

OPUNTIA

45.5



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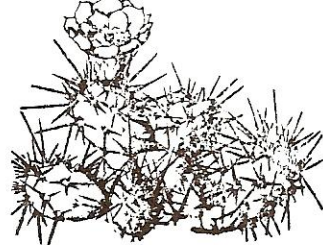
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I ALSO HEARD FROM: Scott Crow, Harry Andruschak, Chester Cuthbert, Lloyd Penney, Sheryl Birkhead, Carolyn Clowes, Karen Pender-Gunn, Teddy Harvia

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

[Editor's
remarks
in square
brackets]



FROM: Guy Miller
2951 Archer Lane
Springfield, Ohio 45503

1999-11-28

Some of the passages [of the OPUNTIA travel essays] seem to parallel our doings. Like you, we try to travel west in the morning and east in the evening whenever we can. Much to see out of one's back door, isn't there?

[Humourist Stephen Leacock referred to it as the Tower of London syndrome, the fact that the majority of Londoners have never been to the Tower of London save perhaps once on a school outing when they were young. I have been trying to visit all those natural areas around Calgary I keep meaning to but never seem to find the time. On the other hand, I have no interest in art galleries or history museums, preferring nature over manmade vanity, so I have yet to visit the numerous Calgary galleries.]

FROM: Robert Lichtman
Box 30
Glen Ellen, California 95442

1999-12-09

Your account of the town of Vulcan ... those Internet terminals in the library bring a definite advantage to the kids stuck living in such remote areas. It makes me wonder if such access to the wider world will accelerate the depopulation of such places, as these kids grow up and seek more urban excitement and amenities, and also if that'll be counterbalanced by urban refugees who, being self-employed via the Internet, can live anywhere and prosper.

[My suspicion is that there won't be as many telecommuting jobs as WIRED magazine predicts, and therefore the rural exodus will continue.]

What is a 13-lined squirrel?

[A ground squirrel with 13 stripes along its body, found in forested areas and mountains, as opposed to the Richardson ground squirrel of the prairies (a.k.a. gopher), which is an unmarked tan colour. I have not personally counted the number of stripes on a 13-lined squirrel since they won't sit still long enough, so I'll take the zoologists' word for it]

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

1999-10-30

Your passage that described the water fights during the Bowness raft race reminded me of a town in Pennsylvania not far from Hagerstown. Once every two or three years its residents decide by common consent that it is time for another water fight. A date is chosen, and the public is advised through wide publicity what is going to happen. Everyone understands that it's best to stay out of the central part of town that evening if they don't want to participate. Then for a couple of hours it's a water free-for-all. Fire trucks, private autos, and pedestrians participate with water propelled by their muscles or by mechanical devices. It is permitted to throw water out of upper story windows with the understanding that this makes the window eligible for use as a target by a hose or extra-powerful water pistol. Nobody gets hurt and there is no damage unless a participant has mistaken a garment that needs dry cleaning for one that can be safely soaked with water.

by Dale Speirs

A lunar eclipse tonight, to begin 19h03 Mountain Standard Time. The day has been variable cloudy, with frequent bare patches of sky. As I walked home from the bus stop across the prairie towards my house, I could see the Moon rising in the eastern sky through a thin ice fog, with its halos intermixing with the clouds.

About 18h50, a heavy band of cloud crossed over the eastern sky where the Moon was. I could not even make out its disk by the start of the eclipse. As I do every Thursday night, I phoned my mother in Red Deer, 100 km north of Calgary. I called about 20h15. She said they had clear skies and the eclipse was just starting to show. Our conversation was briefer than usual, as she wanted to photograph the eclipse.

An Exercise In Frustration.

I looked again after the phone call, and could make out part of the lunar disk, but it was too cloudy to tell if an eclipse was underway. Even more maddening, the western skies were clear, and I could see the stars and Venus over there, while the band of thick clouds on the eastern side parked directly over the Moon.

