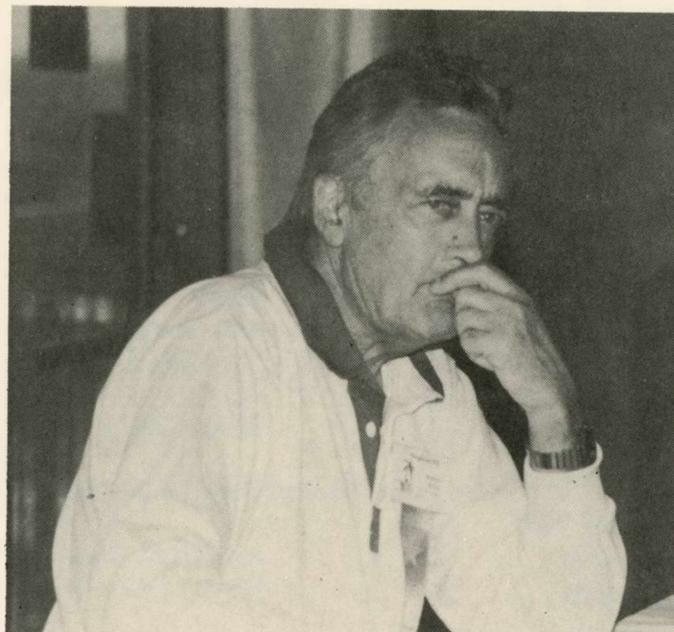




# *The Enchantment*

by

Walter A. Willis



*illustrations by:*

Atom  
Gail Bennett  
Alexis Gilliland  
Lee Hoffman





# The Enchantment

A Trip Report

by

**Walter A. Willis**

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**Cover ID:** *Top:* Madeleine & Walt Willis at the Mai-Kai Restaurant after TROPICON; *Center:* Walt in a pensive mood during his interview; *Bottom:* the Fannish Family - Madeleine, Walt, Edie Stern, Shelby Vick (standing), Lee Hoffman.

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by Walter A. Willis

## Belfast to Fort Lauderdale

Funny how it's always such a lovely day up here, I mused, as the plane rose above the lists of Lough Neagh and set off in the direction of the Mourne Mountains towards London. I suppose it's like this in Florida. Since that seductive letter 15 months ago from Edie Stern, everything tended to make me think of Florida.

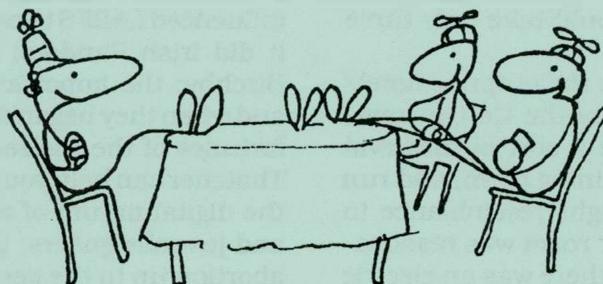
*"TROPICON is a small, relaxed convention with some programming...like to invite you and your wife as our Fan Guests of Honour...expenses paid...need not make any speeches, nor participate in any formal programming...small relaxed gathering...spend part of next winter on the beach in Fort Lauderdale with your friends..."*

Since 1980 I had declined half a dozen invitations to World-cons on account of the stress they involved, but no one had ever invited us to a regional convention before. And the letter seemed to glow with such an understanding warmth. It was an offer we could not refuse.

And in practical terms, reassuringly remote. Besides we had taken winter holidays in the Canaries in previous years, and Florida wasn't all that much further, was it?

Well, of course it was, a lot further. And at this time of year, to get from Belfast to anywhere in America it is necessary to start by flying for one and a quarter hours in the wrong direction. It had seemed sensible to take a holiday in Florida as well, before the Convention. Now here we were on our way to London.

Or so I hoped; for a duvet of grey cloud now wrapped the entire planet as far as the eye could see. But eventually the pilot decided to go down and see if London was anywhere about, and to



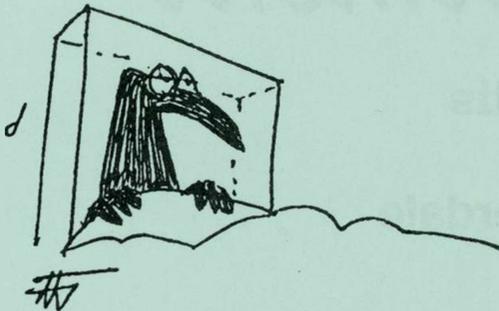
A SMALL RELAXED CON

everyone's astonishment what should we find but Gatwick Airport. Lurching from side to side of the runway in relief, the plane eventually stopped and we started one of those long walks that airport authorities arrange to give the baggage handlers time to consign your luggage to Barcelona.

In the Arrivals lounge I scanned the horizon keenly for Vince Clarke, only to find him talking to Madeleine behind my back. On the telephone yesterday he had already explained that a surprise party had fallen through, Chuck having to attend a family funeral. Atom couldn't come either, having a bad cold; and anyhow Vince had reconnoitered the terrain for him and found that the distance from the car park to the airport building was further than Arthur can manage these days. Now Vince was explaining that Rob Hansen and Avedon Carol were coming direct from work—this was Friday lunchtime—and Owen Whiteoak was also expected.

I had already called Arthur to suggest we visit

ATOM HAD A BAD  
COLD



him, but he was too afraid of giving us his cold and spoiling our trip. He also said he was sorry he hadn't felt up to producing any artwork for the TROPICON auction in aid of the Chuck Harris Fund. I told him I had brought the two original cartoons he had done for the Oblique House fanroom; someone might be interested in them.

Our luggage having arrived, we went up to the main concourse and met Rob and Avedon. They said they would wait for Owen and we should go on to our hotel. The taxi would take only three passengers anyway.

So Vince and I set off for the cutprice hotel/guesthouse booked for us by the Co-Op travel agency. It turned out to be a sort of medieval motel, without a lounge or dining room, and run by a young man with a slight resemblance to Norman Bates. However our room was reasonably large for a British hotel, there was an electric kettle in our room and Norman was more than helpful in producing extra cups and unlimited supplies of coffee, etc., once he understood we were expecting guests. Reverting instinctively to her traditional role as den mother, Madeleine set

off to inspect a nearby restaurant and returned with a report that it was All Right, and with a supply of assorted sandwiches from the garage opposite. They were quite upmarket sandwiches, mostly on wholemeal bread and including some with a tuna and cucumber filling which was my first new taste sensation of the trip, but not the last. By then Avedon, Rob and Owen had arrived, and we were all set for the rest of the day.

We talked for some nine hours nonstop, moving to the restaurant down the road for dinner without drawing breath, discussing such weighty topics as the ubiquitous nature of plaster dust, duplicating ink and Brian Burgess; the upmarket nature of fieldmice as a household pest; the personality-warping properties of the Leeds water supply; why men get more conservative as they get older and women less so; the question of how to pronounce the word Celt and Richard Burton's contribution thereto ("If I am a Selt, you are a sunt."); the trufannishness of confans; Rob's historic discovery that London Fandom meets on Thursdays because that was Ted Carnell's halfday, and how that could have influenced LASFS to meet on the same evening as it did Irish Fandom; the life and times of Sid Birchby; the importance of letters of comment and when they began to be pronounced locks; the fortunes of the Nielsen Haydens; how Margaret Thatcher can help you stop smoking; the poll tax; the digital nature of smoke signals; King Herod and juvenile golfers; the desirability of allowing abortion up to the age of 12; Nehemiah Scudder and the peculiarities of memory; the superiority of American pizza; the grottness of grottoes and the ineluctable modality of the invisible; and the importance of accuracy in fan reportage.

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### Saturday, 19th November, 1988

Next morning Norman Bates drove us to the airport. I gave him a handsome tip and he glowed with *bonhomie*. Maybe if people had tipped the original Norman Bates properly, I thought, there wouldn't have been all that trouble in *Psycho*, not to mention *Psycho 2* and *3*. But then Robert Bloch might have had to do some honest work for a living.

Everything went smoothly at check-in, and half an hour before take-off time we were wedged

into our seats on the plane listening to a cheery message from the Captain about the baggage compartment door. As time went by there were more despondent messages from him on the same subject, until finally he broke the news that the baggage door was broken and a new one had to be rushed from Heathrow, which would take about five hours. Some rush: it reminded me of the saying that there is no word in the Irish language conveying quite the same sense of

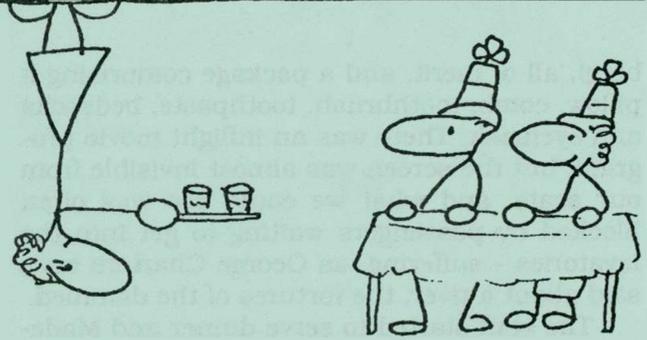
urgency as "manana". But never mind: vouchers for free refreshments would be issued in the Satellite Lounge.

It takes a worryingly long time to evacuate a 747, even when nobody particularly wants to leave, but eventually we were back in the Satellite Lounge again. The name had evoked images of Arthur Clarke's slinky space hostesses walking on the ceiling with Velcro soles in time with The Blue Danube, but the reality of this Satellite Lounge was a throng of confused people looking for somewhere to queue. Apparently the airport administration hadn't been listening to the Captain: we only hoped some of the dedicated public servants in the Baggage Compartment Door Transportation Department were still on the job on Saturday afternoon.

It was now after eight o'clock in the morning in Florida, and Edie should be up. Mastering the strange public payphone apparatus in a way which would have made fandom proud of me, I succeeded in warning her that we would be at least five hours late. It must have been one of the shortest telephone conversations on record, because we had already disposed of most of our sterling coins: the chat with that nice girl in Directory Enquiries had taken longer.

Having obtained our Refreshment Vouchers we considered the mouth-drying alternatives offered by the airport caterers, as indicated by two enormous queues. Our immediate problem was our cabin baggage, which had been given a lot of forethought. As experienced world travellers, whose luggage has been to more places than we have, we carried all our essentials with us. Madeleine had carefully read the conditions on the ticket and brought the largest size of suitcase permissible, which was quite a lot smaller than a cabin trunk.

While I, with the understandable nervousness of a native of Northern Ireland visiting dangerous places like London and Miami, had taken precautions against robbery which tended to hinder my mobility. To foil pick-pockets, I had adopted the cunning stratagem of carrying nothing in my pockets except a wallet with a small amount of money and worthless documents, for throwing at muggers so that they would have something to read while I ran away. The rest, about fifteen hundred dollars in cash and two credit cards, was in a wallet inside my trousers, attached by a loop to my belt. Everything else—tickets, passports, maps, camera, medicines,



Greg Bear's *Eon* and other necessities of life— was in a haversack thing with zips which I did not intend to let go of. There was also a plastic shopping bag from the duty free shop containing two bottles of Black Bush and one of scent.

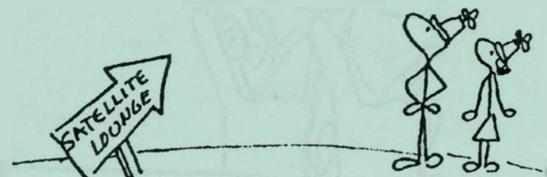
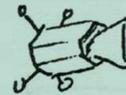
\* \* \* \* \*

*We interrupt this narrative for an anti-commercial. Do not buy any booze at the Gatwick Duty Free. You can get it cheaper at your local supermarket. And now, on with our thrilling story of hardship and privation at Gatwick Airport.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Having inspected the shredded-cardboard sausage rolls and Polyfilla sandwiches available at the cafeteria, I joined the queue at the baked potato place while Madeleine minded the luggage. An hour or so later we changed places, and eventually Madeleine arrived at the head of the queue just as they ran out of potatoes. Numbly she went on over to the cafeteria place and bought a selection of their least unappetising fare. Chewing it disdainfully, we contemplated the pinnacle of modern English civilisation we had now attained. At least in Belfast Airport we could have got home-made scones and a cup of something with a resemblance to tea.

Eventually at 3.15 the flight was called, rather earlier than we had expected, and we left half an hour later with no further trouble. Virgin issued free headphones, which offered several different music channels, and one of humour (including Stan Fre-



berg), all of merit, and a package comprising a pillow, comb, toothbrush, toothpaste, bedsocks and eyemask. There was an inflight movie program, but the screen was almost invisible from our seats, and what we could see was often blocked by passengers waiting to get into the lavatories - suffering, as George Charters once said about a river, the tortures of the damned.

The staff started to serve dinner and Madeleine asked if by any chance there were salt-free meals reserved for us. We had asked the travel agent about this and she had been very doubtful. The stewardess re-appeared a few minutes later with one salt-free meal, a profuse apology for losing the other and a complimentary bottle of *Beaufolais Nouveau* by way of compensation. I decided there and then that Virgin had style, and I would recommend them to you. After all they don't make baggage compartment doors. Their food was excellent, as Avedon had said it would be, and on the flight homeward they produced both our salt-free meals without even asking our names.

Nevertheless after about three hours I felt there was a little man inside me wanting to bang on the aircraft door and scream to be let out. The seats were distressingly uncomfortable for anyone over six feet long (not counting, as Bob Shaw put it once, the bit turned off for feet); the relief supposed to be obtained by the reclining seat was illusory, and the sense of confinement almost intolerable. But once the tumult of serving meals, etc., had subsided, it was possible to get some relief by pacing up and down the plane, which seemed as long as a football field and almost as stable: and after the halfway mark had been passed and it was, as it were, downhill all the way, everything seemed to ease up. The plane gave up its chase of the sunset somewhere off Newfoundland and I got down to some serious worrying.

