

The Hart County News-Herald

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MUNFORDVILLE - HORSE CAVE, KY

Tuesday, March 6, 2001

Science Fiction convention held in Horse Cave

Approximately 350 people were at the Hampton Inn in Horse Cave February 23, 24, and 25 for the 22nd annual science fiction convention, known as ConCave 22.

ConCave organizers Corlis and Gary Robe explained that the name is a combination of convention and cave, because the event is held in the cave area each year.

The Robes, who live in Kingsport, Tennessee, attended Western Kentucky University where
(continued on back page.)

Science Fiction Convention held in Horse Cave

(continued from page A 1) they belonged to the WKU Speculative Fiction Society, the science fiction club. They started organizing the convention in this area then and have continued it for the last 22 years.

This is the first time the convention has been held in Horse Cave. The organizers said they were not pleased with their facility last year and decided to move the event to the Hampton Inn.

"The people here have been great," Corlis Robe commented. "We plan to have the convention here every year as long as they will have us," her husband added.

Ms. Robe described the convention as more relaxed than most. "We don't have a lot of formal programs," she said.

There is a dealer's room where new and used science fiction books and science fiction paraphernalia are available for purchase.

Another two rooms contained all types of art including paintings, glass items, pottery, jewelry and other items, all with a fantasy theme. Most of the items were for sale and convention goers could record a bid on those they wished to purchase. Then, on Saturday night, the items were

sold at auction to the highest bidders.

Artists submitted art from all over the United States.

There was also a game room where participants could play their favorite board games.

On Saturday afternoon, approximately 50 of the convention participants gathered at The Bookstore Cafe in Horse Cave for a banquet. Mayor JoAnne Smith welcomed the group to Horse Cave.

Banquet speaker was Janice Gelb of Los Al-

tos, California. Ms. Gelb is a science fiction fan who has coordinated the Hugo Awards for the best science fiction works of the year. She has also run world-wide science fiction conventions.

Recently she was the U.S. delegate for the Down Under Fan Fund, a grant program that sends one person from the United States to the Australian Science Fiction Convention.

The ConCave Convention began at noon on Friday and ended at 3:00 p.m. on Sunday.



CONCAVE CONVENTION ORGANIZERS Corlis and Gary Robe, left, are pictured with banquet speaker, Janice Gelb of Los Altos, California. An avid science fiction fan, Ms. Gelb has coordinated the Hugo Awards, the awards presented to the best science fiction works of the year.

Front page
above the
fold!

TENNESSEE TRASH #40

Tennessee Trash #40 was produced in the usual last-minute rush by Gary R. Robe following an action packed two months of hectic activity that makes me almost wish that I could come down with the flu so that I could get a couple days of rest. The mail arrives at P.O. Box 3221 and may even fit into the box now that the onslaught of Concave correspondance has ended for the year. The phone rings at (423) 239-3106 although the best you can hope for is an entry on the caller ID box on Monday, Tuesday, and Thursday nights. I don't know if I'll be able to fit in all the stuff that happened over the last two months. As an example of how wild a ride this has been I went from drinking more tequila than is normally advisable at a Mexican friend's birthday party to attendinng a Promise Keepers meeting in 12 hours. It's not been so much a roller-coaster ride than two months in freefall.

TENNESSEE TRASH #40

A Zine by Gary R. Robe for Mailing Number 220 of the
Southern Fandom Press Alliance

February-March 2001

A Convention Where Everything Went Right, Roadside Taco Stands, Mexican Promise Keepers, and Other Surreal Experiences...

February is usually the busiest month of the year for me and will continue to be so as long as I am running Concave. Last year, I was about ready to chuck the whole thing after relations with the hotel became hostile and it seemed unlikely that we would be able to change. That all began to change at New Years when we convinced the Hampton Inn at Horse Cave to take on the convention. This started a chain of hectic activity by Naomi Fisher and me to work out all the "little" details of moving the event into an unfamiliar venue in less than two months. We did it, but it wasn't easy.

First off, I must say up front that Concave 22 would not have happened without Naomi Fisher's help. She sweet-talked the hotel into accepting us, and then held their hands through the room booking and blocking process. I think that by the time the convention actually started she had memorized who was in every room in the hotel, who was throwing parties, and who was likely to cause trouble. By taking the responsibility of hotel negotiations off my hands I was able to concentrate my efforts on the logistics of running the convention.

