

Dpuntia 9.5

Glenmore
Trail →

Heritage
Drive →

Southland
Drive →

↑
Macleod
Trail

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Blackfoot
Trail

↑
Deerfoot
Trail

MAP OF SOUTHEAST CALGARY (REVISED EDITION)

OPUNTIA #9.5

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OPUNTIA is published irregularly by Dale Speirs, Box 6830, Calgary, Alberta, Canada, T2P 2E7. Whole-numbered issues are sercon, .1 issues are reviews, and .5 issues are per-zines. Available for \$1 cash, letter of comment, article (but write first), or trade for your zine.

ART CREDIT: The revised map of southeast Calgary came from a 1983 book THE VLSI DESIGNER'S LIBRARY, edited by John Newkirk and Robert Mathews, and shows a circuit design by Dick Lyon and Llye Smith, who had no idea that it would be perverted to such things. My office is located right on the intersection of Blackfoot Trail and Southland Drive, where the silicon suddenly stops. We are on the "T" of the intersection, and many unaware southbound drivers on Blackfoot suddenly find themselves in our compound and have to make a U-turn to get back out into the road. If I had a dollar for every driver doing a U-turn then I could double my salary (after deductions).

EDITORIAL: First we had an El Niño winter, with shirt-sleeve weather, then we had a Pinatubo summer, with rain until mid-August, at which time we got snow. Since Calgary is a high-altitude city, snow in summer is not unheard of, but it is rather annoying to be wearing parkas in August.

Page 2 of this zine is the last one typed up, mainly because I don't always decide on cover art until the other pages are done. You'll see the anecdotes in this issue begin in April and stretch out to mid-July. OPUNTIA #10.5 will have accounts from early July. Rather than a mish-mash of unrelated items, I try to group things together

so that a continuous story is told in one issue. This ish is moving day and ConVersion, #10.5 will be rodeo and political accounts.

Speaking of politics (notice how smoothly I segue from one subject to the next), it looks like October will have a national referendum on new constitutional proposals. Combined with municipal elections throughout Alberta, it should be a good month for news headlines. I suspect the proposed constitutional amendment will be approved by voters, mainly because they're fed up with listening to the constant stream of news about it and just want some piece and quiet. Canada has a federal Unity Minister; I wonder if any of the Balkan or Slavic republics have similar positions?

One advantage of working for the Parks Dept. is that I can unstress myself a bit by doing an inspection tour of one of the natural areas I look after. Leaning on the railing of a pedestrian bridge over the Bow River, watching a duck and her babies nibbling algae along the shoreline, one realizes that inventories, mower breakdowns, constitutional crises, and other worries of the day don't amount to much in the long run of things. At the opposite end of the bridge, teenagers were jumping off into the water, having the time of their life splashing around. Measuring off 4 km of new pathway to add into the inventory was a miserable job in the rain, but still better than sitting at a desk adding numbers. Pruning in -20°C weather is not the best way to spend a day, but still it is preferred to working all day in a windowless office under fluorescents.

Eighteen years to retirement.

And now the gripping saga of The Day We Moved To A New Depot ...

Tree planting is in full swing. There are several planting crews, mostly doing handplants, as opposed to balled and burlapped or tree spade, both of which require heavy machinery. I don't supervise them directly but since they are planting trees in some of my parks, I keep an eye on what they are doing. One such place was Queen Anne Way, an east-facing ridge overlooking the Bow River and Fish Creek Provincial Park.

The other thing in full swing is house moving. During the last few days of each month, a common sight on Calgary streets is an overloaded pickup truck piled high with household possessions as tenants move from one rental accommodation to another. I fell in behind one such truck as I drove to Queen Anne Way. As we turned the corner into that street, a box on the back of the truck tipped over and began to dribble shoes onto the road. I honked my horn, even as the box fell off completely. The truck pulled over, and a thirtyish lady scrambled out of the passenger seat to pick up the spilled goods. While she was doing so, I drove past her to the park, a block away. I got out and started walking around, checking the newly-planted trees. About the third tree, I noticed the truck had progressed partway down the block but stopped a second time, a different and bigger box having fallen off the back end. It must have been heavy, for the driver had to get out and help his wife reload the box. I checked another tree, then turned to see how the truck was doing. The woman was now riding on the back of the truck as it moved down the street. This time the problem was solved; she was lying spreadeagled on top of the boxes, clutching them for dear life.

SO LET ME TELL YOU ABOUT MY MOVING DAY

I was transferred to the Mapleridge maintenance depot in November 1991. I had worked there ten years earlier, and came back to find it much more crowded. The depot is lo-

cated in the Mapleridge Golf Course compound and is shared between Parks Maintenance and the Golf Course staff. When I left ten years ago, Parks Maintenance used 75% of the garage, all but a couple of the panabodes (skid-mounted shacks designed to be moveable from place to place by crane truck) and an ATCO office trailer. On my return we still had the trailer but were out of the garage and had lost two panabodes, all to the Golf Course.

Meanwhile, we had a new depot, for Parks Maintenance only, under construction at the intersection of Southland Drive and Blackfoot Trail. The building is a three bay garage. Because of budget cuts during the design stage, the office and lunchroom space are too small and the washrooms inadequate. The Corporation of the City of Calgary always takes the lowest bid on a tender, and as a result, the last few depots built were done by shaky contractors who bid below cost, trying to stay in business. They went bankrupt anyway, which is what happened with the new depot. The Corporation called in the performance bonds so taxpayers didn't lose any money, but completion of construction was delayed.