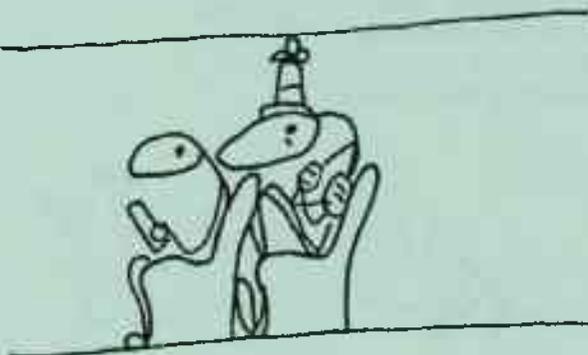
I am not one of your dilettante worriers. I

really work at it. I am capable of worrying simultaneously about two quite incompatible contingencies. I could worry for instance about nobody at all coming to TROPICON on my account, and Edie being disappointed. And simultaneously I could worry about dozens of people coming to see what I was like and then clamouring around her for their money back. Now that this thing seemed to be actually happening both these nightmares re-emerged in full force. Against them I summoned the stalwart friends who had come to my aid in the past - Geri Sullivan, Andrew Porter, Charlie Brown and Euclid. Geri had pointed out that the first and only duty of a Guest of Honour was to enjoy himself, a statement which like herself was so obviously honest and true as to be a source of immense comfort. Messrs Porter and Brown had with their convention listings made me realise that one minor convention among hundreds would not be the end of the world, no matter what went wrong. And Euclid had assured me that things which are equal to the same thing are equal to one another; which I interpreted as meaning that the sort of people who came to meet me would be equally happy to meet one another, and I could as it were leave them to talk among themselves. Relieved by these reflections, I went to sleep.

We arrived at 7.37 Florida time, the flight having lasted 8 hours and 52 minutes, and we were a little earlier than I had expected. I worried lest Joe and Edie would arrive too late. This contingency was averted by the Immigration staff, whose malevolence was mitigated only to some extent by their incompetence. I was not surprised by them, remembering my experience in the New York docks in 1952. Madeleine remembered it too, suggesting this was just Hoboken, with carpets.

But eventually there was the welcome sight of Joe Siclari's friendly face, an impression of opulent and spacious surroundings, some enormous vehicle and a new friend called Chuck, a friendly Howard Johnson receptionist, an enormous hotel room, and Joe considerately leaving us to get a night's rest, it being now 1 am by our time.

However for some reason we didn't feel sleepy. I called at the Lindos car hire office next door in case they had been expecting me (our package deal included three weeks car hire as well as the overnight at the Howard Johnson Airport Hotel) and then we set off in search of one of those all night diners which were one of our



happiest memories of America, like the one we used to go to for late night hot chocolate while staying with Forry Ackerman.

To our dismay, nothing of the sort was to be found. There was not even a restaurant at the Howard Johnson Airport Hotel. A Howard Johnson without a restaurant! It was as if the Statue of Liberty had mislaid her torch. Our faith in the American way of life was eroded. Fortunately it was restored to some extent by the staff in reception, who offered us free coffee from their office machine. It was Sanka, which shouldn't interfere with our sleep, and tasted quite good. We went to bed after finding out how the lamps worked—they had little rotary switches, which seemed a new development since 1962—and slept well.



### Sunday, 20th November, 1988

Next morning, early and reasonably bright, we continued our quest for the lost American Way of Life. We found only a large hotel containing a Spanish-American restaurant called *Los Gauchos*, presumably meaning The Gauche Ones, where Madeleine made a valiant but foredoomed attempt to order porridge. After much semantic confusion—these decadent *coloniales* did not seem to understand my pure Castilian—we ended up with bacon and eggs, and thus fortified I went to collect my hired car from Lindos.

I had been wondering whether I should opt for a stick shift or an automatic and decided to take what came, which was just as well because there was no choice except to pay extra for an upgrade. However the Chevrolet Cavalier they gave me seemed quite satisfactory: I even felt some kinship with it because I drive a GM car at home, an Opel Manta, and that has the same body as the British Cavalier, so I thought there might be some similarities. There weren't except for the turn indicators. I had never examined the controls of an automatic car before, but the gear shift equivalent was ergonomically self-explanatory, like an artefact of an intellectually superior alien civilisation, and I had no trouble driving from the Lindos car park to the Howard Johnson car park which adjoined it. The operation reminded me of

Bob Shaw's observation that the first thing a man does when he gets a glass of beer at a bar is to move it two inches to one side, to establish ownership and control.

Locking the car from force of habit I went back to the hotel room to await Chuck and Francine Phillips, who had kindly volunteered to show us something of Miami and conduct us to the apartment which would be our Florida home. Madeleine told me Francine had already phoned to say they'd be twenty minutes late. In Ireland such delay would have been taken for granted, and we were deeply impressed by this example of American efficiency, not to mention Southern courtesy. (The latter especially commendable in a couple who came from Oklahoma.)

Chuck and Francine duly arrived in their motor caravan and we seemed to become instant old friends. They took us through the fantastic buildings of downtown Miami, reminiscent of an upmarket Paul back cover, along the Rickenbacker Causeway and back for a stroll through the yuppie shopping area on the bayshore, which was extravagant in more ways than one. It was all very strange, but peculiarly relaxing to see so many items of luxury one felt no impulse to buy.

We also saw a fine example of what I came to regard as a Floridian artform, the Genuine Phoney Antique. This was a full size replica of

HMS *Bounty* which had been built for the film *Mutiny on the Bounty*. Not even the Charles Laughton original, but the remake with Marlon Brando. However it was interesting and picturesque, and had a history of its own: it was a genuine working sailing ship, having been sailed to the South Seas for the movie. So it was as genuine an antique as you could expect to find in a State where our own quite ordinary house would be the second oldest building and rank as an Ancient Monument.

I read somewhere that there is a restaurant on the Florida coast which incorporates the hull of the *Marie Celeste* in its dining room decor, but nobody I asked about it had heard of it.

Soon we began to think of lunch and it was back to the Howard Johnson to load our luggage. Francine and I transferred to my hired car, Chuck following with his lights beaming benevolently behind us. We were almost immediately on the US equivalent of our motorway system and I imagined myself the driver. The actual road was not as well surfaced or helpfully marked and signposted as ours are, but adequate for people who knew where they were going and how to get there. The main difference to me was the sheer volume of traffic. Northern Ireland is probably the last place in the Northern Hemisphere where motoring is still a pleasure. The scenery is always changing and always interesting, more varied than the entire state of Florida, and most of the time you can appreciate it because traffic is light. The same applies to Southern Ireland, but the Northern Ireland roads are better engineered, signposted and maintained, and you can drive safely and legally for long periods at 75 mph without stress. Here it was like a sort of linear Dodgems, with what seemed to me constant tailgating and lane-hopping. It seemed to me that if traffic had to come to an unexpected stop it would have been impossible to escape the resultant pile-up, the space for refuge being so limited.

I could not get used to the scale of this country. Here we were making for what was a mere suburb of Miami, and we had been hurtling North for a long time without even seeing a sign for Fort Lauderdale. However eventually we came off the motorway and our little caravanserai parked next to a restaurant called Bennigans. I soon realised this was another fine example of GPA. It was got up like an Irish-American pub of the 19th Century, with bits of bicycles and sporting equipment and old posters; carved wood

panels separated the floor area into what we used to call "snugs" in Belfast. It was indeed strongly reminiscent of the Crown pub in Great Victoria Street in downtown Belfast, an authentic Victorian pub which had been miraculously preserved throughout air raid, civil commotion and urban renewal. It can be seen in the James Mason film *Odd Man Out* (1946), which was about an IRA gunman on the run in the previous Troubles. Its survival is in my opinion due to more than luck. It is just across the road from the Europa Hotel, target of many IRA bomb attacks, but had remained undamaged. It seems to me that this may well be due to the fact that many supporters of the IRA value this pub more than the lives of their fellow countrymen: and that a similar feeling among their female following accounts for the fact that the Marks and Spencer's department store in Belfast has never been attacked.

Even the name Bennigans seemed phoney, because it is one I never heard before. I've just checked the phone directory and there is no one of that name in the whole of Northern Ireland. However the decor was solid and real and done with style, and the food was good. Francine and I had Eggs Benedict on muffin, Madeleine had pancakes and Chuck had deep-fried stuffed potato skins, a bizarre dish which seems in my absence to have become a standard item of American cuisine. Chuck gave me one to taste: it was nostalgically reminiscent of potatoes baked in a camp fire but I thought I could live without it.

About half an hour after leaving Bennigans we arrived at the apartment Joe had booked for us, the *Villa Caprice*. It was what they call an "efficiency" in Florida, i.e. a hotel room with adjoining kitchenette. The hotel itself was a small pastel-pink two storey building in a quiet avenue with palm trees, and the back opened directly on the beach. If we had prospected for a month we could not have found anything more to our taste, and we passed a silent vote of thanks to Joe. The only possible snag was the apparent absence from the area of shops or restaurants, but the ever helpful Chuck and Francine took us to the Publix supermarket on Oakland Park Boulevard—itsself an experience too complex to be taken in—and back again with our supplies. Then, considerately, they left us to settle in.

So here we were at last, after three days travelling, alone again in our own place, without having to go anywhere or do anything. We un-

packed and then went out for a stroll, feeling a need to familiarize ourselves with the immediate environment, like cats. There was an advertisement for a Denny's across the road, but no sign of an actual restaurant. There was no sign of a shop further along our avenue so we turned left and crossed the main coast road. We found a Chamber of Commerce information office half hidden by trees, but it was closed. Left again, and there was a region of big luxury residential apartments. Left again, and we were back where we started.

Exploring the deserted pool area, we found a consignment of newsprint which appeared to be a Sunday newspaper, and among the advertising supplements a separate magazine giving all the tv programmes for the week. Watching tv seemed to us at that stage an ideal way to spend the evening, and I spent a fascinating half hour finding my way through American television. Joe rang up to make sure all was well, and we told him we were just going to watch *Belfast Vice* on television.

When I turned the set on, the first thing I was confronted with was two gibbers speaking fluent gibberish, but I soon realised it was a sports programme. Others were more intelligible. There seemed to be some 35 channels available, about half of them cable. There was one devoted entirely to the weather. Even more surprising there was one devoted entirely to listing the programmes available on all the other channels for the next three hours. I spent a fascinating half hour listing the channels I could get and their numbers on my tuner, but in the end we watched some golf on the sports channel and went to sleep.

We woke up soon after midnight and thought of going out for a walk in the warm and well lit streets. But there were no pedestrians to be seen anywhere and this was after all practically Miami, well know to be a dangerous place for innocents from quiet places like Northern Ireland. So, feeling slightly fearful and lost, we just had a supper of toast and jam, watched the final installment of the BBC's serialisation of *Jane Eyre* and went to bed.

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## Lauderdale By the Sea

**Monday, 21st November, 1988**

Next day dawned sunny, and it was a "glad confident morning again". After a frugal breakfast of sugarless porridge we went exploring again and found that the palm trees in our avenue came complete with squirrels. We also discovered that the Denny's sign opposite was really the back entrance to the restaurant of a Holiday Inn. We just had to walk through a pool patio, where the fearless squirrels were having their breakfast, and there it was in all its delectable glory. "Open 6 am to midnight": that was more like it.

We continued on to the Chamber of Commerce Information Office, but it was still closed: its opening time was not among the information available. Madeleine went back "home" while I waited for it to open. When it did, I skimmed its entire stock, which took about five minutes. There was hardly anything about golf, and what they had was obsolete. More important, there was no street map of the area. I wondered why. Obviously maps would be available in the shops, if I ever found one, and perhaps the Chamber of Commerce was reluctant to compete with its own members. And I could understand that selling things rather than giving them away complicates the work of an office; once you start handling money you have to have accounts and estimates

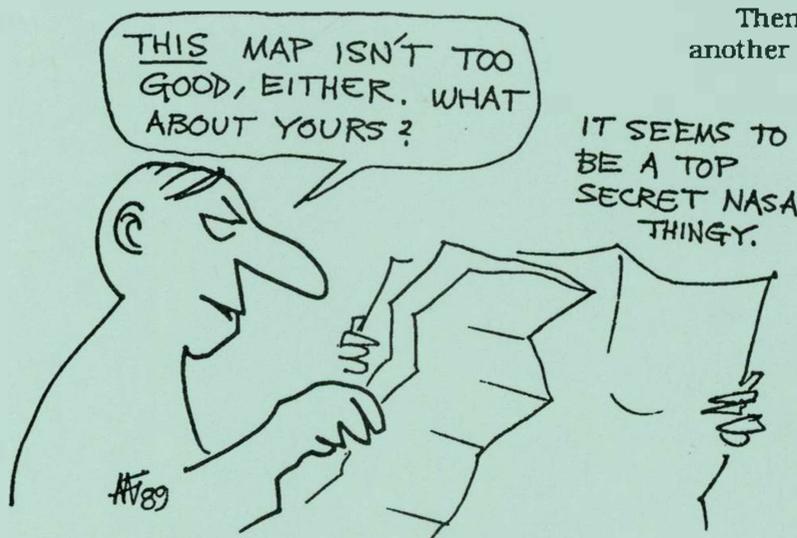
and vouchers and everything.

But surely an information office should provide information? As I was leaving, another tourist came in and asked for a street map. I decided that if I was in charge of this place I would buy a few maps out of my own pocket and sell them at cost.

Having solved this administrative problem to my own satisfaction I continued on up the main coast road (A1A) in the opposite direction to last night. Don't ask me why I didn't enquire in the Information Office where I could get a map. I'm sure they would have told me. Just put it down to that masculine reluctance to ask directions which so rightly annoys women. There was this to be said for it however, that it made all the more thrilling my momentous discovery of an actual SHOP. A real honest to goodness shop, with a counter and assistants and an old fashioned cash register. No trolleys or check-outs, not even any wire baskets. It was, I realised with a thrill, a traditional general store, Florida version, with a frozen food cabinet instead of the potbellied stove and the cracker barrel. I felt like stout Cortez contemplating the Pacific. Plunging into it, I bought a packet of sugar (a pound of sugar in a paper bag! Not a box of little envelopes) and two street maps and a few other essentials of life we had overlooked at Publix yesterday.

