

OPUNTIA 554



Stampede Rodeo 2023

Opuntia is published by Dale Speirs, Calgary, Alberta. It is posted on www.efanzines.com and www.fanac.org. My e-mail address is: opuntia57@hotmail.com When sending me an emailed letter of comment, please include your name and town in the message.

YEEHAW! ETCETERA, ETCETERA
photos by Dale Speirs

The cover photo was taken of a Stampede display in the Suncor Tower lobby in the downtown core. Spot the opuntia.

And so down to the Calgary Stampede rodeo grounds, open from July 7 to 16. Not every day because I had other business to attend to, but I did get in three days. Sunny weather with evening thunderstorms, but I went in the morning and left in the middle afternoon. At right was a noisy midway attraction.



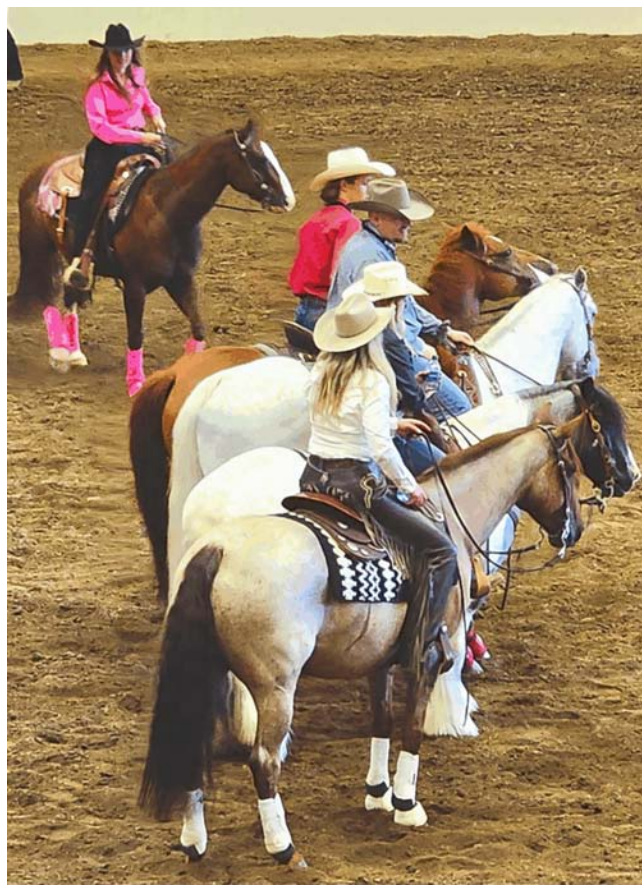


Top: A Charolais cow, a lean beef breed. That may not mean anything to you but our ranch ran Charolais. In fact, the official name of the ranch was CJS Charolais, the first part being my father's initials.

Above bottom: Dad loved auctions. He once saw some llamas up for sale and would have bid on them just for the fun but Mom was with him and said no way.



Above: We never had hogs, not anyone in our extended family of farmers. I know no more about them than the average city slicker.



This year is the centennial of the chuckwagon races. Chuckwagons were cookwagons out on the lone prairie. The cook was one of the highest paid workers on the ranch and only the best was expected.

This exhibit showed an original chuckwagon from way back when, compared to a modern racing chuckwagon (at bottom right).



The modern racing chuckwagons are still capable of being used as cook wagons. Each year an array of them are lined around the Olympic Plaza downtown in the mornings to serve free pancakes.





Far left: Spot the typographical error on this sign. I completely missed it until my brother pointed it out after I texted this photo to him.

Near left: She was laughing because I said to her: "*En anglais, s'il vous plait*".



The Stampede Showriders always fill the arenas. They are young women between 14 and 21 who own their horses, and tour the rodeo circuit before and after the Calgary Stampede.



Q: Why do bees hum?

A: Because they don't know the words to the song.



Like every municipal exhibition or state fair, the Calgary Stampede has commercial exhibits.



I always gain weight during the Stampede. At left from Barbeque Alley is championship beef brisket on a bun. Melted in the mouth, so tender. The food trucks take great pride in their food and display their trophies as proof. Below is a bacon-egg-cheese burger with potato tots. Real cheese, not processed.





On my way to the Stampede grounds through the downtown core, I always came early for the free pancake breakfasts on the Stephen Avenue pedestrian mall.

This one, sponsored by Fluor, served a fluffy pancake with embedded bacon strip.

All the pancake staff are volunteers, as are the majority of the rodeo staff.



MATTHEW 24:6: PART 8

by Dale Speirs

[Parts 1 to 7 appeared in OPUNTIA's #389, 391, 392, 412, 426, 455, and 510.]

Black Holes.

Einstein predicted in his General Relativity theory that a sufficiently large mass would wrap its gravity well around itself completely and pinch itself out of the universe. Karl Schwartzchild did the math in 1916 and confirmed Einstein was correct.

This idea made its way, in garbled form, into the story “Nova In Messier 33” by Chan Corbett (1937 May, ASTOUNDING, available as a free pdf from www.archive.org). The protagonists were astronomers who watched as first the Moon, then Manhattan, were shrunk into individual black holes.

The explanation, given in “As you know, Professor” style, was that the Solar System had intercepted a beam of energy from the galaxy Messier 33, caused by a supernova.

Wayne arose. His clear-cut features were grim. “No,” he answered decisively. “You forget the Relativity Principle. If the Moon shrank to a point where it occupies but a few cubic yards in our space, and its mass focused to something like a million tons to the cubic inch, all our normal laws of gravitation would go by the board. What, after all, is gravitation?”

“The warping or bending of surrounding space because of the presence of matter,” Giles answered promptly.

“Exactly. But when matter is compressed to the incredible limits I have postulated, its warping powers over the neighboring field must be of such intensity as to curve the surrounding space time completely around itself.”

“In other words, it has formed a closed unit, a spheroid sufficient to itself, even as our own Einsteinian space time is considered to be.”

Giles fell back. “You mean, then,” he croaked hoarsely, “that the Moon has been withdrawn from our order of space time into dimensions of its own ; that it is there, yet as infinitely remote as the farthestmost island universe?”

“Farther!” Wayne corrected. “We are in contact with Andromeda by the light which spans the gulf between, by our mutual gravitational attraction, no matter how weak. But the Moon and ourselves have sundered all such connections.”

“It is invisible, for the light by which we see must forever swing around it ; its gravitational sphere has no points of entrance into ours. Henceforth Earth must depend on the stars for night illumination, on the influence of the Sun for feeble tides.”

Big Freeze.

SUNSHINE was a 2007 movie written by Alex Garland, about the voyage of the Icarus 2 to the sun to reignite the dwindling star. Earth was freezing over, so the spaceship was going to drop a humongous nuclear bomb into the south pole of the Sun to restart the fusion process.

There was not even a dust mote of validity to this premise, although much of the other science was reasonably accurate. The SFX were top quality and big money was put into them.

Unfortunately the pacing of the movie in the first half was sloooooow. Way too slow as the background of the eight astronauts was elucidated. Everyone had angst.

As Icarus 2 approached its deployment point, the crew discovered Icarus 1, the previous bomb ship which had gone missing without a trace. At this point, the film turned into a horror movie, with lots of gore, the worst example being someone having his skin peeled off his arm.