After 19 years of running Concave at Park Mammoth Resort, many of the logistical tasks were running on autopilot. With the new location many of these solutions went out the window. For example, I needed to find a new way to buy the sodas. For many years, I was just able to order everything I needed

from Coca-Cola through the hotel. They just included my needs in their regular order, and everything was delivered right to the hotel. The Hampton Inn deals exclusively with Pepsi, so I had to find another solution.

The answer to that question turned out to solve several other little problems and subsequently helped to make our reception into the community of Horse Cave much smoother. Horse Cave is a one-stoplight town far enough off the Interstate to make it seem like it should be nothing more than a sleepy farm community without much to interest outsiders. That would be true except for two things that distinguish the town. First, there is Hidden River Cave that runs right under Main Street with an opening that is nearly as large as Mammoth Cave itself. The cave is also supported by the National Cave Museum. The other thing that makes Horse Cave special is Horse Cave Theater, a summer repertoire theater that has a national presence in the acting world. Although the theater is closed in February, the people of Horse Cave are used to hosting actors in the town all summer.

Some of the owners of Horse Cave Theater decided it would be good business to have a restaurant to cater to the after-show crowd. Just across the street from the theater two of the theater partners established The Bookstore combining a used bookshop and café. I had gotten an e-mail from Tom Chaney, the owner of The Bookstore, welcoming us to Horse Cave and offering to do any catering that the convention needed. I got back to him to order the sodas for the convention at a decent price per case. Tom is evidently one of the shakers and movers of Horse

Cave and making friends with him is a big step into integrating with the community.

Another hurdle was that the Hampton Inn didn't have enough tables and chairs for us. I managed to find a place in Bowling Green that specializes in renting equipment for outdoor events, so for a price I could get all the tables and chairs I needed.

OK, these are boring fiddly little details that nobody cares about, except that if they don't get handled the convention will fall apart. This year we had to re-invent all of the logistics that we had worked out over the decades for the old hotel, and we had to do it fast and right the first time. That's not so easy especially when you are not living on-site to work out the details.

Naomi worked a miracle with the hotel reservations. When the calls started coming in to confirm reservations it became apparent that while the Hampton staff was willing and eager to handle the group, the actual job of putting people into the best possible rooms was beyond them. When it became apparent that the blocking was getting too complex to handle by remote control, Naomi jumped in her car and camped out at the Hampton for two days to hold their hands through the blocking. That way we were able to establish a "cone of silence" around Janice's room so that she would at least have a chance of getting a decent night's sleep. We were able to block the parties mostly into the third floor and one end of the second floor so that the noise would be contained, and it would be easier for party-hoppers. We were able to get the people into the handicapped accessible rooms that most needed them.

One of the "charming" aspects of the old Park Mammoth Resort is that there are no designated nonsmoking rooms. There were, all told, only three types of room available there. Double-doubles with two double beds, singles with two twin beds, and two bridal suites with a single double bed. At the Hampton Inn, we had smoking, nonsmoking, double-doubles, king singles, king suites, Jacuzzi suites, handicapped accessible, and connecting rooms to work with. This significantly complicated the room blocking process.

To make things even more interesting we had to consider factors like people who wanted connecting

or adjacent rooms, political considerations like not putting recently divorced or ex-significant others right next to each other, and we needed to try and maintain a quiet block not only for Janice but also for known light sleepers and people that had to get up early to work in the morning. Think of dinner party seating for a party of 350 at a table that only holds about 200.

Another complication was that we had to take seven rooms out of service on order to run the convention compared to the three that we needed to empty at the Park Mammoth. The old hotel had 91 rooms, and we had to empty out two rooms for gaming and one for the art show, so we ended up with 87 sleeping rooms. The Hampton Inn has 101 rooms, so one would think that we gained a lot of space. Think again.

Since the Hampton Inn had only one small meeting room that served as the Huxter room we had to empty out one room for food storage and preparation, another for serving drinks. We also needed to take a connecting room to the function space in order to accommodate all the dealers, plus another room to use as a smoking consuite/game room. Despite all efforts to limit the size of the art show we got more artists than ever sending in work, so the art show needed to expand to two rooms. Add in two more rooms out-of-service for the gaming suite, and we were left with 95 sleeping rooms. That's a few more than the old place, but not enough to completely eliminate the room shortage. Naomi managed to juggle all of these factors into a workable housing plan without much input from me so that I could concentrate on logistics and operations.