Then I continued up the road and found another marvel, a Walgreen's. I knew about Walgreen's because Jeanne Gomoll had once sent me some photographs in a Walgreen's promotion folder, which I had passed on to our village chemist for his bemused edification. I bought another map (I am kinky for maps and radios) but left the rest of the treasurehouse undisturbed. I had to get home and tell Madeleine about the SHOP.

I found her having exhausted her sunbathing quota for the first day (ten minutes each side) and we had a bathe. I don't think she had really believed me when I told her the water



would be warm. The beach itself was not Grade A by the standards of the West of Ireland, or even Grade B by those of The Algarve: it shelved too steeply, the water was not clear and the sand was soft and coarse, as I thought I remembered the beach in Los Angeles. In my experience you can always play cricket on British beaches, whereas in America it would have to be baseball, because the ball wouldn't bounce. I suppose that figures. However the water was lovely, the surf exciting and there were quite large fish frolicking about in it. Moreover the beach was not crowded: I gave it 8½ out of ten.

The Information Office had given me one good idea, to ask at the motel reception for postcards. I got six large ones of the motel free and wrote to Chuck Harris, Arthur Thomson and the people at the Gatwick party. Then we went across the road to Denny's for lunch. I read the menu with much interest, and some shock. I had promised Avedon I would again order a hamburger with everything and tell her what happened. But unknown to us both, it seemed that Mr (or Ms) Denny had somehow gotten a copy of *THE HARP STATESIDE*, for on the menu was *The Hamburger With Everything*. It was known as *The Works*, and the advertised ingredients seemed to include everything I had encountered in 1952, including bacon, cheese, mushrooms, lettuce and tomatoes, along with things I had never heard of then, like guacamole. No doubt it was only a matter of time until other fancish dishes appeared on his menu... "sunkissed greeps, freshly crottled, on English toast, French muffin or rye, with blueberry and cheese salad".

Another enterprising thing about Denny's

was that they had a special section of the menu for Senior Citizens, which they tactfully defined as people over 55. These were just smaller portions of dishes on the regular menu, with prices reduced accordingly. They suited us fine, because servings in American restaurants were far too large for us, and anyone reared in a scarcity economy hates wasting food.

After our Senior Citizen's lunch we hobbled up to The Shop, inspected Walgreen's and continued on to find quite a large shopping area at what we now realised from the maps was the junction of coast road A1A and Commercial Boulevard. There were small supermarkets, sleazy souvenir shops, cutprice drapers, a big fruit shop (with inferior oranges) but no Post Office. I hadn't even got stamps yet. There had been a stamp machine at Walgreen's, but if there is anything in America that appals visitors from Britain more than private ambulances, it is people reselling postage stamps at an exorbitant profit. Besides the man at Walgreen's said he had no change.

We had remembered upside down wall switches, but not that the shopdoors opened outwards, an encroachment onto public space but safer in the event of fire. We were also caught out by the DONT WALK signs, which really mean DONT START WALKING. The first time, Madeleine feared she was doomed to spend the rest of her holiday marooned on a traffic island. Our flashing green pictograph seemed better.

We walked back home again, worked out a route to our course involving only righthand turns, and lay down for a few minutes rest before starting out again in the car. When we awoke it was dark. We watched *Yes, Prime Minister* on television and went to sleep again.



## Tuesday, 22nd November, 1988

After our marathon sleep we felt up to driving in the Metropolis in search of a golf course, but first we found out where the nearest Post Office was from the cleaning lady. She said it was at the back of a greeting cards shop just round the corner on Commercial Boulevard, run as a sideline by two brothers from Scotland. She conveyed the impression that the enterprise was unofficial, if not actually illegal. This confirmed our feeling that the area of Lauderdale-by-the-Sea was actually a village like home, and we began to feel even more attached to the place.

I negotiated a couple of stop signs on our quiet El Mar Avenue, feeling they were set much too far back, and realising this was because I was still expecting the nearest line of cross traffic to be coming from the right. Then I edged into A1A and into the left lane for the left turn onto Commercial Boulevard. So far so good, but when the lights there changed I made my first mistake, turning too sharply to the left and finding myself about to enter the wrong carriageway on an extra lane provided at the lights for its left turning traffic.

If this sounds complicated, well that's how it seemed to me. The typical traffic junction here was a surface crossing of two multilane carriageways controlled by lights, a phenomenon quite unknown in Northern Ireland. There such a junction is always either a roundabout, where the traffic is light enough, or a split level interchange where it is heavy or fast. But here the traffic was always heavy, always fast and always controlled by a rickety-looking contraption of traffic lights strung precariously over the crossing, like the Big Top of some insolvent circus. There was no other way to deal with such a volume of traffic, but the traffic signs left something to be desired from the visitor's point of view.

Left turn traffic was often but not always provided for by special lights with arrows, sometimes green and sometimes yellow, and sometimes with notices, according to some rule I never figured out. You could always filter right on red at traffic lights—provided of course there was not a notice to the contrary. Reading all these notices was an occupation in itself, and the most grievous of all were the ones saying RIGHT LANE MUST TURN RIGHT, or occasionally LEFT LANE MUST TURN LEFT. I didn't like to think what terrible fate befell any benighted soul who kept straight on, so I kept on changing lanes unwill-

ingly. It would be logical if these notices always referred to lanes newly created for turning traffic, but that did not seem to be so. The situation was further complicated by the fact that we were often not sure whether or not we had to turn at the next set of lights, until it was too late to change lanes. This was because not all the junctions were marked on the map, and the name of the intersecting street was given only in a small sign among the festoon of traffic lights, by which time the information was otiose.

There was also a tendency of roads to change their names in an arbitrary fashion. But on this occasion everything went reasonably well once I bumped safely over the corner of the median divider. No one hooted at me. Drivers here seemed polite and considerate, except for an occasional escaped lunatic. The Post Office run by the wetback Scots was eminently satisfactory, not the least among its virtues being that it was on the righthand side of the road, and we were soon on our way to the *Pompano Race Track Golf Course*. This had been recommended to me by a man I play golf with at Donaghadee, an expatriate Yorkshireman who had married an Ulster girl and eventually retired to Donaghadee. Every winter he visited his son and grandchildren in Toronto, and the last time they had all gone down to Florida and he had played the golf course associated with the Pompano Race Track and, he said, it was All Right.

Now there's an intelligence network for you.

The traffic situation became more manageable further inland and we had no trouble finding out where the golf course should be. The trouble was that it seemed to have disappeared. At an estate office this fact was confirmed: the golf course had become a building site.

We were not really surprised. We knew that sort of thing happened in America all the time. I remember thinking when I was reading the pocket book about the Donner Party that I had been over part of the same route and where people had starved to the point of cannibalism, all was now freeway and cities: during which period of little more than 100 years nothing at all had changed in most of Ireland.

The day was not a dead loss, because on our circuitous all-right-turn route home we found a secondhand bookstore and a Publix supermarket quite convenient to the *Villa Caprice*, and a

good Chinese restaurant where we had lunch.

Afterwards we spent a lot of time separately exploring Publix, arranging to rendezvous under the 'Assorted Nuts' sign. It was pure coincidence we happened to be under that sign when we split; it was just like the time in 1962 when we arranged to rendezvous with Ted White in Macy's at the place we were then standing, which proved to be under a notice saying 'Fan Department'.

I know that supermarket shopping is not generally regarded as holiday entertainment, but we had been looking forward to it. We had kept house in Spain, Portugal and Greece and found the variations fascinating. Now and then we found a particularly delicious local variation which the travel writers hadn't discovered yet, like Menorcan ice cream and Greek cream crackers, and were gradually compiling a perfect international menu for a whole day, starting with Mallorcan *ensaimada* for breakfast. Sometimes I idly entertained the notion of setting up a small gourmet food importing business.

We had never before been long enough in one place in America to know what it's like to live there, and that is what we wanted to find out. Next morning, Wednesday, I established what was to become our routine. I got up first, as I usually do at home, leaving Madeleine to lie in and breakfast on the nearest thing she had been able to find in Publix to traditional Scots porridge. I collected a free newspaper from the little stack provided at the pool. This was one of the things I appreciated about the *Villa Caprice*, like the coffee machine they kept simmering in the patio all day providing unlimited free coffee. It was like what we call in Ireland a relic of the Old Decency, like the country house where the butler ironed your copy of THE TIMES, and there was everything for breakfast you could imagine, from kippers to kedgereee, all keeping hot in chafing dishes on the sideboard.

In my case, breakfast was to be at Denny's across the road, and I was looking forward to it. One of the great things about America is that they understand about fried eggs. Sometimes it seems to me I have spent most of my life trying to persuade British restaurateurs that there are more ways of frying an egg than throwing it on the pan and letting

it frizzle away until someone asks for it.

In America they not only understand that there are different ways of frying eggs, they have a whole lan-

guage for them. I had a refresher course in English from Francine. "I remember when you want the eggs turned you say 'over,'" I said, "but what is it when you want them fried until the yolk is firm?" "Hard over," said Francine. Hard over, of course.

So I was quite prepared when I entered Denny's, and only momentarily thrown by an unexpected new query. "Smoking or Non-smoking?" I was shown to a table and instantly provided with a glass of iced water and a menu. There then ensued the following dialogue between the sophisticated world traveller and a waitress who looked and sounded exactly like Tracy Ullman in her Post Office sketch.

"What'll you have?"

"Two eggs, bacon and toast."

"White, whole wheat or rye?"

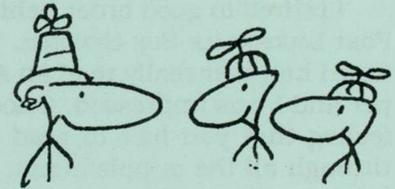
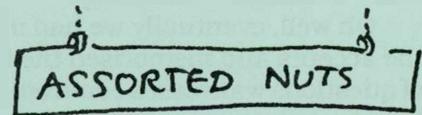
"Hard over."

She was quick on the uptake. "And how would you like your eggs?"

"White," I said firmly, "Thank you."

"You're welcome."

I rather liked the waitresses at Denny's. They seemed independent spirits, efficient without being obsequious, and they loved a joke. The



word, I thought, was sassy.

Oh well, eventually we had mastered most of the accents and memorised the whole repertoire of questions waitresses could ask, but then it was time to go home.

I retired in good order behind my copy of the FORT LAUDERDALE SUN-SENTINEL. This was the first time I had ever really read an American newspaper and I was impressed. Once you got over the feeling that you had to read or at least check through all the supplements, it was really very good. Intellectually it was of course vastly superior to the typical British popular newspaper, which does so much to reconcile one to the imminent extinction of the human race. It even compared favourably with the quality English papers. Its news coverage might not be as wide or thorough, but the syndicated columnists, a purely American phenomenon, provided a balance of political comment not always available in British newspapers, and the general tone was not pompous or stuffy. It was a bit like *The Times* with comics.

Among the comics, by the way, I was astonished to find *Andy Capp*. How incomprehensible people here must find the working class culture of the North of England: but reading the strip it didn't seem out of place. It was like *Benny Hill* and *Eastenders* on tv, which America seems to absorb quite effortlessly.

The sports section turned out to be a curious sort of male chauvinist reservation, the advertisers consisting almost entirely of garages and brothels.

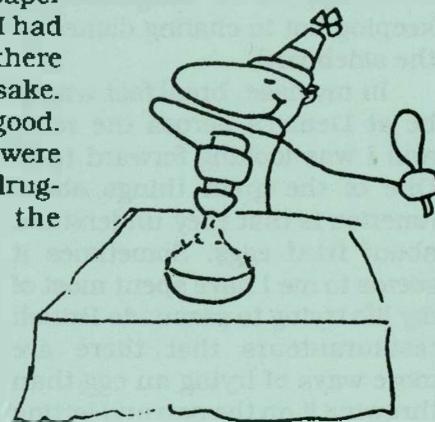
Soon the hardover eggs arrived with the bacon, and a very old question was answered. In the *Goon Show*, they used to have the equivalent of interlineations and one of them was "What happened to the nice crispy bacon we used to get before the war." Well here it was, alive and well and living in Fort Lauderdale.

There was a vivid memory flashover to the newspaper column I was reading. Many years ago, while I was still in the Civil Service, I used to chair promotion boards and there were often hopeful candidates from other Departments. Once there was one from the Pig Marketing Branch of the Department of Agriculture. "Good morning, Mr McAllister," I said, "What happened to the nice crispy bacon we used to get before the war?" He took this in his stride and explained that pigs used to be fed on household scraps but with increased demand for pork products, farm-

ers now fed them on fish meal. I could see this must be true, because I suddenly remembered the man with a smelly barrel on wheels that came to the back of our house when I was a child collecting food "for the pigs." It was a good answer, and there was a twinkle in his eye which made me sure he knew *The Goon Show*. I made another connection. "Would you happen to be the McAllister who had a short story in the BELFAST TELEGRAPH last week?" He admitted he was. I told him he could write and he should do more of it, and the next thing I heard he had retired from the civil service and become a successful bigtime writer with a column in the IRISH TIMES. I always felt I might have had something to do with that, and that it illustrated the importance of feedback.

The breakfast was good, except that they had started buttering the toast before you got it, which mean it wasn't as crisp as it should be. Also the "hash browns" I remembered had been replaced by some machine-shredded substance which looked and tasted like spaghetti which they had managed to undercook and burn simultaneously. Another change for the worse was that the sugar now came in the little sachets you get in aeroplanes. Now I don't take as much sugar as I used to, when sugaring my coffee used to be more like an industrial process than a domestic one, but American coffee is more bitter than I'm used to, and maybe the sachets have got smaller; anyway I needed three of them for each cup of coffee, which meant a lot of tearing and a guilty load of waste paper, for which no receptacle was ever provided. I mourned the passing of the big glass sugar caster.

We found a survivor of the classic diner later that week. Louie's on Commercial Boulevard. It not only had the glass sugar caster but the little tin box for paper napkins, and I had a hamburger there for old time's sake. It wasn't very good. And where were the corner drug-stores and the chocolate malts and the news-stands? And what had happened to



home fries when American food went upmarket ethnic?

After breakfast we sunbathed for the rest of the morning. There was a stiff breeze left over from Tropical Storm Keith but the patio had a screen, and the temperature was just like a summer day at home. I caught up on my cloud watching and observed with interest the advertising streamers towed by light aeroplanes alongside the beach. *The Candy Store* admitted unaccompanied females free. There were free drinks and pizza. And a wet T-shirt contest.

