

OPUNTIA

69.5

ISSN 1183-2703

October 2010

OPUNTIA is published by Dale Speirs, Box 6830, Calgary, Alberta, Canada, T2P 2E7. It is available for \$3 cash for a one-time sample copy, trade for your zine, or letter of comment. Americans: please don't send cheques for small amounts to Canada as the bank fee to cash them is usually more than the amount. US\$ banknotes are acceptable in Canada at par value; what we gain on the exchange rate we lose on the higher postage rate to USA. Do not send mint USA stamps as they are not valid for postage outside USA and I don't collect them.

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WHEN LAST WE HEARD ...

2010-04-28

by Dale Speirs

I haven't written too much lately about economic conditions in Calgary since the oilsands boom faded away in early 2009. Unemployment has risen slightly but is not serious since most of the workers laid off were migrants from eastern Canada. They have returned whence they came to Ontario or Newfoundland, and thus jack up the unemployment statistics in those provinces, not Alberta. We got our hair mussed in Cowtown but nothing like the agony back east where the auto factory towns in southern Ontario have been decimated.

Oil is staying around \$70 to \$80 per barrel, and the loonie is about par with the US\$. This is good news for the western provinces, but not so for eastern Canada, where the manufacturing industry is concentrated. For many decades they have been relying on a cheap Canadian dollar to export with, but now must stand and fight on a level field with the rest of the world.

There are a lot of skyscraper projects in Calgary that began just as the boom ended, so they will provide two or three years of work to bridge construction workers over to the next round of oilsands projects. 9th Avenue South through the downtown core is still a string of lane closures because of all the skyscraper projects. The Bow River flows through the heart of the city and forms the

northern border of the downtown core. Anyone planning a canoe trip this summer will also face closures as a variety of pedestrian bridges are being built over the river.

Two new pedestrian bridges are being built across the Bow River to connect the downtown core with inner-city suburbs on the north bank. Yuppies and petro-executives will now be able to jog to work without having to go several blocks out of their way to the nearest road bridge. At \$50 million for the two bridges, this might seem quite a subsidy for the urban pedestrian crowd, but to be fair to them the city has spent billions over the past decade on freeways and interchanges. Turnabout is fair play.

After 30 years of planning, the west leg of the LRT line is finally being built, running from the downtown core out to the distant suburbs in the Rocky Mountain foothills. Because it was left for so long, it has to punch through the middle of a park, take out the Science Centre (a new one is being built elsewhere), and in passing through older inner-city neighbourhoods attracted the usual squawking from wealthy homeowners. They had managed to stop it for years but now that there are more voters in the suburbs than in the central neighbourhoods, they have lost their power. There is a very nice computer animation of what the route will look like, following a train from the downtown to the western end at: www.westlrt.ca/content/about/route_animation.cfm

INTO THE HOME STRETCH

For the past decade I have been the Weekend Trouble Calls Supervisor for the Calgary Parks Dept. working Friday to Saturday on 12-hour shift. I was hoping to get one final year in at that job before I retired this year. Alas, the department is being re-organized and I couldn't duck the bullet. Worse yet, we are changing to a new computer payroll system. This year is also the centennial of the Calgary Parks Dept., and all kinds of park renovations are in full force for the happy event.

I am now the Weekend Downtown District Supervisor, working a four-day 10-hour shift from Thursday to Sunday. I look after the most heavily used parks in the city, such as Prince's Island, the Olympic Plaza, Millennium Park, Centenary Park (not to be confused with Centennial Park or Confederation Park elsewhere in the city, all three built in 1967), Central Memorial Park, and Festival Plaza. Prince's Island is the Calgary equivalent of Manhattan's Central Park, and the Olympic Plaza is like Times Square, where Calgarians gather for major events such as New Year's Eve, Canada Day, the Second Coming, or, even more unlikely, the Flames winning the Stanley Cup.

Unfortunately, the Parks Dept. hasn't been able to find anyone to take my old job, so I am still doing that as well. No rest for the wicked.

HRH Herself.

