



Dpuntia 5.5

OPUNTIA #5.5

Hogmanay 1991/92

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OPUNTIA is published irregularly by Dale Speirs, Box 6830, Calgary, Alberta, Canada, T2P 2E7. It can be had for \$1 cash, trade, or letter of comment. All back issues except #5 are available at \$1 each; #5 is sold out. Whole-numbered issues are sercon, [.]5 issues are perzines.

ART CREDITS: The cover depicts a marine algae Halimeda opuntia, so named because of its resemblance to prickly pear cacti. It was done by artist O. Embrey, and comes from the book "Marine Algae of the Eastern Tropical and Subtropical Coasts of the Americas". The fillo on page 13 comes from the October 1, 1991, issue of "The New Era". Despite its title, this is not put out by a fundamentalist group or a Young Socialists club; it is the weekly newspaper of Melita, Manitoba. I found a copy in the Co-op Book Exchange from whence this clip art was taken.

EDITORIAL: I had to wahf everyone who locced #4.5. I felt bad about this because there were a number of interesting observations and questions that should be published, so I've decided to combine the locs for this ish and 4.5 together in #6.5, even if it means an all-loc ish. With the increased frequency of OPUNTIA, it should work out okay.

You never knew him unless you lived in Calgary, but Robert Bruce Baxter died on December 24, 1991, at the age of 74. He was the proprietor of "Bob's Books" for thirty years. But he was not just any secondhand bookstore owner. He was acknowledged throughout the literary community as the dean of Calgary booksellers, and newspaper articles about him over the years invariably referred to him by that title. Decades before it became the trendy

thing to do, he had a stereo set in his store playing classical music. There were overstuffed chairs in which to sit and read, and children were not chased out if unaccompanied by an adult. He made no attempt at finding a marketing niche. Other stores could specialize if they liked, but he would carry anything and everything. Many of my books came from his store and I have a number of unusual items. His competitors came and went, but Bob's Books stayed on 16 Ave NW (Trans-Canada Highway) forever, occasionally moving up or down the avenue a block or two as cheaper rents became available. Bob was a crusty old soul, with definite opinions on various topics, but he put his customers first. I remember remarking to him once that I was looking for a copy of "Hunting of the Snark" at a time when I was only a casual customer and probably indistinguishable to him from all the other browsers in his store. A year or so later, I dropped by the store, and he immediately asked me if I was still interested in the "Snark"; he had gotten a copy somewhere and set it aside on the chance that I might come by again. With his passing, there is no other bookseller in Calgary about whom anyone would say "He was the dean of Calgary booksellers."

I have a postcard on hand from Lloyd Penney advising about a bid by the newly-formed Niagara SF Association for the 1998 Worldcon. Their address is Box 500, Bridge Stn, Niagara Falls, NY 14305, USA.

AND NOW THERE CAME BOTH MIST AND SNOW ... 1991-10-28

My first day in charge of Mapleridge district. It began exactly the same as my last day at Bowness; the crew was sent home due to snow and -25°C. My assistant foreman will be gone most of the week on training courses, so I am left to prepare the 1992 budget. Since I know little about the district, I will copy what Joe had done in the 1991 budget. Since he was only at Mapleridge for part of this year, he had copied what the previous foreman had done for 1990. Chris, who had the job before Joe, basically copied out of the 1989 budget that was done by Tim. Tim retired, Chris joined the Fire Dept., Joe is on the other side of the city trying to learn his new district, and I am faced with workplans that haven't altered in three years. I'm not even going to try to look at the old records; we'll muddle through as always.

Shovelling snow off a sidewalk is exactly like deciding whether or not to wash the car (if you do, it rains, of course). I left my sidewalk unshovelled, so naturally my neighbours all did theirs and we had no more snow. I did mine tonight, so naturally it will snow tonight. I have a corner lot, so I have three times as much sidewalk to shovel as the street lots do.

MOWBOT THE ROBOT

1991-10-30

Since the files at Mapleridge haven't been properly arranged in several years, I have been spending time putting them in order. While doing so, I came across some 1989 papers relating to the robot Kubota. Ah yes! Those were the halcyon days, back in 1989, when the world was young and the Parks Dept. was talked into experimenting with the robot Kubota.

The Kubota corporation manufactures ride-on mowing machines; we use about fifty of them. They are reliable

machines, what you'd expect from the Japanese. They cannot be used on steep slopes however, because of their high centre of gravity. For most such slopes, we use Gravely walk-behind mowers. But even for the low-slung Gravelys, some slopes are too much, and the occasional rollover has occurred. The other method is using labourers to weed-eat the slope, expensive and time consuming.

