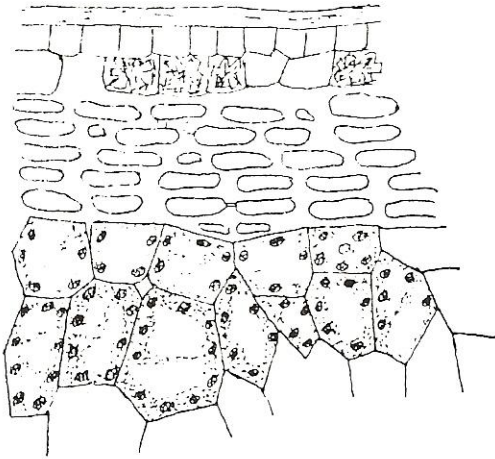
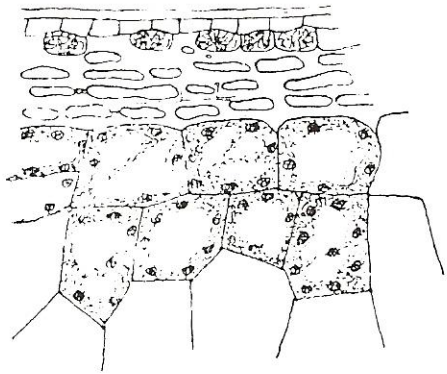


OPUNTIA

43.5



ISSN 1183-2703

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Whole-numbered OPUNTIA's are sercon, x.1 issues are reviewzines, x.2 issues are indexes, and x.5 issues are perzines.

ART CREDIT: Drawn by J.C.Th. Uphof for his 1916 paper co-authored with J.J. Thornber. "Cold Resistance In Spineless Cacti", in UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA AGRICULTURAL EXPERIMENTAL STATION BULLETIN 79:119-144. The leaf pad cross-section on left is frost-sensitive *Opuntia* cv. 'Burbank Special'; on right is cold-hardy *Opuntia ellisiana*. Both specimens are two years old. Note the difference in integument thickness, which determines cold hardiness.

I ALSO HEARD FROM: Teddy Harvia (visiting Australia), John Held Jr, Phlox Icona, Sheryl Birkhead, Lloyd Penney, Chester Cuthbert, Sue Jones, Brant Kresovich, Robert Lichtman, William Breiding, Harry Andruschak (visiting Alberta)

ROW, ROW, ROW YOUR BOAT

1999-08-15

I am working the weekend shift as the Trouble Call Supervisor but it is a quiet day. No broken tree branches, and any irrigation leaks in parks will be unnoticed after last night's rainfall. The annual Bow River raft race is on today, with Bowness Park as the launching point and the 85th Street bridge at the downstream end of the park as the actual starting line. Bowness Park is just downstream of Bearspaw Dam and represents the limit of navigable waters inside Calgary.

I went over to see how the park attendant was doing. Even at 08h00 on a Sunday morning the park was bustling, as contestants hauled in their entries. A construction crane with a 20 metre boom was in the riverside parking lot to lift the rafts into the river, thus sparing the riverbank from damage. Once in the water, the competitors tied the rafts to the shoreline and went for breakfast. In the pavilions and firepits of the park, people were putting on pancake breakfasts, a tradition in Calgary left over from rangeland days.

A Dixieland jazz band tootled away merrily. Every tune they played sounded like either "Camptown Races" or "When The Saints Go Marching In", regardless of the announced title.

As start time neared, the rafters drifted back to their vessels. This is a fun race for charity. Any kind of unpowered raft is permitted provided that it floats, all participants are wearing life jackets, and they are not carrying alcohol, drugs, firearms, or otherwise in breach of Her Majesty's Peace or the City dog leash by-law. Half the junkyards in the city enter rafts made from an old car with oil drums for flotation. Some of the rafts are professionally designed and built. There was a semitrailer tanker truck from a haulage company. Calgary Transit had a half-length bus. I saw a Viking longboat. Further back of it was a tow truck raft with a car in tow. In keeping with Calgary's image, there was a chuckwagon, minus the horses. The movie DEEP BLUE SEA is currently playing in Calgary, which would explain the canoe dressed up as a mako shark with a swimmer in its jaws. Other rafts were homemade affairs of foam-filled mattresses or oil drums lashed together with a few planks for a deck. There was a flotilla of canoes and rubber dinghies.