There was a struggle to the death as the good astronauts tried to get the bomb away on target, fighting against an insane astronaut from Icarus 1. They all died in the end but did re-ignite the Sun. The closing scene was, I'll admit, very well done. Until then, the entire movie took place on board the spaceships, with views of the looming Sun interspersed.

The final shot took place on an ice pack, which the viewer naturally assumed was somewhere in the frozen Arctic. Just as the end credits began to roll, the camera pulled back to show Sydney Harbour, with the sails of the Sydney Opera House in the background. The ice pack was the harbour.

Big Water.

LOST CITY RAIDERS was a 2008 movie written by Jean de Segonzac My copy was from a bargain bin DVD set “Ultimate Disaster 4 Film Pack” from Millennium Entertainment. Worth watching once on a rainy Sunday afternoon with nothing else to do.

The setting was 2048 when most of Earth was flooded by rising waters, supposedly by global warming melting all the ice caps. The extent of flooding was exaggerated but I was pleased to see the Rocky Mountains were still above water, meaning that Calgary would be a port city.

The MacGuffin of the movie was a sceptre which would lower the water. The good guys were the Catholic church and the Kubiaks, a family of treasure hunters. The bad guy was an oligarch who built floating cities. The chase was on hither and yon, thinning out characters as fast as they were introduced.

Team Kubiak finally got the sceptre but not without losing some of their own. Nonetheless they made their way to a secret control room where the sceptre was used as a key to blow open a crevasse and make the water drain back into the Earth.

This was basically a Waterworld movie on a budget, using computer graphics which would have been spectacular in 1980 but sadly low resolution for 2008. There was no real science, just a video display lecture of Pangea and plate tectonics that would have any geologist shouting angrily at the screen.

Big Goo.

“One For Sorrow” by Richard Gregson (2023 May/June, ANALOG) was a story told before but is always useful as a cautionary tale. I’ve read various versions about bacteria used to decompose oil slicks or to biodegrade plastics. They get loose into the environment, destroy all petroleum or plastics, and civilization comes crashing down.

In Gregson’s story, the bacteria were synthesized to separate out metals and silicon from discarded electronic devices. Except, of course, they inevitably escaped and spread into working electronics. Soon the Internet was gone, electrical distribution systems thereafter, and all supply chains, destroying civilization.

MAGYAR FICTION

by Dale Speirs

Bela Lugosi’s career was handicapped by his severe Hungarian accent. He was always scrambling for movie and stage work, and was hampered on old-time radio for obvious reasons. Nonetheless he did appear on some radio shows.

Bud Abbott and Lou Costello were among the famous stand-up comedy teams of their time. The duo was on the radio airwaves from 1940 to 1949. Available as free downloads from the Old Time Radio Researchers at www.otrr.org/OTRRLibrary

“The New Sheriff” aired on 1948-05-05. The guest star was Bela Lugosi, who was nearing the end of his career. Abbott and Costello were having their own problems as well.

The three men were not strangers, as at that time they had just finished working together on the movie ABBOTT AND COSTELLO MEET FRANKENSTEIN. Lugosi played Count Dracula in the film. I have not seen this movie, nor do I consider my life diminished thereby.

As per most comedy-variety shows at that time, the first half was stand-up comedy, an orchestral instrumental, and a mediocre singer. The second half was a comedy sketch. Abbott was honorary mayor of Encino, California, today a suburb of Los Angeles.

Costello asked him for a sinecure, specifically the position of sheriff. There followed some wordplay, such as “corpus delicatessen”. Costello was appointed to the job. A complaint came in about screams, gunshots, and dead bodies in Bela Lugosi’s house.

Lugosi was unhelpful and told Costello: “*That’s my business*”. Abbott sternly told Costello to search Lugosi’s house. Costello suddenly didn’t want the job of sheriff. Notwithstanding that, the comedy duo went out to the house.

Lugosi warmly greeted them and offered a sandwich. A rattlesnake burger with pickled toads and dried bat wings. “*With pickle?*”, asked Costello. Replied Lugosi: “*What? And get heartburn?*”. The breakfast menu was shrouded wheat.

In the house were caskets, robots, skeletons, ghosts, and a grandfather clock with an actual grandfather swinging as the pendulum. Costello told Abbott he wanted to see someone outside. “*Who?*” “*Me!*”

The duo went down into the basement where they found a headless corpse. Lugosi was offended at their reaction, and said the corpse’s rent was paid up until June. Continuing into the next room, they were greeted by screams, gunshots, and crashing sounds.

From there they found secret passages with Paul Revere’s ghost and an attractive vampire. She said she came in on Noah’s Ark. She kissed Costello. She heard Lugosi coming and vanished.

“*What are you trying to do, wake up the living?*” demanded Lugosi. The final jokes fell flat, with no audience response whatsoever, and the episode quickly wrapped up. All three were on the downslope of their careers. The script didn’t help them make a comeback.

The Boomer generation will remember the television show CANDID CAMERA, produced by Allen Funt. He would roam about with a hidden camera and microphone and put innocent bystanders into ridiculous situations.

The predecessor to that show was THE CANDID MICROPHONE, which aired for a season in 1947-48. Available as free downloads from the Old Time Radio Researchers at www.otrr.org/OTRRLibrary

“Guest - Bela Lugosi” aired on 1950-07-18. One of the skits was set up in a curio shop. Lugosi posed as the manager. When a woman walked in to browse, he showed her items such as a flute made from the arm bone of a young girl and a shrunken head.

Her reaction was disbelief but he assured her everything was real. She sounded wary as he displayed different macabre items. Finally he told her she was being recorded by a hidden microphone.

Her relief was obvious. When he introduced himself, she didn’t believe he was Bela Lugosi and began laughing hysterically.

The movies remain Lugosi’s main claim to fame. THE BLACK CAT (1934) was written by Peter Ruric, and starred Bela Lugosi and Boris Karloff. The

leading part was Lugosi more than Karloff. This movie is available on the DVD set “Boris Karloff And Bela Lugosi 4 Movie Horror Collection” from Universal Studios.

This movie was one of a series Universal produced in the early 1930s. They were ostensibly based on Edgar Allan Poe stories but had nothing in common except the titles. Poe was credited for publicity purposes only.

Lugosi played the part of Dr. Vitus Werdegast, recently released from a Siberian prison camp 15 years after being taken prisoner during a World War One battle. On board the Orient Express he met a mystery novelist Peter Alison and his wife Joan. All three were heading to Hungary.

Werdegast explained to the Alisons that he was searching for his wife Karen and daughter, whom he had not seen since the war. They got off the train and got on the same bus. It was a dark and stormy night. The bus crashed near the mansion of architect Hjalmar Poelzig (played by Karloff).

The house was built on the ruins of Fort Marmorus, where the battle had been fought where Werdegast was captured. Poelzig betrayed the fort to the Russians, then took Werdegast’s daughter Karen Jr as his wife.

After the bus crash the Alisons and Werdegast took shelter in the Poelzig house. The two war comrades met privately. Werdegast was about to kill Poelzig but a black cat walked through the room, solely and no doubt to justify the movie title. Werdegast had ailurophobia and reacted hysterically to the cat.