The new depot was to have been occupied July 1991, but construction of the parking lot was held up due to problems installing the sewers. When lot construction began in October 1991, winter immediately set in, and the building was empty all winter. We couldn't move in our panabodes until the lot was prepared, and we couldn't use the yard because the security fence wasn't in. We have snow to late May in Calgary because of the high altitude, further delaying lot construction. It will be done in June 1992. Worse yet, the Golf Course expanded to 18 holes last year, so they want us out because part of the compound will be converted to extra golfer parking. The south end of the compound has already been sawed off for a pathway connecting the new holes, and the north end will become a parking lot, with a fuel shack and a berm to be removed.

THEY DON'T MAKE THEM LIKE THEY USED TO

1992-5-25

At the north end of the old depot was the concrete fuel shack. It had to be removed to make way for the expansion of the Golf Course. The fuel shack had a reinforced concrete slab floor and roof and cinder-block walls. It contained two large fuel tanks, one for diesel and the other for gasoline. These tanks were filled by tanker truck once a week, so we told the truck to eliminate it from the list. We then filled up every vehicle we could find, trying to empty the tanks before the shack's demolition. Still fuel in them, so we filled every spare can. Still fuel in the diesel tank, so we filled the Golf Course bulk tank by hand, lugging diesel in cans from one tank to the other. Finally, even as the contractor was waiting for us, sitting in his Bobcat skid-steer loader, we emptied the diesel tank.

The two bulk tanks sat inside the shack on metal shelves, up tight against the ceiling. There were horizontal pipes on their tops, leading outside where the fuel truck used them to fill the tanks. The shack was built more than twenty years ago (I found some old fuel slips inside from 1972) and the pipes were frozen with rust. We couldn't move the tanks because the pipes penetrating the concrete wall held them. Trying to unscrew the pipes by hand was impossible because the threads were rusted. The Bobcat operator clawed the pipes outside with a toothed bucket, and loosened them enough such that we could turn them by hand and remove them.

LUCKY THING OUR SAFETY OFFICER WASN'T THERE AT THE TIME

Next step was to widen the door to get the tanks out. The Bobcat had a hydraulic jackhammer, and soon knocked out enough of the wall to get the tanks out. Diesel is not hazardous but gasoline vapours are 147 times more explosive than dynamite. What we had here were two tanks tight against the ceiling, one of which was filled with gaso-

line vapours, plus a mixture of gas and diesel slopping about on the floor in puddles. The Bobcat could not reach into the shack as far as the tanks with its forklift attachment, and in any event it wouldn't be able to lift the tanks off their metal shelves because of the low ceiling. The only course of action was to drag the tanks and stands as a single unit forward through the puddles of fuel to the opening in the wall, then hand lift the tanks onto the Bobcat's forks. It could then back out with the tank.

Neither the Bobcat operator or myself were too thrilled about this procedure. The metal legs scraping on the concrete floor as they were dragged forward gave a high probability of sparks, igniting the vapours or spilled fuel. Next to the shack was a loam pile, so I borrowed a shovel from the operator and covered the floor of the shack with 3 cm of loam. That soaked up the puddles of fuel and covered the tips of the metal legs where sparks would occur. The Bobcat operator hooked up the longest set of chains he had between the gas tank and the Bobcat. His machine had been running with an open cab, but he put all the doors and windows back on for protection. Any explosion would be funneled by the concrete walls directly at him. Me, I stood to the side as far back as possible.

Slowly he pulled on the stand, and brought it to the opening in the wall. He then put the forks against the stand. The two of us crowded inside the shack and carefully slid the tank off the stand onto the forks. From there it was easy. The diesel tank wasn't so bad, although I did jam my hand sliding it onto the forks.

Having put the tanks and stands elsewhere in the compound, the Bobcat operator took off the forklift and put the jackhammer back on. He punched some holes into the walls, wrapped a chain through them, and attached the chain to his tandem-axle truck. A couple of yanks and the wall collapsed. The procedure was repeated a

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second time. By now the concrete slab roof was supported by next to nothing but it still wouldn't come down. More jackhammer work. And finally the whole building collapsed into rubble.

We are now without a fuel shack, probably all summer, as the new depot hasn't had one built yet. My assistant foreman who looks after the mowing machines is carrying two bulk tanks on the back of his pickup truck, one for gasoline and the other for diesel. Not a perfect solution since the tanks are smaller and because he is driving about all day, making it harder for the machines to find fuel.

THINGS TO COME

1992-5-26

Found a natural area I didn't know I had, along the east bank of the Bow River, between the river and the new suburb of Douglasdale. I was given a copy of an old citizen complaint about beavers cutting down trees, and told to check the area about once a week. Last year, a Parks crew wrapped chicken wire around a number of trees to stop the beavers cutting them down. Not all of them were wrapped but the beavers seem inactive at the moment and no new damage was seen. Beavers don't seem that efficient, as there were several snags, where the beaver dropped the tree away from the river and hung it up on other trees. Some fallen trees were left where they were lying on the ground and are now resprouting.

Douglasdale is gradually expanding toward the river, and although the natural area is preserved as a park, it is beginning to suffer. The rocks covered with orange lichen are turned over or kicked about, or the lichen is crushed or scraped by people walking over it. There are paved pathways through the park, but people go off onto the turf. The turf is compacted by pedestrian traffic, killing wildflowers and providing a habitat for dandelions, which are already starting to move in. Purple vetch is

in flower right now, but the carpet of purple is gradually thinning out each spring. They'll be relicts in a few years.