The skies were cloudy and cool. In the far eastern suburbs out on the prairies, showers were soaking down the land. Bowness is on the western fringe of Calgary where the Bow River empties out of the Rocky Mountain foothills. It was dry here but not for long and not because of the weather. The rafters do not float placidly down the river to the finish line at Prince's Island in the downtown core. Not at all. They splash water at each other. They use squirt guns. They have water pumps and fire hoses on

board. Rudders may be optional but soaking opponents is compulsory. They also aim at any shoreline spectators within reach. There is no such thing as an innocent bystander at the raft race. Everyone was soaked even before the signal was given to push out and float down to the starting line.

The Fire Dept. Rescue Squad jet boats circled the armada as it straggled downstream to the bridge. The Bow River, like all rivers in southern Alberta, is shallow, only a metre or two deep. It is a mountain river rising out of the nearby glaciers in Banff National Park, and the water is ice cold. The strong and fast currents have undertows. The Fire Rescue boats were not there just for public relations.

The rafters were concentrating more on water fights than navigating. The Calgary Transit bus raft and the chuckwagon floated past sideways, their crews too busy washing each other down to bother with frivolous details such as manning the rudder. Assuming, of course, that someone remembered to install a rudder. The Viking longboat quickly came to grief on a backwater jetty 10 metres from their launch. They managed to refloat themselves after a few minutes, only to immediately collide with another raft. Eric the Red would be grinding his teeth were he alive to see such disgraceful seamanship.

As the two swirled out into midstream, the shark canoe followed the longboat's exact path onto the same rocks of the jetty. While extricating itself it narrowly missed another raft, causing a rafter on the second vessel to fall into the water. He had a good Australian crawl but was quickly rescued by his friends in any event and pulled back on the raft.

The rafters floated on. The laughter and shouts faded, but the airhorn on the tanker truck raft reverberated through the valley. There was some difficulty forming up a line at the bridge, as not every raft designer had thought about anchors. The starter waved the flag and away they went on the 10 kilometre trip to the downtown core. The first bend in the river was just past the bridge and I soon lost sight of them. And so back to work.

LIVE LONG AND PROSPER

1999-08-17

My day off today, and finally we are forecast to get some sunny weather after two weeks of showers. No major rainstorms but for the last fortnight there has been a continuous sequence of showers alternating with a mix of sun and cloud. The land is wet through, and the vegetation is unusually green for August. I resolved to do one thing I have been meaning to do this summer but put off because of the rain. I will drive down to Vulcan, a rural town about 120 kilometres southeast of Calgary that sold its soul to

Paramount Studios in the hopes of economic gain from association with Star Trek.

Travel Hopefully And Try To Stay Awake.

There are several possible routes to Vulcan from Calgary. I chose to head south on Highway 2, then turn east onto Highway 23 at High River. I really must stop in High River some day, as it is the hometown of former Prime Minister Joe Clark. I'm sure they have some kind of proud display about him, possibly at the newspaper office where his father was editor. But on the other hand, Clark is a Tory and if his house was across the street from mine I wouldn't bother visiting.

Highway 23 turns east away from the foothills and heads out across the prairies. It is a two-lane paved road, marked with the usual rural signs such as "Caution Cattle Crossing" or "Keep Your Stubble Up / Alberta Soil Conservation Authority". The land is flat and treeless except for shelterbelts planted around farmsteads. Everything is lush green from the summer rains. I noticed quite a bit of lodging in the wheatfields from the weather. The sloughs and irrigation canals were full to the brim. The sloughs were half covered by duckweed and half covered by ducks feeding on the former.

Along the road was a succession of two-room shacks which once housed pioneer families when the land was colonized a century ago and are now granaries or cow sheds. Almost always there was a newer farmstead nearby, surrounded by the usual shelterbelt of poplars and caraganas. You can tell the history of a farm by looking at its houses. Grandparents lived in the shacks, untold wealth to they who had come from Ukraine with nothing. Now they had more land than they knew what to do with. A son inherited the farm and built a two-story house nearby where both generations lived. Then the grandson went into business with his dad; since the main house was still occupied, he would build a bungalow or double-wide trailer home. But the next generation, the current generation, moved to the big city, where jobs were more profitable with fewer hours of work and better community services. The farms get bigger and bigger because there are fewer people to maintain them. Four-wheel drive tractors the size of small bungalows become standard out here; the farm equipment is worth as much as the land.