Down in the dungeon Poelzig had the bodies of various women in glass cases. He showed Werdegast the one containing Karen Sr. From there events drifted sideways into satanic cults and slightly lesser alarums such as skinning people with a flensing knife.

Poelzig sat down at an electric organ, at that time a cutting-edge device, and played the Mad Scientist Theme, also known as Bach’s Toccata and Fugue in D Minor. This became the standard piece in subsequent movies whenever a mad scientist sat down to play the pipe organ.

Werdegast finally killed Poelzig, the manor house was blown apart, and the Alisons escaped.

THE MAN FROM MONTENEGRO: PART 27

by Dale Speirs

[Parts 1 to 26 appeared in OPUNTIA's #252, 253, 275, 278, 279, 289, 304, 307, 319, 332, 335, 337, 344, 355, 364, 365, 382, 415, 445, 473, 479, 503, 513, 519, 524, and 544.]

Pastiches: Novels.

Rex Stout died in 1975, so his Nero Wolfe stories are still under the copyright protection of his estate. They have granted to Robert Goldsborough permission to write pastiche novels, which I have reviewed in past issues of this column.

The latest novel was issued in June 2023, titled THE MISSING HEIRESS. Archie Goodwin's girlfriend Lily Rowan had a friend Maureen Carr who had gone missing. Carr, a wealthy socialite, hadn't been heard from in two weeks, not like her at all.

Goodwin and Rowan talked to Carr's maid Sofia and got into the Carr penthouse but did not find any clues. Enquiries among Carr's friends produced no useful information.

She had a half-brother Everett, who might be in line to take over her half of the family fortune. He was a loner who lived at the YMCA and drizzled money away on horse races.

Rowan did as much sleuthing as Goodwin because she had contacts in high society where he couldn't go. Wolfe admired her and joined the investigation gratis, hiring his usual freelance assistants such as Saul, Orrie, and Fred.

The net was spread and clues accumulated here and there. A few breaks came in, not by dramatic action, but by slow and steady plodding, which is the real way detective work is done. Carr's travels were partially traced and connections found with Everett and the shady men he associated with.

The excitement began when someone emptied a clip of 9 mm bullets into Everett in a dark alley. That flushed out his sister, running scared and into Wolfe's office. Everett had gotten in deep with a loan shark, and Carr had to write a \$50,000 cheque to cover his gambling debts. The story was set in the postwar period, so call it \$500,000 in today's depreciated currency.

From there to the festivities, as Goodwin called the traditional J'accuse! meeting in Wolfe's office. All the participants were there, plus Inspector Cramer and Sergeant Stebbins. The murderer was not one of the obvious suspects, and killed Everett accidentally, but had to stand trial nonetheless.

The novel read well despite a slow start during the plodding phase. A bit too much information was withheld until the denouement (Wolfe used that word himself). The reader had at least a chapter to narrow the list to two suspects before the naming. Maureen went back to her life, not normal, but reasonably close.

Wolfe's Paperweights.

About once every five years I re-read my set of Nero Wolfe novels. As I became more familiar with the stories, I noticed some recurring references to a paperweight on Wolfe's office desk. I jotted them down and present them herewith for analysis in chronological order.

THE RED BOX (1936)

[Wolfe] *He folded it and slipped it under the block of petrified wood which he used for a paperweight.*

"A Window For Death" from THREE FOR THE CHAIR (1955)

Wolfe gave the check a look and put it under a paperweight, a chunk of petrified wood that had once been used by a man named Duggan to crack his wife's skull.

IF DEATH EVER SLEPT (1957)

Wolfe put the stack of bills on the desk and put a paperweight, a chunk of jade that a woman had once used to crack her husband's skull, on top.

"Eeny Meeny Murder Mo" from HOMICIDE TRINITY (1962)

Two objects were there on the rug which had been elsewhere when I left: a big hunk of jade which Wolfe used for a paperweight, which had been on his desk, and Bertha Aaron, who had been in a chair.

[Aaron had been knocked unconscious with the paperweight, then strangled.]

THE FATHER HUNT (1968)

He removed the paperweight, a chunk of jade that a woman, not young, had used years ago to conk her husband, from some items on his desk.

Robert Goldsborough referred to the paperweight in his 1987 pastiche novel DEATH ON DEADLINE

Dean clammed up, but frowned at the hunk of carved ebony on Wolfe's desk which a man named Mortimer had used as a murder weapon.

The chronology indicated that for two decades Wolfe used a chunk of petrified wood as a paperweight. The wood might have been given away or disappeared during redecorating.

However, there was no reason why Wolfe couldn't have had two or more paperweights on his desk after 1955. This would explain the arrival of the jade chunk, which had the distinction of being the murder weapon in two unrelated cases.

Tecumseh Fox.

The Nero Wolfe stories were published from 1934 to 1975 until the death of Rex Stout. The first was FER-DE-LANCE, in which Wolfe and his legman Archie Goodwin appeared as fully developed characters. They were settled into a Manhattan brownstone and had been operating together for years.

Rex Stout experimented with a private detective Tecumseh Fox. Not obese like Wolfe, and doing his own legwork, Fox appeared in three novels between 1939 and 1941, one of which was converted into a Wolfe story.

The two detectives shared a common universe in New York City and Westchester County. Many subsidiary characters and localities appeared in both series, although the two detectives themselves never met. Fox had an assistant Dan Pavey, a less couth version of Goodwin.

The Wolfe series was far more successful, so Fox went into obscurity. Fox was just another private investigator among so many others. The stories read well but could easily be converted into any other detective with only a name change to Richard Diamond, Johnny Dollar, or George Valentine.

DOUBLE FOR DEATH first appeared in 1939. I have the 1995 trade paperback reprint by Bantam. The murder was that of wealthy Ridley Thorpe at his weekend house in Westchester County. The niece of the accused hired Fox to prove her uncle Andrew Grant was innocent.

While the police and District Attorney were satisfied they knew what happened, Fox took the extra steps they ignored. Eventually he discovered that Thorpe was alive and well, having gone fishing in Long Island Sound for the weekend.

Thorpe was mighty surprised to return home and see the newspaper headlines about his murder. The dead man was a doppelganger named Corey Arnold, hired by Thorpe to provide himself with some privacy. Arnold acted as a decoy.

Thorpe had received a threatening letter, the text of which was printed. No further comment was made for the time being. Nota bene.

Thorpe was diddling a young woman whose stage name was Dorothy Duke. He'd rather not have that relationship known, although her father Henry Jordan owned the boat Thorpe used and knew about the affair.

As Jordan later revealed, Thorpe hadn't been fishing but was at a country cottage with Dorothy. Jordan didn't approve of the affair but she was a grown woman. He had supplied Thorpe with the fishing alibi but later admitted Thorpe was at the cottage with Dorothy.

There was much to-ing and fro-ing of a plentitude of characters but eventually the vast majority of them congregated at Thorpe's estate. One of them was the murderer, who this time got it right and shot the real Thorpe dead.

Half of those present had an alibi and half didn't, so the case was a mess. Fox spent much of his time tripping up the police while fishing for information. There were some clues, not much though. What put Fox into a tight spot was that the murder weapon was his handgun.

That was sorted out eventually. The threatening letter was the clincher. The text was British English, spelling the word 'honour' instead of 'honor' as an American would do. The writer referred to a pavement instead of a sidewalk, for in North America the pavement is what vehicles drive on. Jordan was an Englishman by birth and upbringing. The rest was obvious.