I got brief 10-second glimpses of the Moon, but it was difficult to say if I was seeing the actual eclipse or just wisps of clouds. It looked about one-third eclipsed though. I had to keep ducking in and out of the house to warm up. -20°C is about average this time of year and not that cold per se due to the low humidity, but the wind coming across the prairie from the west made it colder, even though I was standing in the lee of a spruce by my driveway.

The clear patches became larger by 20h40, so I phoned my brother Neil, who lives west of me a few kilometres. He had thought it wasn't starting until 21h00, so I told him to get the kids out to have a look in case it clouded over completely. Going back outside, I saw the clouds had thinned enough that I knew for sure I was seeing a three-quarters eclipse and not just imagining it. Orion was visible in the southeastern sky.

At about five-sixths totality, the Moon disappeared behind a thick band of cloud. The cloud then stalled and I missed full totality. This is the situation for which the word 'frustrated' was invented. The entire sky was now clouded over. Orion was gone and Venus was fading. I watched for a while but by 21h05 could only see an occasional faint patch of fuzzy light where the clouds thinned slightly for a moment. And soon not even that, as the entire sky thoroughly blanked out.

At 22h30 I had another look on the off-chance, and discovered that I could see the Moon as it came out of totality. It was much higher in the sky, and was showing about five-sixths totality but on the opposite side now. Still fuzzy though the clouds, but at least I could see the eclipse.

Alas, the respite was brief. By 22h35, the entire sky was socked in again, and not even a trace of where the moon might be. And so to bed, for tomorrow is work to earn my bread.

Epilogue.

As I left for work this morning at 06h15, I looked up into the western sky. A clear full Moon floated above the mountains, with only the slightest hint of ice fog.

THE ICE WORMS NEST AGAIN

2000-01-28

In addition to answering trouble calls as a Weekend Foreman, I also check on a couple of crews looking after pleasure rinks in different parts of the city. The oldest of these is in Bowness Park, an island park on the Bow River founded in 1911 and historically always one of the most heavily-used parks year-round. The channel between the island and the shore widens out into a lagoon, where visitors paddle in canoes in summer and skate in winter.

The Recipe For Ice.

The cold weather since Y2K has allowed ice making to get underway. It might seem simplest just to keep the lagoon flooded and let it freeze over, but that is actually the worst method to make ice. What happens then is that a thin layer of ice forms across the surface, and the water underneath allows cracking and air pockets. These work their way up to the surface and fracture the ice, making skating difficult. If there is a brief warm spell such as a chinook wind, the ice layer quickly melts and stagnant water appears.

The experience of 80 years in the Parks Dept. of making large and very heavily used ice rinks has been that thin layers of ice built up slowly are better. In the autumn, the lagoon is drained, cleaned out, and then a thin trickle of river water let back in to provide a base. A 4WD truck towing a water tank lays down a thin dribble of water through a spray boom, with a mat of cloth trailing behind. This produces a smooth layer of water only a few millimetres thick. It then freezes almost instantly in the cold, chilled from below by the existing ice and from above by the cold air. If a chinook comes by, only a thin layer on the surface melts, which insulates the rest of the ice and in turn will re-freeze faster when the chinook moves on and temperatures drop again.

Because of the heavy crowds during the day, the ice-making crews work the graveyard shift to build up layer after layer of ice, to a metre's thickness or more by the end of the season. The 4WD is also equipped with a rotary power broom to sweep snow off the ice.

Public Service Still Matters.

Government workers such as myself get a lot of abuse from the public. The effects of that abuse are ameliorated by seeing the results of our work. I like to watch the crowds on the ice. The young teenaged couple skating hand in hand, wrapped up in romance and oblivious of the rest of the world. The father teaching his child to skate, the little one pushing a small chair ahead of her for vertical support, and Dad leaning over from behind, ready to catch her if she falls. A woman practicing her figure skating in a far corner of the lagoon out of the traffic, never to be an Olympic contender but still dreaming of how it might feel. A family gathered round the firepit near the riverbank, conversing and joking. Three men in their 30s, brothers from their facial resemblances, playing crack-the-whip and laughing with each spill. An elderly couple slowly wending their way up the river channel, looking up at the trees with binoculars, obviously birdwatching.