I thought what a pity it was that the coalescence of convention and fanzine fandom had not

progressed a little further, because here was the perfect medium for interlineations. How marvellous it would be to have an aeroplane trail one past the convention hotel. YNGUI IS A LOUSE, perhaps. No, it would have looked too ethnically political. Perhaps WHO SAUED COURTNEY'S BORT?

We had a light lunch in the apartment and read and dozed the rest of the day away. I would date from here the real beginning of our holiday. Our bodies had at last decided, with more sense than our brains, that we didn't have to be always going places and doing things. An essential part of any holiday was doing nothing. I had a feeling we had changed at last to a more easeful gear.

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### **Wednesday, 23rd November, to Wednesday, 30th November, 1988.**

A whole week to TROPICON.

Next morning we had another insight into the Florida lifestyle when two men arrived to spray the kitchen and bathroom with insecticide. It seemed to be effective because we never saw any kind of insect in the apartment. Indeed I never saw a cockroach the whole holiday. It may have been the insecticides, but that never seemed to stop them before; my personal opinion was that they were terrified by the Fort Lauderdale traffic.

Actually in a way I was beginning to enjoy driving in Florida, with the same kind of horrified fascination with which one reads a Stephen King novel. It was scary but exciting, and there was a sense of accomplishment when one eventually arrived where one had intended to go. Moreover I had begun to adjust to the fact that certain road perils to which I had been accustomed did not seem to exist here. There were no children and dogs darting out from behind parked cars, which might have been because there were no parked cars, and there were no cyclists. With my uncanny powers of observation I had already noticed the absence of horses, cows, flocks of sheep and chickens. Really, all you had to do was keep one eye on the car ahead and one on the regions of the upper atmosphere where the traffic lights were to be found. Not counting of course the additional six necessary to observe the surrounding cars: the four lots visible with the naked eye and the others to be seen in the magnifying

wing mirrors.

We spent a lot of time driving around looking at shopping malls and sampling restaurants. We found a fascinating junk shop called *Povorello* in Pompano Plaza: we love junk shops and American junk shops offered us a whole new range of strange objects. I bought a boxed 8 mm movie projector with built-in screen for seven dollars, hoping to adapt it to view my negatives. This has proved impractical without recourse to a saw but like all junk junkies I still devoutly believe my acquisition will 'Come In Useful'.

We also found a tiny cafeteria style restaurant called the Silver Fox in the Coral Hills Mall. It had the day's menu chalked on a blackboard, which is often a good sign; the food was excellent and the bread uniquely delicious. We went there often, eventually noticing a modestly displayed newspaper clipping with a commendation from some gourmet food writer.

On Thursday we had been invited for family Thanksgiving dinner with Chuck and Francine. Chuck drove all the way from Pembroke to collect us, and drove us home afterwards. Months ago, I remembered, I had pointed out to Madeleine that we would be in American for Thanksgiving: wouldn't it be great if someone was to invite us for the traditional Thanksgiving Dinner? It was everything we had hoped for. Congenial friends, delicious food, both the best America had to offer.

Saturday was another special occasion, when Joe and Edie took us out for the day in their

mobile apartment building. It had tv and a VCR and a bed and goodness knows what else. We had been offered our choice of Miami's attractions and chose the *Seaquarium*, on the tenuous grounds that we had a tank of tropical fish at home beside the word processor. (It's better than staring into space.) The aquarium was indeed massively impressive, but the whale and dolphin shows were more unexpectedly enjoyable. I had been inclined to deplore this whole business of making wild animals do tricks, but it was hard to preserve this intellectual snobbery in face of the apparent enjoyment of the participants and, more important, the genuine love the children seemed to feel for them. I still felt some misgivings about the tricks. The trainer said something about positive reinforcement, which I took to mean that the animals were rewarded for tricks, not punished for refusing. But I wondered: if failure means no fish, is that positive? However one could not deny the skill of the entertainment and the charm with which it was presented.

There was also a sort of wild life reservation, with crocodiles and pink flamingoes, and we had a relaxing little cruise in the bay, and it was all very enjoyable. For dinner, Joe took us to a restaurant called *Cap's Place*, which turned out to be the apotheosis of the Florida Antique. There were little signs to it all through an area zoned as purely residential, which was intriguing, but in fact they led to a landing stage, from which a small fishing boat with an inboard engine took us to a wooded island with a rustic restaurant.

Somehow I keep puzzling about the boatman, a lean, young looking but not young man dressed in a towelling tennis shirt and grey flannel trousers, with a nice line in half-mocking patter. I wondered how powerfully he seemed to project the image of some sort of aristocratic drop out, the East Coast Establishment's version of what used to be called a "remittance man" in the days of the British Empire. The restaurant menu was large, but difficult to read—funny how the more expensive the restaurant the less lighting they can afford—so I settled for an item chalked on a blackboard marked TODAY'S CATCH and consisting of the names of fish none of which I had ever heard of before. My random choice was baked kingfish, whatever that is. Edie ordered it too, which was a relief: though now I know her better I wonder if she ordered it just to reassure me and to make sure I was properly fed. It's the sort of quiet thoughtful thing Edie might do.

While waiting for the mysterious fish to arrive I had my first chowder, which was delicious, and sampled one of the specialties of the house called Hearts of Palm Salad. I suppose it was all right if you like eating wood, but I thought I could live without it. I must admit though that I am prejudiced against salads, having always tended to view them as a branch of flower arranging rather than of cookery.

The fish when it arrived seemed to have been baked with almonds and was delicious. I wish I could have seen it. Afterwards on Edie's recommendation I had some Key Lime Pie, and both dishes went straight into my ideal International Menu as America's contribution. The whole evening was delightful and as genuinely romantic as it is possible for such things to be, and it had been a lovely day.

Next day was Sunday and after I had recovered from carrying the Sunday paper upstairs we thought perhaps the Thanksgiving Weekend crowds might have started home by now and we could try again to get a round of golf. The Yellow Pages of the phone book were a help in distinguishing between private and public courses, but there are variations of both—for instance private golf courses often welcome members of other clubs with proper handicaps, or visitors on weekdays—and it seemed odd that with all the money sloshing around here no tourist authority had compiled a list of local courses with their green fees and other charges, and the times at and circumstances in which they welcomed visitors. Our own little Tourist Authority in Northern Ireland publishes such a list, and a handbook with full descriptions of each of our fifty-odd courses, each better than any we were able to see in Florida.

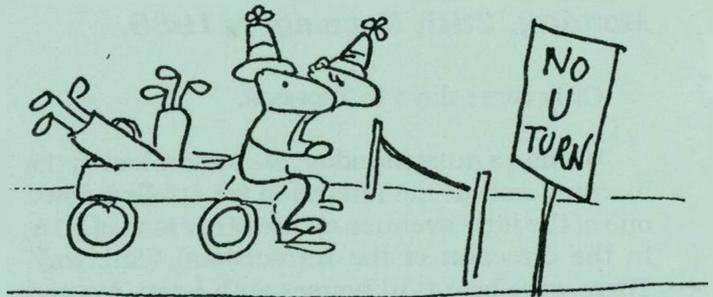
In Fort Lauderdale there were two weekly magazines published for visitors. They cost nothing and were worth every penny, consisting as they did largely of plugs for the restaurants which advertised in them. I could think of a variety of more helpful information that might have been supplied, on local driving conditions and conventions, for instance, and the rules governing street and house numbering, and how to find roughly where on a street a number might be (otherwise an address like 4500 N. Federal Highway is almost useless), and what direction the numbers go, and the rules determining whether thoroughfares are called streets, avenues, boulevards or roads, and postage rates and the whereabouts of

Post Offices, and where and how you have to pay road tolls. There seemed to be an assumption that tourists know all these things, but some don't being, strangely enough, from other places. An example: the FORT LAUDERDALE SUN-SENTINEL ran eight pages of advertisements for a sale in Macy's, not one of which gave the address of the local branch of that store. It was not even to be found in the phone book.

In the end we booked an early afternoon starting time at *Springtree Golf Course*, and found our way there, with some difficulty due to lack of signposting. It called itself a Country Club, as all golf courses in the area seem to do, but it was really just a low budget housing estate surrounding a woefully inadequate golf course. Most of the tee markers had been looted by vandals. However it was good enough for our induction into the rituals of American public golf courses, including the golf buggy. We got into one of these and asked the way to the first tee. The starter pointed west, whereupon I set off at full speed due East, ignoring his plaintive cries. The trouble was that I was on a narrow path and had belatedly realised I had no idea of the turning circle of these things.

I was making for an open space some fifty yards ahead, but when I arrived there I found a rope across it and a notice saying NO CARTS, so I carried on to the end of the path at the distant tenth tee, made a sweeping turn and headed back the way I had come, trying to look as if I had been making a survey of the amenities. Nothing seemed to have changed much during my protracted absence except that the starter was looking at me in a most peculiar way. Madeleine was wearing the same sort of patient look she puts on when I make one of my worst puns. At last we arrived at the first tee and I took the driver from my bag of rented clubs and hit a magnificent drive which made up for everything.

So did Madeleine and as we bowled along the fairway, we found ourselves revising the convictions of a lifetime. We used to despise those golf cart things, with the sort of snobbery typified by Oscar Wilde's remark that America had passed from barbarism to decadence without passing through the intermediate stage of civilisation. But so what, we thought now, calling to mind the words of another great philosopher. As Chuck Harris put it, what's an old birthright compared to a perfectly good mess of pottage? And you could get just as much exercise with a cart, we told ourselves, because you could play more golf.



And after all we were in the Tropics and couldn't be expected to run round the course like we did at home, trying to keep warm. But the clincher was our new and firm conviction that we could play better golf with the drudgery taken out of the game. It was like the inner belief I had always had that I could play golf like a pro if I had a caddy to carry my clubs. Pros didn't get their clubs carried because they were good players: they were good players because they got people to carry their clubs.

There were notices everywhere that we had to be off the course by 5 pm. I hadn't liked to ask what happened then, but I imagined the course was invaded every night by hordes of vandals, drug addicts and assorted ghouls. So we finished in good time, only to find the office closed and locked, with presumably my driving licence inside. I had had to surrender it as security for the rented clubs; it was that sort of place. Alarmed, we set off in the gathering dusk for another cruise in our cart, only to meet the starter tearing along in another cart waving my licence. Thankfully we made our escape from the dreadful place and headed for the safety of the *Villa Caprice*.

Well, comparative safety. Next day men came around to change all the locks because someone had broken into reception the night before and stolen among other things a pass key. In a way it was reassuring that the hotel was so quick off the mark, and it was the only evidence of criminality we saw the whole trip except for a notice on the *Seven-Eleven* store opposite the convention hotel conveying the helpful information that THIS STORE HAS LESS THAN \$30 AFTER DARK.

Apart from this, the Fort Lauderdale version of Miami vice seemed to have a certain innocent wholesomeness, typified by an advertisement for the *Cheetah Lounge*: 75 BEAUTIFUL SUN-BATHED NUDE DANCERS. And we were reliably informed that there was a Topless Doughnut Bar, a concept likely to defeat the most fevered imagination.

**Monday, 28th November, 1988.**

Only three days to TROPICON.

We had a quiet Monday. We sunbathed in the morning and in the afternoon we strolled down one of the little avenues on the other side of A1A, in the direction of the Intracoastal Waterway. There were beautiful houses with boats moored among gardens of flowering trees and shrubs. It seemed an unspoiled paradise, stretching for miles in either direction, but in fact all this was artificial. Dozens of channels had been dredged in the swamp, and the mud shored up with piles to become building land, and now it was all quite beautiful. It seemed to me a unique kind of landscape, one where Man has done nothing but good. There are artificial landscapes in Mediterranean coastal areas like Majorca, and some of them can be quite impressive, but it is doubtful whether any of them are an improvement on the coastline originally offered by Nature. But here something beautiful had been created from nothing, a net gain for the human race and its planet. I felt the world owed a vote of thanks to Florida, and its terraforming pioneers.

As a result of an unfortunate encounter the previous evening with a dead turkey in Howard Johnson's, Madeleine had decided we would

make our own dinner today, so we drove up to Publix and bought some Idaho potatoes and some lamb chops. The chops were not nearly as good as we get at home, but the potatoes were, and we had quite a nice dinner, with the bottle of *Beaujolais Nouveau* donated by Virgin. Then we watched an instalment of the BBC series *The Barseshire Chronicles*.

Keen observers will have noticed that with 35 American tv channels to choose from, we seem to watch only old BBC programs. Well, I'm sorry about that, and no doubt we are cultural chauvinists of the most bigoted kind. All I can say is that we thought American tv was far better than its British critics say, and was technically excellent, but we were unlucky enough not to come across a program other than the ones I mentioned which was interesting enough to make us put down a book. Of course the same applies to most of the programs on any given day on British tv too. The three I mentioned were alltime favourites over years of viewing, and the most marvellous thing to us about American tv is that you can always catch these classics again: the most worrying thing, of course, is where are such classics going to come from when British tv follows the American example.

**Tuesday, 29th November, 1988.**

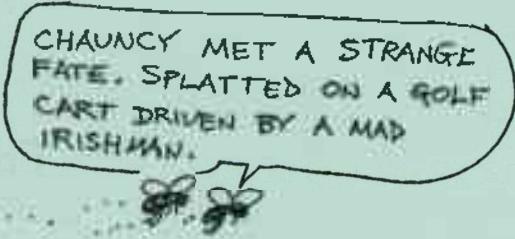
Two days to TROPICON

We sunbathed till it got cloudy, as it often did by noon, and then booked a starting time at the *Ortole Country Club*, which was advertising for visitors in the *SUN-SENTINEL*. We had lunch at the *Silver Fox* and then continued along Oakland Park Boulevard looking out for US 441, where we were to turn right. There was a sign heralding US 441, but the next intersecting road turned out to be State Road 7, so I went straight on, ignoring protests from the Chief Navigator. There was no further mention of US 441. Obviously something had gone wrong, namely me. I turned right at the next intersection and found somewhere to park so we could study the map and find out just where we were now and what to do next.