ON THE CUTTING EDGE OF TECHNOLOGY: PART 8
by Dale Speirs

[Parts 1 to 7 appeared in OPUNTIA's #258, 346, 360, 404, 456, 480, and 543.]

Wax Cylinders.

Jessica Fletcher was the protagonist of *MURDER, SHE WROTE*, a television mystery series from 1984 to 1997. Although the show is long gone, original novels are still being published to date, bylined as “Jessica Fletcher and [name of ghostwriter]”.

MURDER IN A MINOR KEY (2001) by Jessica Fletcher and Donald Bain took place in New Orleans when Fletcher attended a writers’ conference (no casualties) and then stayed on for a jazz festival.

Her friend Wayne Copely was searching for wax cylinder recordings of jazz musician Alphonse “Little Red” LeCoeur. Copely was a music critic and soon enough was dead, found murdered by the grave of an old voodoo queen.

The New Orleans Police Department declared the death to be accidental, a foolish thing to do when Fletcher was in town. On the other hand, she had a free hand in snooping into the matter.

As a music critic, Copely had no shortage of enemies. Throw corrupt political machinations into the mix. The back stories were related to a murder 15 years ago. There were several prime suspects, each fingered in turn. The denouement revealed the culprit set up the hit to get the rare Little Red wax cylinders.

Advertisement from April 1910 issue of RAILROAD MAN'S MAGAZINE

Crash!!—another wax record gone to smash!



If you own a Columbia Cylinder Graphophone (or an Edison phonograph) get *one* Indestructible Record from your dealer.

Or let us mail one to you:—35 cents, prepaid, and a catalog with it.

Lend it to the youngsters. Toss it on the table. Drop it on the floor. Kick it across the room. Leave it in the sun. Then play it and hear a finer, clearer, purer, stronger reproduction—better music in every way—than your machine ever gave out before. Play it every day for ten years and you will still have it, good as new.

Almost too good to be true? Try it! Prove it! Risk your 35 cents.

4-MINUTE INDESTRUCTIBLE RECORDS 50c

Fit any Columbia or Edison machine that has the new 200-furced attachment. Play the complete selection—from 4 to 5 minutes. The only “4-minute” records that are *right*!

Sold by Dealers Everywhere
DEALERS WANTED—Exclusive selling rights granted where we are not properly represented



COLUMBIA
Indestructible Records
never break and
never wear out

THE HENNEY PRESS, NEW YORK

COLUMBIA



CYLINDER & DISC

RECORDS



They Sound Best

THE clear, sweet, natural tone of Columbia Records delights the ear. "A concord of sweet sounds."

They reproduce all the characteristic timbre and sympathetic qualities of the human voice with absolute fidelity.

All harsh, metallic, disagreeable sounds are entirely eliminated, making Columbia Records the smoothest known.

They Wear Best

Columbia Records outlast all others, by actual test. Thousands of users all over the world are discarding other Records for the Columbia.

They Fit All Makes of Talking Machines

Columbia Records sound best on Columbia Graphophones; but if yours is another make, Columbia Records will greatly improve the Tone Quality of your machine.

Prove It for Yourself

Columbia 10-inch Disc Records, 60c.

Columbia Gold-Moulded Cylinder Records [only] 25c.

Columbia Half-Foot Cylinder Records, 50c.

COLUMBIA PHONOGRAPH CO., Gen'l

353 BROADWAY, NEW YORK

88 Wabash Ave., Chicago

526 McAllister St., San Francisco

Grand Prix, Paris, 1900 Double Grand Prize, St. Louis, 1904 Grand Prize, Milan, 1906

Stores in all the Principal Cities

Dealers Everywhere

Wire Recorders.

Before tape, there was wire, magnetized to store and play back sounds on a reel deck. It was the standard until the late 1940s, when tape took over.

BOSTON BLACKIE, real name Horatio Black, had at one time been a jewel thief in Boston, but later became a freelance paladin. He was created by Jack Boyle who only published one book about him, a collection of stories in 1919.

The radio shows are leavened with humour and quips. Everyone, including his girlfriend Mary Wesley, called him Blackie. Writers were not credited, although the actors were. Available as free downloads from the Old Time Radio Researchers at www.otrr.org/OTRRLibrary

Blackie's nemesis was NYPD Homicide Inspector Farraday. The name was originally spelt in the usual way with one 'r' but after the series got going for some reason the extra letter was added.

"The Valuable Door Buzzer" aired on 1947-12-31. Smuggler Henri Taylor brought in an electrical doorbell from his contact in Paris, a shopkeeper named Pierre Lascale. The American Customs officer was suspicious but declaring a doorbell was not a crime. He asked Boston Blackie to investigate.

Once home in his Manhattan apartment, Taylor was soon accosted by two goons Tom Downey and Joe Small, who had previously worked for Lascale. They didn't know what Taylor had but wanted whatever it was. They shot him dead without getting the secret.

Blackie and Farraday investigated. The former correctly surmised that the wires of the doorbell contained a message. The police laboratory had a wire recorder, which played a message when the doorbell wire was run through the deck.

Lascale's voice recited a street address, then a series of numbers which were probably the combination to a safe. Blackie, Farraday, and police proceeded to the address, found a safe, and opened it with the combination. The safe was empty.

The hypothesis was that Lascale had stashed money in the safe before departing to France. He didn't know the safe was empty. Downey and Small had stolen the money prior and didn't want him learning about the theft.

Back in Paris, Claire Taylor informed Lascale in his shop’s back room that she knew what her brother Henri had been doing. She was going to the police, she told him. Claire was quickly garroted. Natural selection in action.

Lascale returned to New York City amidst assorted alarums. Farraday took care of him while Blackie went after the two goons. Justice was served on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean.

Tape Recorders.

Home tape recording at an affordable price with portable devices didn’t arrive until the early 1960s. During the 1950s, some devices, mainly intended for businesses, were available but they were briefcase size at best and open-reel.

Dictaphones were cylinders and meant for business use. Cartridge tapes such as 4-track, 8-track, and cassettes did not become common until the 1970s. All portable hand-carried devices had to await the coming of the transistor.

Which brings us to “The Music Lover” by Tony Noice (1967 April, THE MAN FROM U.N.C.L.E. MAGAZINE). The story took place on board a cruise ship, where a passenger’s diamonds had been stolen.

Dave Shepherd was the security chief on board. He quickly identified the thief as Harvey Grendal but had no proof. The latter was cheerfully contemptuous as Shepherd searched his cabin. Just to rub it in, Grendal plugged in a portable reel tape player to play music while Shepherd searched.

Eventually Shepherd realized the player was dual AC-voltage and battery-powered. He opened up the player and found the batteries had been removed so as to store the diamonds in them. Case closed and Grendal to the brig.

Vinyl.

Wax cylinders and wire recorders are unlikely to make a comeback, but interestingly, vinyl records, once thought to be well on the way to extinction, have actually made a comeback. As of 2022, they outsold CD disks.

VINYL RESTING PLACE (2023) by Olivia Blacke was the first novel in a new cozy series about Juniper Jessup of Cedar River, Texas. She and her sisters

Tansy and Maggie opened Sip and Spin Records, a combination coffee shop and vinyl records store.