Vulcan.

The crystal blue sky and the flat land stretched out eastward, meeting at the horizon at some point just short of infinity. You can see forever on the Canadian prairies on a sunny day.

The highway looped around and approached Vulcan from its east

side. The towering grain elevators were the first sight I had of Vulcan, lining the horizon along the railway track in an array of colors. The muted green of Alberta Wheat Pool, the silver of Agrium, the pale gold of a seed-cleaning plant, the blatant Pioneer elevators with their fire-engine red walls and lemon yellow roofs. As I was looking west, they were backdropped by the Rocky Mountains, blue and grey this time of year now that the snow has melted.

The short main drag of Vulcan was the usual mixture one sees in rural towns. In sequence, a church, a welding shop, a small supermarket, a church, a bungalow, a newspaper office, etcetera. Like most prairie towns, Vulcan went into a long decline after WW2, but unlike most, it has somehow managed to reverse the decline in recent years. The 1999 census indicated that the population had actually increased by 180 people since 1993. Worryingly, most of the population are retired, and town officials want to see more younger people, but with few jobs available there is not much they can do to stem the flow to the big city.

The Vulcan Hotel is a building of historical interest. It was originally located in the Crowsnest Pass of southwestern Alberta, about 100 kilometres away, in the now-vanished village of Frank. Frank vanished on the morning of April 28, 1903, when the north side of Turtle Mountain fell into the pass, the largest landslide in

Canadian history. The hotel just barely escaped, with dust from the rockfall sandblasting the windows, two of which are still in that state today. Frank was buried under the rubble, the exact count of casualties unknown because there was no census and the coal-mining town had a large transient population. The owner decided that "It's me for the simple life", dismantled the hotel, and moved it piecemeal to Vulcan, where the probability of landslides is zero. What he didn't know was that Vulcan gets the occasional tornado. No matter where you live, there's always something.

I walked up and down the main drag, not a lengthy task. Some of the side streets had names like Mars Street and Venus Street, while the main drag was Vulcan Street. I was pleased to see a nice public library, better than I would have expected. I didn't go inside but through the plate-glass windows I could see a sizeable collection of books. There were also three Internet terminals with kids browsing them. They have an advantage that those of us who grew up in rural areas before computers never had; they can connect to the world beyond that infinite horizon.

Trek Station.

The main drag of Vulcan stretched not to infinity but three blocks, four if you count the Vulcan Tourism and Trek Station just off the highway before the railway tracks. This is a tiny museum inside

a UFO saucer-shaped building, next to the model of the U.S.S. Enterprise on the highway boulevard. I was rather disappointed in the museum, which was mostly Star Trek movie posters, cardboard cutouts of TNG actors, and a wall painted like the Enterprise bridge that you could pose against for photographs.

There was one science exhibit, that of the 1962 meteorite that fell on a nearby farm. Just a cast of the meteorite, as the original is in the collection of the University of Calgary. It weighed 19 kilogrammes and was about the size of a watermelon. The exhibit included newspaper cuttings about the event, with photos of the farmer and his wife proudly posing with the meteorite, as well as one of the university professor in his best white lab coat. There was also a letter from the newspaper editor advising the farmer that he couldn't guarantee the photo of the wife would turn out well because she was holding the meteorite against a dark dress, but the professor would definitely be shown because he had changed into a fresh lab coat which showed up the meteorite beautifully.

There was a small case of pioneer artifacts to remind people that Vulcan back when the name referred to a Roman god. To be fair there is another museum just down the street devoted to the real history of the real Vulcan. It was a tiny two-room shack only open three hours a day and not while I was in town.

A freebie table of flyers and tourist brochures inside the entrance to the Trek Station had a stack of facsimile reprints of the first issue of the VULCAN ADVOCATE, dated August 6, 1913. I took one for my newspaper collection. The front page featured ads for hail insurance, Kodak box cameras, and the local butcher. The headlined stories were about a baseball game between Vulcan and the nearby village of Stavely, the telephone system that was about to be installed in town, and a suicide at nearby Champion.

