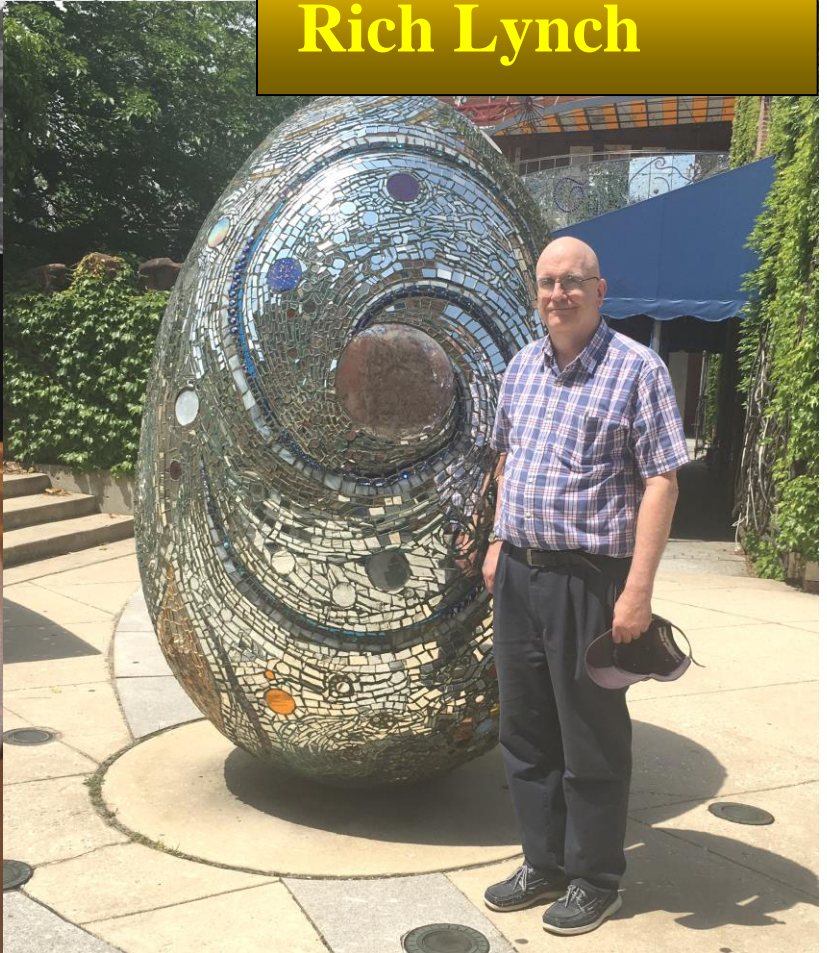


**My Back
Pages 24
Rich Lynch**



My Back Pages 24

articles and essays by Rich Lynch

Welcome to the 24th installment of my personal time capsule. This issue is being assembled in the middle of a pandemic lockdown, and I'll have a bit more to say about that shortly. With all the crowd-size restrictions now in effect there's not been much in the way of sporting events, so I'll use this opportunity to pay homage to some famous 24s of the sports world. And there are a lot of them: Kobe Bryant, Jeff Gordon, Ken Griffey Jr., Bill Bradley, Jimmy Wynn, Rickey Henderson, Sam Jones, Rick Barry, Willie Wood, Miguel Cabrera, Charles Woodson, Dwight Evans, Chris Chelios, Walter Alston, Manny Ramírez, Tony Pérez, Early Wynn, Lenny Moore, Moses Malone, Spencer Haywood, Robinson Canó, Lou Brock, Tim Howard, and Barry Bonds.

And also, here's a shout out to my favorite no. 24 – the great “Say Hey Kid”, Willie Mays. As you'll read in the first article of this collection, I've actually met him! Well, sort of.

Rich Lynch
Gaithersburg, Maryland
June 2020

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Previous issues are archived at efanzines.com and fanac.org

The Day I Met Willie Mays

I remember that it was my friend Rick who came up with the idea: “Hey, wanna go see a baseball game?”

It was the summer of 1973 and I’d been hanging out at the college radio station, wondering what I was going to do with myself over the upcoming Independence Day extended holiday. Back then I was finishing up work on my Masters Degree at Clarkson College of Technology in Potsdam, New York. There wasn’t a whole lot going on in Potsdam in July – it’s located way up in the wilderness north of the Adirondack Mountains and in the summers, after most of the students had left town, they pretty much rolled up the streets. There are two colleges in Potsdam, the other being a campus of the State University of New York, and that’s where Rick was taking a few summer courses. The radio station, WNTC (the ‘NTC’ standing for ‘Northern Twin Colleges’), played rock music, about half current and half from the 1950s and 1960s. Rick and I were DJs, both of us probably spending way too much time on-air instead of studying.

But there would be no studying for us over the holiday break. Or DJ-ing either for that matter. Instead, on the morning of July 5th, I met up with Rick at the radio station and we headed off on a day trip to the nearest Major League Baseball city. For those not all that familiar with the geography of New York State, it’s probably about a seven hour drive from Potsdam down to New York City – more than a bit inconvenient for a day trip. But back then there was a much closer option. Just a bit more than two hours by car, up to the northeast, is the city of Montreal. And on July 5th, *Les Expos* were hosting the New York Mets.

Back in 1973, the Mets were one of the better teams in baseball. They had some very fine pitching, including future Hall of Famer Tom Seaver, and some pretty good if underrated hitters, among them Rusty Staub, who really ought to be in the HoF. And they also had on their roster, in the final season of his illustrious career, the great Willie Mays. He’d spent most of his 22 years in MLB as a member of the Giants, first in New York and then, when the team relocated, out in San Francisco, and by the early 1970s had hit more home runs than any other player except Babe Ruth. But by the middle of 1972 his baseball skills had declined to the point where the Giants, in a cost-cutting move, traded him and his large salary to the Mets in exchange for a minor league pitcher. That must have been humiliating but it did bring Mays back to the city where he was still immensely popular. And it also created an opportunity for me to see him in person. Which turned out to be a much closer encounter than I could ever have expected.

The Montreal Expos played in a small, fan-friendly place called Jarry Park, located in the corner of a much larger urban green space area which, somewhat confusingly, had the same name. Rick and I arrived there in the early afternoon to buy tickets for the game, and then spent most of the rest of the day checking out what else Jarry Park (the green space, not the stadium) had to offer. Not a whole lot, it turned out, and I remember that we eventually became bored enough that we ended up on a park bench for an hour or so watching a group of old guys play bocce ball. An hour or so before game time we made our way back to the stadium, and that took us past the visiting players entrance just as a big bus pulled up. The Mets players quickly made their way off the vehicle and into the stadium, and the bus pulled away. It had all happened so fast that I hadn’t had time to get my camera out and focused to where I could get a photo.

But a couple of minutes later, just as Rick and I were about ready to continue on to the stadium’s main entrance, a taxi pulled up to a stop and out stepped the one and only Willie Mays.

He had to ring the bell on the door to get somebody to open it from the inside and in the ten seconds or so it took for that to happen, I had my chance to speak to him (from a distance of about 15 feet). It went like this:

Me: “You’re Willie Mays, aren’t you?”

Him: [Dead silence] He was staring at me and probably wondering if he’d ever been asked a dumber question.

Me: “Can I take your picture?”

Him: [Dead silence] By this time the door had opened, but he waited patiently as I fumbled around with camera’s focus and f-stop before I finally took the photo.

And then he entered the clubhouse and the door closed. Rick and I gaped at each other for a few seconds, and then I shouted, “I JUST GOT A PICTURE OF WILLIE MAYS!!!”

After all that, the game itself was fairly anticlimactic. The Mets won, and I remember that Willie got a hit in a late inning Mets rally which put them ahead for good. The drive back to Potsdam got us into town well after midnight and I was dead tired the next day. But it had been worth it. And as for my photo of the esteemed Mr. Mays...