The Kubota corporation came out with a radio-controlled robot Kubota, which the Parks Dept. tested in the summer of 1989. It was similar to the human-operated Kubota but without the cab or seat, so it had a very low centre of gravity. It worked well in mowing the grass. The human in charge of the machine stood near and directed the robot Kubota back and forth across the slope via radio controls. So far so good. What wasn't expected was the reaction of the general public.

Imagine you are a commuter, driving down Deerfoot Trail on your way to work. Suddenly your attention is distracted from the morning show on the car radio by the sight of a driverless mowing machine rumbling along the freeway boulevard. Most people will swerve the car on being startled so. One or two of them will put the car into the ditch. And a few Good Samaritans stopped the car, jumped out, and chased the robot Kubota on foot, under the impression that it was a runaway machine, and the Parks worker nearby (controlling it with the radio device) was the unseated driver.

What really put paid to the whole thing was the cost of robot Kubotas, about \$40,000 each. For a few slopes to be cut a few times per year, the expense could not be justified.

And so ended another page in the glorious history of robotics.

WATCHING CALANDRA GROW

1991-11-3

Today was my birthday, and my brother Neil and his wife Pam invited me over for a small quiet dinner in my honour. I quit celebrating birthdays after I turned 18 and was at the age of consent, so my birthday passes quietly. The next birthday I celebrate will be my 55th, the day I retire. In between, I don't really care.

Neil and Pam have a 15-month-old daughter, Calandra Emma Cheryl. Calandra after a Mediterranean songbird, Emma after Neil and I's grandmother, and Cheryl after a close friend of Pam's. Calandra is a well-behaved baby, if I may be forgiven my avuncular pride, not at all a screamer, and cries only when she has reasonable cause, such as a wet diaper. I never thought I would be interested in child psychology and behaviour, but I am quite fascinated watching her develop.

What with all her grandparents and numerous aunts and uncles, Calandra was soon showered with toys. And yet her favourites are simple things. Her father's key ring for one example. The keys make a pleasant jingling when shaken, and they glitter from the light's reflection. Or fluorescently-coloured shoelaces, to wave about. And whenever she is fussy or cranky, the fastest method to cheer her up is to toss a napkin or handtowel over her face. She'll pull it off so she can see again, and when she does so, she is smiling and giggling. She loves to play this type of peek-a-boo.

As soon as she learned to walk six months ago, she would pick up objects and carry them over to an adult. Give the object back to her and she would immediately carry it away again. She'll empty out her toy box, one piece at a time, and put everything on the far side of the room, then move it someplace else again. Reminds me of squirrels for some reason.

Is dancing an instinctive behaviour? It must be, is my

observation. Before she could walk but when she was able to stand up if holding on to something, any kind of music with a strong beat would start her bouncing up and down, hopping and bopping, and shaking her booty. She didn't learn this from her parents; it seems to be ingrained. Everytime the television is set at MuchMusic channel, she starts dancing. Now she can walk, so her dancing also includes turning in circles, as well as boogy woogy.

Calandra makes various nonsense sounds but cannot coherently talk yet. Nonetheless, she does understand some nouns. If Neil says 'eye', 'nose', 'chin', or 'ears', she will point to the correct part of her's or other people's faces. My goatee confuses her; she knows it's where the chin should be, and yet it isn't smooth and pink like everyone else's chin.

SECOND WEEK ON THE JOB

1991-11-4

I put the car through the car wash yesterday. The law of nature held true; there was a light sprinkle of rain on my way to work this morning, and a chinook wind blew in, turning all the snow into slush. I'm still trying to figure out the best route to my new jobsite. Mapleridge is only 11 km from my house, as compared with 16 km for my previous drive to Bowness Park. Even though it is 5 km shorter, it still takes the same amount of travelling time because there are more traffic lights and they are poorly synchronized. I have figured out that for three sets of lights on Southland Drive I can hit three greens in a row if I drag race with all the other commuters to beat the yellow, then immediately slow to idle in order to get to the next light just as it turns green. I got the idea from watching other, more experienced commuters. We look like Street-Legal Night at the dragstrip, all roaring down Southland Drive together.

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The chinook does make it nice in another way though, as I can wear my steel-toed cowboy boots and light jacket to work instead of felt-lined boots and heavy parka. Not that it really matters since I am staying inside my office (construction trailer is what it is) and doing the 1992 budget. It's difficult to maintain concentration because of all the telephone calls or people walking in on Official City Business. No rest for the wicked.

One advantage of the Mapleridge district over Bowness is the better choice of places to eat. I'm not talking of fine dining here; we only have two twenty-minute meal breaks during the day and no lunch hour, since we're on a four-day shift. This means food has to be both fast and good, a difficult combination. Yes, there is Arby's or MacDonald's, but I prefer food that didn't come off an assembly line. Co-op stores have cafeterias but the food varies considerably from one store to the next and with the chef on duty. It usually is good but is also usually slow service. I have found one Ma-and-Pa cafe that serves excellent French toast and scrambled eggs, but it is located at the extreme south end of my district where I seldom have reason to be.