I saw a redheaded woodpecker at its nest in a standing dead tree trunk. It too will be gone in a few years. It and many other forms of life need old snags and standing dead trunks for habitat, but picnickers are burning the dead wood in illegal firepits throughout the park. The logs and branches lying on the ground are starting to disappear. Once the easily accessible deadwood is gone, partyers will push over dead trees and burn them. In a few years there will be no dead wood in the park. Nor will there be woodpeckers or the type of insects found in decaying logs.

A homeowner came by the pathway where I was parked, and noting the Parks decal on the truck, stopped to talk. He was concerned about the beavers; I told him we might wrap a few more trees later this summer. He mentioned it would be a shame for centuries-old trees to be cut down. I corrected him on that, as the trees are not more than about twenty or thirty years old. It is a popular misconception that all large trees are ancient, but even a one-metre diameter poplar is only about 75 years old. This misconception arises from hearing about ancient sequoias or oaks that were planted when Shakespeare was a young lad. But in Calgary, large elms or poplars are seldom more than fifty or sixty years old.

Like other new suburbs, Douglasdale is littered with signs announcing "Future School" or "Future Park". What is funny is the sign that proudly proclaimed that here was a future bus stop. Douglas Range Road has nothing to do with the fact that this used to be a cattle ranch. Rather, the road terminates at a golf driving range. The suburb got its name because from a few high spots it is possible to see the Douglas mountains along the front of the Rockies.

LET ME TELL YOU ABOUT MY BOOK

1992-5-29

To the printers today, to drop off OPUNTIA 8.1 and pick up my book HISTORY OF THE CALGARY PHILATELIC SOCIETY. The book is softcover, illustrated throughout, and 64 pages. 250 copies were printed; the actual cost was \$4.60 a copy but the club is selling it for \$2 each (plus \$2 for postage). In the unlikely event that anyone is interested, you can send \$4 to my address, cheque or money order payable to the Calgary Philatelic Society. The book is being sold at a low cost in order to ensure it is distributed as widely as possible. If my house ever burns down, the CPS Archives will go with it, but the book will ensure that the history of the club won't be lost. The CPS can afford the subsidy; it has a \$30,000 annual cash flow and \$27,000 in term deposits. It puts on two shows a year at no admission charge, and provides numerous other services to members. All of this because of good organization and a willingness for new people to learn from old members. Now you see why I have no patience with those who say it would be a terrible thing for fandom to be organized or learn from Garth Spencer's histories.

THE BEGINNING OF THE END

1992-6-1

The surveyors arrived today to measure out the north end of the Mapleridge compound. We moved an aerifier and the old fuel tanks to another compound until we can get rid of them. The metal shelves the tanks sat on have been washed and set aside; we'll use them as shelving in the new depot. Meanwhile, at the new depot, the contractors are frantically paving, trying to get the top lift down. As they do so, another contractor is installing the landscaping, and I can see problems with the trees already. One tree is planted about 1 m from the curb on Southland Drive, guaranteed to receive road salt in the winter, but it was also planted on a steep berm. One side of the tree well is 15 cm deep; the other side is 60 cm deep.

AN EXERCISE IN FUTILITY

1992-6-2

Work started on the north end of Mapleridge compound. The security fence has been removed so that the berm surrounding the compound can be dug out, several days work for the big payloaders. Tandem-axle trucks shuttle between the compound and the dump site where landfill from the berm is being hauled. The north end of the compound is fenceless and wide open. The compound gate is on the southwest corner. As I locked it up on my way home, it struck me as a rather pointless gesture.

DOWN TO THE WIRE

1992-6-4

I met my boss Harold at the new Southland depot to see where everything should go. Today is Thursday; we have been told to move in Monday. Paving is completed but landscaping is still underway, and the inside of the building is a mess because the contractor is using it for storage. But the foreman promises to be out before Monday, and have the place cleaned up. Security fences are still going up, but will be inadequate since the design architect ordered them too short and without any barbed wire on the top. Any child could scale the fence in ease. Personally I favour a law which requires every architect to live in or use the building he/she designed, at least for a few months. And I like to think that a special place in hell is reserved for landscape designers who put shrubs underneath an eaves, where no moisture will ever go, or plant trees with the roots 30 cm above ground level. But on Monday, all staff report to Southland, even though everything is still at Mapleridge. Foremen are required to report fifteen minutes early, so we'll get a ride from a Pest Control truck over to Mapleridge, pick up our own trucks, rush back to Southland, get the crews, and spend the day moving. (Pest Control starts work 04h00 because there is no wind after midnight; they can spray without drift concerns.)

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Harold and I discussed where to put the panabodes. The Southland depot is overlooked by houses, so we'll have to be careful not to incur the wrath of homeowners. The 40 m³ rolloff garbage bin will go on the far side of the compound from the houses to avoid odour complaints. Panabodes will line up along the south side. My present office, an ATCO trailer, will go next to the panabodes as a lunchroom for smokers; the building is off limits for tobacco addicts.

Every five or so years, the Parks Dept. rekeys all locks as a security measure. We are changing to new locks in a week or so, but fortunately not during the move, which would be a nightmare. The worst problem about changing to new locks is getting the keys to the shift people, who work evenings and weekends on the mowing machines. (Parks runs its mowers six days a week, twelve hours a day, to keep up with the spring growth of grass.) We'll cross the bridge when we come to it.

IT STARTED OFF WELL ENOUGH

1992-6-8

George, from Pest Control, met us at 06h45 at the new depot, and gave us a ride to pick up our trucks at the old depot. Back to the new depot, picked up the crews, who start at 07h00, about face, and back to the old place to empty out the panabodes. Everything was stored in the new building until the panabodes are moved by crane truck to their new location.