I can’t find it. I’ve looked everywhere, in all my boxes and envelopes of old photographs from over the years, and it’s not there. In the 47 years since that day I’ve had eight changes of residence, including one resulting from a fire, and I’ve come to the conclusion that the photo was either lost or destroyed during one of them. So I’m gonna have to be satisfied with vicariously reliving the experience in my mind, knowing that, geez, it *actually happened!*

And you know what? That’s good enough for me! ☀

Afterword:

The Mets made it all the way to the World Series in 1973 but lost to the Oakland Athletics in seven games. Willie Mays got the very first hit of the Series and also drove in a run during the Mets extra innings Game 2 victory. But when he was in the field he appeared, for the first time in his career, to be a defensive liability and he was benched after the third game of the Series. When he retired, following the Series, he said that “growing old is just a helpless hurt”. I can identify with that.

As for me, I finished my Masters Degree work not very long after that Montreal trip and spent the rest of the summer trying to find employment, which eventually brought me to Chattanooga, Tennessee that October for my first career position (with DuPont). I remember that by then my funds had gotten so low that I’d had to give up my apartment and sleep in the WNTC production studio just to have enough money so I could eat.

WNTC no longer exists. I returned to Potsdam in the mid-1990s to visit my friend Dave Kyle and saw that the building which had housed the radio station had been torn down. It had always been a shoestring operation so learning of its demise wasn’t really much of a shock. But I still have lots of good memories of the place. And of the friends I made there. One of them is Nicki Wasnick, who at the end of 1973 became Nicki Lynch. But that’s another story.

And speaking of another story, here’s one (also involving an outing to a baseball game) that looks back to the summer of 1992...and my closest encounter ever with a U.S. President.

Forty-One

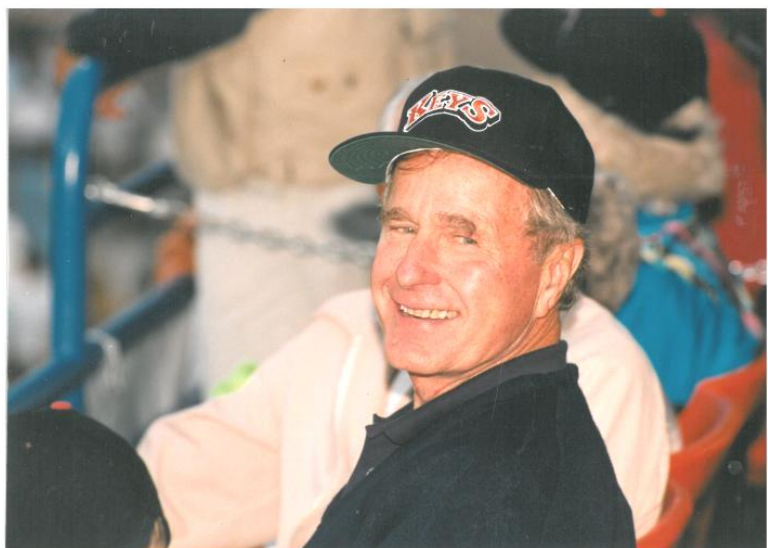
It was more than 26 years ago, back in the late summer of 1992, that I had my closest encounter ever with a United States President. My wife Nicki and I were at Harry Grove Stadium in Frederick, Maryland with some friends for a Frederick Keys minor league baseball game. I had been trying to decide what I wanted to have to eat from one of the concourse food vendors behind the first base dugout when the Marine One presidential helicopter came in for a landing out beyond the right field fence. After a few moments, and while everybody's attention except the players' was diverted away from the ballgame, the door opened, a stairway was deployed, and out of the copter strode the 41st President of the United States, George H.W. Bush.



the view from inside Harry Grove Stadium
at about the same place where Nicki and I were sitting

All of us at the ballpark had actually been expecting him. President Bush had been spending the weekend at nearby Camp David, and it was well known that he sometimes attended minor league baseball games. But what had tipped us off that there would be a special visitor that evening was the extraordinary security at the entrance gates to the stadium – airport-style metal detectors and watchful guys in dark suits lurking close by who had hearing devices in their ears. This had caused long queues which slowly wended their way toward the stadium, and there was rampant speculation by people in line around me on who that special visitor would be. When it was finally my turn to empty my pockets and be scanned, I asked the ticket-taker if Mr. Bush would be attending. When he confirmed that it was, I told him, “Good. I would have been annoyed to go through all of this just for Vice President Quayle.” That brought a chuckle from him, and even the Secret Service guy showed a hint of a smile.

The First Lady, Barbara Bush, was accompanying the President and I remember that she was actually the more popular of the two that evening. Which wasn't really a surprise. Maryland is a very Blue-leaning state and back then, during the run-up to the 1992 Presidential Election, Mr. Bush's job performance ratings were plummeting partly because, to his misfortune, the economy happened



President George H.W. Bush at Frederick Keys game in August 1992

to be tanking. But for that evening he still was accorded the deference that he, as a respected statesman, was due. It's just that Barbara was the rock star. They were seated in the open-air mezzanine behind home plate, not all that far from where Nicki and I were sitting. It was a special baseball glove giveaway night for all the kids at the park, and people down below were constantly tossing baseballs, baseball gloves, and other stuff up for Mr. Bush and her to sign. And then she would wave to everybody and the crowd would cheer. I remember that Mr. Bush, from his placid demeanor, appeared to be content that she was the center of attention.

But what *really* made it a close encounter for me was that on the way to where Mr. Bush was to be seated, he was escorted into the stadium through a gate which brought him down that same concourse where I was pondering dinner. At one point he was so close that I could have reached out and touched him. But if I'd been dumb enough to try that, I'm sure my arm would have been broken by the big Secret Service guy who was between us.

One other thing I remember about that evening was that as Mr. Bush passed close by me, I could see that he looked old and tired. The Presidential election polls were starting to turn against him about then, and I could read in his face that he was aware that his time in office was probably coming to an end. Being in the middle of a long and at times harsh re-election campaign must obviously take something out of you, and it showed.

The Bushes didn't stay to the end of the game – they were back in the helicopter soon after the 7th inning stretch. And after that the focus was back on baseball. As I mentioned, it all happened more than a quarter of a century ago. And most of it has become etched in my memory. But not everything – try as I might, I can no longer remember who won the game! ☀

Afterword:

I'm embarrassed to say that it's been many years since the last time I've been to a Frederick Keys game. And there's the possibility that I won't see another one. Major League Baseball, as part of a cost-cutting strategy supposedly brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, would like to contract the number of minor league teams by eliminating 40 of them. The Frederick Keys are one of the teams in jeopardy.



And speaking of being in jeopardy, I guess I should be in fear for my life if something said by one of Donald Trump's sycophants holds any sway. Back in late March, just as all the pandemic lockdowns had started to happen, Trump bloviated that all this social-distancing stuff should be ended sooner rather than later in order to 'save' the economy from the Coronavirus. And to reinforce that, Dan Patrick, the not-so-esteemed Lt. Governor of Texas, took that idea to the extreme by asserting that the population sectors at most risk, including senior citizens like myself, should be willing to die from the pandemic if it meant that the economy could quickly recover by getting rid of the lockdowns.

When I read that on the news feed, my first thought was: "Fuck you and the horse you rode in on, Mr. Patrick. I am not willing to sacrifice my life just so people like you can go back to enjoying your cocktail parties and political fund-raising events." But my second thought was: "Waaaaait a minute, I think I've actually attended a seminar on pretty much that same topic!" And I had. It was back in July 2003, down in Washington at a luncheon event sponsored by the conservative American Enterprise Institute, and I reported on it in my now-defunct LiveJournal blog. Here it is again:

How I Quit Being a Slacker, and Other Enlightenment

I see it's been a while since my last essay was posted here, and I'm trying to figure out if it's because I'm wilting from the arrival (finally!) of the summer heat, or if it's just that I've become a slacker. It's not that nothing much has happened, because in the last half of June there's been the opening of the annual Smithsonian Folklife Festival and a trip to Cincinnati among other things. On the other hand, I hadn't been to any of those luncheon seminars and forums since mid-June. It turned out that today I could put a stop to that string.