People still quote that advice about how you should look for a truck stop with lots of rigs parked around it if you want good food. Incorrect advice, I'm afraid, as a truck driver generally eats at a place with room to park his semi-trailer before considering food quality. My advice is to look for a cafe that has lots of government pickups and crewcabs around it.

CIVIC PRIDE

At the end of October, a survey of Canadian universities was published, ranking the University of Calgary in 27th place for quality of education. Front page news it was, what with Cowtowners quickly rallying around the U of C

and denouncing the survey as misleading and poorly worded. The hue and cry from outraged Calgarians was deafening.

A week or two later, a different survey was published by a different group, in which Calgary was ranked as the #1 city in Canada in terms of quality of life. It also made the front page, as we all nodded and said "I knew it all along!". A day after, a Montreal columnist (Montreal came in #8) denounced the survey as misleading and poorly worded.

And as for me, I moved to Calgary because I couldn't bear the thought of spending another winter in Edmonton.

THE SUBURB THAT NEVER WAS

1991-11-6

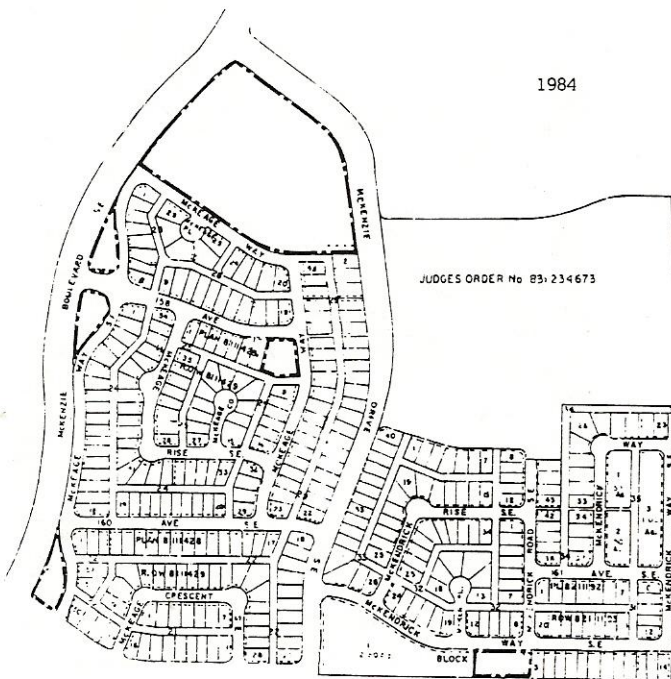
I used to work down here in south Calgary ten years ago. The oil boom was at its height and developers were building subdivisions in places that even today are quite remote. In 1982, one of these subdivisions was McKenzie. And it was also in 1982 that the oil boom collapsed.

The Calgary economy basically had a heart attack and fell dead to the ground. It took almost a full decade to recover. As I drive through McKenzie in 1991 I see that it has only resumed development in the last few years. I was familiarizing myself with the parks and boulevards that I will be looking after. In Calgary, the developer is responsible to build parks and roads, and the City only assumes responsibility for them after a few years, to make certain that the trees will live and the road won't sink. Only then is a Final Acceptance Certificate (FAC) issued, which passes over the park to the City. I had gotten a batch of FACs and was trying to locate a park we were

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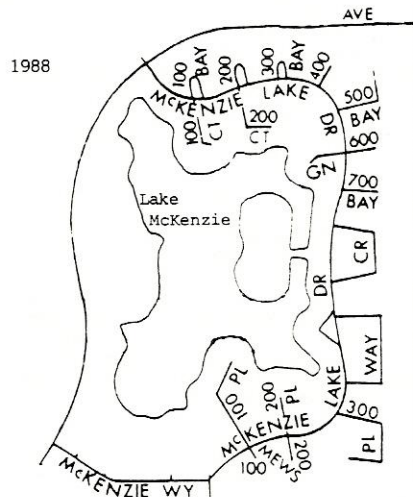
supposed to have accepted in McKenzie.

But I couldn't find it. The address on the FAC wasn't on the map I was using. None of the streets shown on the map appeared to exist in the real world. Finally it was noticed that my map was dated 1984. The rather boring middle-class suburb laid out on the 1984 map had never been built. This 1984 map is shown below.



What happened was the developer redid the plans. The land sat idle until a few years ago and then was rezoned for an upper-class neighbourhood surrounding an artificial lake called Lake McKenzie. There must have been some legal disputes, most likely a receivership or bankruptcy, because the 1984 map had a Judge's Order 1983 shown on it. The lake was scraped out of the ground and is a private lake; no public access is allowed. If you have to ask the price of the houses, then you can't afford them.