It seemed that US 441 and State Road 7 were actually the same thoroughfare. It also seemed it

would be simpler to carry on the way we were going and make another right turn, rather than attempt a U-turn to find our way back to US 441, alias State Road 7. Unfortunately it proved more difficult to find the golf club from this angle and we arrived ten minutes after our starting time. Tides and starting times wait for no man, and there were now about four parties ahead of us. Play was painfully slow, even with a cart to sit in, and the course was little better than Springtree so we seized an opportunity to cut out a couple of holes, moving rapidly from the fifth green to the eighth tee. This is of course a mortal golfing sin, so you can imagine our horror when the players now in front of us lost a ball and the people we had leapfrogged over came closer and closer. At last, overcome with shame and frustration we drove full speed for the clubhouse, losing our way only once, and turned in our cart and clubs. It was not

the most enjoyable game of golf I had ever had.  
Back at the *Villa Caprice* we had dinner at Denny's with a bottle of white wine to drown our sorrows, and then watched the next instalment of *Yes, Prime Minister*.



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**Wednesday, 30th November, 1988.**

TROPICON tomorrow!

It rained in the morning and we did some packing. Then the sun came out and we had a bathe. We were now trying to use up our food stocks, and lunched off a tin of gazpacho (good) from Publix and one of baked beans (horrible).

Then we went exploring for books and junk, and dined at home again. It was a quiet, tense day. Tomorrow morning we were to check out of our quiet *Villa Caprice*, in its cozy ecological niche between the fish and the squirrels, and move into the TROPICON Hotel, another world inside this other world. What would become of us?

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## TROPICON

**Thursday, 1st December, 1988**

We had to check out of the *Villa Caprice* by 11 a.m., and from the hotel reservation form we had been given for the airport Howard Johnson's by the travel agent, it seemed you could not check into an American hotel until 3 pm. Besides, Joe Siclari had told us no one else would arrive at the Convention hotel until the evening; so it seemed a sensible idea to go and play golf. Though I had the irrational feeling it would be a bit like a Nero violin recital.

I phoned a course called the Plantation Country Club, because it was due west of a point halfway between the *Villa Caprice* and the Tropiccon hotel, and was told there would be no problem with starting times between one and two. So we crammed all our stuff untidily into the car, paid the bill by credit card and surrendered the keys, and set off down A1A, free as birds.

Just past Sunrise Boulevard we turned into Breakers Avenue, where we should find an apartment house called The Breakers. This was the only self-catering accommodation offered in the Fort Lauderdale area by any of the British tour operators and we had meant to go there, until Joe offered to find us something better. We were curious to see what it was like. It seemed to be in a congested area, and there was no parking except at meters, so I used one for the first time and we went in. We thought the place was horrible, like a deluxe but rather run down Cell Block. There was nowhere to go but the public beach on the other side of A1A, no grass and trees or quiet avenues to stroll along. Compared to the

*Villa Caprice* it was hell in concrete.

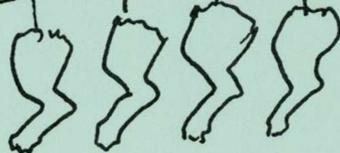
Calling down blessings on the head of Joe Siclari, we turned back to Sunrise Boule-

vard and headed west for the Plantation Country Club. This time it was a real country club, with a real golf course. There was a huge dining room where we were the only customers of a very pleasant young waitress. We ordered a club sandwich and two coffees. I had the sandwich and Madeleine the accompanying salad, which was our usual practice. Then we strolled into the pro shop and paid the green fees. With the hire of clubs and cart it all came to \$51 which was the most we had paid yet. But it was obviously a more upmarket golf course than any we had so far seen. (I didn't have to surrender my driving licence here; just my credit card.) And while it was much dearer than golf at home, it was still cheaper than Portugal.

It was a nice course, specialising in dog-legs, though the fairways were rather bare by our standards. We saw a raccoon, maybe two. There were no other players holding us back or pressing us from behind, and we enjoyed our golf. But there was a curious feeling that we were in a dream world between two realities. Behind us the idyllic holiday in the *Villa Caprice*, already becoming remote, before us the momentous event which had been looming in our future for over a year. And here we were in this strange interregnum, playing golf. We had no home, and no one knew where we were.

There is however nothing like golf for imposing its own gritty reality. We played well, and completed the 18 holes without feeling tired, thanks to the cart, and set off for the Convention Hotel via the famous Las Olas Boulevard. We found the hotel easily thanks to our guardian angel Joe, who had taken the trouble to show us it on the way from Miami last Saturday. Indeed he had even driven round it to show me the parking area. He had actually done this anti-clockwise -

WE SPECIALIZE IN DOG LEGS



i.e. all left turns, a feat which much impressed me at the time. Thanks to him I arrived without incident at hotel reception with two of our less disreputable items of baggage, which no one had offered to carry, and broke the news to the young lady that she had a reservation for Walter and Madeleine Willis. She handed me a card to fill up. "Will you be paying by cash or credit card?" she asked. "Well, neither," I said, "we are guests of the Convention." "No," she said firmly, "everyone pays their own bill. Do you have a credit card?"

Next thing she was going to take my card or ask for its number; the attitude of Modern Man in such circumstances is not unlike that of the ignorant savage who refuses to have his photograph taken or even to reveal his true name, lest it give his enemies power over him. This girl was not going to get so much as a whiff of my credit card.

"We are Guests of Honour at this Convention and the organisers are paying our bill," I said firmly. She consulted with another girl with a badge reading Customer Relations, and with a man who emerged from an inner office, and finally they presented me with a key marked 1122. We hauled the cases to the lift and pressed the button for the 11th Floor. We had no trouble finding 1122. The door was open and the first thing we noticed was the marvellous view. The second was that there were no beds.

We are of course just simple Irish fisher folk, but we do know it is customary for hotels to provide beds of some sort. No doubt, I thought, men were even now manhandling a double bed up the eleven flights of stairs, like Laurel and Hardy with the piano, followed by the Manager with profuse apologies for the oversight and a bouquet of flowers. Maybe even a bottle of domestic champagne. I set off to get more luggage while Madeleine unpacked. On my way back this time a man in uniform in the foyer showed praiseworthy willingness to carry some of my collection of plastic shopping bags filled with Coca-Cola tins, jars of drinking water and other household goods, but I declined.

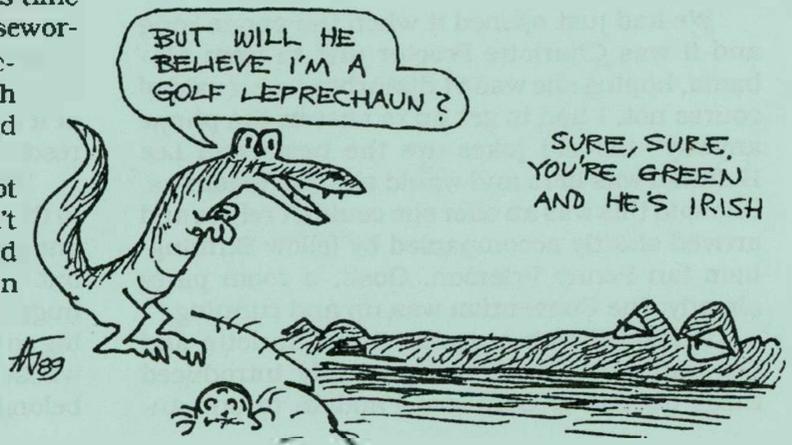
Back on the Eleventh Floor I could not get into Room 1122 because the key didn't work. Madeleine let me in, and I called Housekeeping to report on the key situation and to enquire what prospect there was of getting a bed for the night. After a pause, a competent voice told us we had apparently been mistakenly allocated a room

which had been cleared "for demonstration purposes". I passed this information on to Reception and was asked to come down again.

There Customer Relations invited me to go straight upstairs again, to a Room 1125 which would be ours. They couldn't actually give me an actual key just right now, but there was a man working there who would let us in and give us the key. Up again for the third time to the Eleventh Floor, I went straight to our supposed new room, being by now of a less trustful disposition. Sure enough, the door was locked and there was nobody inside, unless deaf or dead. I went back to Room 1122 and Madeleine let me in with an enquiring look. "You'll never guess," I said. "Listen." I deposited my collection of plastic shopping bags where the bed should be, picked up the phone, and when Reception answered recapitulated recent events with a patience which would have qualified me for instant canonisation if I had been of the Roman persuasion.

There was another long loud silence and I was asked to come to Reception again. But going down for the third time I met a man carrying what looked like a bag of tools and asked him did he know anything about keys. He did, having just changed some locks on this floor and being now on his way to get keys cut for them, which he would give to Reception. He let me into Room 1125 and I wedged the door open and fetched Madeleine and our luggage. The room was lovely, a corner room with two staggering views, even at night.

For it was now night-time: over an hour had passed and we were hungry, but we couldn't leave our room to get something to eat. Indignantly we looked for and found the Room Service menu, but one look at the prices was enough to make us feel quite merciful again so we just



ordered a hamburger and a chicken sandwich. They took ages to arrive, and at one point I began to suspect they were lying on the floor outside Room 1122 and went to check.

In the corridor I ran into Joe and Edie, who had just arrived. I told them our room was marvellous, which it was, but we couldn't leave it just yet because new keys were being cut, so we had ordered something from Room Service. Joe, typically, said we were to be sure to order a proper dinner, not just sandwiches or something. I didn't say anything about the bed shortage because it might be one of those conventions where everything goes wrong from the start, and I didn't want to add to their worries. But looking at them, I had the unreasoning conviction that it wasn't going to be like that. They projected such calm competence that it seemed clear that now they had arrived everything was going to be all right.

And so it was. Almost at once Room Service came up with the goods, and when I called Reception they said our keys were ready. In my new calm and benign mood, brought on by meeting Edie again, though no doubt the hamburger helped, I didn't even ask them why they hadn't let me know about the keys; or even sent them up.

We had told Joe and Edie that if physically possible we would go with them to meet the Busby's arriving from Seattle at 1.30 am, so it seemed sensible to catch some sleep. Sensible, but not practicable. Eventually we gave up and I went down to collect our keys, promising to report back where the action was, if any. I brought the action back with me, in the welcome form of Lee Hoffman whom I had found in the lobby. We talked over old times and old friends, and at Madeleine's suggestion Lee went and got her fabulous photograph album which we had heard about.

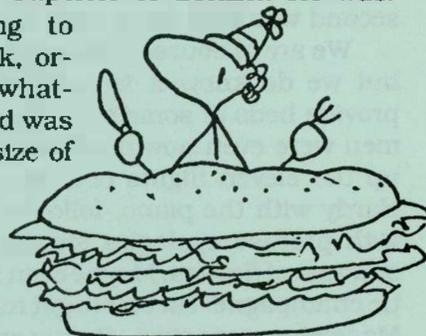
We had just opened it when the phone rang and it was Charlotte Proctor just in from Alabama, hoping she wasn't disturbing me. I said of course not, I had to get up to answer the phone anyway—the old jokes are the best—and Lee Hoffman was here and would she like to join us. She said this was an offer she couldn't refuse and arrived shortly accompanied by fellow Birmingham fan Penny Frierson. Gosh, a room party already: the Convention was up and running.

I realised with surprise that Charlotte and Lee had never met, and promptly introduced these queens of Southern Fandom to one an-

other. It was to my mind a service to American fandom comparable in its historic significance to my introduction of Lee Hoffman to Forry Ackerman in 1952 and my introduction of Dean Grennell to him in 1962. Obviously this continual excitement had become too much for Forry, for he did not show up on this occasion.

It is a well known fact, which I have just rediscovered, that the more interesting a conversation is, the less likely you are to take notes of it at the time. This is why all convention reports, except those by Owen Whiteoak, are so bereft of reported speech. So while I think of that evening as memorable I cannot remember any of the subjects discussed, except sex shops and the care and feeding of Bob Shaw. Oh, and I remember Charlotte saying that she had put some things in her fanzine that she had particularly liked but, discouragingly, no one at all had mentioned them in their letters until I singled out both in consecutive postcards with revivifying effect.

About ten we went out for something to eat and after wandering about aimlessly the way one does, the decision as usual was made by the hungriest person, and we went into an Italian diner. I ordered a slice of pizza to see if Rob Hansen had been right when he said American pizza was vastly superior to British. He was. Madeleine, trying to find a light snack, ordered a "sub", whatever that was, and was appalled by the size of the artefact that resulted. Nevertheless she attacked it bravely and eventually reduced it to a wasteland of rubble, which seemed to occupy more space than the original dish. Charlotte assessed the mangled remains. "Well at least," she said, "you've made sure it won't be resold."



Back at the hotel someone advised us to go up to the penthouse floor. Known to the hotel and no one else as "Top o' the Surf". It was almost literally out of this world. It apparently consisted of a huge platform floating in space, resembling nothing so much as the Van Vogt Spaceship in a story whose name I can't remember just now, which belonged to neither the old cigar school of space-

ship construction, nor the more modern apartment building architecture of *Close Encounters* and *Star Wars*. It was simply a deck five miles long, one mile wide and six inches thick. Quite sensible, given force fields and inertia drives, and even without them excellent for a science fiction convention. Joe told me later it was the main reason they had decided on this hotel for the Convention and I could well understand it. Nothing could be more appropriate for the broad mental horizons of us starbeggotten.

We greeted the Convention workers who were toiling away, and setting up round tables seating about ten. At one of them already were our fellow Guests of Honour Poul and Karen Anderson, whom we hadn't seen for 26 years. Poul and I reminisced about the Chicon penthouse party in 1952 with Tony Boucher and Mack Reynolds, and Karen absolved us from our guilt at missing her party in 1962 because of having to leave for Los Angeles, and we enquired after their Morris Minor which had the little hard lump of petrol in the tank, and we mourned Terry Carr, and generally filled each other in on what we had been doing this past quarter century. They revealed it was their wedding anniversary, and we congratulated them from our even greater seniority as a married couple.