Today's luncheon forum (hosted by the conservative American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research) was actually a pretty thought-provoking one: "Valuing Lives: Are Old People Worth Less than Young People?" Here's the event's description:

"A controversy recently erupted when a cost-benefit analysis, conducted by the Environmental Protection Agency, valued seniors' lives 37% less than the lives of younger people. Derided by critics as a 'senior death discount', the formula estimated the worth of someone over seventy at \$2.3 million and the worth of a younger person at \$3.7 million. Federal regulations often put a price tag on lives in order to determine the relative costs and benefits of life-saving investments, but there is little agreement on the right way to do it. [AEI] has assembled a panel to explore different ways of evaluating these investments and how those approaches affect public policy decisions."

As usual, the event consisted of each panelist being given about ten minutes for a speech or presentation, with audience questions afterwards. Much of the time was spent describing the different ways in how a person's life can be given a monetary value for purposes of being used in a cost-benefit analysis (CBA). For instance, there's the Value of Statistical Life (VSL) – if somebody spent, say, \$500 to reduce by 1/10000 his or her mortality rate (by getting one's automobile repaired, for example), that person's VSL would be \$5 million (i.e., \$500 divided by one-ten-thousandth).

It gets worse from there. There are also parameters (and I won't define them here) called Quality-Adjusted Life Years and Disability-Adjusted Life Years. There's also a person's 'Willingness to Pay' (in millions of dollars) to reduce his/her own risk of death, which is apparently determined empirically (by a survey, for instance).

The purpose of all of this is to place a numerical monetary value on lives so that it can be used in cost-benefit analyses for any proposed health-related legislation. This could include revisiting any existing environmental-related laws and rules, such as the Clean Air Act, when the cost of implementing any remedial technologies is very high.

Needless to say, this approach is very controversial. A recent CBA, done by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, had estimated the 'worth' of someone over 70 years old at \$2.3 million and the 'worth' of a much younger person at \$3.7 million. There was so much criticism of this methodology (it was attacked as promoting a "senior death discount") that the EPA Director, Christine Todd Whitman, quickly backed down and announced that her Agency would never value an older person's life differently from anyone else's.

To its credit, the somewhat right-wing AEI set up the event so that both sides of this issue were represented. One of the panelists argued that we should not be playing the game “How much for your Grandmother?”, while another claimed that use of CBAs for pragmatic decision-making, especially in times of tight resource allocation, leads to an overall measurable improvement in human welfare. As for me, though, I have great difficulty in accepting that use of a CBA in this manner is anything less than outrageous. I tried to make that point in my question:

“When I hear of the use of cost-benefit analyses with assigned numerical values to evaluate life, I’m reminded of Patrick McGoohan’s character’s quote from the TV series *The Prisoner*: ‘I am not a number, I am a free man!’ My opinion of the CBA is that it is nothing more than an exercise in Chaos Theory – even in a rigorously scientific CBA for evaluating, say, a new chemical process, by tweaking the various inputs it’s only too easy to make the outcome whatever you want it to be. A lot has been said about use of ‘Willingness to Pay’ as a rational parameter for evaluation, but how can you believe that when it’s obvious that a ‘Willingness to Pay’ for mortality risk reduction is greatly influenced by a person’s ability to pay?”

I ended my question by asking the panelists to consider that such a CBA would be, in effect, no more than an example of “Garbage In-Garbage Out”, but I was sloughed off. One of the panelists claimed that what I was suggesting was something that a sensitivity analysis would disprove, and to use a simple example, it was obvious that a CBA would definitively prove the worth of having defibrillators installed at airports for the times when passengers suffered heart attacks when transiting through.

I was not allowed the chance to respond. If I had, I would have challenged him on that – defibrillators are not meant to preserve quality-adjusted life years, they are there to save lives. The use of a CBA for quality of life-related decisions absolutely requires that the person doing it be totally disinterested in the outcome. This is almost never the case, though – instead, what’s happening is that CBAs are being used to justify the repeal of rules and regulations unpopular with groups which contribute a lot of money to elected legislators.

I suppose I should feel more outrage than I do about this, but I came away from the forum feeling that I’d actually clarified my thinking on the topic. The rest of the afternoon sped by rather quickly after I got back to my office, and hey – I’m no longer a slacker! ☀

Afterword:

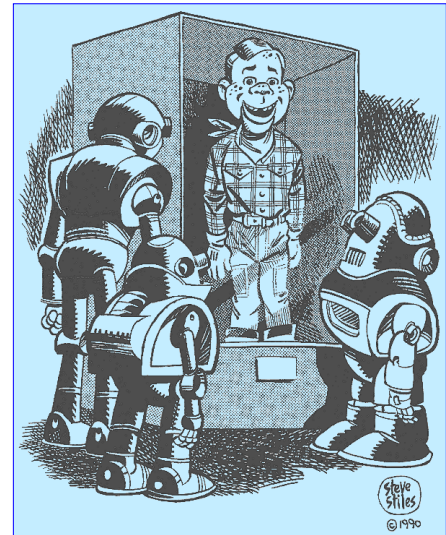
A lot of things have happened in the seventeen years since that luncheon seminar, but nothing quite so surreal as how much everyday life has changed since the middle of March. Stuff I used to take for granted, such as going to science fiction conventions, suddenly was no longer possible. Almost every convention from late March onward has been cancelled due to the pandemic, including several that Nicki and I had planned on attending: Balticon up in the Charm City over Memorial Day weekend, Midwestcon in Cincinnati at the end of June, and the 2020 North American Science Fiction Convention at the end of August. I feel particularly bad about the cancellation of the NASFiC because several of our friends were to be Guests of Honor. I can only hope they all will be offered that opportunity again in some future year.

As far as I know, the very last science fiction convention to be held this year was the annual fanzine fans’ convention Corflu, back in mid-March. Nicki and I didn’t attend, but I did have a remembrance of a good friend published in its program book. Have a read:

My Friend Steve

It was at about the beginning of 1989 that I first met Steve Stiles. But I'm not sure *exactly* when, because we first met through correspondence. Nicki and I had moved from southeastern Tennessee to the Maryland suburbs of Washington, D.C. near the end of 1988, and back then we were still publishing our general interest fanzine *Mimosa*. We had joined the Washington Science Fiction Association not too long after the move and when it became known that we were fanzine publishers who needed some illos for our next issue, somebody, maybe it was Alexis Gilliland, suggested that we write to Steve.

His first illos for us were in our 'Welcome to Maryland' 6th issue, for an article by Harry Warner, Jr. about strange happenings in the house next door to him. Steve also illustrated Harry's next article, in our 8th issue, about even stranger happenings Harry had observed while on walks a bit farther from his house. It wasn't until our 11th issue, in 1991, that we finally were able to coax a set of covers from Steve, and they were good ones – the front depicted a middle class city scene about to be interrupted by a deluge of falling robots, while the back showed some of those same robots displaying idol worship in the most literal sense. The very next issue featured Steve's first writing contribution for us, a now legendary article titled "My First Orgy" which was actually about a huge misadventure, and after that he was a frequent contributor (with both words and illustrations) for the remainder of the run.



Steve Stiles' back cover for *Mimosa* 11

Steve had transitioned from contributor to friend at some point early on in those first few years after Nicki and I had moved to Maryland. But we lived far enough away that we usually only crossed paths with him at conventions, mainly the local ones but once in a while at Worldcons. It was at the 2016 Worldcon, the evening before the Hugo Awards Ceremony, that we had what I consider our most memorable dinner together. It was part of a group which had convened at a downtown Kansas City sports bar restaurant which had such loud ambient noise that the only people Nicki and I could talk to were Steve and his wife Elaine. I remember that it was entertaining and that we talked about a lot of things, but one of the topics that got left at arm's length was the upcoming Hugo Ceremony – he was one of the finalists in the 'Best Fan Artist' category.