I bought some postcards and signed the guest book. I was the second visitor today, both of us from Calgary. I went over to the post office three blocks away to mail the postcards to some Trekkies I know. I asked the postie to handstamp the postcards with the Vulcan postmark. Rural mail in southern Alberta goes through the Calgary Mail Processing Plant; had I just dropped the postcards in a letterbox, they would have received only Calgary machine cancels.

Back outside after fifteen minutes in the Trek Station, I wandered over to the Enterprise model. It is quite large, about 10 metres long, and mounted on a high concrete plinth. It was hoisted into place in 1995 according to the bilingual (English and Vulcan) plaque. I noticed a subtle joke, or perhaps silent commentary, on the part of the local welder who fabricated the five-ton model. The forward ends of the engine nacelles have Christian crosses on them. Not an off-center X strut, but an obvious cross.

You Know You're In A Rural Alberta Town When:

- 1) You can jaywalk without looking for traffic.
- 2) The major occupation in town is the old-age pension.
- 3) You can park on the main drag next to the front door of your destination, not two or three blocks away.
- 4) You can park anywhere for free.
- 5) Residential suburbs start one block from the downtown core.
- 6) Two-thirds of all vehicles driving by are pickup trucks.
- 7) It only takes fifteen minutes to circumnavigate the town perimeter on foot.
- 8) The "Welcome To Town" sign and road map at the main entrance lists fifteen churches, seven of which are Baptist.
- 9) At least a quarter of all buildings are not on their original foundations and were moved in from someplace else.
- 10) The only traffic jam is in front of the post office when farmers' wives come into town to pick up the mail from their box numbers.

Homeward Bound.

I took a different route back to Calgary, directly north via Highway 24. It dipped in and out of glacial meltwater valleys, with tiny misfit streams meandering along their floors. On the plateau of the prairies, cattle sunned themselves on the rangeland,

while on the cultivated fields the quarter-mile-long irrigation sprinkler pivots stood motionless, unneeded because of the wet fortnight past. The wheat is still green but swathings of canola has just begun, and I saw a farmer or two circling about in their combines. Oilfield pumpjacks spotted the rangeland, and all were working, the price of oil having risen recently.

In keeping with a universal law, I ran into roadworks on Highway 24, which is being upgraded from two lanes and steep ditches to two lanes with shoulders and shallow ditches. There is no rural county so remote that it doesn't have at least one major road reduced to one lane of travel. As in the big city, the roadworks crews were mostly standing about idle, apparently in expectation that something might be happening soon. The flagmen are always young women. The crew foreman is a middle-aged Italian, and the labourers are young studs stretched out working on their tans and trying to impress the flagwomen.

I turned my face to the west (and the car) and drove towards the blue mountains and home.

THE BLUE MOUNTAINS UP CLOSE

1999-09-21

In the 22 years I've lived in Calgary, I've never visited the Kananaskis valley, even though it is closer than Banff National

Park. A beautiful warm sunny day predicted, my day off, and finally out to remedy the lack.

One of my favourite parts of working weekend shift is driving out of town on a weekday morning such as today and seeing all the commuters going into Cowtown for their daily grind. Even better it is when I am traveling west, because the inbound commuters have the sun in their eyes and will again go home, whereas I will have it behind me or on the passenger side. I zip down the freeways at a steady pace, while in the opposite direction the stop-and-go traffic tails back for kilometres.

Normally going west to the Rockies, I take the old Trans-Canada Highway, which is slower but more scenic. Kananaskis Park is south of the new Trans-Canada Highway, so I must take it and turn off where the prairies end at the foot of the Front Ranges. Instead of continuing west into the Front Range and Banff, I go south into the Kananaskis Range, where a glacial meltwater valley empties into the Bow River valley at a perpendicular angle of drainage. Unlike the century-old national parks (Banff was Canada's first national park) nearby, Kananaskis Park is relatively young, only assembled in the 1970s and 1980s. It is not as pristine as the national parks due to the previous uses grandfathered in, such as grazing, water, hydroelectric, and ski hill rights.

Rapid Progress.

First stop was Canoe Meadows Day Use Area (that is, picnicking and boat launching only) on the right bank of the Kananaskis River. The lower section of this river is a whitewater river, very popular with kayakers and canoeists looking for trouble. Unfortunately this creates a visual blight in the canyon, because ropes are strung across with pairs of wands over the rapids indicating which chutes to take. Upstream there are no guides and the river is more enjoyable to look at in its natural state.