Despite all of these arrangements, I was more nervous than ever on Thursday Morning as we began to set up because so much of our plan for the weekend was no more than ideas in several people's heads. Running a convention is really a piece of performance art. You have a venue, sets, props, cast, crew, and audience. The trick is to make all of these come together into a great performance without losing money, burning out the crew, not burning down the house, and leaving the audience wanting to come back for more. Oh, yeah, you don't get a rehearsal.

The first act began on Thursday morning when we made a run to the grocery in Glasgow to buy the consuite supplies and then to Bowling Green to drop

off the boys at my parent's house and to Annette Carrico's house to pick up all the stuff that needed to be hauled up to Horse Cave. I started at the liquor store and picked up the beer and booze. We were able to use our Winstar, the Saturn, and another van to load all the stuff that needed to be hauled up to the hotel in one run. This was tremendously helpful since it is a 90-minute round-trip from Bowling Green to Horse Cave. We had all the stuff at the hotel by mid-afternoon on Thursday, just in time for others to start arriving to help set everything up. By the time we arrived with all the equipment the Coke delivery had been made, so we had all the liquid refreshment we would need for the weekend. We also had a refrigerator rented to store perishables like all of Janice's kosher food for the weekend. By 5 p.m. we pretty much had everything we needed unpacked and ready to go except for the rented tables and chairs.

We had a good time with the people arriving early on Thursday night. (The convention really starts on Thursday night for those in the know.) This is the one time during the whole show that I can actually relax, drink a beer or two, and visit with people without pressure. Janice's flight was delayed from Boston. Mark Linneman was arriving at the same time from California that Janice was supposed to arrive, so they were riding together. Mark had to wait for a couple hours for Janice's flight to finally arrive. This gave us a good excuse to sit in the comfy chairs in the hotel lobby and wait for them to arrive and decrease the surplus beer population and sampling the huge tub of cheese balls.

When Janice and Mark finally arrived at around midnight, I had a box of chocolates waiting for her at the check-in desk. Of course, the only mistake that had been made in the hotel booking was turned out to be Janice's room. Somehow, we had not arranged for her to be arriving on Thursday. Since the hotel was mostly empty that night, we were able to find a room for her to stay that night. She did, however, have to move the next morning into The Janice Zone. We stayed up until about 2 a.m. hearing travel horror stories and indulging in general smuffing until all agreed that it was time to get some sleep.

One bone of contention was the box of chocolates that I had for Janice as she checked in. Last year amidst the hotel turmoil I had neglected to do something similar for Steven Boucher. Since Steven

was there as Janice arrived, he was quick to point out that we were giving Janice preferential treatment since he had not received any chocolates. Thus began the idea for the Boucher Chocolate Flood.

First thing next morning I called the table rental place and got profuse apologies from the owner who had written down the reservation in his record book but put down the wrong date on his delivery schedule. I will say that he dropped everything and had our tables delivered within 90 minutes after I called. With that last piece of equipment in place, we were ready for people to start arriving.

Once we had the tables and chairs distributed, I got busy in getting the consuite under operation. This was one of my major concerns for the ambiance of the convention. At the Park Mammoth Resort, we had one of the best rooms in the world for a consuite. The Barn Room was decorated like, well, a barn. It was large enough for seating 75 people, had a bar and kitchen built in, complete with restaurant-scale sinks a refrigerator, and large storage cabinets. We could unload all the beer, munchies, soft drinks, and food prep equipment into this area and run the whole operation from there. This was, to me, the heart of Concave.

At the Hampton Inn we exchanged ambiance for utility. Since we were using the whole hotel, we were able to take over the entire lobby/breakfast area as the consuite. We had to turn one room into a kitchen/food preparation/storage area, and another adjacent room into the bar/bathtub-o-sodas. This spread out the consuite operation into three separate rooms but gave us a lot more space in which to operate. I was afraid that we would lose the feeling of the Barn Room as a place to hang out, and that people would not use the lobby.

In reality, the arrangement worked out better than I had hoped for. Since the consuite was the lobby of the hotel, everyone passing through could make a stop for munchies and drinks and check out if anything interesting was going on in the seating area. The consuite may not have had as much character this way, but it was much more accessible to the members, and much easier to keep stocked. Since we were able to use the breakfast counters to put out munchies, the feeding area was much less crowded

and much less messy than ever before. In the end the new arrangement was a big improvement.