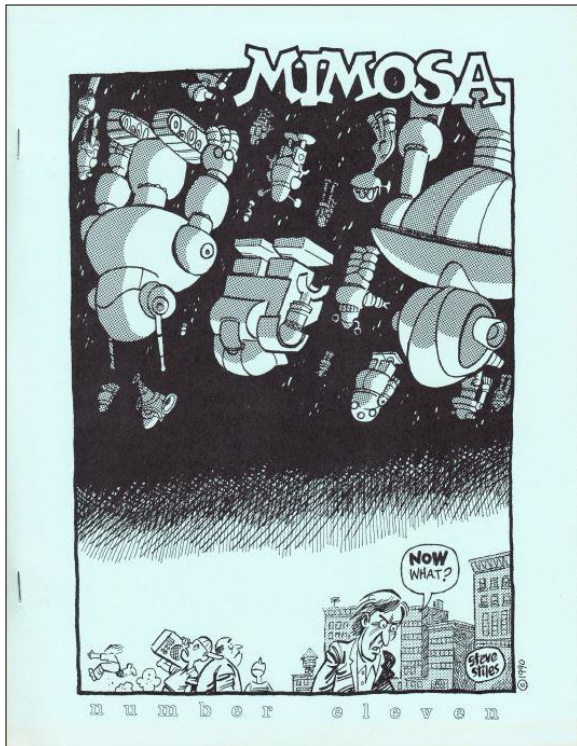
It turned out that he was the winner, much deserved with all the fan art he has done over the years. And it had been a long time coming. Steve had been a finalist fourteen previous times, the first one dating back nearly half a century to when 'Fan Artist' had originally debuted as a Hugo Awards category. He made a reference to that as he told the audience, "You know, I had written an acceptance speech, but I wrote it back in 1967 and it got lost amid the fossils."



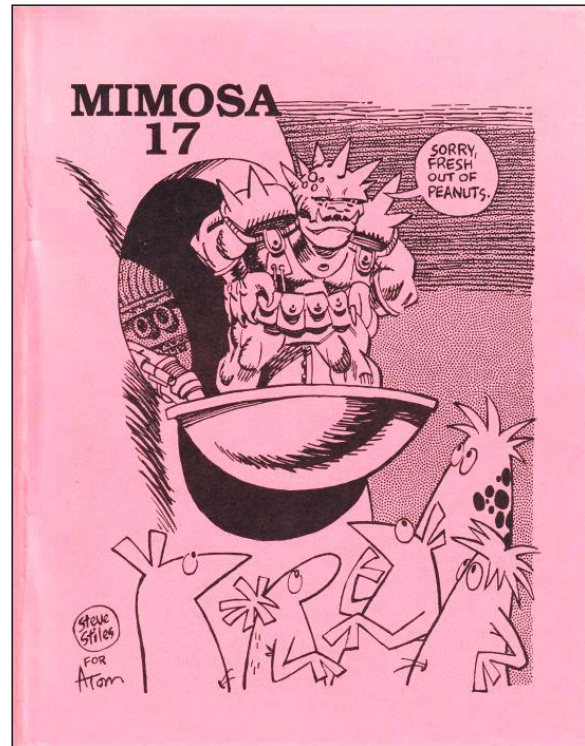
Steve contemplates his Hugo Award

And now he's gone. As I mentioned earlier, I'm not really sure when the first time was that I met Steve Stiles, but I do know the last time. It was in October 2019 at the local Capclave convention. I'd already known about his cancer and had asked him about it – he told me he felt pretty well, all things considered. And I remember that he also looked well, so it was a somber day a few months later when I learned of his passing.

Even though Steve did finally win a Hugo Award, he unfortunately missed out on what is probably the ultimate career honor in the science fiction genre – being a Guest of Honor at a Worldcon. I do believe it would have happened, and probably soon, had time not run out on him first. What's left are recollections about him from people who've been fortunate enough to have had him as a friend. These were some of mine. ☀



Steve Stiles' front cover for *Mimosa 11*



Steve Stiles' front cover for *Mimosa 17*

Afterword:

Among the conventions that were cancelled was this year's Worldcon, CoNZealand, though it's only being cancelled in a physical sense. They're still going to have a convention, but it's going to be entirely online. It will be the first 'virtual' Worldcon, and if it's anything like the 'virtual' Balticon that was held at the end of May, all the programming events will be streamed over various online meeting platforms such as Zoom. I haven't seen the program schedule yet, and I'm hoping there will be remembrance events for Steve and others from the science fiction genre who have died in the time since the 2019 Worldcon. It would be highly appropriate.

Looking ahead, the 2021 Worldcon will be held in Washington, D.C., which will make it the closest Worldcon ever to where Nicki and I live. At least I hope it will be, as we won't know its status for sure until this pandemic is finally over. Until then, as a certain loudmouthed individual has decreed, we are at war with an unseen enemy.

Life During Wartime

“You better not go into a bank dressed like that!”

That was my comment to Nicki, back in late March, when I saw how she was dressed as we were getting ready to head off for some grocery shopping. Hat, hoodie jacket and face mask. In less strange times somebody could very easily come to the conclusion that she was planning a heist.

But these are most definitely not usual times. There are not very many things the President of the United States says that I agree with or for that matter even consider as truthful, but I think he was mostly right when he claimed that: “The world is at war with a hidden enemy.” Except that by the time he finally came to that conclusion he was probably the last person in the world to acknowledge it.

As I write this we are now about two months into a pandemic-induced lockdown and it’s mind-boggling to me on how much my perception of day-to-day living has changed. It didn’t used to be that I felt I could be risking my life by going grocery shopping. It didn’t used to be that I counted it as a victory when the grocery store had gotten in a shipment of paper towels or toilet paper. And it didn’t used to be that I wonder if I’ll ever again feel safe in places where there are crowds such as at a baseball game, or a theater performance, or a science fiction convention. I’m fortunate that I have a job which makes it possible for me to work from home, and Nicki and I are taking extreme care the times we do leave the house. So much so that we have a small soap-and-water wash-up station in the trunk of my car which we unflinchingly use every time after we’ve been in a public place of any kind. And we also have plenty of face masks, one of the benefits of having a spouse who is an expert quilter. The one Nicki was wearing back on that cold March day is one of my favorites, with planets, stars and galaxies of all kinds. She made me one just like it, and yes, we have gotten some compliments a few times we’ve worn them out in public. But from a respectful six-foot-away social distancing, of course.



me with one of Nicki's "outer space" pandemic face masks

So life goes on. Some things haven’t changed – the lawn still needs mowing from time to time, for instance, and the cat’s litter box still needs cleaning every evening. But other things are different. One of them is that I’ve grown a beard! I started it the day the COVID-19 lockdown began. Several weeks later it’s still a work in progress and I’ve decided I’m going to keep it until all this is over. And maybe even longer. Nicki seemed a bit dubious at first, but she’s gotten used to it and no longer looks at me like she’s wondering who this strange man is that’s replaced her husband Rich.



Nicki in her grocery shopping garb



a work in progress: my pandemic beard

This is the first time in my life I've ever had a beard and I'm frankly surprised that it's taken me this long to want one. But in the end it's really only a small lifestyle change. Even in these highly unusual times, as my friend John Hertz likes to say, it seemed the fannish thing to do. ☀

Afterword:

It was only a couple of weeks after I finished this essay that paper products like facial tissues and toilet paper started to become readily available again. But bread yeast continues to be a problem. I bake fresh bread on Sundays and even though I've been able to find bags of bread flour in the grocery store often enough where I've never been in danger of running out, bread yeast is another matter. There hasn't been any in grocery stores for well over a month. I was able to eventually find an alternate supply, and in retrospect it should have been an obvious place to go. There's a branch of the Spring Mill Bread Company a short distance from where Nicki and I live, and even though they don't promote it they do in fact sell both yeast and flour.



the neighborhood Dress-Up Goose in times of pandemic

As for the area where we live, at first glance you might think that things were as normal as they could be – people we see around the neighborhood usually are not wearing facemasks. But a closer look shows that things are far from ordinary. For those who are out on walks, social distancing is easy to observe – people invariably cross to the opposite sides of streets to avoid getting very near other pedestrians. And there are other signs as well, some of them a bit whimsical. I've noticed that someone had painted “Keep Your Distance” on a large rock near the sidewalk. And just up the street from us, the Dress-Up Goose which guards the entrance to a house was wearing pandemic protective wear.