I could have continued walking another couple of kilometres upstream to Widowmaker viewpoint. I elected to drive since I didn't know how to plan my time for all the sites in the valley I wanted to see. Besides, it was still chilly in the canyon, where the morning sun had not yet penetrated.

The Widowmaker Day Use access road was slow going. There was a chain gang fixing potholes in the cold-mix road. I had to slowly weave in between convicts in fluorescent orange coveralls and Ministry of Justice paddy wagons and trucks parked at random locations in the road.

In the parking lot, I saw some kayakers unloading. I went ahead on the trail to the river. Still shady but the air was noticeably warmer so I decided to follow the trail downstream and

descended into the canyon. Differing from the nearby national parks, Alberta provincial parks have unmarked trails and no guard rails on overhang cliffs. The unmarked trails were a nuisance because I kept wasting time on cul-de-sacs. I found myself on a cliff overlooking the first rapids. I felt a spongy patch of ground where I was standing. When I looked down, I noticed that the only thing keeping me in situ were a few thin tree roots, so I hastily backed up to safer ground. It suddenly occurred to me that perhaps Widowmaker got its name from an unfortunate hiker, not a kayaker. One wrong crumble and my biography would have terminated abruptly here.

I waited to see the kayakers come down river. They could be heard first around the bend of the canyon, and then here they were, straggling along in twos and threes for a party of about a dozen. There was a backwater beside the rapids which allowed them to keep recirculating to the top. The idea seemed to be to try to stay broadside to the current at the base of each fall, using the paddle to stay in place. All got dunked several times, but that was obviously part of the fun. One kayaker got into trouble and couldn't right himself. He was pulled to safety by his compatriots. I couldn't see the actual rescue because they went underneath the overhanging cliff I was on. I saw the other kayakers watching intensely. When they suddenly relaxed and began shooting the rapids again, I knew the rescue had come out okay.

As I was watching the kayaks, I kept noticing a movement out of the corner of my eye but thought it was just a ponderosa branch waving in the wind. It was in fact a 13-lined squirrel on the branch, which was its main track past me. It hesitated, dithered back and forth, and finally summoned up courage to scurry past me to the next tree. The next tree was a large spruce leaning out into 20 metres of thin air, with its centre of gravity over the rapids, and its few remaining roots the ones that had been holding the spongy ground I had been standing on. The squirrel ran along the cliff edge. When I write that, I don't mean it was a centimetre or two from the edge, I mean the very edge, a small-diameter root holding back the soil. Just typing this up, I get vertigo thinking about it.

I got tired of watching the dunkers, and so continued down the trail after the squirrel, albeit at a safer distance inland. The cliff dwindled down to the junction of Lusk Creek where the water tumbled under a tangle of fallen trees into the Kananaskis River. The footbridge over the creek was two halves of a spruce tree that had been split longitudinally and spiked into place. As I contemplated the view, my friend the squirrel jumped down from a ponderosa and scrambled across the footbridge ahead of me.

Moving on, the footpath went in and out of a dry fork of the creek, then came out on a floodplain. I looked back up the rapids and saw the kayakers were now coming downstream as well. We

saluted each other, and I turned and followed the path back into the forest. After about a half-kilometre it didn't look like anything new, and as it would only bring me out at Canoe Meadows, I decided to return to the car.

Reaching the parking lot, it was now very warm, so I took my jacket off. The chain gang had worked their way to the entrance of the parking lot. I was kept waiting while a skid-steer loader smeared some asphalt over a pothole. The convicts were waving at him to warn about me, but the operator was fully immersed in his job. He certainly cannot be faulted for sloppy work; he packed and re-packed that pothole repeatedly. One of the chain gang finally got his attention by standing in front of the loader and tossing a handful of cold mix at him. Startled, he noticed that the convicts weren't just playing charades and looked behind to see me patiently waiting. Chagrined, he smiled at me weakly and ran the machine onto the shoulder to let me pass.

Barrier Lake.

A hydroelectric reservoir, nothing special, seen one, seen them all. There was, however, a scenic viewpoint on a small mountain in the middle of the lake which promised a view of the Kananaskis valley. I climbed a short but very steep trail through aspen woodland. Indian paintbrush was in full bloom, its red blazes

scattered under the trees. The climb definitely gave me my cardiovascular workout for the day. I stopped a few moments on the way up, ostensibly to admire the view but, truth be told, to catch my breath.