2010-05-14

HRH Princess Margriet from the Netherlands is paying a visit to Cowtown this weekend, and Parks Dept. is in the thick of it. She will be at a ceremony this evening in the newly rebuilt Central Memorial Park, officially opening it and paying tribute to the war dead at the cenotaph in the centre of the park. Construction workers were racing to get the last touches done before she arrived in a few hours. One of my gardeners set out pots of tulips everywhere for the ceremony. There is a large Canadian flag just behind the cenotaph but it was starting to fade and fray, so I replaced it ahead of schedule.

Years ago I had learned from somewhere that protocol dictates that a flag should not be allowed to touch the ground. I managed to keep the new flag tucked under my arm while I brought down the old flag. With a bit of struggling, I got the old flag off and set it on top of a nearby pedestal. I then unfurled the new flag to make certain it was right side up, and after some difficulty got it clipped on to the lanyard without it touching the ground.

As I raised it up, a construction worker detached himself from his work group and came over to me. "God bless you, sir!", he said, "You didn't let it touch the ground.". I surmised out loud that he had served in the military and he said yes. It just goes to show that you never know who's watching you.

Heading back to the depot, I walked through a natural area on Prince's Island. A beautiful day, the sun was shining, the Canada geese were parading their goslings, and the early spring flowers were in full bloom. The park is heavily used by pedestrians, but they all had their heads down, staring at their handhelds and grimly texting without noticing what was around them.

Bubbles And Bikes.

2010-05-15

Since management hasn't gotten round to naming my replacement on Weekend Trouble Calls, I am still doing that job as well, and spent the day out in the suburbs chasing down boulevard trees with broken branches. Wayne, my second-in-command, was busy rounding up bicycles for HRH Margriet's ceremony on Prince's Island. The name of the island has nothing to do with royalty. It was originally owned by a pioneer businessman named Peter Prince, who also built the first bridge across the Bow River in Calgary. He used the island for a sawmill for logs floated down the Bow River from the adjacent Rocky Mountains.

At the ceremony, HRH will present 20 bicycles to underprivileged children, following which she and her entourage will take another 17 bicycles and go for a tour. They will travel upstream along the south bank pathway past Prince's Island, take a pedestrian bridge to the north bank, pedal back along the north bank, then ride over a different bridge back around to the island.

This will demonstrate how green bicycle riding is. The bikes are being brought to the island in 1-ton crewcab trucks, which can carry ten bikes at a time. Each bike must be individually wrapped in plastic to prevent scratches. She will travel by limousine motorcade to the ceremony, the spectators will all drive there from the suburbs, police and support vehicles will be standing by, and Parks trucks will haul everything out again after the event.

I took time to visit Olympic Plaza this afternoon, where the Girl Guides of Canada were celebrating their centennial. Hundreds of the little dears were running about. Someone had given them soap bubble makers, so they were all busy blowing bubbles and the air was solid with them. Any pedestrian walking through the park got a free shampoo and clothes wash. But the girls were well behaved and supervised closely. They had also chalked most of the concrete in the plaza with Girl Guide slogans, but those will wash off in the next rain.

Bicycle Monarchy.

2010-05-16

All sorts of fiddly details this morning before HRH arrived for the bicycle ceremony. The upshot was that at the appointed time I found myself on the west end of the Prince's Island pathway, awaiting the bicycle rally. They came on me rather swiftly, with the Princess in the lead, and I barely had time to take a photo. I was the only spectator there. As she went past, the Princess

waved at me and I tipped my cowboy hat in the traditional "Howdy, Ma'am" western-style greeting.

They peddled on, followed by about 200 Calgary Dutch, easily recognized as they were all wearing bright orange T-shirts donated by ING Direct, the Netherlands on-line bank. After the pack rode by, I drove in the opposite direction, crossed the river, and stationed myself at the Langevin Bridge to direct the bike riders on their return trip. I had stationed a couple of my workers as marshals further upstream to guide them around a construction site. The bike riders were more spread out by the time they reached me at the final loop, and many were visibly surprised to be passing the same cowboy again.

Once the last orange men (and ladies) swept by, I hopped back in my crewcab and raced them downtown to Prince's Island. There I made my third appearance, waiting with my crew to clean up after the event. The plaza was a sea of orange, plus one cowboy. There were tulips as far as the human eye could see, and a few puzzled dog walkers who had no idea what they had wandered into the midst of. I made friends with a Yorkie while waiting for the event to conclude. The pup evidently had never seen a cowboy before. The participants all congratulated each other for demonstrating their environmental concern by riding bicycles, then loaded their gear into their SUVs and dispersed to their homes in the far-flung suburbs of Calgary.