But the most obvious sign that things are definitely *not* okay is a Soul Pantry which has taken up curbside residence a few houses up the street from ours. It's a little metal cabinet that's stocked with food supplies, urging people to “take what you need, give when you can”. The first time we saw it, on one of our neighborhood walks, it was completely empty. But a couple days later, on our next walk, it was fully stocked. We added to its inventory with a can of soup, a box of Mac-and-Cheese, and one of Nicki's pandemic face masks. Several days later, they were all gone and had been replaced by stuff other people had left. The area where we live is far from impoverished and the fact that people around here are that much in need of food speaks volumes on how much the world has changed over the past few months.



the Soul Pantry near our house

I doubt that any sense of normalcy will return for at least the rest of this year and possibly longer. My age puts me in a relatively high risk group so I would have to be absolutely convinced that there was essentially zero threat to health from the Coronavirus before I'd be willing to attend any event where there's a crowd. It has to be that way. It *has* to. One of the places I'm going to miss the most is the regional theatre, which had to cancel the remainder of its season. As you will read next, that's the place, back at the beginning of 2017, where I saw a show that made me just a *tiny* bit fearful of barbers.

Sweeney

Back in 2012, at the Chicago Worldcon, I participated in a discussion panel for which I wasn't even close to being qualified.

I only found that out while I was up there on the dais in front of the audience. The panel was titled "Magical Musicals" and the topic was about use of fantasy-related themes in musical theatre. I had wanted to participate not only because my friend and the convention's Guest of Honor, Mike Resnick, was on the panel, but also



me trying to look intelligent on the "Magical Musicals" panel

because I have a strong interest and enjoyment of Broadway musicals and I had thought I might have something to add. But as it turned out, I was way, way out of my league. All the other panelists, Resnick included, had immense knowledge of the topic; one of them had even written a quiz book about Broadway musicals. So I tried my best not to embarrass myself, which mostly consisted of letting the other panelists do almost all of the talking.

At the very end of the hour all the panelists were polled on which Broadway musical, of any genre, was their all-time favorite. My answer was *Anything Goes*, mostly because of all that wonderful Cole Porter music and that the stellar performance of show I saw featured the great Sutton Foster as the lead. But three of the other four panelists, Resnick included, were entirely in agreement on their choice: Stephen Sondheim's *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street*.

This more than a bit surprised me, not only because with all the musicals to pick from that there could be such near-unanimity, but also on what their preference was. *Sweeney* is a very good show, to be sure, but it wouldn't make it into my top ten. I don't even think it's Sondheim's best musical. (*A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* leaves everything else by him in the dust. In my opinion, at least.) But that said, I would absolutely go out of my way to see a performance of *Sweeney*. Turns out I didn't have to go very far.

I live in the northwest suburbs of Washington, D.C., and I'm fortunate that there are many high-end regional theatre companies within a relatively short distance. The closest is over in Olney, Maryland, which is about a 25 minute drive. It's been doing Actors' Equity-level productions since 1938 and in its eight decades of existence has staged hundreds of shows. Olney Theatre Center, over the years, has had many big-name movie and theatre stars as featured performers, including Helen Hayes, Tallulah Bankhead, Burl Ives, John



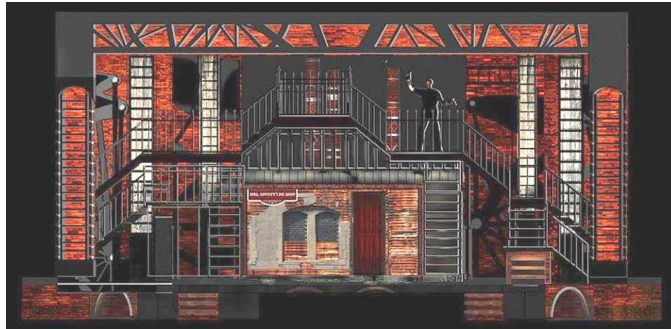
Carradine, Carol Channing, Roy Scheider, Olivia de Havilland, and Ian McKellen. Each OTC season includes no fewer than three musicals, and for 2017 the first of them was *Sweeney Todd*.

The show has been around long enough that we're all probably fairly familiar with the plot. It's based on a serial that appeared way back in the 1840s, in one of Britain's 'penny dreadful' magazines. The main character is a barber who had been falsely convicted of a crime and shipped off to Australia, leaving behind a wife and infant daughter. Years later he returns and in a psychopathic rage carries out his revenge by killing those who were responsible and while he's at it, many others as well. And in the process, providing a continuing supply of meat for the pie shop of his downstairs landlord, Mrs. Lovett.



David Benoit as Sweeney Todd
in the OTC production

No big names were in the cast, but there was no lack of high quality actors. In particular, David Benoit, who played Sweeney, is a powerful baritone who was mesmerizing in the role. Reviews of the show mentioned that he wanted to perform as this character so much that he took a three month leave of absence from his other gig in the national tour of *Phantom of the Opera*. But in my view, it was the scenic design



conceptual stage design for OTC's Sweeney Todd

that was the real star of the show. OTC is continually cash-strapped but it has nevertheless gained a reputation for opulent stage design. The one for *Sweeney* was done by a Peruvian immigrant, a lady named Milagros Ponce de León who has earned her chops in various productions throughout the middle Atlantic region. It was rich in both detail and functionality, with metal-railing staircases and moveable sets-within-sets –

more than enough for an active imagination to transport me to mid-nineteenth century London. As for the show itself, it was certainly entertaining though in a macabre way. There were many good songs and a lot of mayhem, with razor slashing and blood spurting. Often happening all at the same time.

So after finally experiencing a live performance of *Sweeney*, am I going to elevate it into that upper echelon of musical theatre where Mike Resnick and others on that Worldcon panel have placed it? No, I'm not ready to do that; I am way too much a fan of musical comedy. But I did like the show a lot, and it changed what had been a difficult day for me into a memorable one. And one more thing: after vicariously experiencing what a sharp razor can do in the hands of a crazed and demonic tradesman, I've made a firm decision.

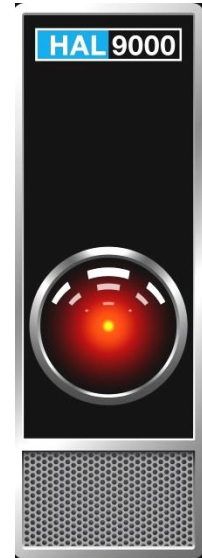
I'm never *ever* going to a barbershop for a shave! ☀

Afterword:

Besides not yet being willing to attend any events where there are crowds, the pandemic has also caused me to avoid all public transportation, especially airlines. That means no trips anywhere distant until all of this is over, business as well as pleasure. One of the casualties was a multilateral carbon sequestration conference in Norway that I had helped organize. It had been scheduled for the end of March, and if all goes well will happen in early 2021 instead. Last year's conference, as you will read next, was held in a place not quite so far distant.

In the City of HAL

It was back in either 1992 or 1997, depending on which alternate timeline one observes, that a self-aware supercomputer became operational. It happened in Urbana, Illinois, at the Coordinated Science Laboratory on the campus of the University of Illinois. As we know, the HAL 9000 computer that came into existence in those timelines went on to become the murderous systems manager of the Discovery One spaceship on its ill-fated voyage to the outer planets. The Coordinated Science Laboratory does exist in our actual timeline but its activities do not seem to include creation of artificial intelligences. Which, given what happened in those alternate timelines, is probably a good thing.