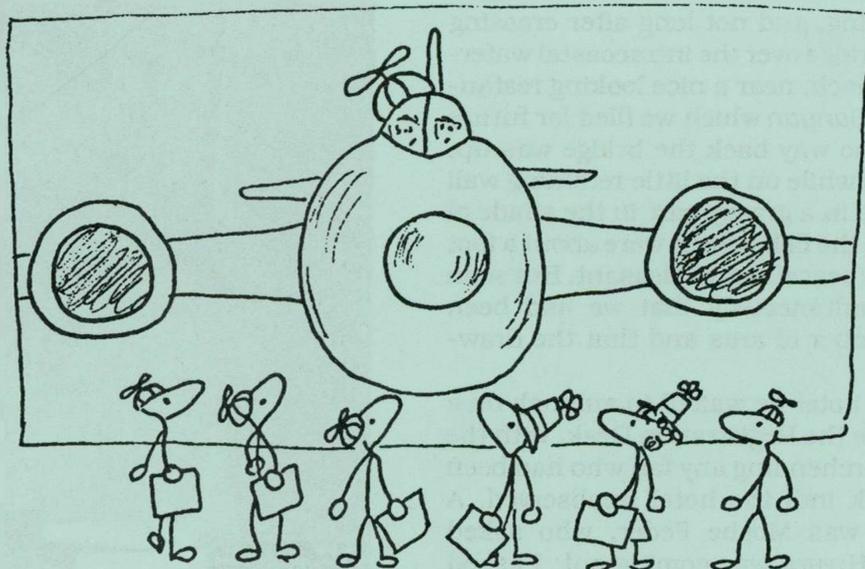
Little groups formed and reformed round the tables, in a natural and easy-going way, each

person seeking some ultimate congeniality, and often finding it. I surmised that Joe and Edie had been influenced by the success in this respect of Greg Pickersgill's similarly arranged fan room at Brighton.

After midnight the numbers dwindled and about 1 am a little group comprising Lee Hoffman, with Joe and Edie, Mike Drawdy, Madeleine and I, set off for Fort Lauderdale Airport. Like everything else here it was further away and larger than I expected, but deserted at this hour. Joe and Edie knew their way about as if they had designed it, as for all I know maybe they had, and we found ourselves in a huge glassed-in balcony where we could watch the plane taxi in and disembark, with as little fuss as a Greyhound bus. A screen announced that the origins of its passengers included five cities, none of them Seattle.

Almost at once Buz and Elinor appeared, looking much less than 26 years older, and in no time at all we were all shaking hands or hugging one another, all a bit incoherent. Briefly, I pulled myself together. "Welcome to Florida," I said.

Everybody talking at once we arrived at the hotel and saw the Busbys to their room: there we left them, figuring they needed a rest after that journey. We must be tired ourselves, we realised, because it had been a long day. We went to bed to check this theory and it proved correct.



### Friday, 2nd December 1988

First thing Friday I took photographs of the view from our room. It was so complex that I knew I could never remember it, and really I needed a movie camera to record its property of constant movement. There were the busy roads round the hotel, the intracoastal waterway with its complexity of piers and harbours, thronged with shipping and pleasure craft. And receding into the hazy distance in every direction an infinite landscape of trees and buildings, everything clean and clear and cared for. I used to say America would be nice when it was finished; well, here it was, finished, and a beautiful job it was too. It reminded me of what one of our Ulster businessmen said after seeing the immaculate landscaping of Long Island estates: "It just shows," he said, "What God could have done if he had had money."

We went down to breakfast about nine. The restaurant was quite small, adjoining the swimming pool. It was a nice morning, we thought, but the locals seemed to feel it was cold, judging from a notice chalked beside the door reading "Good morning. *Brrr.*" The tables seemed to be fixed to the floor and were either for two or four people, so there was none of the joining friends for breakfast which is usual at conventions in our experience.

So after breakfast we were still by ourselves, and decided to have a look at those fabulous shops in Las Olas Boulevard while we had this chance. But it seemed much further than it had in the car, and we didn't seem to have our usual energy for walking, and not long after crossing the great drawbridge over the intracoastal waterway we turned back, near a nice looking restaurant called *The Banyan* which we filed for future reference. On the way back the bridge was up, and we sat for a while on the little retaining wall of the waterway, in a grassy part in the shade of a tree, watching the fish, which were about a foot long. It was very peaceful and pleasant. But soon we noticed simultaneously that we had been joined by a number of ants and that the drawbridge was up.

Back at the hotel we waited in ambush on a big sofa opposite the Registration Desk, with the intention of apprehending any fan who had been hoping to sneak into the hotel unobserved. A notable victim was Moshe Feder, who asked when the next *HYPHEN* was coming out. I asked him about his letter of comment on the last one,

which he had promised in Brighton. He said it was nearly finished and, desperately trying to change the subject, commented that he had always thought that meeting me was like meeting someone out of the Bible. I said he needn't expect any miracles, my being here at all was miracle enough. He asked was it not strange to have this dual role of contemporary fan and legend; reinforced by Geri Sullivan's advice I said yes, sometimes, but I figured there was only one me and people just had to make the best of it. What You See Is All You Get.

Other pleasant people came and went, but eventually there was a hull and we went to the hotel restaurant for lunch. After we had ordered I remember we hadn't got our low sodium salt, so I went up to our room to get it. Hurrying back to the restaurant I almost collided with a red-haired girl. "Hi," she said, a little tentatively. "I'm Geri Sullivan?" For a split second my fine mind considered this proposition. Certainly the girl in the photograph had been much smaller, older and above all less alive than this radiant creature, but there certainly was a resemblance. Then with an almost audible click the two coalesced like the images in a stereoscopic viewer. "Of course you are," I reassured her, and swept her before me in triumph into the dining room to meet Madeleine. There with an uncharacteristic imperiousness induced by euphoria, I commanded the waitress



Geri Sullivan

to move us to a larger table, which she did with alacrity. I can't remember what we ate, or indeed if we ate anything at all, we had so much to talk about.

However before we had exhausted the subject of Chuck Harris, let alone the Nielsen Haydens and Arthur Thomson, we had to leave the restaurant and go upstairs to the penthouse floor. There the afternoon became a succession of pleasant surprises, culminating in an event of sheer astonishment.

First there were Steve and Elaine Stiles, whom in a way I met twice. There was this familiar friendly face I could not for some reason immediately put a name to, and then there was Elaine to make me realise it had been my old friend Steve from Brighton who had somehow changed his appearance. I felt a little guilty about this, but remembered that both Chuck and I had failed to recognize Teresa at Brighton, just because she had changed her hair, and anyone who can do that deserves sympathy rather than censure.

After lunch I must have remembered to change the recorder on my camera from trip mode to convention mode, ie to record time instead of date, so I am able to state with complete authority that by 2.43 pm Geri and I had met Alexis Gilliland. He reminded me of George Charters, but you would have to have known George to realise what a compliment that is.

Then there was Georgina Ellis, all the way from Canada. Now that we had finally met I asked her to confess once and for all whether or not it was true that she had come into fandom as a result of reading a copy of *HYPHEN* found lying on the floor of Calgary bus station. Lately I have had the uneasy idea that Bob Shaw or I invented this legend as a pretext for some ghastly pun about a Read Litter Day. She told me the Truth. It is not suitable for those of a nervous disposition, but I will share it with anyone who sends me an oath of secrecy, written in blood on the back of a ten dollar bill as a guarantee of authenticity.

Then there was Linda Bushyager, and Richard Brandt with a message from Pat Mueller, and Amy Thomson all the way from Seattle with an equally nice message from Jerry and Suzanne. And here was Joe Green and his new wife Patrice. And— and—

And good Ghod, here was Shelby Vick! A distinguished looking Southern gentleman, with a neat beard, and very prosperous looking, but

unmistakably still Shelby. Admittedly this identification was assisted to some slight extent by the fact that he was wearing a T-shirt with SHELBY VICK on the front and an original puffin: and on the back the legend YOU HAVE JUST MET SHELBY VICK.

I found this very satisfactory. For 36 years I had thought of Shelby Vick as the father of the T-shirt as a literary medium. Since I first saw him at Chicon II in 1952 wearing a shirt very like the present one, I had observed his creation grow in the mundane world in eloquence and importance, so that now at parties T-shirt speaks to T-shirt across crowded rooms and entire political manifestos are set out on them, with commendable brevity. How different, and perhaps more peaceful, might have been the history of the world if Shelby Vick had been active before Karl Marx. And of course it is now only a matter of time until someone produces a T-shirt version of *Wuthering Heights*, along the lines of Monty Python's semaphore version.

I found that since I last heard from Shelby he had gone into the insurance business, Suzy having evidently convinced him that if he could sell me he could sell anything. Sure enough he had done quite well, and had now retired. I told him that while he was wasting his time making money, we dedicated fans had been busy making him into a fannish legend as the founder of TAFF; and that, seriously, everyone here was grateful to him for having gladdened the lives of so many people.

We were still talking when Joe came along and told me that Ted White and rich brown had unexpectedly arrived, having driven all the way from Virginia. I looked around and it was true: there was Ted at the Registration table, with a substantial figure who must be rich brown. It was like the time at Chicon II when I fancied that Burbee and Laney were about to appear in our midst on a pillar of fire, except that this time it was actually happening. Madeleine and I stole up behind them. I asked, "Is this where you get to meet Ted White?" while Madeleine, ineffectively concealing her name badge, asked rich brown for his autograph; but he knew at once who she was.

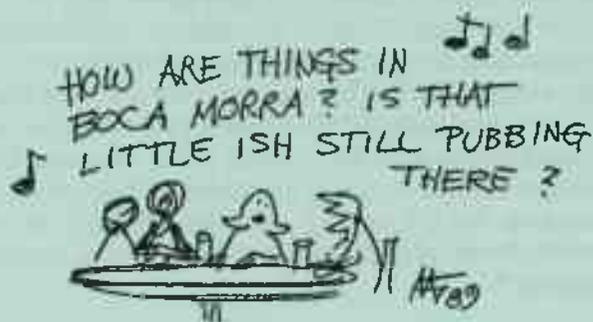
Ted and rich slid effortlessly into the life of the round tables and the endless party that was the convention, now subtly enriched. ("I have been in fandom for 54 years," said Art Widner, in an aside, "most of them spent editing articles by rich brown.")

We left at 5 for the "Introduction to Florida Fandom" and "Opening Ceremony", where various members of the Convention Committee introduced themselves in an informal way. I thought this was a lovely idea, for often you do not get a chance to meet the people who are working so hard behind the scenes to help you enjoy yourself. Even this time I have regrets at not having been able to thank every convention worker individually.

Then Edie formally opened the Convention and introduced us Notables, which was our first exposure in this role. We survived it, and probably went then to have something to eat, but the next thing I remember was **The Night of the Round Tables**. We were back on the space platform again, for what was billed as the "Meet the Celebrities Party - 8 pm to ??", and there was now a cash bar ("Come with me to the Cashbar," I murmured to Madeleine, dreadfully dating us both) but really it was the same happy party going on and on into the night, now better than ever. There seemed no reason why it should ever end as each group alternated effortlessly between laughter and serious discussion, and people moved about endlessly as the mood took them in a sort of Brownian movement - you might say a richbrownian movement, I thought, watching the perceptive way he helped things along.

I think of it as one of the most memorable occasions of my life, so why is it that I can remember so little of it? I remember the time-binding feeling at the beginning, when Joe asked Madeleine what she would like to drink, and she asked for a Tom Collins, remembering that the last time she had had one of these was in New York in 1962 while waiting for the bus to Chicago.

## THE NIGHT OF THE ROUND TABLES



I remember asking Ted White what his trip was like, those two days and 1000 miles of fast driving, and finding I wasn't the only one disturbed by the behaviour of expressway traffic. I also remember getting into one of those serious constructive discussions you can have with Ted White about fandom. He might have lost his lean and hungry look, but he still thought a lot and was a dangerous man to parade an ill-considered idea in front of. I advanced the proposition that after the influx of talented women into fandom, the next most promising development was the entry of confans into the fanzine field. He doubted this, suggesting that confans might just produce their own style of fanzine, outside our tradition, like a literary equivalent of fancy dress. I argued that by Sturgeon's Law 90% of any style of fanzine, even ours, was crud. What determined the nature of a fanzine was the feedback the editor got, and feedback was our field of expertise. It was up to us by our letters of comment and reviews to help the editor produce the kind of fanzine we like. I don't remember what devastating rejoinder Ted had to this, but I do remember wishing Charlotte Proctor was here.

I remember Moshe admiring an old photograph of Lee Hoffman and wondering that Madeleine allowed me to visit her, thereby deftly insulting all three of us. But Madeleine was able for him: "Ah," she said. "You haven't seen a photograph of me as I was then."

I also remember that round about 12 we were thinking what a wonderful convention this could turn out to be if only we could get through our program appearances tomorrow without utter disgrace. Maybe we should get a good night's sleep to improve our chances. So we went off to bed. It was with some reluctance because although we had talked more tonight than we would normally do in a year, we felt far from talked out. We had difficulty in coming down from this exalted state and turned on the television, to find coverage of a golf tournament. Even this had no interest for us, but it did make us realise how tired we really were so I clicked off the remote control and we sank into a deep and tranquil sleep.

**Saturday, 3rd December, 1988.**

Next morning after breakfast we went for our usual walk (usual!!) along A1A as far as the World Windsurfing Championship. The beach for a hundred yards was covered in shoals of windsurfing boards and I took a photograph of the spectacular scene for my son Bryan.

Back at the hotel I entered the Dealers Room for the first time, determined to repair as many gaps as I could in my knowledge of contemporary science fiction. There seemed an awful lot of stuff based on *Star Trek* and *Dr. Who*, neither of whom I had watched for years, and many of the other authors were unknown to me. None of the vile hucksters had a copy of the only book I was specifically looking for, the Hugo-winning *Watchmen*.

So I was delighted to espy Amy Thomson, and threw myself on her mercy. "I have money," I said, "I want to buy books. Help me." I thought this might be a prospect as attractive as what *Vogue* once supposed to be the secret ambition of all women, to be naked with a chequebook. I explained that my favourite authors used to be Van Vogt, Hal Clement and Theodore Sturgeon. Since then I had liked Sheldon's *Up The Walls of the World*, Sagan's *Contact* and Priest's *Inverted World*, among the contemporary science fiction that had trickled into Donaghadee Public Library.