Princess Margriet waves at your humble editor. Not a Mountie in sight, but then again she is only ninth in line to the throne in a minor country, so terrorists wouldn't bother with her.

A long line of Dutch ex-pats and emigrants follow behind her.

With the last Dutch ex-pats out of the way, my crews descended on the plaza with a fleet of trucks, engines idling as we loaded the equipment for transport. Just for fun I took a spin on a bicycle once around the plaza. I hadn't ridden a bicycle in 40 years since I was a teenager, and I do not exaggerate. I wanted to test the old saying that riding a bicycle is something you never forget. True enough, although I was a bit wobbly at first because the bikes had knobby mountain tires not really suited for asphalt.

If You Don't Like The Weather ...

May 26: The tulips and other spring flowers are in full bloom.

May 27: I mowed my lawn.

May 28: I shoveled the snow off my sidewalks.

May 29: I injected antifreeze into the door lock of my ice-encased car so I could get to work.

Lots of tree trouble calls today since the leaves are out, but I have three Urban Forestry crews to transfer most of my calls to. I took one for an irrigation leak in an Edgemont park. This suburb is on top of Nose Hill, the eastern-most foothill of the Rockies, and which always catches the worst of any bad weather. I found the leak easily enough, a sprinkler head slowly bubbling. With 10 cm of snow on the ground though, I couldn't find the shut-off valve. I wasn't going to shovel the entire park clean to find the

underground control box, so I just left the leak running for the Irrigation crew to deal with on Monday.

Towards the end of the day, another tree call, a poplar across one lane of traffic on 146 Avenue SW, west of 37 Street. This was in the far distant corner of the city, and I didn't want a UF truck wasting time trundling down there when I could get there faster. It proved to be in the countryside along the southern edge of the Tsuu T'ina tribal reserve. Calgary annexes land years before population growth reaches it in order to keep some control on development. If the tree was on the north side of the road, it would be a Tsuu T'ina tree. It turned out to be on the south side, which meant I would have to deal with it. The tree was natural, not planted, growing in the bush, but it was still a City tree.

But first, I had to wait ten minutes to get out of my truck, because on my arrival I attracted the attention of a farm dog that had been roaming the adjacent pasture. This was a Doberman cross-breed, full size, about my weight, and foaming at the mouth at my intrusion into his domain. I'm paid by the hour, so I just turned on the truck's wig-wag flashers and arrowboard for safety, and out-waited the beast. He eventually got bored and wandered off. Once he was far enough away, I leaped out of the truck and did the fastest pruning job in history.

Prince's Island.

Looking southeast from the island across the Bow River channel to the east end of the downtown core.

Chinatown is just behind the leftmost skyscraper.





A section of the interior of Prince's Island. Bland landscaping, but it has to withstand tens of thousands of people packed in for major festivals such as Canada Day or the folk festival.



*The turf
never has to
be fertilized
because the
C a n a d a
geese do the
job for free.*

*All three
photos were
taken from
the same
spot; this
one is
looking
southwest to
the western
core.*

A beautiful sunny day and Prince's Island was solid with people. I had done some trouble calls in the northern suburbs and came back to the island out of the east. Chinatown is an enclave within the downtown core, opposite the island on the southeast river bank. I took my usual short cut down 3 Avenue SE through Chinatown but traffic was at a complete standstill. Cars were making three-point turns and coming back my way. Whatever it was had traffic completely stopped, not just down to a crawl.

One advantage of operating a Parks crewcab is that I can drive down pathways and cut through the middle of parks, on official business of course. The riverbank pathway would bypass whatever the obstruction was, so I bumped the truck over the curb and merged myself into the steady flow of bikers, joggers, and young couples strolling along the pathway. Coming past the blockage, I saw the problem. Chinatown, like the Parks Dept., is celebrating its centennial this year, and they had a parade winding through the core and into the Chinese Cultural Centre. I pulled off the path, drove across the turf, and nosed up to the curb. I got out to enjoy the spectacle, particularly the dragon dancers.