But there's more to Urbana than just the Coordinated Science Laboratory. From what I could see, it seems to be mostly a bedroom community which includes housing for married U of I students. And that's where I was on the morning of April 26th, in the parking lot of the Orchard Downs Apartments. My



in the parking lot of the Orchard Downs Apartments

sister and her husband were there for about a year, back in 1974-75, and when she found out I was in Champaign-Urbana for the week she texted me the location and also mentioned that: "There was a HUGE open field behind apts. Best kite flying ever!"

After that I had felt obligated to see for myself and found several places where kites could possibly fly. And also a parking lot where resided a crashed Beamer with its air bag deployed. Not sure what to make of that, except it seemed that U of I students are more affluent than they were several decades ago. But not better drivers.

###

What had brought me to Champaign-Urbana was another in a long and continuing series of multilateral carbon sequestration conferences that I organize. The venue for this one was not nearly as spectacular as a year ago, when we were in Venice, but there were still some places of interest including a couple of museums and the very picturesque main quad of the U of I. Too bad I didn't get to see any of it – the few daylight hours that I wasn't in meetings I was preparing for them. But one of the delegates did, and photos he texted me during his walkabout served as a reminder of what I was missing.



at the carbon sequestration conference

The sole evening event of the conference was the only chance I got to absorb any of Champaign-Urbana’s culture, and that was pretty much limited to its sports heroes. It was at a buffet reception in the U of I’s football stadium, which is home to the University’s sports hall of fame. Among the honorees were pro football legends such as Dick Butkus, Bobby Mitchell, Ray Nitschke, and George “Papa Bear” Halas. But the greatest of the great was The Galloping Ghost, Harold “Red” Grange, who (in 2008) was named the greatest college football player of all time by the cable sports network ESPN. There’s a statue of him on prominent display at the west entrance to the stadium and it became a photo-op for just about everybody who attended the reception that evening. Even those from Asian and European countries who had no idea who Grange was, or for that matter, what American-rules football was all about. It was all part of the Illinois experience.



The Galloping Ghost of Champaign-Urbana

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Just getting to Champaign-Urbana had presented some challenges, though more for those coming from outside the United States than for me. In the end I had decided to fly into Chicago-O’Hare and rent a car, mostly because I dislike very small regional airports like the one in Champaign. That decision helped out one of Canada’s delegates, who met up with me at O’Hare for the three hour drive downstate. He’d been in a similar situation and had very much appreciated my offer to be his chauffeur. We had pleasant conversations for the durations of both rides, down to Champaign-Urbana and back to O’Hare a few days later, which ranged all the way from comparing next-generation technologies for capturing carbon dioxide to speculating on who would end up on the Iron Throne. Very entertaining for both of us, and it seemed to make the time go faster.

I had thought that this could be my final meeting, but during my time in Illinois I decided to wait until at least the end of the calendar year before retiring. The next conference, in early November, will be in a suburb of Paris, which was tempting enough by itself but there’s currently nobody else capable of doing all the facilitating, organizing and sweating the details that go into making these conferences successful. Like it or not, I’ve become irreplaceable. For now, at least. That will ultimately change at some point because it *has* to – I have no intention of becoming preserved in amber at my office desk. But maybe not *quite* yet. Looking forward toward next year, well, I’ll just paraphrase what the Conference Chair, from Norway, told me:

You know, we’ll probably be holding a conference about a year from now in Oslo. And you don’t want to miss out on one last trip to Norway, do you?

How can I refuse an offer like that? ☀

Afterword:

I don’t know of anybody whose travel plans for the year have not been disrupted. This includes my good friends Guy and Rose Marie Lillian, who were hoping for a trip to France later this year. I’m not at all going to be surprised if they decide they need to cancel. And so I offer the following essay (from back in 2013) on some things they can look forward to when their trip does happen.

Pardon My French (and Flemish)

Prolog: A Giant Crystal of Iron

“There it is!” Nicki said.

We had just spent a frustrating 45 minutes navigating through the Brussels Metro system, overcoming ticket machines that wouldn't take charge cards or folding money and transfer stations that seemed to require that you to exit and then re-enter the system. All so that we could see a most unusual building.

I am a late bloomer, as far as international travel goes. My first trip outside North America didn't happen until I was 40 years old, back in 1990, and the seminal event that brought it about was the Dutch Worldcon, ConFiction. Until then I had been intimidated by what I had naively and wrongly perceived as insurmountable difficulties with languages, locating places to stay, and in general, just finding one's way around.



at the Atomium in Brussels



view up from the base of the building

That trip is now 23 years in the past, but my memories of it are as clear as if it were last week. Nicki and I spent three days in Amsterdam prior to the convention, and afterwards spent a single day in Brussels on our path through other parts of Europe. And until this year I had never been back to Brussels. My memories are of grand museums and plazas, and not nearly enough time to see everything the city offered.

One of those things was the structure we beheld with some amazement that late afternoon – the Atomium. It was built for, and is the only remaining relic of the 1958 World's Fair. And it's huge! The building was designed to be a super-sized iron crystal, magnified 165 billion times, with each of the 18-meter spheres representing an atom. The top of the uppermost sphere is more than 100 meters above the ground.

It's possible to go inside the place (there are some historical exhibits about Expo58) and at night the spheres are lit by a myriad of small lights mimicking the paths of electrons around the super-sized atoms. There wasn't enough time for either of those, so it will be something to look forward to seeing the next time we're there.

Hopefully in less than *another* 23 years!

The Tower of Radiant Energy

There's another, more famous building about 200 miles southwest of the Atomium that also has an evening light show. The Eiffel Tower is an artifact of an even earlier exposition. It was the entrance archway of the 1889 World's Fair and was never intended to be a permanent structure, but proved valuable enough for communications purposes that the City of Paris decided to keep it. It has a footnote in science (in 1910) as the place where cosmic rays were discovered, but back at the end of 1999 it gained even further prominence for a different form of radiant energy. During the new millennium celebration, thousands of strobe lights were installed on the Eiffel Tower and ever since then, for five minutes at the top of every hour in the evening, they are all flashed at random intervals to give a rather amazing display.

Nicki and I were in Paris for four days prior to our stay in Belgium, and the Eiffel Tower was the very first thing we went to see there. But it's so tall, you can't help happening across interesting vistas of it wherever you are in the city. The day we were there we couldn't get to the most interesting vista of all, the one looking upwards from beneath the tower, because of a noisy demonstration of some kind, complete with smoke bombs, going on in the plaza surrounding the tower.



the Eiffel Tower from an alleyway



demonstration at the base of the Eiffel Tower

It's possible to go more than 900 feet up to the tower's *troisième étage*, the uppermost observation deck, but any thoughts of that nature were put to rest by all the chaos we'd been witnessing. Besides, that observation deck, for all its panorama, has the *worst* view of Paris in the entire city.

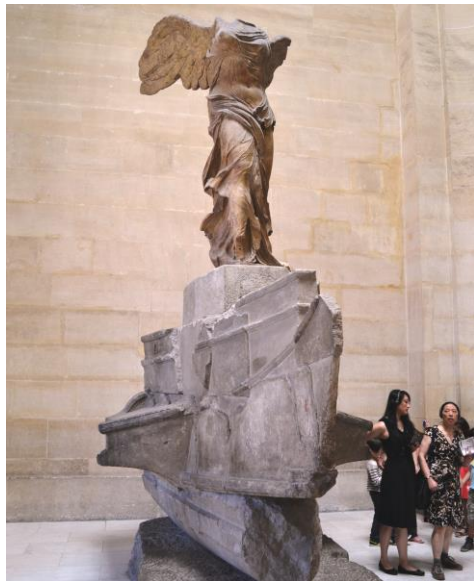
It's the only place where you can't see the Eiffel Tower!