It all comes out of those taxes

people complain about. Whenever I have someone whining to me about government waste as if I were personally responsible, I feel no guilt. The chairman of the Bank of Montreal was paid \$21 million last year, NHL owners waste millions on player salaries and then demand tax breaks, and Internet billionaires make a fortune from what used to be called watered stock but is now generally accepted accounting practice.

Do they produce as much public good as the equipment operator driving the water truck on the graveyard shift?

FROM BUGGIES TO THE STARS

A.E. van Vogt, the pioneer SF writer, passed away on January 26, 2000. He was born in 1912 in Manitoba, began publishing SF in 1939, and moved to the USA in 1944. Enough books and essays have been written about him that I need not repeat his biography and bibliography here. The zine LAN'S LANTERN did a special issue on him in #37.

Science Fiction Is What Happened In Real Life.

In looking at van Vogt's obituary, what struck me were his life dates, 1912 to 2000. There still remain a few elderly SF writers

around with similar life spans. They have seen changes in kind that we are not likely to see ourselves for our future. We will see changes in degree, yes, such as ever-faster computers, better medical care, and plant and animal breeding with test tubes. It was van Vogt's generation that saw changes in kind such as the invention of the airplane and the spacecraft, while we will see only changes in degree such as bigger and faster passenger jets or long-duration space stations.

In 1912, my great-grandparents migrated from the forests of Rice Lake, Ontario, to take up a homestead near Shaunavon, Saskatchewan, on the treeless prairie. They brought with them their eleven children, of whom my grandfather Harvey Speirs was the youngest. The Canadian Pacific Railway took them through southern Manitoba where van Vogt was in nappies somewhere; Harvey was a 14-year-old teenager.

The train was unheated, as was standard at the time and for many years yet. Roads were rutted tracks across the endless grassland. The ruts were the same width as English wagons, which were the same width as Roman wagons, which were that width so an ox could comfortably walk between the ruts. (Not, as myth goes, so that two horses could walk side by side.) Thus did a long-dead empire reach out to an unknown land and impose its standards. The ranches connected by those ruts were spread far apart, and one could not even see the smoke of a neighbour's

chimney. To get wood or coal for the homestead was a full day's trip to go 80 kilometres to the nearest supply at Cypress Hills. Fifty years later, when Harvey was a family man farming near Calgary, they could drive that distance on the Trans-Canada Highway in an hour.

When Harvey was a teenager, machines were loud and noisy, but none of them beeped at you. Science fiction wasn't even invented yet, although H.G. Wells wrote stuff known as scientific romances. The Moon was just a bright light for navigating across the prairies. Harvey told me that during a new moon phase, people took a lantern to travel across the pitch-black land or else they stayed where they were until dawn. Today, combines harvest late into the evening by headlights. The rural villages did not get electricity until the 1940s, by which time van Vogt was living south of the border and writing about spaceships. Those farmers who could afford a radio ran them off batteries recharged by attaching a generator to the windmill in the barnyard.

We Live Better Than We Have Ever Lived Before.

Harvey and van Vogt grew up when the polio season was something everyone dreaded. In Harvey's early life, people died of 'acute indigestion', not heart attacks. Cancer was not a major problem because most farmers didn't live long enough to get it.

The Speirs family tree shows clusters of deaths, with three or four family members dying within a few days of each other. The influenza epidemic of 1918 deleted entire branches from the family tree. All of Harvey's grandchildren grew up healthy and unworried over anything worse than a bout with chickenpox. Better fed, they towered over Harvey and his children, who had grown up during the Dirty Thirties when there was no rain or snow in southern Saskatchewan to speak of, and crops barely returned seed for next year.