A constable on point duty at the intersection came over and asked me if I would mind blocking the side road with my crewcab so he could move down the street with the parade. As I could see the

tail end of the parade a couple of blocks away,

I agreed. The crewcab was long enough to block a lane and a half, and I put out traffic cones for the rest before settling down to watch the parade. Although it was for the Chinatown centennial, there were other ethnic groups marching as well, plus the usual highland pipe and drum band, the Calgary Stampede band, and a gaggle of belly dancers (or flock or whatever the plural is for them).

As the belly dancers approached, they began squealing, pointing at me, and then came running toward me. I was perturbed, and turned round to see if there was someone behind me they were after. I was the only one on the intersection. I'm not used to having a flock of half-naked women swarm me, however pleasant the situation may be. As they came within groping distance (not that I did any; I am a gentleman), I suddenly recognized two of the women as Parks District Supervisors on the weekday shift. I had only ever seen them wearing work denims, so I didn't recognize them out of context. The women surrounded me and did an up-close performance that had the other spectators on the sidewalk wondering why that cowboy was getting such preference. Maybe it's the hat. I was caught off guard and missed getting a photo of the women stampeding towards me, but my colleagues graciously allowed me to take a snap of them. They returned to the parade and I, alas, returned to point duty.

*Dragon
dancers on
the streets of
Chinatown.*



Two of my fellow Parks supervisors on the streets of Chinatown. They are off-duty, I hasten to add, and are not wearing regulation uniforms.



World Wide Party #17

The 17th annual World Wide Party was held on June 21st at 21h00 local time. Invented by Benoit Girard (Québec) and Franz Miklis (Austria), the idea is to get a wave circulating the world of zinesters, mail artists, and SF fans celebrating the Papernet. At 21h00, I dutifully stood in my kitchen, hoisted a can of soda while facing east, and toasted those in the Papernet who had already celebrated. I then faced south and north to salute those who were in my time zone, and finally west to those who were yet to begin the festivities. See you at the party next year!

Grave Matters.

2010-06-26

I had a brief trouble call to the Reader Rock Garden, on Cemetery Hill next to Union Cemetery, which is an amalgamation of several of Calgary's oldest graveyards. Afterwards I took a brief stroll around the adjacent graves, dating from the first 15 years or so of the 1900s. I saw many stones with reclining lambs on the top, indicating a child. We forget that life expectancies increased in the past century not because people were living longer but because children weren't dying as young. There was a stone inscribed "*In memory of Saundry Michell who lost his life in New Orleans Jan. 18, 1921 aged 15 years*"; I later checked the Calgary newspapers on microfilm at the library but couldn't find an obituary for him. I wonder what happened in New Orleans.



Gravestone for shipwreck victims.

I also saw a tombstone for William and Mary Garnett, "*In loving memory of our parents, Lost on the Empress of Ireland*". This was Canada's worst maritime disaster. On May 29, 1914, the liner Empress of Ireland was outbound from Québec City to Liverpool, England, with 1,477 passengers and crew when it was broadsided by the SS Storstad, a Norwegian freighter. Only 465 people survived. At the inquest, each side blamed the other. The judge sarcastically remarked that if the evidence was to be believed, both ships were motionless and on opposite sides of the river at the time of impact. The captain of the Storstad was found guilty since it was a broadside impact.

That's All There Is, And There Ain't No More.

The lady in Parks Payroll who handles retirement applications is definitely a hard-working woman, as the initial surge of Baby Boomers start sending in their intent-to-retire letters. So many staff are going from Parks that individual retirement parties are no longer held, but instead a monthly gathering for three or four people at a time. Other departments are the same, and private industry is scrambling to replace accountants and geologists.

My letter of intent has gone in for a retirement date of December 18. Calculating vacation time and banked time, my final day of work will be August 8. I had saved a lot of banked time in previous years, first when my mother was in her final illness and

I had to keep driving 140 km north to Red Deer to assist her. She died in 2002 and I was her executor.