Well, there was one small delay. When we had arrived at work 06h30, the front door wouldn't unlock. Fortunately the back door unlocked okay. Since we're changing to new locks in a week or so, we'll let that ride.

Two crewcabs, one pickup, and a one-ton truck to haul the stuff over in several round trips.

FERTILIZER? WHAT FERTILIZER?

The 88 bags (1 tonne) of tree fertilizer that I was told to expect at the old depot at 10h45. The driver of the 1-ton went there to have it unloaded directly onto her truck. I was there cleaning out my office. No sign of fertilizer. The man from Alberta Government Telephones came by and disconnected our phone. No sign of fertilizer. We helped the Golf Course staff do some of their work. No sign of fertilizer. One of my crew foremen showed up and told me the fertilizer had just been unloaded at the new depot.

MEANWHILE ...

The landscape contractor has moved out of the building but is still at work on the grounds surrounding the new depot. They hydroseeded the berm behind where we will be lining up the panabodes. Hydroseed is a mixture of grass seed and green dye fired from a high-pressure water cannon mounted on top of a water tanker truck. It is used in seeding large areas such as playfields or freeway boulevards, and, in this case, steep berms. The contractor is still busy planting trees and loaming the rest of the grounds, but is out of our way.

SNAFU

The crane truck to move our panabodes was to appear at 12h00. It showed at 12h30 but without the spreader bar which had been ordered. I sent the driver away to get it, and half an hour later he returned. The spreader bar is need to avoid crushing the panabode when the crane lifts it off the ground and swings it onto the back of the truck. Two large straps are wrapped around the panabode and hooked to the crane. If the crane were

to lift up as is, the straps would squeeze the panabode, splintering it into firewood. The crane instead hooks on to a heavy I-beam wider than the panabode, and the straps connect to the ends of the beam. This keeps the straps away from the sides of the panabode and allow it to be lifted safely.

WHAT, MORE FERTILIZER?

Just as the crane truck was depositing the first panabode at the new depot, I received a call that our long-awaited turf fertilizer was arriving. This would, of course, be on our busiest day of the year. Eight tonnes showed up on a semi-trailer, and both crews unloaded the bags into the panabode.

Meanwhile, we had called our propane supplier to come and move the propane tank that heated the office trailer. The tank was delivered to the new depot with no trouble and put in the approximate place where the trailer will go.

THEY'RE DROPPING LIKE FLIES, AREN'T THEY?

Theresa brought in one of her stationed labourers, who was claiming a back injury from pushing a wheelbarrow in the park where he worked. As I received the news, I was trying to put up shelves in my new office, so I threw the paperwork in Theresa's lap.

At the start of work that morning, one of the mowing machine operators, Dave, told us he had mononucleosis, but it shouldn't affect his work. And off he went on his mowing route. About the time Theresa was telling me about a labourer with a bad back, an urgent phone call was sent to us from the South Area office. The lab tests were back on Dave, and he had contagious hepatitis. This meant that

his twenty or so co-workers, myself included, had all been exposed. But the doctor (we immediately phoned the Public Health office) told us that we "probably" would not come down with the disease. Dave was ordered to report to the hospital immediately, we are short a mowing operator, and a machine will sit idle for a day or two at the height of grass growth until we get a new operator.

MEANWHILE, BACK AT THE ~~RANCH~~ DEPOT ...

The office trailer had a nice set of wooden steps which had to be salvaged. Good, solid, and damned heavy. The crew's first task was to un-nail them from the trailer. The 1-ton was then backed up to the steps, the flatdeck hoisted up at an angle, and the entire crew manhandled the thing onto the truck, grunting and sweating all the way. The steps will sit in a corner of the new compound until the trailer is moved there. The trailer was partially embedded in a berm; it's been there decades, and the tires have sunk 15 cm into the ground. The crane truck lifted the trailer out, spun it around so that the hitch is facing into the yard, and left it for someone else to move tomorrow. The crane truck still has panabodes to move, and in any event doesn't have a hitch.

OVERTIME

An hour's worth, as we get the last panabode into its new home. The day has been hot and sunny; I've been drenched in sweat all day. It would be the day I wore a polyester shirt. The garage of the new building is piled high with tools, machines, and junk we'll have to get sorted out this coming week. Some of it went into the panabodes, some will stay in the garage, some of it will go into the garbage.

The second day was a bit smoother. Because the crews were behind on their schedule, they spent the morning and mid-day on parks maintenance. In the afternoon, when temperatures were about 30°C, they sorted and put away all the stuff at the new depot. Just as hot as in the parks, but they can get cold water to drink anytime. The place now looks clean and presentable.

I went with Dan, my equipment foreman, down to Central Stores to see what we could find for furniture. The two crew foremen are in the loft, and Dan and I will share the office on the main floor. Central Stores collects unwanted furniture from city departments and gives it out to other departments who need it. We picked up a nice L-shaped desk which was intended to go upstairs for one of the crew foreman. It wouldn't fit, so it is now in my office. Although it gives me more surface area to spread my papers, it has fewer drawers. My battered wooden desk was shoved over and is now Dan's desk. Since I don't have enough drawer space, I'm using one drawer of his desk as well, the one immediately adjacent to my desk.