Clean sanitation meant the outhouse was downhill of the water well. If Harvey or van Vogt wanted drinking water in their boyhoods, it came up a bucket out of a well. At an SF convention in Calgary a few years ago, L. Sprague de Camp reminisced about his upbringing in the early 1900s in a well-to-do home, when it was standard practice to put a dome over each food dish on the table to keep the flies off. Grandfather Harvey milked his cows by hand; two of his sons who took the farm over did ten times the number of cows in an electric milking parlour.

Atoms were something a few educated people knew about if they had studied Greek philosophy. Certainly Harvey never heard that word until 1945. A computer was a low-paid clerk who added numbers all day under the supervision of an accountant. Harvey died in 1982 when a laptop meant an old-fashioned portable writing desk you balanced on your knees. It was long obsolete

even in his time, but he remembered as a young boy seeing people use them on that train hurrying past the baby van Vogt out to Saskatchewan.

THIS JUST IN ...

2000-05-29

Life In The Colonies.

In today's mail, I had a letter from my mother, enclosing a newspaper clipping from the local newspaper, the RED DEER ADVOCATE. This daily broadsheet was owned for many years, strangely enough, by an English holding company. I never learned how they had picked up one solitary rural Canadian newspaper, but having done so they held on to it as it was returning a reasonable profit. One of our neighbours was The Widow Galbraith, the very model of a Roman matron, whose late husband had been publisher of the paper.

When I was a young lad, she told me of how once a year the English company's directors would send out an auditor at fiscal year end in August to verify the books. Even today most companies in rural areas end their fiscal years in August, as the next harvest begins in September. Farmers use the new crop year as a logical dividing point. Companies with no agricultural

interests nonetheless follow suit, since their business cycle follows their customers spending patterns.

The English company used the annual audit as an exercise to train up their young clerks, and always sent out not a middle-aged chap but a 20ish Bertie Wooster. We got the impression the company directors believed it would toughen up rising junior executives to do a tour of duty in the Colonies. Skills learned in dealing with rude colonials and red Indians could then be used against, say, Birmingham shopkeepers or Cockney job stewards. In actual fact, Red Deer was a reasonably cultured city, and the nearest tribal Reserve was 30 km north at Hobbema. The Bertie Wooster would always show up with full Arctic winter gear, indicating that Mr. Galbraith's annual letter was once again filed and forgotten. In that letter, he would remind the directors that while Red Deer in August may not be as warm as California, it was usually shirtsleeve weather, and that no polar bears had ever been seen in the vicinity, not even in ancient tribal legend.

Ancient tribal legend of the local Crees was obsessed with elk and moose. Red Deer is at the junction of the Red Deer River and Waskasoo Creek. 'waskasooseepee' is the Cree word for elk, which the original Scottish settlers mistranslated as 'red deer'. All the tribal stories I ever heard were boring accounts of how some hunter had killed an elk, or, for occasional variation, a moose. Mooses were actually more common, but elk were more

glamorous, like the difference between a plow horse and a thoroughbred racehorse. If you were a Cree hunter, you told stories about elks, which were tricky buggers to track and kill, as opposed to a moose placidly chewing aquatic weeds in a swamp. A moose may not be dumber than a horse but is seldom smarter.

Nuke The Polar Bears.

To get back to the newspaper clipping my mother sent me. It was humourist Dave Barry's syndicated column, which he writes out of Miami, Florida. He is quite popular in Canada because he mentions our country frequently in the strange news stories his 'alert readers' send in. and, as in this clipping, true stories about dunb criminals. This one was out of the RED DEER ADVOCATE, telling how a drunk driver tried to beat the breathalyzer test by eating his underwear. He thought the cotton fibres would soak up the alcohol. Another good laugh for the Red Deer Mounties.