I found a 1988 map closer to the truth (shown below) but even it underwent minor changes. Compare it with the 1990 map on the following page and you'll see the south end is slightly different, with 'Landing' and 'Cove' instead of 'Place' or 'Mews' in the as-built.



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WHAT'S NEW IN VENDING MACHINES

1991 -11-10

I went up to Marketmall today, a shopping mall that I seldom visit except on specific business. Coming in the north door to the mall, I noticed a machine set up just a short ways in. It had a computer screen on it, so I assumed it was either a bank machine or an automated information display. But as I got closer, I was startled to see that it was in fact a new type of vending machine that printed business cards and announcement cards while you waited.

I spent some time looking at it, although I didn't use it, partly because I already have lots of business cards and partly because it was relatively expensive, \$8 for fifty business cards or twenty-five announcements. Since it produces the desired goods immediately, I can see it is a useful service; most print shops expect several days or a week to do business cards. I don't know how long the machine has been there or if it is profitable but I could see one problem; it would only take eight loonies as payment. Not too many people carry that many loonies on them, thus the potential for impulse sales would be limited. It would probably have better sales if it accepted Mastercard or Visa.

The machine had a Windows-type display screen, and one simply touches the screen to design and then order the cards. There are a number of logo designs ready to use, and the name and address is typed in. Sort of a mini-Pagemaker program. After a few minutes designing the cards, one gets them printed out immediately. If only a few cards are needed, this is much better than a print shop.

1991-11-11-11h11

Today is Remembrance Day, a holiday to most but

serious business to the older generation. I live near Canadian Forces Base Calgary. At 11h11, they fire a twenty-one gun salute for the war dead. There is but an open field between my house and the parade ground, and as a consequence the west wall of my house intercepts the full force of the shock wave from the guns. The house shakes exactly as if an earthquake occurred.

I bought the house in February 1982, so the 1982 Remembrance Day was my first at that address. I'll never forget it. I was sitting quietly in my recliner when a tremendous boom shook the house. In a split second, I was out of that chair, through the kitchen, grabbing the fire extinguisher by the stove as I ran on down the stairs into the basement. Low frequency sounds such as cannon fire are hard to localize, and because the house had shaken, I thought the furnace had blown up. Frantically I hunted around the basement with the fire extinguisher looking for the problem. The furnace and hot-water heater were both okay and several heartpounding minutes later I finally realized what the sound had been.

There was much concern this year about the declining interest in Remembrance Day. Veterans who sell poppies have a harder go of it each year; many people such as myself have stopped wearing them, not from a lack of respect for the war dead, but because it seems pointless. Even the veterans have recognized that wreath-laying and bagpipers are not very interesting to children. There is a debate about what to do. Many veterans are making it a point to visit a local school, and personally tell the kids about war, about how it is not the glamorous thing one sees in movies. It is about watching your buddy trying to fit his intestines back inside his body, or sitting in cold mud for hours on end. It is not Rambo spraying machine gun fire around and single handedly defeating an entire battalion. The Gulf war veterans of this year are too few and spent too little time at war to replace the WW2 veterans now dying out.

Once a week or so, I make the rounds of Calgary's second-hand bookstores. I don't visit every bookstore in town, as some of them seldom change their stock-in-trade, and are only worth seeing about once a year. Others are always bringing in fresh stock and I stop by as often as I can. My observation is that secondhand bookstores do not compete with each other, as each has a unique stock and generally has some particular specialty. This is unlike the chain stores such as Coles and W.H. Smith, which dominate new book sales but all have identical stocks. Many secondhand stores have branched out into comics or sports cards to generate cash flow. The only sideline chain stores seem to carry is audio cassettes, mostly self-help or books-on-tapes.

In case you are wondering about the sparrow inside of the bumper, I was making my rounds today and parked my car on the street next to a bookstore. I was about to get out when I noticed an English house sparrow hopping about underneath the car in front of me. This is nothing new, as I've seen countless sparrows hopping along the ground or under parked vehicles as they continue their endless hunt for food. But this sparrow hopped up inside the wheel well of the car and down inside the tire rim. It was out again in an instant, then dropped to the ground below the rear bumper. This bumper was a hollow one, with a cross-section like a "C". The sparrow hopped up inside the car bumper and worked its way along the bumper foraging. I couldn't see it, but it was easy to track the progress of the bird by all the dust and fluff it disturbed as it moved along. A gentle drizzle of dust fell from the bumper and moved along behind the sparrow.

As I check the bookstores, I look mainly for periodicals, regardless of the subjects I collect, which are SF, philately, aquarium-keeping, and small-press zines. I find that periodicals make livelier reading than books; about two-thirds of my library is made of periodicals. I long

ago stopped being surprised by the weird titles and obscure zines found in Calgary stores. It would be interesting to know how some of them found their way to this city.