Amy examined the entire contents of the room, and I rejected some of her suggestions from prejudice about the plot or distaste for the blurb, and we ended up with:

THE FORGE OF GOD, by Greg Bear  
GREAT SKY RIVER, by Greg Benford  
TERRY'S UNIVERSE, edited by Beth Meacham

SMOKE RING, by Larry Niven  
DAWN, by Octavia Butler  
ADULTHOOD RITES, by Octavia Butler

THE DISPOSSESSED, by Ursula LeGuin

ALWAYS COMING HOME, by Ursula LeGuin (in tribute to Jeanne Gornoll's TAFF trip report)

In addition to this motley crew I also bought books by some more reputable authors, like F. M. Busby, Lee Hoffman and Bob Shaw.

As I was leaving, Mitch Silverman could be heard appealing to the

room at large for the title of a story by Van Vogt about a stellar expedition which is overtaken by a later, faster expedition, finding itself on arrival literally *passé*. There was no reply, so I said, "Far Centaurus". "Gee, that's right," cried Mitch. "Say, it's great to have one of you oldtime fans around who knows these things."

Quite pleased with myself I left the books in our room and rendezvoused with Madeleine in Becky Peters' art show, quite the best organised one I had ever seen. We also studied with a sort of awed diffidence a neighbouring display of publications of mine, some of which I don't have copies of myself, assembled by Judy Bernis with the assistance of Lee Hoffman.

But the programme was starting again and we thought it might help to be familiar with the ambience when our turn came. It was all reassuringly friendly and informal. We listened to the panel on marketing sf with about 20 other people, and then one in the smaller program room on "Creating Creativity" with Will Eisner, Vincent Miranda and Lee Hoffman. It also now included Ted White, who had been roped in by the gleeful organisers the moment his car crossed the State line.

It was all very interesting, but Lee had not got a word in edgewise when we left for my own turn in the main program hall. I thought it was very sensible of Joe to schedule our "Interview" for 1 pm, because only those really interested, or already nauseated, would forego lunch; but furtively counting the house I realised there were about 45 people here. I took a photograph of them, asking them to 'Smile please', and then we



Steve Stiles, Gail Bennett, Will Eisner talking about graphics used in narrative forms.

were off.

Joe and I had done nothing by way of rehearsal, but that was ok by me because I am by nature a counter-puncher. I had no trouble thinking of things to say, people seemed to be able to hear me and understand my funny accent, and I had to pause several times for laughter to subside. In no time at all it was nearly two o'clock; I could hardly believe it was all over. I thanked Ted White, who had been a big help: at one time we had a fascinating little public debate going, with Moshe Feder.

Thinking back, I don't recall seeing any recorder, and I don't remember much of what was said. I do remember near the beginning being asked what my future plans were in fandom and answering that I would probably confine myself to writing letters of comment, letting the mantle of Harry Warner settle softly on my shoulders...like dandruff. The only trouble with this scenario, I went on, was that I was older than Harry Warner. Someone in the audience vehemently denied this: "nobody is older than Harry Warner." I said there was a possible alternative. I had in my attic a working electric Gestetner and in my correspondence file a suggestion by Bob Shaw that I publish for him an occasional installment of his *Glass Bushel* column to help him with his correspondence. If this was to happen there would probably be readers' letters, and editorial interpolations and heaven knows what else.

There was a sort of general discussion about *THE ENCHANTED DUPLICATOR*, of which my most vivid memory is of Ted White saying he first read it under his desk in High School. I was quite taken aback. It gave me a most peculiar feeling, comprising I think elements of nostalgia, affection, surprise and sheer awe.



Joe Siclari interviewing Walt Willis

I also remember being asked why I had never written any science fiction after the first issue of *SLANT*. This was a question which had never occurred to me before and I speculated aloud that it might be due to the fact that everything I wrote in those days was designed to fill space in my fanzine and *SLANT* #1 was the only fanzine I had no other contents for. The things I wrote after that were little essays designed to fill the space between contributions. Eventually a surplus of these developed and I unloaded them onto Lee Hoffman. Fiction cannot be cut up into convenient lengths, but there was another reason I stopped writing it. It attracted very little comment, whereas the essay stuff in *QUANDRY* did. It was possible, I suggested, we were all together here today because of a letter in *QUANDRY* 9 from Joe Kennedy, which had a profound effect on me. I had never experienced egoboo like it before.

It was an ideal letter of comment because it said not just what he liked, but why. He said for instance that my stuff was urbane. I had never been called urbane before; in fact I doubt whether any fan had ever been called urbane before. At least I knew what it meant, and I always think you can't be urbane if you don't know what it means. I was reminded for some reason of Chuck Harris's famous remark, "I ain't half bloody suave myself."

We went for lunch, but Madeleine didn't eat much because her turn was still to come, at 3 pm and she was more nervous than I had been, knowing the propensity of her throat to seize up after three sentences. But I thought she did very well. She was on a panel about fannish contretemps, and coped convincingly by keeping her contributions short and to the point, giving an impression of relaxed composure. I thought she was great.

We left the program for a happy world in which we had nothing to do but enjoy ourselves, which we did. It was back to the round tables until we were evicted by the banquet preparations. I see among my all too sparse notes of this period one reading "Gerl Bubbles 4.40 pm". I don't think this means that Gerl was any more effervescent than usual at that point in time. It merely denotes the moment when in my opinion Burbee's

water melon story was superseded as the classic fannish anecdote. No longer would one fan ask another, have you heard Burbee's water melon story? Henceforth it will be, have you heard Geri Sullivan about the bubbles in her dining room table? I have heard Burbee Himself tell the water melon story, and I am here to tell you that Geri's story is funnier. Cleaner, too.

Later came the banquet and Poul Anderson's Guest of Honour speech, both of which were excellent, the first surprisingly so. The food was so good I suspected the hotel had let out the contract. Poul's speech was thoughtful and original, and will certainly be published. There was also a performance by members of the Society for Creative Anachronism which I am sure was much enjoyed by many.

Afterwards there was more conversation, so interesting that everyone in our group forgot the masquerade entirely and came back to reality only just in time for the most tasteful event of the evening, the sampling of the prizewinners of the Dessert Contest. After everyone had had their just desserts the occasion developed into a large room party, and we have learned that these are not for us. Once the background noise reaches a



Poul Anderson and Hal Clement

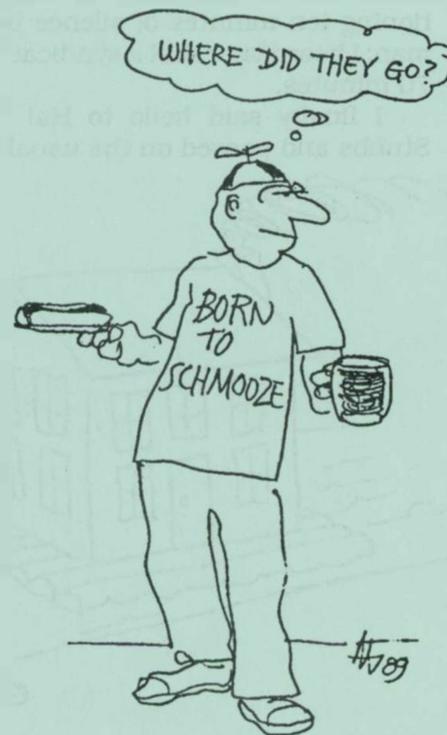
certain level we can no longer hear what anyone is saying, and can do nothing but smile benevolently. After a while this tends to pall on all concerned, so we stole away to our room.

### Sunday, 4th December, 1988.

On Sunday morning we woke early, took a photograph of the dramatic sky over the Intra-coastal Waterway, and had a leisurely breakfast with the Sunday paper provided by the hotel. One could easily get used to this way of life.

Then we went along to the artists' symposium, a sort of quick draw contest featuring Alexis Gilliland, Gail Bennett, Phil Tortorici and Phred. At first we formed two thirds of the audience, but attendance gradually increased. It was very entertaining, sometimes in unexpected ways. Once Phil Tortorici drew attention to the fact that before our very eyes a two-story house was being drawn along the Intra-coastal Waterway on a raft, an example of the fact that life was more improbable than the artist could imagine. Of course, he explained, it was only the tip of a condominium.

The rest of the day seemed curiously fragmented. I remember a hilarious conversation with Amy Thomson and Georgina Ellis about





Poul Anderson during his Interview at TROPICON

Harlan Ellison. What is this gift of Harlan's, that everything he does seems the stuff of legend? My contribution was the time he telephoned me in Belfast from Cleveland, at a time when I didn't have a phone.

I went back to the program to see Poul Anderson's "Interview" and then we went to lunch. On our way back we overheard Joe auctioning ten minutes of silence by Mitch Silverman: I heard later that a syndicate acquired a full 70 minutes.

I finally said hello to Hal Clement/Harry Stubbs and passed on the usual greetings from

James White. I pointed out that we had been passing one another in this way at Conventions, like icebergs passing the Titanic, for nearly 40 years, and it was about time I told him that he had always been one of my three favourite authors; and thanks.

FM Busby asked me to contribute to a special revival issue of *CRY OF THE NAMELESS* and in a fit of nostalgia for the writings of Wally Weber I agreed, though I should have held out for at least a letter of comment on *HYPHEN 37*. Then Art Widner pointed out that there had never been a fanzine in which both Burbee and I had appeared, and—which I could not deny—if there was to be such a fanzine, he was the man to publish it. Would I contribute if Burbee would? I agreed to that too in the euphoria of that afternoon, though I did stipulate that I had to see the colour of his Burbee first.

Then we all went to **The Chuck Harris Auction**, which was amazing in the pleasantest possible way. It brought in a total of \$683. Atom's coloured cartoons which had hung on the door of the Oblique House fan attic for many years, went to Linda Bushyager and Moshe Feder for \$275, bringing the Fund to its immediate goal. They had me write Certificates of Authenticity on the back. There were other munificent bids and it was all very nice. Fans have always been





The Atom illo from Oblique House purchased by Moshe Feder. The marks are from many thumb tacks which kept being used to rehang this illo when it was knocked off during Ghoddminton games.

generous by nature and it was good to see that a time had come when they could show it.

It used to be that the life cycle of the science fiction fan was as depicted in the advertisements in the pulps. He first appears there as a young weakling getting sand kicked in his face. Then, having presumably dropped out of high school through excessive concentration on the Charles Atlas exercises, he has to take more correspondence courses to "join the well paid ranks of the trained men". But he fails here too, no doubt because of excessive reading of science fiction, and has to take heavy unskilled labour. This gives him a hernia ("RUPTURED? THROW AWAY THAT TRUSS!") and he is unemployed. The worry of this makes his hair fall out and he succumbs to religious dementia, joining the Rosicrucians.

Fortunately, having seduced a young lady by hypnotism, he marries her and they give birth to a son, who is allowed to read science fiction and asks for a Commodore 64 for Christmas. Now the first generation of personal computers is meeting the first generation of computer-friendly users. Society has evolved to the point where it appreciates the fine minds and broad mental horizons of science fiction fans, and our young hero gets a good job designing software which, figuratively speaking, kicks sand in the face of all the beach bullies.

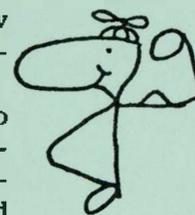
After the auction there came the "Closing Ceremony", and then it seemed that people were leaving who to my mind had only just got here. It was a shock to have to say goodbye to both Amy

Thomson and Charlotte Proctor inside ten minutes, and then Alexis and Dolly Gilliland, off to the Bahamas. We were beginning to think of the Convention as something that was coming to an end instead of going on for ever as it should.

I think rich brown started our retrospection by pointing out that TROPICON had been CORFLU 5.5, by which he meant that slightly more than half of the people who had been at the last CORFLU had been here. Ted said I had been like a magnet, attracting good people from all over. I think it was magnet he said: it may have been maggot, as in bait. It had been a wonderful convention, he thought. For one thing, he added in some surprise, it was many years since he had attended so much of the official program. I agreed. Nothing had gone wrong, everything had worked, everybody had been kind to everyone else and everybody seemed to have had a good time. Such a thing was unheard of.

Now it began to seem more urgent than ever to us that we should see FM and Elnor Busby. Each couple had come something like 4000 miles to see the other, and we had not yet had one of those long neighbourly chats we used to have in 1962. We had always felt we should be next door neighbours, calling in every now and then to borrow a cup of correcting fluid.

But we couldn't find them, so we had something to eat by ourselves and went back to the convention floor. Next thing we heard



that they had gone for dinner, so we went down again and found them at a table in the corner with Art Widner and Georgina Ellis. We organised the movement of a couple of chairs, not without some difficulty and Buz's help, and ordered two cups of tea. When they arrived even the good cheer around me could not distract my attention from the fact that the tea was cold. It was cold, even by the standards of American hotels, where their tea is as good as English coffee. It was so cold I seriously considered the possibility that I had ordered iced tea by mistake.

As inconspicuously as possible I sent it back. When it returned I was more sure it wasn't iced tea but that was all. There was less danger that my spoon might become a superconductor, but the tea was so far from being hot that I thought it might take the whole evening at the current rate of improvement to bring it above room temperature. So we just left it, and forgot it, until Buz ordered four cups of tea for his lot.

I knew what was going to happen and it did. The tea was cold and Buz sent it back. I also knew what was going to happen next. Buz is not a man to take things lying down, and there was going to be a confrontation worthy to rank with Roger Graham's pogrom about weak coffee which is still spoken of in hushed voices among the survivors along US 30.