Dave Barry, in past columns, likes to pick up on weird Canadian news stories sent in by his alert readers. One of his best was about worm smuggling (most bait worms sold in the USA come from Ontario), based on a true story about a battle between worm thieves at an Ontario golf course. Often as not, he'll hang it on a ugly-Canadians-are-a-threat-to-America, and suggest the USA use some of those nukes that are just sitting around in silos.

About a decade ago, Red Deer Council voted to declare the city a Nuclear Weapons-Free Zone, and so says the big welcome sign at the entrance to the city. Calgary's welcome signs brag about the Olympics we hosted in 1988 and the annual Stampede Rodeo, while Edmonton modestly proclaims itself the City of Champions because Wayne Gretzky played hockey there and the football team won many Grey Cups. Red Deer looks to more important things, not too surprising given that most of the councillors are NDP (labour socialist). The proclamation would have more moral authority if there was the slightest chance that nukes would ever be stored there or even just pass through. Red Deer is not a garrison town though, and the nearest nukes are several thousand kilometres away in Washington State. We stand on guard for thee.

ONE BEAUTIFUL DAY, WITH MIX OF SUN AND CLOUD

Over the last few weeks I've been thinking of taking a run out into the countryside on my days off, but there were always errands getting in the way. But today, Tuesday, I have absolutely nothing on my schedule, and so I decided to make a day trip to the Canmore area, halfway to Banff National Park. I've driven through Canmore many times on my way someplace else, but never previously explored the area around it.

Grotto Creek, If You Can Find It.

2000-06-27

I like my job as Parks Dept. Weekend Trouble Call Foreman partly because I only work three days a week, giving me four days off to enjoy life while everyone else is stuck in the rat race. The particular advantage of going out into the mountains on a weekday is that there are few others in the park. No hassles finding a parking spot; just park immediately adjacent to the trailhead. Scenic views and footpaths have only a handful of other visitors; no screaming kids or loutish parents.

I took the old Trans-Canada Highway out this morning. As always, I enjoyed the lineup of traffic the other way, as commuters inched their way into the city core, while my direction was wide open. The old highway is a narrow, two-land road that wends through the Bow River valley bottomlands, snaking through every village and tribal Reserve en route.

A short distance before Canmore, about 15 km, is Grotto Mountain, on the slopes of which are several cement and magnesium oxide plants mining the dolomite bedrock. I stopped at one scenic site, the Grotto Creek Trail, and decided to walk it to see the waterfalls. The trail is not unspoiled wilderness, as it follows underneath power lines and is never out of the sound of

the cement plants or the roar of highway traffic. But the flowers were in full bloom: pink wild roses, orange tiger lilies, blue lupines, purple oxytropis, yellow astragalus, and blue flax. I startled a chipmunk on the ground, and it zigzagged at subluminal light speed on the terrain in front of me, stopping every few metres to see if I was still oncoming. I counted four stripes on its back, so it definitely wasn't a 13-lined squirrel. Finally it disappeared under a dwarf spruce as I walked by. I went a couple of kilometres further to the creek, but discovered it was completely dried up. The snowmelt has not yet started, and where the waterfalls would normally rage was but a jumble of dolomite boulders. It was not a wasted trip though; I stood on the creek bed and admired the view down below, with the blue Rockies forming an amphitheatre on the far side of the Bow River.

The Glory That Was.

After stopping at Canmore to have a bite to eat and mail some postcards, I went across the river to the Nordic Centre, which hosted the cross-country ski events during the 1988 Calgary Olympic Winter Games. The ski trails are hiking trails during the summer. I followed some of them partway up the mountain slopes.

It was a good view, and a good cardiovascular workout. If I stopped often to admire the view, it wasn't just to admire the view

but to give my heart a chance to catch up. In this area, there was not the Persian carpet of wildflowers as at Grotto Creek, but rather the red speckles of Indian paintbrush.

The site is popular with mountain bike riders. One almost ran me over from behind, he came so silently. "Couple more behind you", he said to me. I turned to look, but no one in sight. "You must be a better rider than them", I said. We grinned at each other and went our separate ways on the network of trails.