Dan and I also picked up a credenza for our office, but it wouldn't fit, so it went upstairs. I spent a bit of time programming the new telephones, but they have only a few options, and speed-dialing is the only one we needed. I've ordered a 10 m cord so we can put one of the phones in the loft. No plug-ins upstairs either, so extension cords dangle everywhere. Since the lunchroom was built too small, we've split it into several parts. Downstairs, next to my office, we put in couches and coffee tables, a parting gift from Mapleridge Golf Course, who were renovating their clubhouse. It makes an unusual change from all the other depots, which have battered tables and benches that make them look like factory canteens. This lunchroom looks like a doctor's waiting room. Our equipment trainer, who works out of Midnapore depot, came by to see the new place, and remarked that we had the first

foreman's office with a lobby.

Upstairs, a few benches and tables will hold a few more people at break time. The roof is very low, like an attic, so if you stand up quickly in the wrong place, you'll knock yourself unconscious against the ceiling.

My old office trailer was brought over this morning by the four-ton garbage truck and lined up next to the panabodes. It has a few chairs and a tiny table, and will serve as the smoker's lunchroom. We have a picnic table beside the building, which is popular in sunny weather like we're having now.

I started to sort out my files, as during the move the crew had turned the file cabinet upside-down while the files were still inside.

The specifications for the parking lot gate were altered halfway through construction. The original gates are now leaning against one of the garage bay doors, with no place to go. I've phoned the Fencing foreman and asked him to take them away to his compound; he can use them elsewhere or cannibalize them for parts. All the mowing machines plus our only gas-powered crewcab park inside the garage. The rest of the trucks are propane, and cannot be parked inside buildings. The reason for this nuisance regulation can be illustrated by a fire this winter, when a taxicab was parked inside a garage by the cabby. It was cold out when the propane tank had been filled. The warm garage caused expansion of the propane, which opened the safety valve. The excess propane was vented, then ignited by the garage furnace. An explosion occurred which demolished taxicab, garage, and pieces of neighbouring properties.

Lots of minor deficiencies in the building, but still better than what we had before. I'm making a list of racks and cupboards to be built; we'll see if we get the money.

MAY YOU LIVE IN EXCITING TIMES

1992-6-10

Day Three of the new depot, and it almost was christened in blood. The landscape company is still putting on the finishing touches to the grounds. Duncan, the owner, was using our workbench to cut six pieces of small rebar, a type of iron rod used in reinforcing concrete. I was in my office doing paperwork. Duncan was cutting the rebar with a carborundum circular blade mounted on a power drill. I heard a bang, then a loud shout, followed by moaning. Going into the garage, I saw Duncan doubled up in pain, clutching his groin. He hobbled about crying in agony. The saw blade had shattered on the sixth rebar, and some of the fragments struck full force on his crotch and thigh. His helper and I managed to calm him down a bit. He went into the washroom and dropped his pants to see how bad the damage was. Fortunately no blood drawn; the heavy denim cloth of his jeans probably saved him. My first aid kit was not required. The pain crippled Duncan for about an hour. He gradually recovered, and by afternoon was back at work again, albeit somewhat subdued.

The story came out later that day. The saw blade had been used to cut the tops level on the pipes of the chainlink fence. The employee used it at head height, held directly in front of his face. When he noticed the blade wobbling he stopped using it, and told Duncan. Duncan agreed it was unsafe. But a little later, he had to make six cuts on some rebar, and figured the blade should last that long before being thrown away. He guessed wrong. Two of the blade fragments were found at the opposite end of the garage, one piece was where he had been cutting, and a quarter of the blade had disintegrated into fine powder. It could have been worse, as a slight change in the angle might have sent the blade into his eyes.

The trouble with experience is that the test comes first and the lesson afterwards.

RAIN, RAIN, GO AWAY

1992-6-15

Today is Monday. The weekend just concluded was the wettest in Calgary history, two days of heavy drizzle that swamped basements all over the city. My basement tends to leak anyway, although the water only flows harmlessly across the concrete floor of the undeveloped half and into the sewer drain. I've been doing work around the house foundations on the outside and over a period of years have reduced the problem somewhat.

I went downstairs in the new depot first thing, and to no particular surprise discovered that this brand new building leaks like a sieve. No accumulation of water, as it too flows into a drain. During construction, a number of holes were punched in the wall for utility pipes, and now all of them leak. In fact, the heaviest flow of water was over the electrical meter, but the box the meter is in is watertight. For now. I phoned the higher-ups and they will send an engineer out to look at the problem.

Winter should be fun. I wonder what the heating system will be like?

A pruner position is opening up, and various of our employees who indicated an interest are being asked to provide proof of training. Miva, one of the stationed labourers, supplied me with her horticultural diploma. It's in Polish, and could be a birth certificate for all that any of us could tell. We'll have to trust her on this one, I guess.

OVER AT THE STAMP CLUB

1992-6-17

My book HISTORY OF THE CALGARY PHILATELIC SOCIETY made its debut at the general meeting a couple of weeks ago, and I sold 37 copies. The club also has two auctions a month, one of which was tonight. The auctions get a different crowd than the meetings, so I took a batch of

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books to sell. A tougher crowd though, as I only disposed of seven copies. While waiting for the infrequent customer, I noticed the auctions director talking with Henry, my brain-damaged old schoolmate. Henry was showing his chequebook to the director, and it was obvious from across the room that he was being chastised. Since I was standing next to the auctioneer who calls the lots, I asked him what was going on. Jim told me that Henry is the biggest spender in the club, buying as much as \$500 a night at the auction. Where he gets the money I don't know; he must have a disability pension and may have some kind of help from family. But he gets carried away in the bidding, so what the auction committee does is they find out how much money he has to spend, then cuts him off after he has exceeded his limit.