It was worth the climb though, to see the view up the valley and to scout where I would be going next. The lake below was created during World War Two by German prisoners-of-war who cleared the valley floor of trees and laboured on the dam. Today Barrier Lake and other lakes up the valley built by the German POWs are part of a long chain keeping Calgary humming with electricity.

One of the POWs guards at the time was Ed Harris, then a young conscript, now a distinguished member of the Calgary Philatelic Society. Ed told me the story of his charges, who were separated into two groups. The largest group were the Luftwaffe POWs, and Ed was with a smaller group that he liked to refer to as Hitler's supermen. These were SS and other elite force officers, who had to be kept away from the Luftwaffe, who hated them. Originally the groups were intermixed but after a few of the elite officers were murdered, the internment camp was split into two new ones. The Alberta winters of the WW2 era were intensely cold. Ed remembers how, as an 18-year-old boy shivering in his greatcoat and fur cap on guard duty at the wire, he would watch the officers come out of their bunkhouse in nothing but shorts and then do a round of exercises and laps, hence his name for them.

Kananaskis Village.

From Barrier Lake I continued up the valley, stopping on Highway 40 to view Mount Allan, on the far side of the Kananaskis River. This was where the downhill skiing events were held during the 1988 Calgary Olympic Winter Games. The mountain is now a marginal ski resort. Prior to its moment of glory in 1988, it was famous for being the only mountain in the Rockies that wouldn't hold snow during the winter, due to chinook winds. To be fair to the Calgary Olympic Committee, their first choice was Mount Sparrowhawk, but that was vetoed for environmental reasons. Not the mountain itself but because one heck of a road-building campaign would have been needed to get to it, including several tunnels.

That is all in the past, a decade already. Nearby, built to service several ski resorts in the park, is a 1980s complex of hotels called Kananaskis Village. It now being noon, and I being hungry, I went in for a bite to eat. The Village (and they do capitalize the V) has the hotels clustering around an artificial trout pond, with artificial waterfall and obviously planted woods. 'Redundant' was the word that came to my mind. It was a pleasant site for all that, and I took my meal outside and contemplated the pond as I munched.

The trout swam in circles, as they would. The younger tourists clambered up and down the waterfall ledges, as they would. The plethora of elderly tourists toddled around the perimeter pathway, if they could.

The surface of the pond suddenly erupted as if an underwater volcano was about to emerge. I looked to see two staffers tossing food pellets to the trout. This seemed interesting, so I went over to see better, along with several other tourists. One staffer was explaining to a German (who spoke good English) that the pond was due to be drained next week for the winter. Fishing was now permitted, with provincial licence of course, and any uncaught trout would next week become the special of the day in the surrounding hotels.

His lady wife listening was distressed to hear that. She had better be a vegetarian, I thought to myself, but said nothing out loud in case she had the filet mignon for lunch. The trout certainly weren't raised all summer in the pond in the hopes of finding aquarists with good homes for them. The German man kneeled at the pond's edge and wiggled his finger tips at the water surface to attract the fish. He then tried to grab them with his hand as they came near, but always failed. Another tourist told him he should be aiming at the head. I resisted the temptation to mention light refraction in water and why that would cause him to miss.

I walked the Village Rim Trail around the edge of the complex and admired the view. The Kananaskis River glittered far below, and beyond it was the Kananaskis Golf Course. This golf course is the most famous in Alberta amongst us professional landscape gardeners because of its elk problems. The golf course is prohibited by provincial law from molesting elk, nor can they build fences and Texas gates to keep them out. This keeps golfers on their toes with a different kind of hazard. We always offer our sympathy to the golf course staff if we meet them at conferences, while being secretly thrilled that it's better them than us. The Rim Trail was quite balmy despite the wind. It was a short trail, made only longer by terminating in a confusing matrix of parking lots and woods. I finally found my way back to the centre, where I bought some postcards, got some canceled at the post office, and departed.

Ribbon Creek.

Ribbon Creek is in a narrow canyon and runs for tens of kilometres up into the mountains. It is very shallow in summer, not enough to get your kneecaps wet, but is one continuous sequence of rapids as it tumbles down through the boulder-strewn canyon. You could jump across it in two leaps, except that you'd take a bad fall on the slippery boulders.