On Friday morning Mark Linneman and I made a trip into town to buy some needed supplies and to rectify the Boucher Chocolate Shortage. Since Valentine's Day had just passed and Easter was on the way, we were able to do a masterful job if I say so myself. First, in the clearance bins of Valentine's stuff, we found chocolate roses 4 for \$1. We got a bunch of them plus a vase to put them in. Next, we picked out a chocolate Easter Bunny chosen on the grounds of excessive cuteness. Last, we found a 1-½ lb. Solid chocolate bunny to top off the collection.

That night I waited for the consuite to fill up and for Steven to come back from dinner to spring all this stuff on him. I called the room to attention and then explained how I had screwed up last year and had not gotten Steven the traditional GoH chocolate welcome gift. If Steven was a lady, I continued, it would take chocolate and flowers to make up for the slight, but in Steven's case I could take the shortcut of giving him chocolate flowers. I then produced the bouquet of roses from under the counter. I then explained that since Steven is from Australia, they may not have the same Holiday traditions as in the US, and that he may have never received a chocolate bunny for Easter. The Big Ears Bunny should have cleared that up. I then went on that when he opened the Big Ears Bunny he would soon run into the disappointment that every child feels when he discovers that his chocolate Easter Bunny is hollow. In order to compensate for that, I presented him with the smaller but completely solid bunny to assuage any disappointment from getting a hollow bunny. By this time Steven was a nice shade of pink and admitted that I had recovered from my gaffe. What makes this even funnier is that Steven hates American chocolate since it is too sweet and soft for his taste.

The big event on Friday night was the Art Show Reception and Boston in '04 Bid Party catered by, you guessed it, Naomi Fisher. About 45 minutes before starting time people started to line up in the hallway in front of the door. Some brought chairs to make the wait easier. Various crises kept me from making it into the room until after midnight and by that time most of the crowd and food was gone. I did get enough to eat to keep me going through the night since the only thing I had to eat since breakfast was

part of the sandwich that Corlis had brought in from Aunt Bee's. By the time I made it to Naomi's party the crowd had thinned down to mostly The Usual Suspects, and I stuck around until they shut the doors sometime in the wee hours.

I then ran headfirst into one of the problems of being In Change. I headed down to the consuite and discovered that the guy who had signed up for bartending in the small hours was passed out behind the bar, and the one who signed up to take over at 4 a.m. was a no-show. I just didn't go to bed and took over tending to the few drunks customers who were still ambulatory at that hour. I also needed to move our stuff off the breakfast bar to make way for the hotel's continental breakfast setup at 6. I had not intended to pull an all-nighter but that was the way it worked out. I did manage to get about four hours of sleep between breakfast and preparation for the banquet.

Since the Hampton Inn has no restaurant, we had not planned on having a banquet at Concave this year. When we started working with Tom at The Bookstore, we changed our plans. I am really glad we did because that meal was one of the high points of the weekend and one of the most fun convention banquets I've ever attended. The groundwork for the banquet began about two weeks before the convention when Pat and Naomi made one last trip up to Horse Cave to measure the space for the art show. I had told them about The Bookstore, and they went there for lunch. Tom served them a bit of everything and told them that we could take over the whole place for our function. OK, here you have an all-you-can-eat buffet on one side of the room and a used bookstore on the other. Do you think that fans would go for that? Got it in one.

Tom Chaney's partner in running The Bookstore is Jerry Matea, who doubles as the Horse Cave Correspondent for the Hart County News-Herald. Jerry showed up mid morning on Saturday while I was sleeping and interviewed Corlis about the convention. He asked if it would be OK if the mayor dropped in at the banquet to welcome us to the city. Only Corlis and I knew about this turn of events.

I wish I could have gotten a picture of the jaws dropping when I introduced Mayor JoAnne Smith to the banquet guests, and she very nicely welcomed us

to Horse Cave and told us how much the city was glad for us to be there. Let me put this into perspective. We are talking here about a little town in the Kentucky countryside that was happy to have 350 SF fans drop in for the weekend. Mayor Smith asked the crowd if there was anything she could do to make our stay better and Ken Moore piped up with "Yeah! Pay our hotel bills!"

Without skipping a beat, The Mayor pointed to the decaying hulk of the abandoned train station/hotel right across the street from the restaurant and said, "You can stay there for free!" It was a classic moment.