Their grandparents had once operated a music store but had been wiped out by Napster and iTunes. The cycle eventually turned and vinyl was back. The grand opening went well until the body was discovered in the store’s supply closet.

The woman was an old friend of the Jessups, and their Uncle Calvin was the prime suspect. Juniper went Marpleing. (Her mother’s name was Begonia, so maybe I should have put this review in the Botanical Fiction column.)

Juniper had to, since the three sisters put up their shop as collateral for their uncle’s bail. They were kept busy selling vinyl and scones, while shooing away curious customers who wanted to peek into the supply closet.

Most of their sales were in the coffee shop. They bragged about their eclectic records selection but played Diana Ross and The Supremes over the shop sound system.

Specifically stated was that the shop also sold over the Internet, which made economic sense for a cozy. Too often the economics of cozies are ridiculous, such as a puppet maker in the boreal forest of Ontario or, my favourite, the typewriter repair shop in a modern-day Colorado ski resort.

But I digress. The police and the three Miss Marples continued. Eventually the killer was exposed. He was a womanizer and the victim had threatened to tell his wife. And so to the final page, where a customer bought a jazz record and then enjoyed a frappé.

ATTACK AND DECAY (2022) by Andrew Cartmel was the sixth novel in a series about the Vinyl Detective, whose name was never given. He was an Englishman who earned his living tracking down rare vinyl records on commission, assisted by his girlfriend Nevada.

Owyn Wynter, né Owen Winter, was an impresario who produced death metal music for his vinyl label Whyte Ravyn Records. He hired the Vinyl Detective and Nevada to go to Sweden to buy a rare vinyl “Attack And Decay” by the Storm Dream Troopers.

Never as simple as that, of course. They met two Swedish nerds, one of whom drove a van called Obi Van Kenobi. There was incessant talk of things such as Beogram 4000 turntables with tangential tracking arms, not to mention Bang & Olufson.

The record search took a turn for the worse when, halfway through the novel, the first murder took place. The victim was killed in the same manner as described in the lyrics of one of the “Attack And Decay” songs. Others died according to other songs on that vinyl. Death metal indeed.

The perpetrator liked to bwah-ha!-ha!. When she was identified in the denouement, instead of shooting everyone immediately, she explained at great length what she had done, how, and why. This gave one of the others a chance to free them all in a single bound.

High Grade Talking Machine

20 inches long. Uses either Victor or Columbia Records

Reproduces speeches, songs and music, equal to a \$30 machine. Don't throw your money away, but take advantage of our generous offer. In order to introduce MARVEL WASHING BLUE in every county in U. S. we have decided to give away the "GRAND" Talking Machine, ABSOLUTELY FREE, for selling only 36 packages of Washing Blue at 10c per package. **DON'T SEND A CENT, WE TRUST YOU;** order today, and we will send you the Washing Blue by mail, postpaid; when sold send us our money, \$3.60, and we will promptly ship you this machine complete with 25 points, including a GOOD SPIN. **NO CHARGE FOR BOXING, PACKING, E. C.** It reproduces songs, speeches, band music, etc., as loud and clear as a \$30 machine, and can be used at all entertainments



E. J. MORGAN BLUING CO.,
Dept. 7 173 Greenwich St., New York.

FREE

and concerts, in any size hall or room. The base is piano finished, with concert sound box, and 14 inch metal Amplifying Horn. This machine is **OPEN FOR INSPECTION AT OUR OFFICES,** between 9 A. M. and 6 P. M. We are giving away the "GRAND" Talking Machines to quickly introduce our Washing Blue, and all we ask is that when you receive the machine, which we give away absolutely **FREE** for selling only 36 packages, that you will show it to your friends. This is a grand opportunity to get a fine Talking Machine for a very little work. **\$100 REWARD** will be paid to anyone who can prove we do not give this machine as we say for selling only 36 packages of Washing Blue. Write to-day. Address

From May 1903 issue of THE BLACK CAT magazine

Make More Money

The PSYCHO-PHONE Way



Here are typical results reported by users

"My salary increased from \$200 to \$218 per month."
"In six weeks it increased my husband's salary 50 %."
How are results like these brought about? By directing the great powers of the unconscious mind. These powers are the real source of achievement. Control them and there is no reasonable wish that may not be fulfilled.

The Psycho-Phone Latest Triumph of Science

The Psycho-Phone is an automatic suggestion machine. It directs your unconscious mind during sleep—to say and do what you desire. What do you want of life? Here are some further statements from actual users of the Psycho-Phone, illustrating the great variety of purposes for which it is employed: "I have overcome a great fear and inferiority complex"—"In two months it cured me of constipation and doubled my practice" (from a doctor)—"It made me look much younger and greatly increased the growth of my hair"—"It greatly increased my vigor," etc.

Send for Free Book "MIND POWER"

While the Psycho-Phone may seem a revolutionary invention, it actually is simply a modern, scientific means of harnessing the working principles utilized by the Superman of all the ages. These principles are explained in a valuable Free Book that is worth sending for. Mail coupon or write. No cost or obligation.

THE PSYCHO-PHONE COMPANY, Inc.

103 Lafayette St., New York City

Psycho-Phone Co., Inc., Dept. 2-B
103 Lafayette St., New York, N. Y.

Kindly send me without any obligation on my part, free copy of "Mind Power" and full details about the Psycho-Phone.

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____

From, very appropriately, the September 1930 issue of WEIRD TALES

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

[Editor’s remarks in square brackets. Please include your name and town when sending a comment. Email to opuntia57@hotmail.com]

FROM: Lloyd Penney
Etobicoke, Ontario

2023-07-13

OPUNTIA 550: [The food issue] We are trying to eat better all the time, so breakfast for me is usually plain yogurt with fresh fruit on top, with some bran. Actually, I quite like it, and I am pleased to have it nearly every day of the week.

I do most of the cooking here, to give Yvonne as much time as she needs to be creative, and make more of the Hawaiian-style shirts she’s become famous for. Both meals you show here do look good.

There are almost too many food truck festivals or other festivals that feature the trucks. So expensive, so good. There are a couple of coffee shops up the street from us (including a Tim’s), and down the street, a burger joint and a Starbucks. I haven’t been in any of them, at least, any time this year.

We are trying desperately to keep off the weight we lost during the pandemic. Reading the rest of this is making me hungry.

[As you will see in this issue, Stampeding is a foregone conclusion to gain weight. But what the heck, you live only once.]

A few months ago, Toronto lost its great crime/suspense bookstore, the Sleuth of Baker Street, so I am not sure where I’d find many of the books you list here. I know, Amazon, but I miss the experience of walking through book stores, new or used.

[I don’t. I prefer physical books because they can’t be suddenly yanked offline because a woker complained. But the stuff I’m interested in seldom appears in Chapters/Indigo, so I buy regularly from Amazon.ca]

OPUNTIA 551: We had a few smoky days here, but it’s not the first time we’ve had that. It’s far better than the smog that used to rise up here from factories in Ohio and Tennessee.

[Re: Calgary library calligraphy display] Calligraphy is unfortunately one of many dying arts, so I am pleased to see people keeping it alive. I could list cursive writing as one of those arts, but our illustrious provincial government has announced that cursive writing will return to schools here. There are still paper cheques and contracts to sign, so that is a plus.