Take, for example, the July/August 1955 issue of the Camsell Arrow (Volume 9, #2) celebrating the Golden Jubilee of Alberta, which became a province in 1905. This 90-page mimeographed zine was produced by the patients and staff at the Charles Camsell Hospital in Edmonton, which treated native Indians for tuberculosis. This bimonthly zine published stories, historical accounts, and news of past and present staff and patients. When the Camsell Hospital first opened ten years previous, the natives were afraid of the place due to the death rate. As the Superintendent, Dr. M. Matas, wrote in an editorial, "At one time the Indians felt that the hospital was a place to come to die. Today, as they see their relatives and friends coming home well and strong from the Camsell, their fear of hospitalization is greatly reduced."

Calgary, like any large city, has produced lots of small-press zines, most of them avant-garde fiction or poetry. I've been building up a collection of them. Most seem to publish at least two or three issues being vanishing, either from insolvency or lack of interest. When I get enough, I'll sit down and do a bibliography on them.

Some publishers were insanely optimistic, producing a specialized zine that hadn't a hope in hell of ever getting enough subscribers. CANADIAN FISH FANCIER is an example. The USA has difficulty sustaining fish publications with ten times the population, and CFF was not long for the world with only a fraction of the readership. About once a year someone starts up a Calgary zine reviewing the business community or the arts; the zine will last exactly as long as its capital, and when the money is gone, so is it.

CAT ON A COLD ASPHALT ROOF

1991-11-22

I walked out of my house this afternoon to do a few errands, including mailing OPUNTIA 4.5, but before getting the car out of the driveway I decided to quickly shovel the snow off my sidewalks. A thin skiff of snow came last night. Today the temperature was slightly over freezing, melting the snow a wee bit but not enough to get rid of it completely. I knew if I didn't clear it off before nightfall, it would freeze into rough ice, and if more snow fell, I would then be faced with shovelling snow off the rough ice.

When I finished clearing the snow, I stood for a moment, leaning on the snow shovel, and happened to glance up at the roof of the house. I was rather startled to see a housecat sitting there, looking down at me and silently miaowing.

The cat is a tabby; I've seen it before stalking squirrels in the yard, although I don't think it was ever any good at catching one. I don't know which of my neighbours owns it. How did it get on the roof? I suspect that it was chasing a squirrel. The squirrels use the roof as a shortcut, climbing up an elm in the backyard, jumping onto the roof, then jumping onto a Manitoba maple on the other side of the house. The cat probably had chased a squirrel up the elm, leaped on the roof, then discovered that the maple branches were too light to support it, although the squirrel could make it. To jump back down on the elm would have been very tricky. It is difficult to describe the geometry of the elm but it is easier to go up the tree than back down. All this is my speculation, but I can't think of any other reason why the cat would be up there; the backyard is fenced off so a dog could not have been chasing the cat unless the dog could hurdle a two-metre tall solid board fence with no gripping points.

Since I had things to do, I left the cat alone, thinking

that it would come down on its own. When I came back a few hours later, it was still sitting up there. I left it still, figuring that it must be getting hungry and would thus be motivated to take a chance on the elm.

If this was summertime, I would have let it stay all night. But the forecast was -10°C tonight, and the dark sets in about 17h30. My conscience got to me so I took a flashlight out and shone it up on the roof. Two eyes reflected back; the tabby was still there.

Sighing heavily, both physically and mentally, I got out my extension ladder. I wore leather gloves and a heavy parka, not from the cold but because I knew the cat might scratch. They are ungratefull victims, as I learned several years ago when I rescued two small kittens from a tree at Confederation Park. (Ever hear a kitten scream? I can still remember the sound.)

Standing at the top of the ladder, I whistled and called the tabby. No way was I going to walk on the roof; although it has a low pitch (my house is a bungalow), the asphalt tiles were slick with frost. The tabby took several minutes to come to me. It would rub the fireplace chimney with its scent glands, come towards me, suddenly veer away, reannoint the chimney and repeat the process. Finally it allowed me to rub its cheek. Carefully I took hold of one leg, then gathered in the rest of the animal, and tucked it in my left arm. It struggled only a little bit. I had my belly hanging over the eavestrough, which meant I had to lean out and back to get down the ladder. With a struggling cat, this was no easy thing. I dropped it to the grass from a height of two metres. It landed on all fours and took off like a cruise missile.

At least it didn't scream, just one loud yowl and an attempt to cling to the eavestrough with one paw. But no gratitude. That is not the way of cats.

For the previous fortnight, I've been working on the new budget for my Parks district, about \$427,000 for 303 hectares of parks and freeway boulevards. The budget is distributed amongst several accounting centres such as mowing, shrub and tree maintenance, spring cleanup, etc. Into each centre, I had to put in hours for all the job classifications (foreman, truck driver, equipment operator, labourer) and types of equipment (crew cabs, mowing machines, turf sweeper). This was all done with pencil, paper, and pocket calculator. After a while, one starts to put in as many errors as are taken out. Computer spreadsheets? Management has them but I don't expect to see any terminals in the depots for a while. We take weeks to do by hand what could be done on a computer in a day or so.