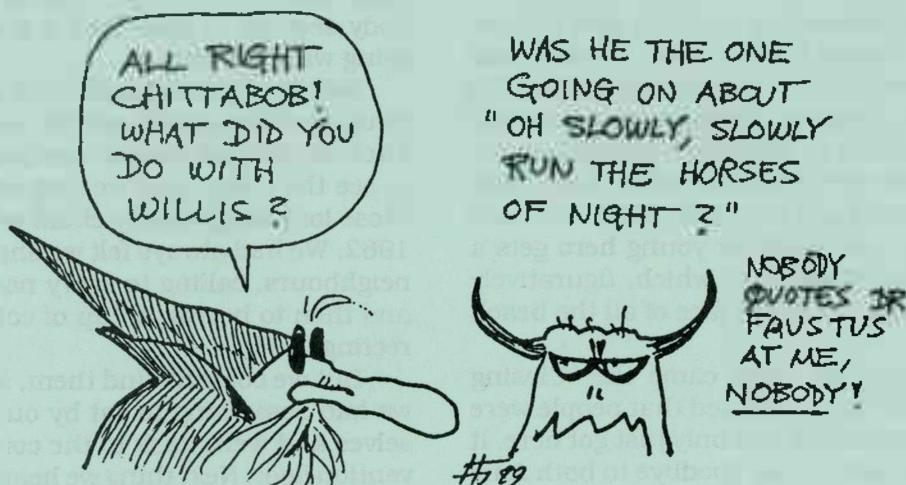
Sure enough, when the tea came back it was still cold, and Buz pointed this out with a deceptive geniality which would have had anyone who knows him climbing up the curtains, gibbering. Even the waiter felt something of this: trembling,

he took the tea away again. There was a long delay.

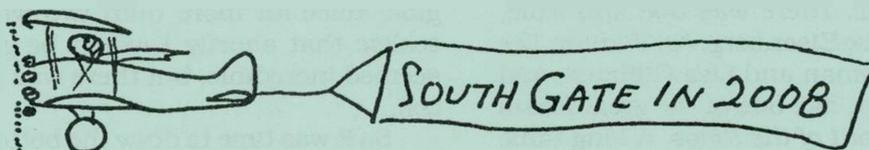
What is it with us and the Busby's I wondered, that every time we meet there is some disaster involving tea? In 1962 a full breakfast teapot disintegrated traumatically in Madeleine's hand, an incident that became known to us as the Great Teapot Doom Scandal. And now this. Then with a dread such as can be known only to those who lived through the Brighton Worldcon, I realised the full horror of what was happening. For three days the forces of chaos and evil, which lurk in every convention hotel, had been held at bay by Edie Stern, as they can be by the pure in heart. But only an hour ago she had herself declared the Convention closed. And now, here at the periphery of the hotel, Edie's enchantment was wearing off. A Satanic horror was even now consuming the weakest part of the hotel, the kitchen. I explained this briefly to Buz — hell, the Convention's over, was the way I put it — as we discussed what to do next, and when the waiter returned to explain that somehow the "apparatus" didn't work, Buz let him live. Of course the apparatus didn't work: it might never work again.

We hastily retreated to the Convention floor where the living heart of the Convention was still beating, in the person of Geri Sullivan. She sold me a post-supporting membership of Minneapolis in '73, which costs -1¢, and gave me the requisite 1¢. This seemed a trend in the right direction, but I was perturbed by the implications of the Convention bid and sought the advice of Moshe Feder, in the absence of Sid Coleman.

## CRISIS AT CON'S END



Knowing fandom's ability to turn fantasy into reality, I asked, as with South Gate in 1958 and the Dream Issue of *ASTOUNDING*, is there not a danger that we will make Minneapolis in 1973 actually happen? That any minute now Fandom, perhaps the entire Universe, will go into reverse and hurtle backwards in time in the direction of 1973?



Taking out his battery-operated Occam's razor, Moshe shaved off this fuzzy thinking from the situation. He had consulted Stephen Hawking about this and it was all right. It was just that Minneapolis liked to party.

Because of my relief about this, or maybe it is some characteristic of Minneapolis parties, I find I remember absolutely nothing more of that day.

### Monday, 5th December, 1988

Immediately after breakfast next morning we packed our stuff and I carried it down to the car. There was as much of it as ever because although we had distributed the crackers and Coca-Cola to deserving fans, we had acquired a number of priceless artefacts, including a blow-up globe of the world, helpfully annotated, from the Minneapolis group. Just what I had always wanted. No, seriously, I remember that as a child there was a time when what I wanted more than anything was a globe of the world. It had taken me some time to get it, but here it was.

While I was cramming stuff into the trunk, a young man came up and asked for money for breakfast, and I gave him a handful of small change. Shortly afterwards, another one came along asking for bus fare to get a job, and I gave him the rest of it. I was glad of the opportunity. I was so happy there was nothing I wanted to do more than to give things to people. Then I went over to the "7 to 11" store to buy some postcards.

Everything packed and ready to check out, we went back to our former lair in the lobby to say goodbye to anyone we had missed, and perhaps even meet the fans from Toronto who were supposed to be there and whom we had been looking out for in vain. We were also looking out for Art Widner, who had wanted to buy us lunch today in return for our hospitality in Ireland. I had a note of his room number but there was no answer when I called it.

In the intervals I wrote postcards to Chuck

Harris, Vince Clarke and Arthur Thomson, telling them the CRH Fund had met its target and of Arthur's contribution to that goal. We said goodbye to Poul and Karen, Jeff Schalles, David Singer, Nancy Tucker and others I didn't have time to take photos of. We were joined by rich brown, who was waiting for Ted White to get up and face the world.

Eventually Ted did appear, still protesting he hated goodbyes but saying them anyway. "It was a great convention," were his final words.

Then we helped Geri Sullivan wait for her taxi. I felt guilty about not having offered to drive her to the airport. But the responsibility was too much for me. If I crashed the car, Minneapolis would never forgive me. Why they might take back my globe. So I just carried her case down to the taxi, resisting with great difficulty the temptation to tell the man to drive carefully.

Then we handed in our own keys. The hotel felt empty and the lobby was quiet. We sat on for a while, wondering whether or not just to get into our car and drive back to the *Villa Caprice*, when Moshe Feder came and asked us had we any plans for lunch. We explained we'd been trying to get Art Widner but there was never any answer from his room. Moshe wandered away thoughtfully and came back to tell us we had the wrong number. Art had been looking for us and would be along shortly. (How does Moshe know these things? It can't be Stephen Hawking all the time.)

Art asked had I any ideas for lunch and I

suggested *The Banyan*. Moshe said he would wait for Joe and Edie and join us later, and Art and we strolled over the huge drawbridge for the last time but one. Its corrugated surface emits a loud growl under every vehicle, a strange sound which puts one in mind of dragons, and which will linger in the memory of everyone who went to TROPICON.

Soon ten of us had assembled in the sunny open air restaurant. There was Joe and Edie, Moshe Feder and Lise Eisenberg, Art Widner, Lee Hoffman, Jay Haldeman and Lisa Gibbons, and us. It was, I thought, like one of the great feasts at the end of *The Lord of the Rings*. A long table under an enormous banyan tree; at one end the wise young queen, at the other her doughty champion; in between, the other survivors of a great adventure.

But people of a less elevated turn of mind were thinking about food, and Moshe was actually in conversation with a young waiter. "I thought so," he called to me, "he comes from

Northern Ireland." The Waiter said "Belfast!" and I replied "Donaghadee!", wondering again how Moshe does it. How could he pick from all these funny accents this one person who speaks normally; as normally as me, indeed, for the waiter obviously came from my own East Belfast, that well of English undefiled.

The shock of hearing the first wholly intelligible voice for more than two weeks made me realise that shortly I would be going home. It seemed incredible, but there was life after TROPICON.

So it was time to draw the bottom line on that enterprise, and it had already been uttered. I turned to the person who was responsible for us being here, our Elfin Earth Mother.

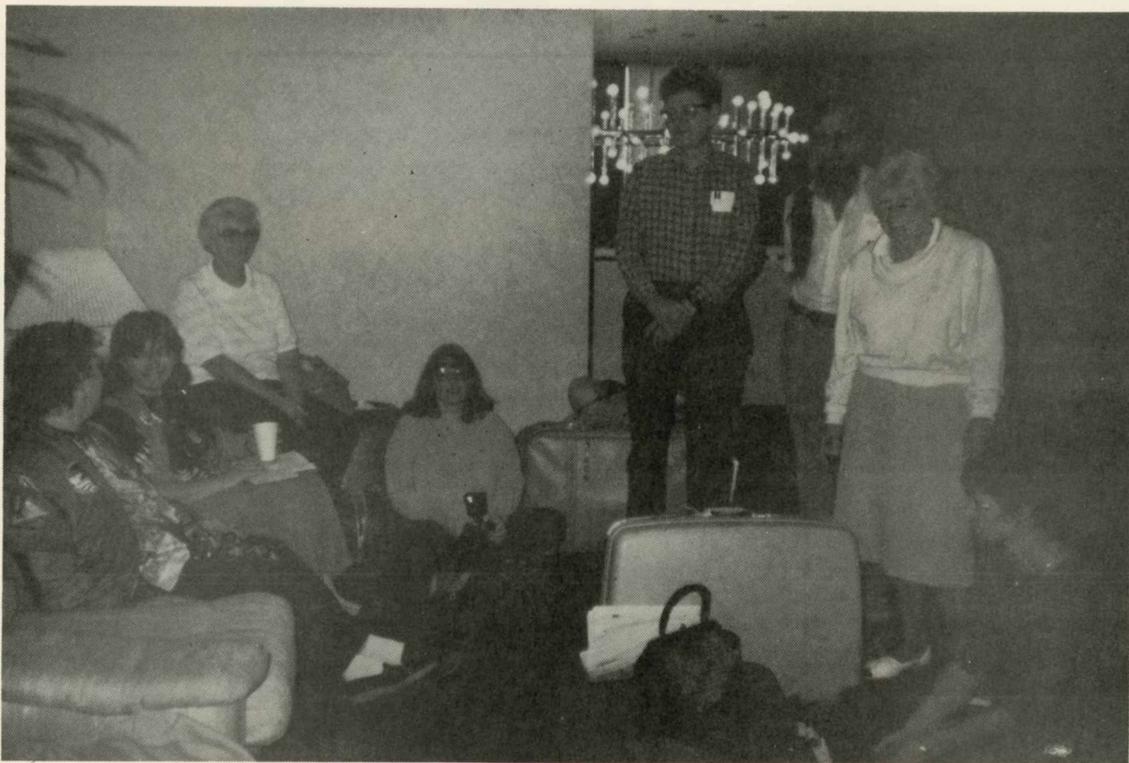
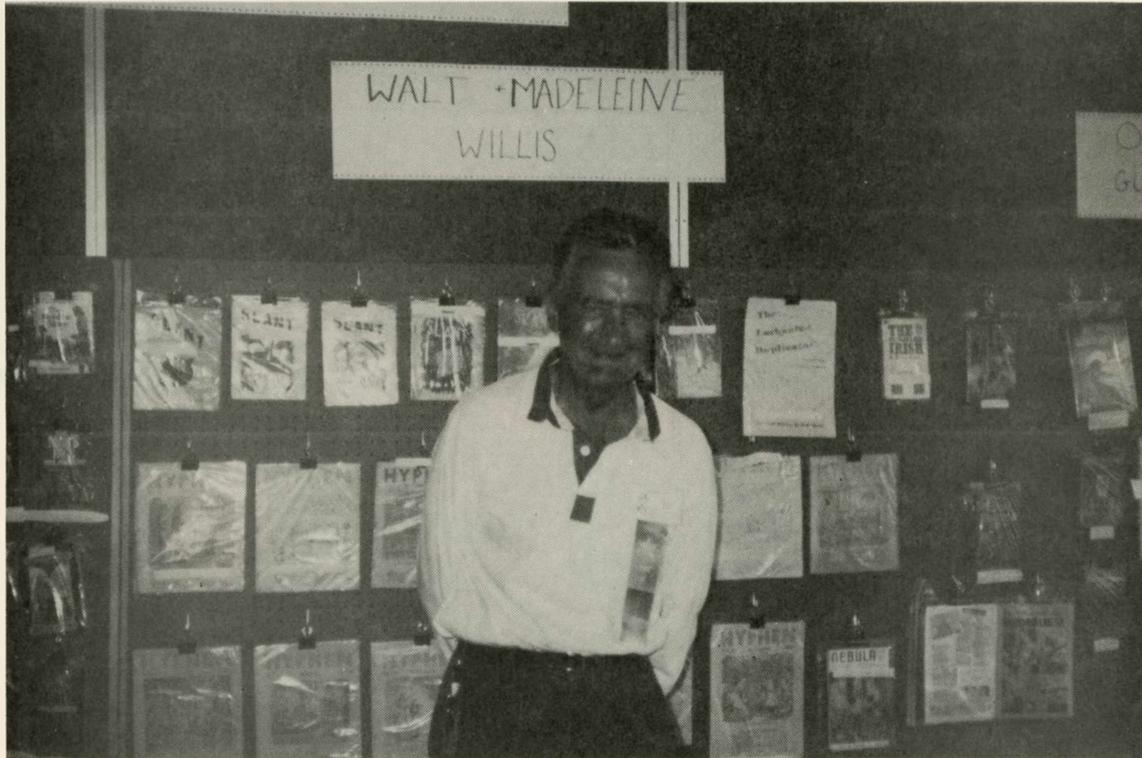
"Edie," I said, "Ted White...last words of. Quote. It was a *great* convention. Unquote."

Edie got a pen and wrote it down.



**Under The Banyan Tree:** (l to r) Lisa Gibbons, Moshe Feder, Walt Willis, Art Widner, Edie Stern, Madeleine Willis, Lise Eisenberg, Jay Haldeman, Lee Hoffman, Joe Siclari (behind the camera)

Walt in front of the Guest of Honour Exhibit compiled by Judy Bemis (publications from the collection of Lee Hoffman and Joe Siclari)



**The Goodbye Hall Party (Monday morning):** (l to r) Karen Anderson, Edie Stern, Lee Hoffman, Geri Sullivan, Poul Anderson, Jay Haldeman, Madeleine Willis, Lisa Gibbons

TROPICON staff arrange a farewell for Walt & Madeleine at the Mai Kai Restaurant.

(After all, we are in the Tropics.)



At the Mai Kai the lighting was low, the table was long but the show was interesting. *Top:* Walt's personal greeting, Joe looks on. *Center:* Joe and Chuck Phillips are delighted by Walt's greeting; Walt seemed bemused. *Bottom:* (l to r) Madeleine, Walt, Lee Hoffman (hidden behind Walt), Joe Siclari, Edie Stern, Fran Mullen Phillips (hidden behind Edie), Chuck Phillips, Peggy Ann Dolan, Carol Porter, Rich Tetre, Becky Peters, Dora Schisler, Bill Wilson, Sue Trautman, Stu Ulrich on the stage taking the picture.