By the time I got her estate settled, her older brother Norman, who lived here in Calgary, began to need assistance. He never had children, so it fell upon me to take care of him. He finally died in 2007 and I had to settle his estate as well. At one time, my greatest fear was that I would spend my retirement as a caregiver instead of enjoying my life. With Mom and Norman gone, I had no one else to worry about; my other elderly relatives have their own kids to look after them.

Ironically, another re-organization is taking place in Parks, the previous one having failed, and I was scheduled to go back to my old job as Weekend Trouble Calls on August 13, the weekend after I retire. That has become moot and if nothing else, my going has saved the job of the seasonal who was replacing me. It's a good time for ambitious young gardeners in the Parks Dept. who want to get ahead, as us Boomers clear the way for them. It is a change from the stagnation of the 1980s, when Alberta suffered from the collapse of the petroleum industry and Parks Dept. had no vacancies often for years at a time.

It is a disquieting feeling to retire. Unlike many people, I never defined myself by my job, yet one cannot walk away from 31 years with the same employer without emotion. The time went by so fast, reminding me that life is the journey, not the destination.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

[Editor's remarks in square brackets.]

FROM: Stuart Stratu
Box 93
Paddington, New South Wales 2021, Australia

2010-05-14

[Re: my photographing Grey Cups fan dressed up in costumes]
I admire you for going up to outrageously dressed and decorated fans and taking their photos. This is something that I hope to do myself one day. It takes a certain courage or leap of faith, I imagine.

[People who dress up in costumes want to be noticed, and will be flattered if you ask them if you can take their photograph. I have never been refused such a request.]

2010-07-07

That photo you used of the Olympic Flame being passed from one torch bearer to another was a good one. Those pixilated trees were cool. I was really scratching my head wondering how you got that effect.

[It is an artifact of trying to brighten the photo on my computer to show something better than a couple of grey blobs on a black field. The relay took place in the late afternoon in winter after the

sun had set, so my digital camera (Nikon D80) had to work doubly hard, since it was not only dark but I was photographing moving objects with no chance for a long exposure.]

[Re: my anecdotes of trouble calls with the Parks Dept.] In the 1980s and early 1990s I worked for the telecom Telstra as a lines serviceman. We installed new telephone lines but my favourite job was working on faults. We'd call in and get an address, phone number, location of the local junction box and the type of fault, which could be an open circuit, short circuit, wires down, or a noisy line. I loved the detective nature of this work and never knowing where the next line fault would take you.

[That was what I enjoyed about service requests (as the City of Calgary officially styles trouble calls). Every day was different, with broken tree branches, irrigation leaks, vandalism, or mower accidents. I could never work on an assembly line or in a cubicle doing exactly the same job all day.]

FROM: Chris Carson
Box 1035
Fort Worth, Texas 76101

2010-04-11

Your piece on the Grey Cup makes me think of finding a suitably neutral location and staging a playoff

among the U.S., Canadian, and Australian football leagues. The chaos resulting from the rule differences would be part of the entertainment.

[I don't know Australian football but Canadian football has one more player on the field than American football (he runs the snowblower to clear a path for the receiver) but one less down (which makes for a more aerial game).]

FROM: Jeanette Handling
1905 Southview Court
Jacksonville, Illinois 62650-3525
2010-04-07

[Re: the Olympic torch relay in Calgary] In 1984 a coworker of mine was selected to be a torchbearer, and we all went to south St. Louis, Missouri, to watch her run. I even got a souvenir T-shirt with the path of the torch and asked her to sign it. They sent her a souvenir torch later after her parents paid the fee required. Not being very competitive myself, I'm always interested in the national pride that is evoked by the Olympic Games.

[I think the general public is tired of hearing nothing but bad news and special-interest groups complaining on the evening news. The Olympics are about athletes and volunteers looking forward to participating in something more positive, where people are

rewarded on their merits, not compensated for their perceived grievances.]

FROM: Lloyd Penney
1706 - 24 Eva Road
Etobicoke, Ontario M9C 2B2

2010-04-19

The Olympic flame came within two blocks of our apartment. I had thought to apply to be a torchbearer, but organizers said they couldn't guarantee that my part of the run would be in my home town or even home province, and it was up to me to get there and do it. Add to that difficulties in getting time off from work to do it, and I decided against it.

I Also Heard From: John Hertz, Franz Zrilich