8½ Million People and One Smiling Lady

The Eiffel Tower receives 7½ million visitors per year. But even more popular is The Louvre which, at 8½ million visitors per year, is by far the most popular art museum in the world. It's also one of the largest art museums in the world, housed in a former royal palace that dates back to the Middle Ages. To see the entirety of the museum in a single day requires far more time and stamina than is possible for most mortals, so Nicki and I restrained ourselves to seeing mainly the *crème de la crème* of the collection.



view of The Louvre entrance plaza
from the 2nd floor of the museum



Winged Victory of Samothrace

And as a result, there were dozens of people constantly jockeying for position to get their very own personal photo. I really don't know what the allure was, as a much better photo than they could ever possibly take can easily be found with a simple web search. I'm guessing it must be, at least in part, a mob mentality thing as even I was sucked into the frenzy. But *my* souvenir photo, a 'meta-photograph' of one of the scrummers who had finally made it to the front of the pack, at least had a bit of entertainment value to it. I'd like to think that even Leonardo might have been amused.

And there were many of them. The Louvre is much more than just an art museum, and its holdings include Egyptian, Roman and Greek antiquities (including the *Venus de Milo* and *Winged Victory*), Islamic art, and even some modern-day paintings in addition to works by the Olde Masters. The star of the show, of course, is Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*, and trying to get anywhere near the painting required you to brave the museum equivalent of a rugby scrum.

The previous time I was in The Louvre, back in 2007, photography of the smiling lady was *interdite* (forbidden), but this time around it was definitely *quelque chose se passé* (anything goes).



an over-the-photographer's-shoulder view of *Mona Lisa*

The Palace of Splendor

This was Nicki's first visit to Paris, and we had settled on a four-day stay so that we could experience the city without being constantly in a rush. But one place that was a priority for us to see was actually not in Paris at all.

For more than a century, from the early 1680s to the start of the French Revolution in 1789, the Royal Palace of Versailles was the hub of political power for the

country. It was the home of nobility and the center of government. Nowadays it has become a UNESCO World Heritage Site, preserving the apartments and living spaces of French royalty as a historical museum. In all there are more than 700 rooms, containing thousands of paintings, statuary, items of furniture, and other furnishings. It was the place where, in 1919, the Treaty of Versailles ended World War I and, in 1871, where the German Empire was founded. And it was the place where, in 1789, French Revolutionaries captured King Louis XVI and Queen Marie Antoinette.



a small part of the Royal Palace of Versailles



the Hall of Mirrors in the Palace

There are self-guided tours in many different languages available but for just a small amount more, Nicki and I were able to sign on to an additional English-language guided tour that brought us into some of the rooms that were otherwise only viewable through doorways. The splendor was breathtaking, with the tour taking us through a recreation of the king's day starting with the royal bedchambers, through the Hall of Mirrors, then the Royal Chapel, the Council Chamber, the Library, and various

drawing rooms. But in the end, sensory overload won out and after several hours of walking around with our mouths agape we headed to the train station for the short trip back to Paris.

Back when we were planning this vacation, I'd been told by a friend that no trip to Paris is complete without a visit to Versailles. After experiencing the place, I absolutely agree.

The City of Light

If I had to do it over, I'd have extended the trip so that we could have had one additional day in Paris. There was just too much to take in at any reasonable pace. Obvious things, like the Notre Dame Cathedral and the Arc de Triomphe, we made sure to see. Other places, like Montmartre and its equally grand cathedral, will be things to experience next time.

We didn't limit ourselves to seeing only the most famous sights of the city, though. On our final day we took a more low-key



the towers of Notre Dame Cathedral from across the Seine



a small part of the weekend market at the Place de la Bastille

famous Left Bank gathering place, Shakespeare and Company. It was described by its owner, back in 1964, as “a socialist utopia masquerading as a bookstore” and counted as its patrons such notables as Alan Ginsberg, William S. Burroughs, Anaïs Nin, and Henry Miller. The place even has some cinematic street cred, with cameo appearances in Woody Allen's *Midnight in Paris* and in the third season of the *Highlander* TV series. The store is packed with used books and the aisles are very narrow, but Nicki was still able to discover a book on crocheting that the current owner had been wondering who would claim it. It's one of keepsakes we took with us from our all-too-short stay in The City of Light.

approach, seeking out many of Paris's less-famous cathedrals and exploring the vicinity of the Place de la Bastille. The Prison itself is long gone, demolished soon after the French Revolution. But the area is now home to a very large weekend outdoor market where there were all kinds of meats, seafood, fresh produce, wine, jewelry, clothing, and...just about anything else of everyday convenience, from what we could see. If we lived in Paris, this would absolutely be the place where we'd buy our weekly provisions.

One other place we sought out was a



the Shakespeare and Company bookstore

The City of Chocolate

Brussels was just a bit more than an hour's train ride from Paris on one of those high speed Eurostars. The center of the city is dominated by Grand Place, one of the great town squares of Europe. It's an ornate mixture of Gothic, Baroque, and Rococo architecture styles, all coexisting in harmony with each other.

The architecture, in all of its varied forms, is actually the star attraction of Brussels, but it has the odd fate of being overshadowed by “Le Mannequin Pis”, a small bronze fountain sculpture of a little kid urinating into a pool. The statue dates back to the 1600s and has several different legends attached to its origin, but its burgeoning popularity can only be attributed to one of the most powerful known forces in the universe: bad taste.



Grand Place in Brussels



“Le Mannequin Pis”

The city has gone out of its way to encourage this. The statue is frequently dressed out in costume, sometimes as often as several times a week, and the Brussels City Museum even has a permanent display of many of the hundreds of outfits that have been worn by the statue. But this pales in comparison to what must be the ultimate in tackiness: I've read that the statue, on occasion, has been connected to a keg and passers-by have been treated to glasses of beer that had been ‘Pis’ed out.

Neither the town square nor the statue seemed very much different from what I remembered of them from 23 years ago. There was a crowd of people with cameras jockeying for position near the statue and there were many outdoor restaurants in and around the Grand Place. I remember that back then the most popular cuisine, from what I could observe, was bivalve mollusks: Mussels from Brussels. But that was not the case in 2013 – we didn't see a single restaurant patron, anywhere, dining on shellfish.

was not the case in 2013 – we didn't see a single restaurant patron, anywhere, dining on shellfish.

What we *did* see was a proliferation of chocolate shops. We noticed at least a couple dozen of them, sometimes located next door to each other, in the tourist-trafficked parts of the city. In all, Brussels is home to about 2000 *chocolatiers*, large and small, which must make it the most chocolate-dense place in the world.

But much as we were tempted to, you can't really eat large amounts of chocolate. Luckily, there were alternatives. At one sidewalk kiosk there were mini rhubarb pies, and we found that rhubarb is indeed "the secret of the good life as we know it". (Thanks, Garrison!) And even better were the waffles. It seemed obligatory to have a Belgian Waffle in Brussels, so that was one of the



workers at a *chocolatier* in Brussels



a handful of heaven in Brussels

first things we did. And also the last thing we did, out in the city, on our last evening in Europe. There were many different options to choose from, but the one that looked best to us was layered with sweet European strawberries and then covered in whipped cream. *Way* too much for one person, but just right for sharing. But there was no way to eat it without making a mess, so it seemed almost a badge of honor to walk around with dabs of whipped cream clinging to your nose and cheeks. From what we observed for other tourists, we weren't the only ones to think so!

The City of Cuberdons

Just a short train ride northwest of Brussels is the city of Ghent. It's the birthplace of the famous painter Jan van Eyck, the home of International Olympic Committee President Jacques Rogge, and the host of a large international music festival that would have made it impossible to find a hotel room if Nicki and I been in town while it was going on.



scenic Ghent

Brussels is a mostly French-speaking city, and we had wanted a day in the Flemish-speaking part of Belgium before we ended our vacation. We narrowed it down to Ghent, Bruges, and Antwerp, but in the end, we chose Ghent mostly because it had a Marriott Hotel and the other two cities didn't.