THE 50¢ GUIDED TOUR OF DOUGLASDALE FLOWERS

1992-6-18

In Alberta, the best time to see wildflowers in bloom is about now, late June or early July. The dandelions were out in full force in May but are about done; they have a secondary bloom in August. The poplar fluff season opens in a week or two, to be followed by the foxtail barley. I rather like foxtail barley, as its seedheads are spikey and annoying to dogs. (I used to like dogs before I began with the Parks Dept., but after fourteen years of side-stepping dog droppings in parks heartily dislike them and their owners.)

I was back down at the Douglasdale natural area along the Bow River. The river level is up about 1 m because of the record rainfall over the last week. It isn't up any higher because the rest of the water filled up so many basements, I suppose. The potentilla bushes are in bloom, a background of small yellow flowers against the pink wild roses are set. (The wild rose is Alberta's official floral emblem.) Purple asters are here and white achillea is found in disturbed areas.

At the entrance to the park, the pathway is lined with black henbane, in full bloom with cream-coloured flowers nodding from the tips of each branch. Speckled about is blue-eyed grass, and along the riverbank I saw a plant of gaillardia, a large-flowered red and yellow daisy. A sprinkling of blue throughout the grass, coming from the blooms of wild flax. Buttercups in moister areas, white anemones in shaded places.

I strolled down a footpath that tunnelled through alders arching overhead. The distant sound of hammering floated across the river from the other side, where new homes are going up in Diamond Cove. It is not on a cove, but rather sits on the edge of a high cliff. No diamonds, either.

CONVERSION 9

1992-7-17

And so to Calgary's annual SF con, held at the Westin Hotel downtown. Today is the Friday of the con. Parked my car at Chinook LRT station. A bit of a wait for the train, but I spent my time observing the behaviour of house sparrows in the station. The passenger platform is enclosed, with open ends for the trains. The inside of roof is a lattice of beams and wires, upon which all the sparrows were spaced with geometric precision. Each of them defended territory with song; the chirping was deafening. One of them sat on the trains' overhead power line, reminding me of the old joke about how a bird sitting on an energized line is safe as long as it doesn't put one foot on the ground. A frequent cause of power outages in Calgary is some hapless animal, usually a squirrel, climbing on transformers or switches. Utility poles carry telephone and cable TV lines down low, and power lines at the top of the poles. Most squirrels only climb as high as the telephone line and travel on it. But there are always a few inquisitive souls who want to explore and end up crispy fried. There Are Things That Squirrels Were Never Meant To Know.

TELL THE OLD, OLD STORY

Arrived downtown and stopped at the Public Library to peruse the philatelic newspapers to see if my book HISTORY OF THE CALGARY PHILATELIC SOCIETY had been reviewed. Not yet, so off to ConVersion. I had preregistered and went through the registration area in about ninety seconds. Sat down to read the program book and was almost immediately interrupted by Cath Jackel and Dave Panchyk, fresh off the boat from Edmonton. After a brief conversation, I resumed reading the program book and discovered that all is not well. Two pages of depressing news about why the con is in trouble. It is a familiar story. Most of the faithful servitors on the concom are burning out after six or eight years of work. Gafiation is underway, with difficulty in getting recruits to take over.

A brief encounter with Garth Spencer, discussing his Van-fanhistory. Part Two of it was in OPUNTIA 9, which I took to the printers this morning before coming downtown. It was still early for the con, which didn't officially open for another few hours. The dealer bourse had a few places set up, but most were still to come and the tables had signs indicating who was sitting where. One sign announced "Garth Spensor". I met up with Catherine Girczyc, who had edited the final issue of NEOLOGY. She mentioned that many Edmontonian BNFs were moving towards prodcom. The prozine ON SPEC, published in that city, has had a tremendous influence on the fannish community. The idea I get is that fandom there has diverged into several directions, some remaining resolutely fannish and going to SCA, Star Trek, etc., and others are looking to make a career of it.

The ConVersion Opening Ceremonies started at 18h30. This was an excellent ceremony, the kind I like, namely brief; it was over in ten minutes. Conchair was Cris Hall; she introduced the concom and GoHs. David Brin (GoH) and Peter David (Toastmaster) both had their wives and newborn kids with them; the little ones got a round of applause.

While wandering about ConVersion, I was astounded to meet one of my coworkers from the Parks Dept.. Jack is a Pest Control Foreman; he and I have worked together for more than ten years. Yet neither of us knew the other was interested in SF. Even more amazing, Jack has been to every ConVersion and I've only missed a couple, yet we had never crossed paths until today.

It is easy to see how we didn't know about each other. I seldom mention SF to outsiders because the invariable response is "Oh, you like that Star Trek stuff?". (No one says "that Buck Rogers stuff"; he became extinct a long time ago.) When I do tell someone about my interest, I immediately add that I am only a literary fan and avoid the media types.

Further to the coincidence, on Saturday I attended a panel on SETI put on by Grant Gussie, a University of Calgary academic. Grant and I know each other from the Calgary Aquarium Society, and again, neither of us knew about the other having an SF interest.

FRIDAY PANELS

The first panel I attended was a Smart Tech demo of the large screen computer, with a freestanding white board that could be written on with a fingertip. Two boards were hooked together to show how they could be used for teleconferencing; as you wrote on one board, the other board reproduced the display. About \$19000, in case anyone is interested.

The "Alchemy as SF" was poorly attended, but I think if more people had known what it was going to be like, then the room would have been packed. The talk was given by a U of C English Dept. professor Stan B?????. I didn't get his full name because the con badges had everybody in ordinary type, done with a dead ribbon, so even if you

were standing on the person's toes, you still had trouble reading it. I noticed that I wasn't the only one squinting at nametags to see who I was talking to. I even did that to Garth Spencer because he had a doppleganger walking around the con.