I continued upslope, the dolomite walls of the mountains towering above me, but not always visible because I was now up in lodgepole pine forest. The trail leveled off, then turned back down. Where it sloped down again, there was a warning sign "Difficult". No kidding on their part. I had to lean back a bit as I walked down. Mind you, I was going opposite the direction the skiers would take in winter. That would be the real cardiovascular workout. I zigzagged back down the mountain, and so to the car.

Grassi Lakes.

Just up the road from the Nordic Centre are the Grassi Lakes. They are actually invisible from the valley since they sit on the mountain top, but the overflow is a spectacular waterfall dropping 300 metres down the face of the mountain pass. I walked up the

trail to the waterfall, which wound through silent pine forests. It seemed to go on forever, and I was about to give up when I noticed an elderly couple ahead of me striding onwards and upwards. Well, if they could do it, thirty years older than me, then I should be able to tough it out. We found ourselves passing and re-passing each other as one or the other stopped to admire the view of the valley far below. The forest was impenetrable but two rockslides had opened vistas to admire. There were seeps and springs flowing across the trail as we approached the top. Looking back down at the valley, I was surprised at how far and high I had walked from the car.

The trail culminated at a cliff just below the waterfall. Imagine, if you will, a giant piece of white lace draped across a rock wall 100 metres wide and 300 metres tall. The noise of the waterfall filled the canyon. I looked for a place to sit and watch, but the only suitable boulder had its view blocked by a lodgepole pine.

The good viewpoints required me to sit with my legs dangling over 300 metres of empty air, and as the rock slabs sloped downward, I declined to chance my life for the scenery. I therefore stood balanced on the boulders and watched the waterfall until my leg muscles began to protest. The Grassi Lakes were still out of sight above me, but I wasn't going to walk another 300 metres vertical and a couple of kilometres horizontal, and so I retraced my steps back to the car.

Kananaskis Country.

2000-06-28

Since the mountains are only an hour's drive from Calgary, I went home overnight rather than rent a hotel room for \$50. Back out the next morning, I turned off into the Kananaskis River valley, just before Canmore.

My first stop was Ribbon Creek, where I sat down to eat a belated breakfast before going up the creek without a paddle. The rising sun coming over the mountains had a double sunbow, with a tangent line rainbow on the top part of the inner sunbow, and two sundogs on either side of the outer sunbows. A thoroughly spectacular vision, which was to persist all morning. It did puzzle me though, because the sky was clear blue, so there must have been a very thin ice fog at high altitude to create all the sunbows.

While I was munching breakfast beside the Ribbon Creek parking lot, two charter buses pulled in and disgorged about 50 or 60 young teenagers. Obviously an end-of-school-year outing. I don't mind sharing the trails with tourists in twos or threes, but an endless crocodile of chattering schoolchildren rather ruins the experience of nature. I decided to seek some other location to commune with nature.

Hyphenation.

Driving a short distance further in to the valley, I came across a trail for the Evan-Thomas Creek, up which I had never been, with or without a paddle. I should perhaps mention that none of the creeks emptying into the Kananaskis River are navigable, not even with the shallowest kayak. These are all boulder-strewn washes taking the meltwater down from the mountain heights.

I walked in through the cool pines at the Evan-Thomas site. Looking straight up, I saw the sunbows embracing the tree tops with bands of red, yellow, green, and blue. Although a nice trail, it didn't go anywhere near the creek, but stayed in the silent forest, evidently cut as a service road or fire break. After going a couple of kilometres, I gave up on it and returned to the car. The return trip down the slope gave me a view of the mountains on the far side of the river valley, and a gap in the bush allowed a look at Evan-Thomas Creek from 50 metres distance. It was almost dry, with only a thin burble of water chuckling its way down the mountainside.

I drove up and down the valley highway but most of the sites I wanted to visit were closed due to the spring breeding season of wildlife. So back to Ribbon Creek, where the noisy mob should be safely ahead of me about 5 kilometres.