The trail alongside the creek is an abandoned coal mine road, flanked at its entrance by two antique coal cars from the mine. The coal deposits are good quality (Alberta has enough coal to supply the entire world for two centuries). In the first part of the 1900s, it was not economical to mine it because it didn't pay to build the railroad to reach it. With the arrival of motor vehicles, the mine could be opened and managed to survive the Great Depression but was marginal because it was so far from markets. When railroads switched to diesel in the early 1950s, the coal market in Alberta died, taking the Ribbon Creek mine with it. The tiny hamlet was abandoned and all that is left is the trail and a few ruins at the minehead.

The Rockies are mostly dolomite bedrock, and all the trails in the parks are made of crushed dolomite. I had been doing so much walking on them that as I started up the Ribbon Creek trail I noticed my cowboy boots had turned from dark brown to off-white. Hiking up my jeans like a woman lifting her long skirts, I cautiously stepped into the rapids to wash my boots. I shuffled to the left, I shuffled to the right, I did the hokey-pokey in the stream bed. Most of the dust came off, as well as cooling my feet. I stepped out of the creek wearing boots that were now medium brown; I'd have to polish them once I got back home. Then on up the trail.

I was looking for what a sign at the entrance had announced was

Troll Falls. Since the creek was a continuous series of rapids and small waterfalls, I didn't know what to be looking for. The trail crossed back and forth across the creek, but when I looked under the bridges I didn't see anything, either waterfall or mythical beast imported from Europe. After about an hour, having gone about 2 kilometres up the canyon, I gave up. Seen one stretch of rapids, seen them all. I stopped on the way back and sunned myself on a car-sized boulder in the middle of the creek.

I tried to imagine what this trail was like back in the 1930s at the height of Ribbon Creek's prosperity. Today we consider it a one-lane road but it would have been wide enough for two Model T trucks to pass each other, with care. To be so far from civilization might be nice if you only think of escaping the hustle and bustle of the city, but not so for a medical emergency and no doctor nearer than Calgary. It is an hour's drive to the base of Ribbon Creek from Calgary today; back then it would have been an all-day trip.

Going back down the trail, I met the German couple from the trout pond at Kananaskis Village. They asked me if I had seen any bears and I said no. I mentioned that I had given up trying to find Troll Falls but the lady said they were 12 kilometres up the canyon, so I had been well put to turn back. I had mis-read the entrance sign and thought the falls were 1.2 kilometres.

We went out separate directions. I stopped out on another boulder in the creek and sat there soaking in the white noise of the rapids around me. Back on the trail again, I met the German couple and thought for one horrible second that I had gotten turned around. But the path still sloped downwards, and this couple proved to be a different pair. Good dopplegangers though.

One thing I had noticed in Kananaskis was the complete absence of Japanese tourists. This confirmed what I have seen in Banff National Park, that the Japanese go about only in coach parties. They jump out at each stop, take each other's photo against the scenery, and a half hour later are on their way again. When I go walking up trails through canyons, all the foreigners were Germans or other Europeans walking on their own account, not as part of a group. Kananaskis is not that well known to outlanders because it is overshadowed both figuratively and literally by the adjacent national parks.

Death And Dreams.

On my way past Barrier Lake into Kananaskis Village, I had noticed a wishing well on the roadside in the opposite direction, so I stopped to look on my way out. The well was beside O'Shaughnessy Falls, a pretty waterfall that tumbled out of the conifer forest of the mountain side.

The wishing well proved to be filled with gravel up to just below the rim, but that didn't stop people from leaving messages on scrap paper, held down with pebbles or a few pennies. I jotted down a few of the messages for the record.

"I wish health and happiness for all my family and friends and that fate will bring Teddy and I back together in the future."

"I wish for true peace of mind, heart, and soul."

"I wish that I will be with Darcy forever."

"I wish that my brother and sister would love me more than I can tell."

We need more social workers, I think. Next to the waterfall outlet were two white wooden crosses, from siblings in memory of their father. I later checked the name against the newspapers and determined that the youngsters' father was active in wilderness conservation. He had died in his thirties, not a pleasant thing for two young kids to deal with.