But all that is behind me, at least until next November. From the last week of November until the last week of March, we are pruning trees. This is one reason why I take a month's vacation in February. The other reason is that I take a \$200/month pay cut in the winter (since I don't have crews) but my vacation pay is the higher rate of pay, so this gives me nine months a year at Foreman 4 and only three months at Foreman 2. District foreman such as myself are officially Pay Level F2/4, but we are nicknamed two-by-fours. Occasionally, a new-hired district foreman takes offence at being called a piece of lumber, but we cheer him up by pointing out that two-by-fours are studs. Needless to say, this does not work for female foremen.

We prune in multiples of two, but usually four people on a crew. Two people on each tree, one pruning, the other stacking branches or holding the ladder. Right now, we are legging up poplars on street boulevards. Legging up is removing all lower branches on the tree, up to three metres for the big poplars we're on. This prevents low-hanging branches from obstructing pedestrians or vehicle

traffic. Four pruners can leg up about 70 trees per day.

Legging up is straightforward. The fun will start as we go into the parks and do corrective pruning on the small trees so they grow in a proper shape. Trying to get foremen to prune the same way is like herding cats. The basic principles of pruning are the same. First remove dead, diseased, or crossing branches. Do not leave stubs or stumps because they die or produce weak sprouts; cut the branch back to the trunk or the next branch.

Beyond that, everyone has different ideas on how to shape a tree. I'm an aggressive pruner, believing if you clear out branches when they are small, then the small cut is better than coming back a few years later and making a big cut. My supervisor believes in cutting off half the branch the first winter, then removing the rest of the branch the following winter. Every supervisor is different; I learned a long time ago to go with the flow. I'll do it his way next to the street (he doesn't like to walk very far from his truck) and my way out in the middle of the park.

The poplars we are pruning now are on a street in the Midnapore district. Midnapore was a village in its own right until it was swallowed up by Calgary back in 1979. It is named after the city in India. Early settlers had trouble deciding on a name, so the postmaster took an atlas, closed his eyes, riffled the pages, and stuck a pin in at random. The pin landed on Midnapore, India, and thus a new Alberta town came into being. The street we're on runs along the south boundary of Fish Creek Provincial Park, also swallowed up by the expanding city. But the natural area is preserved, and as we prune, we see deer bounding down in the valley slopes. They go through thick brush humans could not penetrate, bounding up and down like jackrabbits.

PRUNING, WOMEN'S LIB, AND HOCKEY

1991-12-9

We're still legging up poplars in Midnapore but have now moved onto Midpark Boulevard, after doing Midridge Drive and Midvalley Drive. (Exciting developer names, eh?). I have four other pruners with me. Two each on ladders, and myself on the back of the crewcab truck. Occupational Health and Safety regulations state that pruning must be done from a stable platform, a ladder held by a coworker, or while roped to the tree. The back of the crewcab constitutes a stable platform, so I can work by myself, and the other four in two pairs. One pair of pruners are female gardeners; when I first started with the Parks Dept. female gardeners and foremen were rare, but are now reasonably common.

Midpark Boulevard is the main entrance into Midnapore, and is a four-lane divided road. Because of the traffic we use signs and cones. Because of budgets, our signs are about the same age as I am and say "MEN AND EQUIPMENT WORKING" instead of being the modern pictogram with a silhouette of a labourer digging into a pile. Leslie and Terry, the above-mentioned gardeners, used a felt pen and modified one sign to read "WOMEN AND EQUIPMENT WORKING". They use this sign for their side of the street when pruning.

I'm sure a lot of drivers get a chuckle as they go past. Just today, a Dear Old Lady in a compact car tooted the horn and gave Leslie and Terry a thumbs-up as she drove past. It appears that middle-aged and elderly women are most likely to respond to the sign, based on what I am told by Leslie and Terry. I suspect that this is because they know better than anyone how far women have advanced in the last few decades. Younger women take it for granted that they don't have to quit their jobs when having a baby. Another District Foreman I used to work with up in North Area, Cathy, is back at work eight months after having her baby.

The newspaper today had an article about Manon Rheame, a nineteen-year-old who on the weekend became the first woman to play in major junior hockey, only one step below the NHL. She was goalie for the Trois Rivieres Draveurs, and by all accounts performed well as a relieving goalie brought up from a farm team. It was only a short stint, replacing an injured player, but it having been done once, could happen again. The NHL might be tougher to crack, but who knows?