Ribbon Creek Redux.

Up the path alongside Ribbon Creek, which is essentially 15 kilometres of continuous boulder rapids. The path was coated with butterflies of three species. There were small blue ones, orange monarchs, and a large yellow species. They covered the path, fluttering out of the way as I walked up into the canyon. It was like wading through a living Persian carpet, with bright splashes of colour foaming about my ankles.

About 4 kilometres up, I stopped at a footbridge to admire the view and rest my heart. The noon-hour sun stood directly above. The sundogs and outer sunbow were gone. Only one sunbow there was, a perfect rainbow of light around the sun, uninterrupted by the horizon.

I sat on a car-sized boulder in the middle of the creek and contemplated life. The boulder was 400-megayear-old dolomite. From a crack in it at my feet was a willow sprout.

When the boulder's sediments were consolidating into rock at the bottom of a long-vanished ocean, plants still had 100 megayears to go before they would invade land even as humble mosses. Seed plants, of which the willow is one, did not start to evolve until just before the Rocky Mountains began to lift up, as the North American

tectonic plate scraped up against the Pacific plate. The dinosaurs were gone by the time the Rockies had risen up to their heights. 65 megayears later, there was a blip of ice, an eyeblink in geological time. When the ice sheets melted, the seed plants came north from the tropics, evolving as they went.

Bipeds from another continent spread into the Rockies and claimed they had conquered them. 200 years later, one biped walked up the creek, sat himself down on the ancient sea bed, and wrote these words. Tempus fugit.

DOWN IN THE BOTTOMLANDS

Canada Day 2000

Another weekend, another shift. I was doing a routine inspection of a new park under development, The Bottomlands, so-called because it is on the west floodplain of Nose Creek, just upstream from its junction with the Bow River and the Elbow River.

Be Careful What You Ask For ...

The Bottomlands area, although new as a park, was actually one of the first settled areas when the Mounties founded Calgary in 1875. It was for many years the red-light district of the frontier town. A women's committee for public decency succeeded in driving out the brothels in the late 1800s. In consequence of this,

the prostitutes moved into the growing town itself, and merged into the commercial district.

This made it more convenient for the menfolk, who could now duck into an alley side door to get a nooner inconspicuously. They no longer had to explain to wives or moralizing friends why they were seen out on the banks of Nose Creek. The standard excuse "I was fishing" died out, and stores were left with a surplus of fishing rods on their shelves. The reputation of Nose Creek lingered, and for the next century it was a wasteland of weeds, unused parking lots, and storage yards for marginal businesses.

Never Argue With People Who Buy Ink In Tanker Loads.

In the 1970s, Deerfoot Trail, an 8-lane freeway, was built on the east side of Nose Creek, across from the Bottomlands, and just past the C.P.R. tracks that run on the east bank. A tunnel was excavated under Deerfoot Trail for the trains to haul rolls of newsprint and tank cars of ink to the CALGARY HERALD newspaper building on the far side. As I strolled along the path, I saw a short train coming my way to the tunnel junction, two locomotives pulling four boxcars. I stopped to watch, as did a number of joggers, bicyclists, and dog walkers. But not the dogs, who were disporting themselves in the muddy waters of Nose Creek. The train rumbled along like a tornado. (Every tornado eyewitness describes its sound like the rumbling of a freight train; ergo, the reverse description should apply to freight trains.)

As the freight train approached the junction, it cut its engines and coasted through the switches. Two brakemen dropped off at the switch. They yanked on the rods and the train reversed. I thought the locomotives would push the boxcars up the track through the tunnel, but instead a third brakeman riding on the train cut the boxcars loose. The engines then switched back to the mainline, let the boxcars (with brakeman clinging to them) roll back onto the mainline from the spur, and then chased them down the track. Clamping onto them, it then chuntered up the tunnel siding, as the brakemen all hopped on and off, busy opening and closing switches in an industrial ballet.