In any event, Prof. B.'s talk was on medieval SF, more specifically how three fictional accounts published in the 1500s developed into the Rosicrucians. These books were speculations by alchemists on what alchemy could do if it could do what people hoped it would. Since burning at the stake was a popular pasttime, these books were written as Christian allegory to avoid heresy charges. A flood of people wrote in to journals of the day accepting this fiction as fact, and asking to become a part of it. Their offers were never taken up for the obvious reason that the Rosicrucian society was fiction. Isolated believers therefore got together and formed their own groups, which is why you see those advertisements for California Rosicrucians in all the magazines. A dialogue developed during the centuries between believers trying to smooth out inconsistencies in their system. Prof. B. compared this to Niven's RINGWORLD novels. After Niven published the first novel, he got letters from readers pointing out a number of errors, and as a result he wrote the second novel to take care of these points. Dialogue between readers and authors is rare in literature. We take it for granted in SF, but in many genres, authors never get much contact with their readers. Rosicrucian thought developed by such a dialogue.

SATURDAY

1992-7-18

The video room had a miscellany of movies. A fair amount of anime (Japanese animation) was shown. This was new to me, and I found it interesting in small doses. I can see why so many people like it, as the quality of the animation is much better than the usual American Saturday cartoons, and the subject matter is a bit more intelligent.

I also watched the movie THIS ISLAND EARTH, which contains my all-time favourite line: "Let's plug it in and see what happens.".

SETI

Grant Gussie started off this nicely-presented panel by calculating the probability of other sentient life, using a formula with umpteen variables, but in a final analysis controlled only by one, the lifetime of a civilization. He discussed character traits of sentient life. Such life is probably using exothermic metabolism, aerobic, airbreathing, heterotrophic (not photosynthetic; it is more efficient to gain energy by eating plants or animals), carnivorous or omnivorous (vegetarians please note that herbivory is an intellectual deadend), social, have equivalents of hands, have senses, able to communicate by sound (line of sight is required for visual methods), must know physics and mathematics, live on crowded planets, and don't look like us.

One difficulty in colonizing the galaxy is that such a civilization would have to be able to switch from a stable population (starships in transit) to a growing population (colonies), something that is hard to do. And forget about jackboot SF; interstellar societies are no threat to us or vice versa.

ZINES

The ON SPEC crowd had a strong presence at the con. I usually buy my copies at a bookstore, but such distribution seems to have ceased, and I missed the two most recent issues. Not to worry, as I bought them at the dealer bourse, where ON SPEC had a table manned (personed?) by Cath Jackel. From her I also took a year's subscription to the zine. If you are interested, the

cost is C\$14.98 or US\$14 (overseas US\$21) payable to ON SPEC, Box 4727, Edmonton, Alberta, T6E 5G6.

I took a bunch of OPUNTIA back issues to the con for distribution at the freebie table. They all went, but I know from previous experience at this and other cons that no new loccers are to be expected. But on the other hand, I don't see any copies thrown into the garbage later, so I assume that people are actually reading them. I do all this not so much for myself as to let neos out there be aware that fanzines exist, and there is an alternative to paying money for mediazines. One thing I don't do, however, is distribute the latest issue at a con. I have better things to do than carry a bundle of zines around and scrutinize faces in the crowd just to save postage on a few copies. What also happens is that the recipient is busy at the con and just jams the zine into a bag to be forgotten or lost.

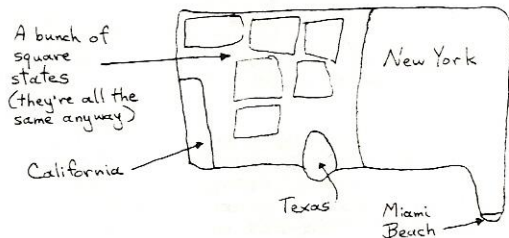
ART SHOW

Much the same as always, with the usual dragons, Star Trek, and barbarians waving swords under a night sky with impossible configurations of planets. And, as always, I found that Adrian Kleinbergen had the best work and the freshest ideas. He seems pretty much into 3-D works by now. He won the category "Best Corporate Advertising Of The Future" with a miniature tank about waist high. I couldn't read the handwriting on one exhibit, but it was a jewel-encrusted book with a half-section of a skull mounted on it. Another collage he titled "Evidence Of Early Java Man", which showed fossil bones, skull, and coffee cup embedded in a matrix.

Alberta cons always seem to have original artwork on display as used for magazine illos. Robert Pasternak had the original painting "Thorns and Petals" which was used on page 83 of the July 1991 AMAZING, excepting that the illo was mirror-reversed.

SPEECH, SPEECH!

Toastmaster of the GoH speeches was Peter David, and a novelist by name of David Brin sitting next to him. As many Canadians are as ignorant of American geography as vice versa, Peter David helped us out by drawing a map as below. He also led us through a diction lesson and taught us the proper way to pronounce the name of his home, that is, Nyawk.



After this, he went on to tell us how at a con Isaac Asimov had told the audience to applaud everytime they heard the word "Isaac". Peter went on to say that he was much too modest to do such a thing himself, so instead of having us applaud "Peter", he told us to clap hands everytime he said "David", in honour of the GoH. Peter then gave an hilarious speech in which he mentioned his full name many times to applause, but only referred to the GoH as "Mr. Brin".

Peter David (applause) then finished up after all the speeches by telling the audience that they too could be toastmasters. In fact, just to help them out, he offered a free starter kit. Having said this, he then began tossing slices of bread into the audience.

