortage of room for the right-of-way. Owning a cement factory in Alberta is a licence to print money.

Gasoline is today at \$1.33 per litre in Calgary (that would be \$6 per gallon for my American readers), but suburban sprawl is only slightly slowing down. Inner-city condos are very popular nowadays, not so much because commuters are worried about gas bills but because they don't like sitting in traffic jams.

In another not entirely unrelated matter, yesterday someone passing through a park in Bridgeland (an inner-city neighbourhood just across the Bow River from the core) noticed an electrical underground vault with the manhole cover off and chunks of copper wire strewn about. An Enmax (Calgary electrical system) crew was working nearby, so he asked them if it were not dangerous to leave an open hole like that. This was news to them, since they hadn't been near the vault, so they went to check it out. Looking within, they saw a man lying face down in 15 cm of water at the bottom of the vault. 9-1-1 was dialed, the electrical current turned off, and, just in case, the vault was ventilated for poisonous gases. The deceased had heavy-duty cutters and evidently was in the process of stealing copper wire when he cut into an energized main line while standing in the

water. The price of copper is also hitting all-time highs, -14- so while this was the first such case in Calgary, it was not a total surprise. The homicide squad quickly verified that this was a case for the Darwin Awards people. No further action required.

His Own Gifts.

2008-07-03

Oil closed today at \$145.29 WTI (West Texas Intermediate), slightly higher for North Sea Brent. Those in front cried "Back!" and those to the rear cried "Forward!", as the commodities analysts contradicted each other about the future of oil. (For some interesting on-line reading, visit www.theoildrum.com.)

I began my day by taking the #7 bus downtown. Normally all the routes going through the downtown core converge on 7 Avenue SW so that passengers can easily change routes, but it has been closed for a couple of months due to construction. The buses are now scattered about the core, and the #7 bus has been going down 8 Avenue before turning north onto 4 Street to get back to 7 Avenue on the other side of the construction. This morning, alas, 8 Avenue was closed for a block due to concrete being poured for the base of a new skyscraper. The bus turned south, going past 9 Avenue, which does not intersect with 4 Street but goes overtop it on an overpass with no side ramps. 10 Avenue was open but it is one of Calgary's oldest roads, built narrow in the pioneer days when it was just a railroad siding and too tight for a bus.

(The trans-continental railroad is the southern boundary of the downtown core.) We trundled past 11 Avenue, a one-way going in the opposite direction, and I feared I might end up back at my house. The bus turned on 12 Avenue finally, and thence doubling back on 4 Street. The scenic tour finally concluded and I alighted downtown. I walked to the post office, detouring a block around the courthouse construction, zigzagging along sidewalk repairs, and finally to my box number. Such is life in boomtown Cowtown.

Here are a few ideas that probably won't make it past the Stamp Design Advisory Committee over at Canada Post.

Non-denominated perpetual stamp: Depicts a Hummer, is oversized compared to regular stamps, and takes up too much room on the envelope. Instead of a numerical face value, it would have the letters WTI, and would sell for the same price as a barrel of oil, using the previous day's closing on the commodities exchange. Before you laugh, remember this: within living memory a 50c stamp used to be considered a high value stamp suitable only for registered mail or heavy parcels.

Commemorative stamps: A set of four science fiction stamps, showing fantasy scenes such as:

- i) Deerfoot Trail with no accidents or traffic jams
- ii) Calgarians celebrating the Flames winning the Stanley Cup
- iii) LRT passengers politely lining up to get on the train after first

standing aside so riders could get off

iv) a retail store with sufficient staff who know their job and provide good service

Definitive stamps: 1-cent stamp made from shredded sub-prime mortgages, which would double the value of the paper. It would depict a banker being hanged from a Bay Street light pole by a mob of angry investors.

Duck hunting stamp: Shows a scenic view of a tailings pond up at the Athabasca Tar Sands.

His State Is ...

2008-07-13

"... the price of oil is projected to decline modestly over the next two years, reaching an average level of \$53 in 2008."

(GLOBAL ECONOMIC PROSPECTS, page 23, published by The World Bank in 2007.)

Today is Daniel Yergin Day, a Sunday, so the commodity markets are closed. Oil closed Friday at \$145.08. On July 13 a year ago, the price was \$73.89, and in 2005 on that date it was exactly \$60. Ten years ago, it was \$14.06 a barrel. Daniel Yergin is still considered an expert on energy by the news media.

I took the #7 bus downtown again to pick up my mail before heading up to the university. As we stopped on 8 Avenue SW, the bus driver announced that not only was the avenue blocked again further down, but so was 4 Street. We wouldn't even be taking the scenic tour but would instead bypass the rest of the downtown core completely. I got off and started walking. After getting my mail, I walked over to the nearest LRT station, only to hear an announcement on the public-address system that the track was closed in the downtown core due to construction. Anyone going to the university would have to get on at the 8 Street SW station in the far west end of the core. I didn't fancy doubling back all that way, so instead I walked a few blocks to a stop for the #9 bus, which also goes by the university. It took me some calculated guessing as to where the #9 route stopped, since it had been detoured in the same manner as the #7 but on the opposite side of the core. We Calgarians never worry about terrorist attacks on our buses because they would have to find them first.

Every Calgary bus stop has a 4-digit number on its signpost. We call the Tele-Ride line on our cellphones (I have it on speed dial), enter the sign number, and a computer voice tells us how long until the next bus comes by. It's quite accurate because it uses the GPS devices on the buses to locate their position at the time of calling, compares it to a street map, measures the bus' speed, adds

a delay factor if the time of day is the rush hour, and hey presto! Since none of the buses keep very close to published timetables due to the shortage of drivers, Cowtowners generally rely on Tele-Ride. My call told me that #9 would trundle on by in seven minutes, so I stood and waited.

And Wait. 2008-08-18

Oil prices have been slumping steadily over the past few weeks, and closed today at \$112.89. A year ago, oil was \$71.90, in 2006 it was \$70.93, in 2005 it was \$63.47, and in 2004 it was \$47.36. World oil exports continue to decline, as the new production is less than the decline in production from existing oil fields, and the exporters such as Saudi Arabia keep a higher proportion of their production to provide jobs at home.

What is finally moderating the price is demand destruction, not a production glut. Decades of lectures and moral suasion did not get Americans out of their SUVs, but a few months of \$4 gasoline convinced them to change. World demand has fallen faster than production supply, finally leaving a comfortable surplus. The bad news is that outside of Alberta and the Arabian Gulf, most developed countries are in an economic tailspin.

What will the world look like when the next x.5 issue of this zine is published. We can only stand and wait.