And so on home, past the commuter lineups heading in the opposite direction into the sun. A good polish for my boots and the day ends.

Gopher It In Torrington.

You never heard of Torrington, and neither did most Albertans until 1996. Population today is 192, a tiny village even by rural Alberta standards, and, being on the treeless prairie, totally without any natural tourist attractions such as badlands or a lake. In 1995, a committee of village elders was desperately brainstorming ideas to keep Torrington from extinction.

But before that, this. There are no rats in Alberta but we do have Richardson ground squirrels by the tens of millions. They are commonly but incorrectly called gophers; the real gophers are nocturnal and seldom seen. Richardson ground squirrels plague every farm and urban park in the southern half of the province. They are squirrels, but burrow instead of climbing. Their holes trip up livestock, they nibble crops to the ground, and enjoy hearty meals in grain bins. They are, in short, both scientifically and legally a pest animal. The resources that are devoted to rat control in other parts of the world are in Alberta used against gophers.

An unsung genius on the Torrington committee suggested stuffing gophers and using them in dioramas for a Gopher Hole Museum. The exhibit cases depict gophers posed in scenes of daily life around the village, such as the postmistress handing out mail or the Baptist minister preaching a sermon (with a choir singer sound asleep in the background). Some of them have word balloons for

jokes. There were 44 cases at the time I came to visit and a few more are added each season.

The museum got off to a fine start when it opened its doors on June 1, 1996, due to tremendous publicity from animal rights groups. People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) sent protest letters, saying that instead of using stuffed gophers the museum should have used pre-fabricated models. This, of course, raised the obvious question of who would manufacture pre-fabricated gophers in small quantities at an affordable price. The Torrington Tourism Committee sent a postcard to PETA which was short and to the point: "*Get stuffed.*".

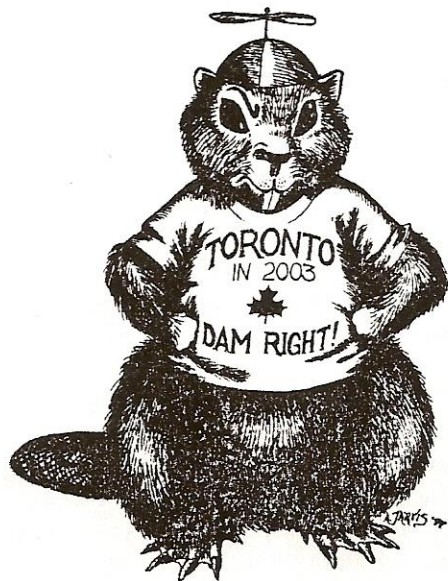
The story was picked up by the news media, with dozens of Canadian newspapers editorializing for or against. It even made WALL STREET JOURNAL and NEWSWEEK. Now the museum is the major attraction of the area. Just as nearby Drumheller, the heart of fossil country, is littered with businesses named Dinosaur This or Dinosaur That, so it is that one sees in Torrington such businesses as the Go 4 Fuel and Parts.

I had been meaning to visit the Gopher Hole Museum for quite some time but had never gotten around to it until I heard that it would be closing for the season after September 30.

The entire Gopher Hole Museum, building and yard, is small, possibly the old one-room schoolhouse, and would fit into the front entrance of any shopping mall. Actually it would fit into an average living room. I opened the door and found myself immediately in the display area. A middle-aged lady at the back of the room set down her knitting and came forward to greet me. After extracting the \$2 admission fee (fortunately I had a toonie, as Canada's \$2 coin is called) she gave me the guided tour. It was the first guided tour I have been in where I stood in one place and didn't have to move. I did have to squat down to see some of the exhibit cases on the lower shelf.

The Gopher Hole Museum is a fifteen-minute visit. Gophers dressed up as Mounties or housewives do not require long and contemplative thought as might be the situation with a case of Burgess Shale fossils. The museum has a book of letters and newspaper clippings that take a bit longer to page through.

I bought some postcards from the gift shop, a desk at the back, getting my toonie back in change. I took the postcards over to the Torrington Post Office to have them canceled. One of the display cases had a gopher postmistress with a frizzy hairdo. It was with a sense of deja vu that I handed my postcards to the postmistress with the frizzy hairdo. On my way out of the museum I signed the guest book. I was the first visitor there that day. The time was 15h45 in the afternoon.



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