ARE THESE THE DARK AGES?

1992-7-19

This was the last panel I attended. It was held in the third of three rooms side-by-side. At the far end was a different panel, and in the middle room was a Wiccan ritual. This ritual involved lowering the lights in the room but since the light switch controlled all three rooms, a problem arose. When the Dark Ages panel started, the question was immediately answered in the affirmative, as the room was plunged into total blackness. We carried on anyway, but it was like being in a disco, as the witches next door kept fiddling with the lights, and we were alternatively blinded by light or blinded by dark at frequent intervals.

AND IN THE END ...

422 people paid their way into the con, according to a concom member. The final result was about a \$1400 profit. I had a good time in my own way. Met up with a few of my loccers and can now put a face to the name Paula Johanson. Picked up a bit of gossip from others and drew my own conclusions while observing the courting behaviour of certain individuals, but as this is a respectable zine I shall not tattle. I never did get to the second floor where the gamers, Trekkies, Whovians, and such were.

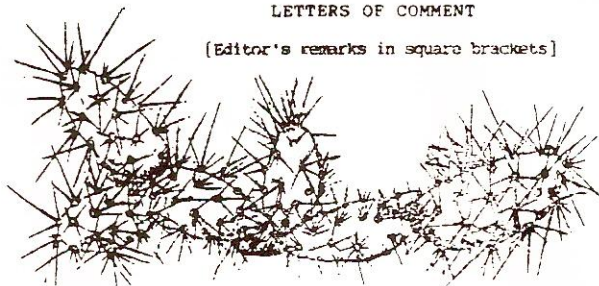
RAIN, RAIN, GO AWAY

1992-7-23

It has been the wettest summer in decades. A while back, I mowed my yard on Thursday evening and it needed cutting again by Monday morning. At work, we have our mowing machines cutting six days a week, but still had to hire four more machines from private contractors. The water trucks, on the other hand, have been laid off for weeks, and their drivers are getting desperate. It could be worse; I could be living in Vancouver.

LETTERS OF COMMENT

[Editor's remarks in square brackets]



FROM: Steve George
642 Ingersoll Street
Winnipeg, Manitoba R3G 2J4

1992-6-24

I read a book a few years back, THE INDEPENDENT SCHOLAR'S HANDBOOK by Ronald Gross, subtitled "How to Turn Your Interest in Any Subject into Expertise", in which Gross suggests one way of becoming an acknowledged expert is to pick a subject nobody seems to be interested in and explore it for all it's worth. His primary thesis is that scholarship and research is possible and worthwhile outside the scope of university and academia. His other thesis is that such scholarship will lead the scholar in question to a fuller life.

[This is certainly true in many hobbies such as astronomy where amateurs get in more observing time than the pros. Likewise I've made a name for myself publishing on aquarium fish, philately, and succulent plants, all without a hassle of teaching, committee meetings, and peer review.]

FROM: Buck Coulson
2677W-500N
Hartford City, Indiana 47348

1992-6-24

Eight tons of leaves per day seems an incredible amount, considering the weight of the average leaf. I well believe you have a lot of trees in the city.

[The computer inventory has about 300,000 trees, whether parks, boulevard, or residential. Not bad considering the natural condition of the land is treeless plains.]

Hotels expect everyone to patronize their bars. A southern Indiana convention, Confabulation, just lost its hotel because the fans didn't spend enough in the bar. It's going not only to a different hotel, but to a different town.

Some people still use rolls of paper to type on, though not to save on postage. When I first met Gene DeWeese, his mother worked for the local newspaper and brought home the stub ends of the huge paper rolls used by the newspaper, and Gene put a wire rack on the back of his typewriter to hold the roll. I acquired some paper rolls somewhere, probably the bookbindery where I was working, and, inspired by Gene's example, did the same thing. Gene claimed to have written a letter six feet long; I never did that well. (Nobody who knows Gene today would believe that he ever had that much to say to anybody.)

The USA may be up for some changes yet. A referendum on separating northern California from southern and making a new state out of it is on the November ballot. Counties in Kansas, Oklahoma, and Texas are talking about seceding from their parent states and forming a new state. Ten years ago, one county in Michigan voted to secede and join Indiana, but nothing came of it.

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FROM: Harry Warner Jr.
423 Summit Avenue
Hagerstown, Maryland 21740

1992-6-28

I was intrigued to learn that the Douglas range of mountains is similar in colour to the sky. This sounds like evolution at work, a mountain range that has survived because it is inconspicuous and hasn't received as much attention from land developers, foresters, and other enemies as gray mountains.

[I wish I'd thought of it at the time, but I could have titled that note "Stealth Mountains".]

It had never occurred to me that old postage stamps might share the fate of elderly pulp magazines, suffering discolouration and brittleness of paper that threatens extinction. I would think collectors' stamps would tend to resist the passing of years because most of them are kept in albums. The albums stay closed most of the time, reducing the stamps' exposure to light, which seems to be a chief culprit in the senility of paper.

[Light fades the inks, but the main culprit is the acidic gum and poor paper. Used stamps generally last longer due to the gum having been washed off when the stamp was soaked off the envelope. While most stamps were printed on reasonably good paper, a lot of them were done by the lowest bidder on acidic paper.]

I ALSO HEARD FROM: Harry Andruschak, Chester Cuthbert, Henry Welch, Don Fitch, Tom Fulopp, Ned Brooks, Alexander Vasilkovsky, Boris Sidyuk, Robert Sabella, Robert Lichtman, Jim Emerson