What this all accomplished was to move the locomotives to the opposite end of the train. Up the slope then, under the tunnel, and on to Lord Tubby's newspaper. As it reached a level crossing next to the CALGARY HERALD building, I heard its lonesome whistle blow. Or at least as lonesome as a whistle can blow just outside the downtown core of a city of 800,000, immediately adjacent to the second-busiest highway in Canada.

COWTOWN CELEBRATIONS

2000-07-05

The Calgary Stampede, held annually in July since 1912, is the world's largest rodeo, with more than a million paid admissions to the rodeo grounds and who knows how many more participants

in private celebrations throughout the city. One tradition is the free pancake breakfast, dozens of which are held throughout the city daily before and during the Stampede. Almost every organization has a private breakfast for its employees, much as the Christmas party. Free public breakfasts are put on by businesses and non-profit groups out on the sidewalks and parking lots. If you schedule yourself right, you can eat free for ten or twelve days. The breakfasts are a tradition descended from the 1920s, when cowboys coming in off the range into Calgary for the Stampede would park their chuckwagons downtown, fire up the stoves, and hand out free flapjacks to passersby.

These days, larger organizations will host their own individual sidewalk breakfasts, while businesses in shopping plazas combine for a single event. All breakfasts guarantee a minimum of flapjacks, orange juice, and coffee, and most will have sausages or bacon as well. Rental companies have a run on barbeque equipment during the ten days of the Stampede, and even the worst country-and-western band can get gigs playing to the crowds at the breakfasts. Grocery wholesalers offer reduced prices for breakfast food supplies in exchange for sponsor's advertising. Churches and community halls also put on events, about half of which are free and the other half in aid of charity.

I'm not ashamed to look for free food when I can find it without inconvenience, so today I stopped off at the downtown Co-op supermarket for their breakfast. A beautiful sunny day, and a good crowd in the east parking lot. I lined up for my flapjacks and sausages. Ahead of me was an accountant/manager type dressed in western wear, and obviously of Arabic or Pakistani descent from his skin colour. He asked the volunteer serving the sausages if they were pork or beef sausages. There was a delay while the volunteer went to the back to read the label of the box. Regretfully they were pork sausages, so the gentleman passed on them.

This incident is reflective of Calgary's changing ethnic composition. Most immigrants are Chinese or Southeast Asian, but there are substantial Muslim and Sikh communities now. The new suburbs have just as many mosques and temples as they do churches. Cantonese is the second language in Calgary, not German or Ukrainian as once was the case. (French was never the second language here or even in the top five, which is why western Canadians opposed compulsory bilingualism.) The immigrants join in the Stampede celebrations, just as the white folk paddle in crews at the dragon boat races of Chinatown, and everybody goes downtown to Prince's Island Park for the annual Caribfest.

Sitting down to enjoy my flapjacks and sausages, I heard what sounded like somebody playing a harmonium, but I couldn't see where at first. After a while, I spotted a 6-year-old girl sawing away on a fiddle, mercifully unamplified. But we all politely applauded her efforts; no reason to discourage a potential line dancer star of the future. The microphone was turned back on after she was done and a more professional C&W group stepped up to play some "yer cheatin' heart" songs. I never liked C&W back on the farm, but for free food I'll tolerate it for the time it takes to gobble down the grub.

After eating, I went over to look at a petting zoo that had been set up for the children and, dare it be admitted, adults who wanted to see what farm animals looked like up close. The attendant inside the pen was leaning on the fence chatting with passersby. She was negligently dangling a bucket in one hand which, judging by the interest expressed in it by various goats, calves, and pigs, still had some food in it. As she moved along the corral fence, she was evidently unaware of her following. A persistent goat was constantly being frustrated by her. Just as it managed to work its head past the swaying bucket handle, she would move off, and the goat would have to start its infiltration attempts anew. I saw the Muslim gentleman just down the fence. He leaned over and delicately patted a pig on its back.