I knew about the Jessica Fletcher books after the series went off-air, but not about the Adrian Monk books. Vision TV here runs both series, plus a myriad of Murdoch Mysteries episodes.

My mention of [the late convention runner] John Mansfield reminds me that in just a few days [July 20 to 23], it will be Pemmi-Con, this year’s NASFiC in Winnipeg. Wish we could have gone, but the money just wasn’t there. Next year’s NASFiC will be much closer, in Buffalo, New York, and we have initial plans to be there.

OPUNTIA 552: We have food truck events here and there, but we don’t go; watching our wallets and waistlines. A huge ribfest is coming up this weekend in Etobicoke’s Centennial Park, but we will be vending at an anime convention in northeast Toronto.

[After the Stampede rodeo ends, Calgary goes full gear into ethnic and street festivals, two or three every weekend across the city until September.]

I have enjoyed Holmes pastiches, especially those by Laurie R. King, and we have a few of those on our shelves. There is much more pastiche than canon out there, so a visit to canon is necessary from time to time.

As much as I liked Jeremy Brett’s performances as the sleuth, I quite enjoyed the 2015 movie MR. HOLMES, starring Ian McKellen as a retired Holmes with a slowly fading memory, trying to recall his final case.

OPUNTIA 553: Sometimes, the most interesting parade at the Stampede is the parade of politicians who come in to various breakfasts to attempt to flip pancakes. They attempt to look experienced, and usually botch the attempts, but at least they try.

[Calgary Stampede breakfasts had, of course, the Alberta Premier, plus the Prime Minister and the Opposition Leader from Ottawa. Every city councilor, federal MP, and provincial MLA in Calgary hosted pancake breakfasts.]

Good to see [honourary parade marshal] Jeremy Hansen getting attention for his upcoming trip on Artemis II to go to the moon. Celebrations of the RCMP’s sesquicentennial will, I hope, not overshadow the obvious reorganization the force needs.

World Wide Party, June 21: We did what we do each year, toast our fellow fanzine fans with something fizzy and non-alcoholic, plus a few tasty bits. This year, though, we did something else; we toasted our fellow fans of all interests, with the hope that we can all recover from the damage the pandemic did.

The idea of a literary SF convention in this country is nearly extinct, and with soaring prices for food and hotel space, I shudder to think of how much a general SF con would cost. Can-Con is returning to Ottawa to provide some SFnal networking for readers and writers, but we just can’t afford it. We really are local fans now.

[The fan-run conventions themselves aren’t that expensive in Canada, but travel and hotel costs are breathtaking. Calgary’s readercon When Words Collide this coming August 4 to 6 is sold out and the hotel solidly booked for the final version of this convention. Visit www.whenwordscollide.org]

[Rumours are afloat of a successor group who will start a new series. My fear about them is they will pattern it after ordinary literary festivals. WWC’s success was based on sticking to genre fiction instead of the pretentious drivel that university academics promulgate. We shall see.]

SEEN IN THE LITERATURE

Astronomy.

Shen, L., et al (2023) **Discovery of spectacular quasar-driven superbubbles in red quasars.** SCIENCE ADVANCES 9:doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.adg8287 (available as a free pdf)

Authors’ abstract: *Quasar-driven outflows on galactic scales are a routinely invoked ingredient for galaxy formation models. We report the discovery of ionized gas nebulae surrounding three luminous red quasars at $z \sim 0.4$ from Gemini integral field unit observations.*

All these nebulae feature unprecedented pairs of “superbubbles” extending ~20 kiloparsecs in diameter, and the line-of-sight velocity difference between the red- and blue-shifted bubbles reaches up to ~1200 km/s.

Their spectacular dual-bubble morphology (in analogy to the galactic “Fermi bubbles”) and their kinematics provide unambiguous evidence for galaxy-wide quasar-driven outflows, in parallel with the quasi-spherical outflows similar in size from luminous type 1 and type 2 quasars at concordant redshift.

These bubble pairs manifest themselves as a signpost of the short-lived superbubble “break-out” phase, when the quasar wind drives the bubbles to escape the confinement from the dense environment and plunge into the galactic halo with a high-velocity expansion.

Planets.

Bucko, J., et al (2023) **Prospects for localizing Planet 9 with a future Uranus mission.** MONTHLY NOTICES OF THE ROYAL ASTRONOMICAL SOCIETY: LETTERS 524:doi.org/10.1093/mnrasl/slad067

Authors’ abstract: *Past years have seen various publications attempting to explain the apparent clustering features of trans-Neptunian objects, the most popular explanation being an unconfirmed ‘Planet 9’.*

The recently proposed Uranus Orbiter and Probe mission by NASA's Planetary Science and Astrobiology Decadal Survey could offer the opportunity to precisely determine Planet 9's sky location and mass by carefully monitoring ranging data during the interplanetary cruise.

We use Monte Carlo Markov chain methods to reconstruct simulated spacecraft trajectories in a simplified Solar system model containing Planet 9, providing an estimate of the mission's localization capacity depending on sky location, Earth-spacecraft Doppler link noise level and data collection rate.

Birch, S.P.D., et al (2023) **Reconstructing river flows remotely on Earth, Titan, and Mars.** PROCEEDINGS OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES USA 120:doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2206837120

Authors' abstract: Rivers have been found only on Earth, Mars, and Saturn's moon Titan. We use a universal framework for river geometry to unlock clues about the climates of all three worlds. On Earth, our method can predict sediment and water fluxes in regions where field surveys are impractical.

On Mars, our results imply that the river deposits explored in situ by NASA's Perseverance and Curiosity rovers required prolonged time periods when conditions favorable for life were maintained.

On Titan, we show that its active methane rivers may have substantially different geometry than rivers on Earth. NASA's Dragonfly mission to Titan can test our predictions and may witness active sediment transport.

Alluvial rivers are conveyor belts of fluid and sediment that provide a record of upstream climate and erosion on Earth, Titan, and Mars. However, many of Earth's rivers remain unsurveyed, Titan's rivers are not well resolved by current spacecraft data, and Mars' rivers are no longer active, hindering reconstructions of planetary surface conditions.

To overcome these problems, we use dimensionless hydraulic geometry relations, scaling laws that relate river channel dimensions to flow and sediment transport rates, to calculate in-channel conditions using only remote sensing measurements of channel width and slope.

On Earth, this offers a way to predict flow and sediment flux in rivers that lack field measurements and shows that the distinct dynamics of bedload-dominated, suspended load-dominated, and bedrock rivers give rise to distinct channel characteristics.

On Mars, this approach not only predicts grain sizes at Gale Crater and Jezero Crater that overlap with those measured by the Curiosity and Perseverance rovers, it enables reconstructions of past flow conditions that are consistent with proposed long-lived hydrologic activity at both craters.

On Titan, our predicted sediment fluxes to the coast of Ontario Lacus could build the lake's river delta in as little as ~1,000 years, and our scaling relationships suggest that Titan's rivers may be wider, slope more gently, and transport sediment at lower flows than rivers on Earth or Mars.

Paleobiology.