THE LIGHT FANTASTIC

1991-12-13

I drove over tonight to have a look at the Smith home not far from where I live, just on the other side of CFB Calgary. Each Christmas, they decorate the house with lots and lots of lights and displays. I wish I could afford to print OPUNTIA in colour, because the display is incredible. So much traffic goes past the house that the Streets Dept. has to put up temporary traffic signs converting the road into a one-way. The Smiths, in a newspaper report, say that the Christmas lights cost them \$700 a month in electricity alone; a heavy-duty branch circuit had to be installed to handle the electrical load. While I was there (I parked a block away to avoid the traffic jam), four buses were going by. The Smiths sell a 6 x 9 postcard at \$2 each or 3 for \$5 suggested donation to help pay a part of the cost of the display. The neighbours are of divided opinion about the display; some don't mind and others object to the hassle in what is supposed to be a quiet residential neighbourhood. At any given moment there were three or four people photographing the house. Basically the whole house, yard, garage, and hedge were covered with lights. This year's theme was Santa's workshop, with elves, etc., and a train that ran from one side of the yard over the top of the house and down to the garage on the far side.

NUTS ABOUT SQUIRRELS

I keep a bag of peanuts on the hallway shelf, and each morning as I go out the door I grab a handful and fling them over the front steps and yard. They are gone in a few hours. The squirrels get most of them but the magpies often arrive first. The grass is mulched with peanut shell fragments, which are eventually pulled underground by worms and reconstituted into humus. The yard is not one you'd care to go lawn bowling on; in fact you might twist your ankle from all the dew worm mounds and the holes loosely filled in by squirrels. When I mow the yard, the lawnmower kicks and shakes like a buckboard wagon on cobblestones.

I sometimes sit on the front steps with a handful of peanuts by my side and wait for the squirrels to show. Usually only one comes by at a time, but on one occasion there were three black and one gray all here at once. If it is a solitary squirrel, it only eats the peanut if the shell is broken. After picking up the peanut, the squirrel rotates it with its hands and tests the shell with its teeth to see if it is intact. If so, the peanut will be buried, sometimes within sight of where I sit, and sometimes taken to another site a half block away. If the latter, there is a long wait before the squirrel returns, and in the interval another squirrel may appear.

The animals often come by and sniff around for buried peanuts. I wonder about their vision though. It must be excellent if they can run across overhead cables or jump from tree branch to branch. And yet, when I feed them, it is obvious that they locate peanuts by scent alone, as a peanut tossed within a metre of them is not immediately pounced upon but tracked down by sniffing in a search pattern.

It has often been supposed that squirrels forget where they cached their food and must locate it by scent. The

sniffing search pattern that they use certainly lends credence to this belief. I came across an interesting paper by Lucia Jacobs and Emily Liman that deals with this subject, published in 1991 in *ANIMAL BEHAVIOUR* 41:103-110, and titled "Gray squirrels remember the locations of buried nuts".

In this study, captive squirrels were released one at a time in caged areas and allowed to bury nuts. After a delay of two, four, or twelve days, they were returned to the area and watched as they retrieved the cached nuts. Although they did dig up some nuts buried by other squirrels, they retrieved significantly more nuts from their own caches than from those of other squirrels, no matter what the delay in returning to the site.



1991-12-14

Until a few years ago the Parks Dept. had an employee newsletter "Time Out". For whatever reason it took a permanent time out. The Parks Dept. is decentralized in four geographic Areas, being North, East, South, and Centre/West. With the disappearance of Time Out, they began publishing their own newsletters, such as Northern News. Recently, management decided to go with a single Department-wide newsletter again, and as part of this, held a contest for a title for the newsletter. I entered, of course. The Dept.'s slogan is "Adventure Us" and the mascot is Recky Raccoon, so I calculated that titles incorporating one of these two would have a better chance of winning. There were 35 entries; I submitted 18, as follow.

The Adventure Us Reporter	The Adventure Us Eyeopener
The New Calgary Eyeopener	The Parks & Rec Eyeopener
The Green Scene	The Adventure Us Life
Adventure Us People	Adventure Us Times
The Parker and Recky Report	The Arboreal Advocate
Departmental Ditties	The Adventure Us Department
Forests and Leisure	The Weedy Bunch
Green Adventures	Flowers and Fun
Tree-mendous News	The Good Leaf

Thursday last, my boss told me to be at the depot for a pleasant surprise, which turned out to be a visit from Recky Raccoon and the downtown person (I've forgotten her name) responsible for the newsletter. I won the contest with "Adventure Us Times". For this, I will get my picture in the newsletter posing with Recky outside the Mapleridge depot, with my prize in hand (literally, as it was a hand puppet of Recky Raccoon, dressed in a size 2 t-shirt with the Dept. slogan on it).

I had to visit my brother this weekend on family business, and so took along the Recky hand puppet for little Calandra. The t-shirt fit her perfectly, and as soon as

she saw the Recky puppet on my hand, she ran across the room to me and hugged it. She loves fuzzy animals; she has enough of them already to stock a Toys R Us store.