But it was a good choice! Ghent was mostly spared by the numerous wars of Europe, and its medieval architecture is largely intact. The historic center of the city is dominated by three towers, all of which date back to the 13th and 14th centuries. Two of these belong to magnificent cathedrals. In one of them resides a Van Eyck masterwork, the 12-panel 15th century altarpiece painting "Adoration of the Mystic Lamb", that is considered one of the world's art treasures, and in the other we were able to sit back and enjoy a rehearsal for an upcoming pipe organ recital.

There was more than enough content for the day we had in Ghent. Too much even, as we



the historic center of Ghent



a Nose of Ghent

didn't get to see any of the imposing Gravensteen Castle except from the outside. And there were also small discoveries to be made. One of them was the 'cuberdon'. It's a cone-shaped candy made from a chewy berry-flavored fondant and filled with a thick berry-flavored jelly. It's colloquially known as 'The Nose of Ghent' from its shape, and you can't find them in North America. The shelf life is only a few weeks (the jelly eventually starts to crystallize), so they're not exported. We saw a sidewalk vendor trying to interest tourists into buying a

bagful, telling them that: "You can't leave Ghent without trying some of these. They will be a highlight of your stay here!"

And you know what? He was right!

Epilog: The City of Jules Verne

While we were in Brussels and Ghent we were able to stay in hotels close by the city center, but in Paris we stayed in the 'La Défense' business district on the west side of the city, well away from the city's main points of interest. I'd chosen that hotel deliberately because there was a very large shopping mall nearby with good and affordable places to eat in case we needed them. But it turned out that La Défense was not without a few points of interest of its own. The most

prominent landmark is the Grande Arche, an office building with a 110-meter square hole through the middle. It's aligned so that the view from under the arch is directly down toward Paris's main street, the Champs-Élysées, and you can see Paris's other and more famous arch, the Arc de Triomphe, in the distance.



a telephoto lens view from beneath the Grande Arche

On our final morning in Paris, a couple of hours before our taxi to the train station, we took a long walk around the plaza near the Grande Arche and found even more of interest. There's an Alexander Calder metal stabile, "L'Araignée Rouge" ("The Red Spider") that dominates the northeast corner of the plaza. And not far from that is a little carousel.



the Calder stabile with the Verne carousel and Grande Arche in the background

When we checked that out, we were surprised and pleased that it honored one of Paris's most famous citizens, the great novelist and playwright Jules Verne. Instead of the usual array of horses there were various forms of transport from his novels – the balloon from *Around the World in 80 Days*, the submarine from *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, and the rocket from *From the Earth to the Moon* among others.

Verne wrote fantastic literature, so it seems only appropriate to use 'his' carousel as the coda for a fantastic vacation. Our experiences in Paris, Brussels, and Ghent by far exceeded our hopes and expectations. And someday, soon perhaps, we would like to have additional adventures on another visit to these grand cities. ☀

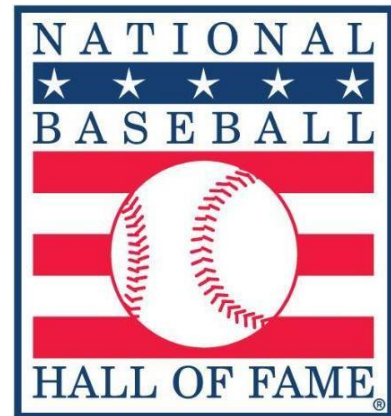
Afterword:

Time to end this issue the same way I started it, with one more baseball-related essay. If you're a lifelong fan of baseball, as I am, there's one place that absolutely has to be visited – the central New York village of Cooperstown. It's home to a museum where legends of the game reside.

The Museum of Dreams and Legends

The village of Cooperstown, New York has been the home of many notable people. The famous American writer James Fenimore Cooper lived there, as did publisher Erastus Beadle who has been credited with creating the very first ‘dime novels’. Painter and inventor Samuel F.B. Morse was a resident there for a time, as was U.S. Supreme Court Justice Samuel Nelson. But perhaps the most mythic resident of Cooperstown was Civil War General Abner Doubleday who attended a private preparatory school there prior to entering the U.S. Military Academy. It was in the summer of 1839, in a cow pasture just south of town, that Abner Doubleday invented the game of baseball.

Or maybe he didn’t. In the decades since that claim was originally staked a lot of evidence to the contrary has surfaced. But that didn’t prevent a committee of the New York State legislature, in 1936, to declare that Cooperstown was “the birthplace of baseball”. Three years later, on the 100th anniversary of that first cow pasture game, the building that houses the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum was dedicated. It is a place where millions of visitors have since come to immerse themselves, for all too short a time, in the fabulous history that surrounds this storied game. Nicki and I included.



I have been a baseball fan for most of my life – 60 years and still counting. My first memory of professional baseball was seeing the 1957 World Series on a grainy black-and-white television broadcast. The Milwaukee Braves beat the New York Yankees in seven games, and the hero of that World Series was a young slugger for the Braves named Hank Aaron. The third floor of the museum has a gallery that showcases Hank Aaron’s career from his minor league years, including three months in the segregated Negro American League, through his 23 years in the big leagues where he was a 24-time All Star and the 1957 National League Most Valuable Player.



remembering Shibe Park

Most of the ballparks that Hank Aaron played in back in the 1950s no longer exist, places like Shibe Park in Philadelphia, Griffith Stadium in Washington D.C., the Polo Grounds in Manhattan, and Ebbets Field in Brooklyn. I was pleased to discover that the museum has preserved many artifacts from these extinct ballparks – turnstiles, building stones, a pitching rubber from a 1951 no-hit game, and even the Griffith Stadium locker of the great Washington Senators pitcher Walter Johnson. These places were actually sacred ground to the faithful, the hometown fans who made baseball a big part of their lives.



San Francisco Giants team exhibit

The museum is big and there was a lot to see. Every major league team was ‘encapsulated’ in individual lockers which contained game-used bats, gloves, baseballs and jerseys worn by team players. There was an extensive exhibit on the history of the sport, including the earliest professional teams and players, and there were also galleries that honored the Negro Leagues, the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League, the broadcasters and baseball writers who made the game accessible to those of us who didn’t live anywhere near a ballpark, and, far from least, a look back at the life and times of the legendary George Herman “Babe” Ruth. It was he, more than anybody else, who by the power of his personality transformed professional baseball from a mostly localized summertime form of entertainment into a larger-than-life spectacle. He was the most celebrated athlete of his time, and the sport’s first great home run hitter. And he was one of the first five players to be inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame.

The Hall of Fame is really what most baseball fans come to Cooperstown to see. It takes up much of the ground floor of the museum, with brass plaques for each of more than 300 players, managers, executives, and umpires. It’s the culmination of a long and successful career to be enshrined there, and those who do make it are the best of the best – there is no Hall of Pretty Good Players.

It took me a few minutes to track down the plaque that I had really wanted to see – my boyhood hero Mickey Mantle. Many, many times in my pre-teen years I had stayed awake past my bedtime, surreptitiously listening to New York Yankees games on the radio, hoping to vicariously witness Mantle hitting one of his mammoth home runs out into the night. And hoping – often dreaming – that someday I would be a big league baseball player just like him. It took another few years to realize that would never come to pass, but it did not diminish my love for the game that still very much exists.



with my boyhood hero Mickey Mantle

Some people have likened visiting the baseball museum at Cooperstown to a religious pilgrimage, and I suppose that’s true. The Hall of Fame is filled with icons of the saints of the game – players whose exploits have become the stuff legends are made of. For me, baseball has always been a deep-seated, true-believer part of my existence and I am happy that it has. I’m taking my cue from another Yankee, Jim Bouton, who said: “You see, you spend a good piece of your life gripping a baseball and in the end it turns out that it was the other way around all the time.” It’s an apt description. ☀