Bicknell, R.D.C., et al (2023) **Raptorial appendages of the Cambrian apex predator *Anomalocaris canadensis* are built for soft prey and speed.** PROCEEDINGS OF THE ROYAL SOCIETY OF LONDON 290B:doi.org/10.1098/rspb.2023.0638 (available as a free pdf)

*Authors' abstract: The stem-group euarthropod *Anomalocaris canadensis* is one of the largest Cambrian animals and is often considered the quintessential apex predator of its time. This radiodont is commonly interpreted as a demersal hunter, responsible for inflicting injuries seen in benthic trilobites.*

*However, controversy surrounds the ability of *A. canadensis* to use its spinose frontal appendages to masticate or even manipulate biomineralized prey.*

*Here, we apply a new integrative computational approach, combining three-dimensional digital modelling, kinematics, finite-element analysis (FEA) and computational fluid dynamics (CFD) to rigorously analyse an *A. canadensis* feeding appendage and test its morphofunctional limits.*

These models corroborate a raptorial function, but expose inconsistencies with a capacity for durophagy. In particular, FEA results show that certain parts of the appendage would have experienced high degrees of plastic deformation, especially at the endites, the points of impact with prey.

The CFD results demonstrate that outstretched appendages produced low drag and hence represented the optimal orientation for speed, permitting acceleration bursts to capture prey.

*These data, when combined with evidence regarding the functional morphology of its oral cone, eyes, body flaps and tail fan, suggest that *A. canadensis* was an agile nektonic predator that fed on soft-bodied animals swimming in a well-lit water column above the benthos.*

*The lifestyle of *A. canadensis* and that of other radiodonts, including plausible durophages, suggests that niche partitioning across this clade influenced the dynamics of Cambrian food webs, impacting on a diverse array of organisms at different sizes, tiers and trophic levels.*

Bouthlil, S., et al (2023) **Earth's interior dynamics drive marine fossil diversity cycles of tens of millions of years.** PROCEEDINGS OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES USA 120:doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2221149120

Authors' abstract: *The evolution of life on Earth has changed dramatically at tens of million-year (Myr) time scales. However, the causal mechanisms of these biotic changes remain conjectural. Here, we show evidence of cycles of tens of Myr in marine animal fossil data over the last 250 Myr.*

We find similar, correlatable cycles in sea-level and Earth's interior processes, suggesting that long-term marine biodiversity was paced by geodynamically driven global sea-level cycles.

We argue that biotic diversity has fluctuated by quasi-cyclical continental flooding and retreat of the ocean, expanding and contracting ecological niches on shelves and on epeiric seas.

The fossil record reveals that biotic diversity has fluctuated quasi-cyclically through geological time. However, the causal mechanisms of biotic diversity cycles remain unexplained.

Here, we highlight a common, correlatable 36 ± 1 Myr cycle in the diversity of marine genera as well as in tectonic, sea-level, and macrostratigraphic data over the past 250 Myr of Earth history.

The prominence of the 36 ± 1 Myr cycle in tectonic data favors a common-cause mechanism, wherein geological forcing mechanisms drive patterns in both biological diversity and the preserved rock record.

In particular, our results suggest that a 36 ± 1 Myr tectono-eustatically driven sea-level cycle may originate from the interaction between the convecting mantle and subducting slabs, thereby pacing mantle-lithospheric deep-water recycling.

The 36 ± 1 Myr tectono-eustatic driver of biodiversity is likely related to cyclic continental inundations, with expanding and contracting ecological niches on shelves and in epeiric seas.

Peña-Kairath, C., et al (2023) **Insect pollination in deep time.** TRENDS IN ECOLOGY AND EVOLUTION 38:doi.org/10.1016/j.tree.2023.03.008

[Angiosperms are flowering plants. Gymnosperms are cone-bearing plants such as cycads and conifers.]

Authors' abstract: *The pollinating role of insects preceded the evolution of flowers. Insects pollinated gymnosperms before the appearance of angiosperms.*

The oldest record of pollinating insects is from the Upper Jurassic (~163 Ma), demonstrating the antiquity of animal pollination. Detailed study of bioinclusions in amber and fossil compressions can provide invaluable data for understanding insect-plants interactions in deep time.

Inferring insect pollination from compression fossils and amber inclusions is difficult because of a lack of consensus on defining an insect pollinator and the challenge of recognizing this ecological relationship in deep time.

We propose a conceptual definition for such insects and an operational classification into pollinator or presumed pollinator. Using this approach, we identified 15 insect families that include fossil pollinators and show that pollination relationships have existed since at least the Upper Jurassic (~163 Ma).

Insects prior to this can only be classified as presumed pollinators. This gives a more nuanced insight into the origin and evolution of an ecological relationship that is vital to the establishment, composition and conservation of modern terrestrial ecosystems.

Dinosaurs.

Spiekman, S.N.F., and E. Muij (2023) **Decapitation in the long-necked Triassic marine reptile *Tanystropheus*.** CURRENT BIOLOGY 33:doi.org/10.1016/j.cub.2023.04.027

Authors’ abstract: *Extreme neck elongation was a common evolutionary strategy among Mesozoic marine reptiles, occurring independently in several lineages.*

Despite its evolutionary success, such an elongate neck might have been particularly susceptible to predation, but direct evidence for this possibility has been lacking.

*Composed of only 13 hyperelongate vertebrae and associated strut-like ribs, the configuration of the long neck of the Triassic archosauromorph *Tanystropheus* is unique among tetrapods.*

*It was probably stiffened and used to catch prey through an ambush-strategy. Here, we show that the neck was completely severed in two *Tanystropheus* specimens, most likely due to a predatory attack, providing vivid evidence of predator-prey interactions among Mesozoic marine reptiles that are rarely preserved in the fossil record.*

*The recurring incidence of decapitation suggests that the elongate neck was a functional weak spot in *Tanystropheus*, and possibly the long-necked marine reptile bauplan more generally.*

[Image demonstrates the main disadvantage of long necks and why so few species of any kind have them]



Han, G., et al (2023) **An extraordinary fossil captures the struggle for existence during the Mesozoic.** SCIENTIFIC REPORTS 13:doi.org/10.1038/s41598-023-37545-8 (available as a free pdf)

Authors’ abstract: *Dinosaurs and mammals have coexisted for the last ~ 230 million years. Both groups arose during the Late Triassic and diversified throughout the Mesozoic and into the Cenozoic (the latter in the form of birds). Although they undoubtedly interacted in many ways, direct fossil evidence for their interaction is rare.*

Here we report a new fossil find from the Lujiatun Member of the Lower Cretaceous Yixian Formation of China, showing a gobiconodontid mammal and psittacosaurid dinosaur locked in mortal combat.

We entertain various hypothesized explanations for this association, but the balance of the evidence suggests that it represents a predation attempt on the part of the smaller mammal, suddenly interrupted by, and preserved within, a lahar-type volcanic debris flow.

Mesozoic mammals are usually depicted as having lived in the shadows of their larger dinosaurian contemporaries, but this new fossil convincingly demonstrates that mammals could pose a threat even to near fully-grown dinosaurs.

The Yixian Formation, and the Chinese fossil Jehol Biota more broadly, have played a particularly important role in revealing the diversity of small-bodied dinosaurs and other fauna.

We anticipate that the volcanically derived obrution deposits specific to the Lujiatun Member will likewise continue to yield evidence for biotic interactions otherwise unknown from the rest of the fossil record.