PUT THE 'X' BACK IN 'XMAS'!

1991-12-26

I went out today for a few shopping errands, braving the crowds looking for Boxing Day bargains. Retail stores had a horrible Christmas season because of the recession supposedly, but I think they keep shooting themselves in the foot with their Boxing Day sales; customers hold off buying in anticipation of reduced prices. If the stores had lower prices all year long without sales, then they might have steadier income. I also needed some bread, but the supermarkets close on Boxing Day, so I had to settle for a three-day-old loaf from a convenience store.

Yesterday I drove up to Red Deer to spend Christmas Day at my parents' house. I had almost forgotten what snow looked like. Calgary is brown and dry, and not until just before Red Deer did I see snow lying on the ground. Red Deer is in the parkland belt outside the reach of chinook winds. We had the usual turkey dinner, my uncle and granduncle also with us.

Since I don't have a television set, the only time I watch it is when I visit my parents or friends. One of our family traditions is to gather around the set and watch the Queen's Christmas message. This year, however, it was pre-empted from its regular time by Gorbachev's resignation speech. Later on in the day I caught part of her message while flipping through the channels with the remote control. Now that Gorbachev is no longer a lightening rod for Yeltsin, it will be interesting to see how long Yeltsin can stay out of trouble. He will no longer have anyone else

[continued next page]

to blame for the troubles of the republics.

I also, for the first time, saw an episode of Star Trek; The Next Generation. I was quite impressed, as it is much better than the original series. I don't approve of Trekkies dressing up as Klingons (they need to get a life of their own), but I do take in the movies as they come out. ST6: The Undiscovered Country was one of the better movies in the series. I still think they made a mistake bringing Spock back to life.

Granduncle Kai Christensen had driven out from Eckville for the day. He is a Dane, having married my mother's aunt Lempi, since deceased. Kai is 86 years old, and still spry enough to get around by himself. Eckville is a small village comprised mostly of pensioners living out their final years in quiet surroundings. It hasn't grown by much since I was born there, and there are very few jobs for young people. They have to move to the big city, have their own business such as a farm, or scrape by as a clerk in the Eckville Co-op. Kai is much in demand at social events. There are so many widows, and so few bachelors, that the unattached males are mobbed at dances.

My father and I were pumping Kai for details about his early life, in between watching Gorbachev. I think we were both aware that all too often we take people for granted and neglect to get the details of their lives until it is too late. Kai told us of how he left Denmark in 1929, coming to Canada to make some money. He was on a boat a fortnight coming across the Atlantic. A friend was so seasick that he jumped ship at Montreal, but Kai and the group he was travelling with continued on their way, taking the train out to western Canada. He spoke no English; I wonder if I would have the courage to go to a foreign land not knowing the language. His first job was on the farm of a Danish couple in the treeless prairie of southern Alberta, near the hamlet of Millicent, which even today is only a cluster of a few

farmhouses and a couple of stores. It was quite some shock to be put down in the wide-open unpopulated plains, after growing up in a densely-crowded European country. It was an irrigation farm. But his employers only spoke Danish with him, so he never had a chance to learn English. After a while, he moved on to Vancouver, where he learned English from the small child of his employer. Eventually he came back to Alberta, working in a small-town hotel. He noticed a woman who worked at a different hotel: she was my grandmother's sister Lempi. They were later married and moved to Eckville to farm.

My earliest memory of their farm is watching Uncle Norman practising his golf swings out in the cow pasture. I can't remember if there were any cows in the field at the time or what their reaction was to this bipedal hitting little white balls in their direction.

Today Canada frowns on uneducated immigrants. All the homestead land is gone, and what the country wants now are educated professionals or investors with lots of money. Our population is kept from declining only by the influx of immigrants. But we need more people in order to stabilize the home markets. Stephen Leacock, the celebrated humourist, was an economist in his day job. He once calculated that if Canada was populated at the same density as Britain, then B.C. alone could hold 50,000,000 people and still have a large wilderness. Alberta and Scotland have about the same population, yet Scotland is only a third the size. The American state of California has more people than all of Canada. I am told that Canada could never support a large population because of our waste lands, and yet California is mostly desert or mountains.

Canada has been spoiled by our tremendous natural wealth, and we have forgotten that true wealth is in the people, not the land.

FROM: Dale Speirs
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CANADA, T2P 2E7

WHY YOU GOT THIS ZINE

TO:

- ___ Noblesse oblige.
- ___ You contributed (this ish).
- ___ You contributed (next ish).
- ___ We trade.
- ___ We should trade. Interested?
- ___ You sent money. Thanks.
- ___ How about a letter of comment?
- ___ This is the last issue you'll
receive unless you Do Something.