[Images are from this paper.]



Biology.

Ferreira, V.S., et al (2023) **An extraordinary case of elytra loss in Coleoptera (Elateroidea: Lycidae): discovery and placement of the first anelytrous adult male beetle.** ZOOLOGICAL JOURNAL OF THE LINNEAN SOCIETY 198:doi.org/10.1093/zoolinnean/zlad026

Authors’ abstract: Insects are one of the few groups of animals that developed the ability of active flight. Such mobility allowed the group to successfully explore and thrive in nearly all kinds of ecological niches.

At the same time, during the evolutionary history of insects, due to high costs of wing development, flight was lost independently in many groups.

In beetles, the reduction or complete loss of hind wings has been reported in multiple lineages, especially in several extreme paedomorphic and larviform females, mainly in Elateroidea, in which not only the hind wings but also the elytra are lost.

However, the complete absence of elytra in adult males was hitherto unknown, despite nearly half a million described species in Coleoptera. In this study, we report the discovery of *Xenomorphon baranowskii* gen. et sp. nov., the first completely anelytrous and wingless adult male beetle, belonging to the family Lycidae (Coleoptera: Elateroidea).

Xenomorphon baranowskii is illustrated, described, and provisionally placed in Calopterini, based on our morphology-based phylogenetic analyses. We discuss the possible scenarios that could lead to such a rare event, when a beetle loses its elytra, and its evolutionary consequences.

Human Prehistory.

Ivan Sprajc (2023) **Equinoctial sun and astronomical alignments in Mesoamerican architecture: fiction and fact.** ANCIENT MESOAMERICA 34:doi.org/10.1017/S0956536121000419

Author’s abstract: Archaeoastronomical studies carried out during the last decades in Mesoamerica have demonstrated that civic and ceremonial buildings were largely oriented on astronomical grounds, mostly to sunrises and sunsets on certain dates, allowing the use of observational calendars that facilitated the scheduling of agricultural and related ritual activities.

One of the deeply rooted but unfounded ideas is that many alignments recorded the Sun’s positions at the equinoxes. By examining such proposals and analyzing their methodological flaws, I argue that they are not based on reliable and objectively selected alignment data, but rather derive from the preconceived significance attributed to the equinoxes.

The most likely targets of the near-equinoctial orientations were the so-called quarter days, which occur two days after/before the spring/fall equinox and mark mid-points in time between the solstices.

Considering that the astronomical alignments dominate extensive parts of the built environment, they must have played an important role in religion, worldview, and political ideology.

Therefore, only a correct identification of their celestial referents, a prerequisite for any convincing interpretation of their meaning, underlying intents, and

observational practices employed, can contribute to a proper understanding of some prominent aspects of architectural and urban planning in Mesoamerica.

Modern Humans.

Goh, R.Z., et al (2023) **The perception of silence.** PROCEEDINGS OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES USA 120:doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2301463120

Authors’ abstract: *Do we only hear sounds? Or can we also hear silence? These questions are the subject of a centuries-old philosophical debate between two camps: the perceptual view (we literally hear silence), and the cognitive view (we only judge or infer silence).*

Here, we take an empirical approach to resolve this theoretical controversy. We show that silences can “substitute” for sounds in event-based auditory illusions. Seven experiments introduce three “silence illusions,” adapted from perceptual illusions previously thought to arise only with sounds.

In all cases, silences elicited temporal distortions perfectly analogous to their sound-based counterparts, suggesting that auditory processing treats moments of silence the way it treats sounds. Silence is truly perceived, not merely inferred.

Auditory perception is traditionally conceived as the perception of sounds, a friend’s voice, a clap of thunder, a minor chord. However, daily life also seems to present us with experiences characterized by the absence of sound, a moment of silence, a gap between thunderclaps, the hush after a musical performance.

In these cases, do we positively hear silence? Or do we just fail to hear, and merely judge or infer that it is silent?

This longstanding question remains controversial in both the philosophy and science of perception, with prominent theories holding that sounds are the only objects of auditory experience and thus that our encounter with silence is cognitive, not perceptual.

However, this debate has largely remained theoretical, without a key empirical test. Here, we introduce an empirical approach to this theoretical dispute,

presenting experimental evidence that silence can be genuinely perceived (not just cognitively inferred).

We ask whether silences can “substitute” for sounds in event-based auditory illusions, empirical signatures of auditory event representation in which auditory events distort perceived duration.

Seven experiments introduce three “silence illusions”: the one-silence-is-more illusion, silence-based warping, and the oddball-silence illusion, each adapted from a prominent perceptual illusion previously thought to arise only from sounds.

Subjects were immersed in ambient noise interrupted by silences structurally identical to the sounds in the original illusions. In all cases, silences elicited temporal distortions perfectly analogous to the illusions produced by sounds.

Our results suggest that silence is truly heard, not merely inferred, introducing a general approach for studying the perception of absence.

Ossokina, I.V., et al (2023) **Do highway widenings reduce congestion?** JOURNAL OF ECONOMIC GEOGRAPHY 23:doi.org/10.1093/jeg/lbac034 (available as a free pdf)

Authors’ abstract: Highway construction occurs nowadays mainly through widening of existing roads rather than building new roads. This article documents that highway widenings considerably reduce congestion in the short run, defined here as 6 years.

Using longitudinal microdata from highway detector loops in the Netherlands, we find substantial travel time savings. These savings occur despite strong increases in traffic flow. The welfare benefits in the short run already cover 40% of the widenings’ investment costs.

Our article contributes to an explanation why countries invest in roadworks even when the fundamental law of congestion predicts that travel savings disappear in the long run.

FREE STUFF ONLINE

You will have noticed that I provide sources for the pdfs and mp3s reviewed in this zine. Here is a summary of some good resources, all of which are free.

In particular, the “Seen In The Literature” column cites only peer-reviewed papers. For topics such as climate change or social media effects, more people should be reading these papers instead of blogs where commentators confuse their opinions as being facts.

For scientific papers for which free pdfs are available, the easiest method is to Google either the title of the paper or its digital object identifier, the phrase beginning with doi.org.

Many papers are behind a paywall, so unless you have access to a university library computer, you can only get the abstract. However, the abstract is often enough to understand the gist of the article.

Every scientific periodical has free email notifications of each new issue’s table of contents. I subscribe to dozens of notification services, in case you were wondering how I manage to keep up with the literature.

For zines, www.efanzines.com provides current pdf zines as well as some older ones. A club called Fanac at www.fanac.org does the reverse; they provide thousands of old zines from the 1930s to date, with a few current zines. Both sites have a free email notification service you can subscribe to.

The Old Time Radio Researchers have thousands of old-time radio shows (1930s to 1950s) covering all the genres, such as comedy, science fiction, fantasy, and mystery. Visit www.otrr.org/OTRRLibrary.

They also publish a free bulletin OLD RADIO TIMES, available at www.otrr.org/?c=times, with an email notification service. Don’t pay money for audio books and listen to a droning voice when you can listen for free to full-cast shows such as Jack Benny or Inner Sanctum from the OTRR.

For pulp fiction magazines from all genres, visit www.archive.org/details/pulpmagazinearchive?&sort=-downloads&page=2 Books in the public domain are free from www.gutenberg.org