We all then proceeded to stuff ourselves with the buffet and then the fans drifted across to the bookstore and started picking out stuff to buy. I had to herd them back over to the café for Janice's Guest of Honor Speech. After we were finished, Jerry took pictures of Janice, Corlis, and me for the newspaper. Rickey Sheppard bought us a year's subscription to the Hart County News-Herald so that we got a copy of the article that ran on the convention. Concave was front page above the fold news in Hart County the next week!

After the banquet the next big event was the art auction. This was another experiment since we were not sure how well we could convert the lobby into an auction room. It actually worked out well. We were able to build a partition out of tables that gave us a good working space to lay out all the artwork and to keep it secure after the auction. With Janice as GoH and Pat and Naomi on the committee, the DUFF auction was an important part of the sale. The two items that were bid up most fiercely were the hour of massage from professional masseuse Tish Krog and a large bag of Naomi Fisher's chocolate chip cookies. In all we raised about \$260 for DUFF.

After the art auction, it was Party Time! There are people that plan their whole year around their Concave room parties, and this year was no exception. Of course, Frank and Millie Kaliz put on their "usual" Xerpes hoax bid party complete with lots of green glowing aliens, streamers hung from the ceiling, black lights, strange punch, and Zydeco music. One thing that distinguished the Concave party, however, was the presence of a Jacuzzi in the room. I wasn't there to confirm it, and I'm pretty sure

I didn't want to be, but I understand that things Got Naked in there after midnight.

Other parties ranged from the Party 9 From Outer Space room complete with pie plates strung from the ceiling and Ed Wood videos on the TV to the 50's Bomb Shelter Party thrown by Brynley Dolman and Judy Chantelois accented with 50's Red Menace SF invasion movies on the TV and hosts dressed in radiation decontamination suits. There were also parties hosted by the SFC, the Chattanooga DSC bid, the Charlotte in '04 Worldcon bid and several more "because we're here" parties that lasted well into the night. Things were well enough in control that I was able to go to sleep at about 2:30.

On Sunday morning we especially enjoyed the late checkout that the hotel allowed. One unbendable rule we had to cope with at the Park Mammoth was an absolute noon checkout time. At the Hampton Inn, once they had enough rooms made up to handle the anticipated off-the-road arrivals that night, they really didn't care when people left. In years past people left in a hurry at noon. This year, most people were not in a big hurry to leave. There were even some that decided at mid-afternoon that they could stay over on Sunday night and just get up early on Monday morning. Instead of a screeching halt, the convention came to a soft landing on Sunday evening.

I said before that the hotel staff was really working hard to make accommodate us, but I really need to explain more. When trying to explain Concave to the hotel staff, Naomi told them that some people would try to freak them out. She explained that the best way to handle this was to give back as good as they got. On Friday afternoon Theresa Threadgill, the General Manager, looked through the Huxter room and fell in love with one of the medieval costumes one of the dealers had. Anna Dennis, knowing that Scoring Points With The Hotel is a Good Thing allowed Theresa to borrow the dress. Soon another of the desk clerks followed suit, so most of the people checking in on Friday evening were greeted with hotel staff already in costume.

At midnight on Friday, Bill Payne told the night clerk that if they weren't careful the Jacuzzi would be full of naked people. She gave Bill a look like "I get weirder things than you in my breakfast cereal" and told him that as long as they weren't dancing naked in front of

the fireplace in the lobby, she didn't care what was happening in the Jacuzzi. Once again, I carefully avoided the area.

Robert the maintenance man turned out to be a long-time SF fan but had never managed to connect with Fandom by living in Hart County, KY. He took our antics in stride and was perfectly happy to move the furniture out of seven rooms because of the neat stuff going on. When the elevator gave out on Saturday evening his only comment about being called in from home was that he had been curious as to how long the elevator could hold on through the weekend and that he was perfectly content to hang around the parties until the repairman got there from Evansville.

Theresa was not able to be there on Saturday because there was a regional Hampton Inn manager's meeting in Indianapolis. On Sunday morning the other managers were trying to convince her to stay on for lunch, but she told them, "No, I have to get back to my hotel to oversee the convention checking out today."

"No way!" chorused her colleagues, "Hampton Inns don't have conventions!"

"Mine does," she purred.

As people left on Sunday afternoon, many of them stopped me to say how great the weekend had been, how much they enjoyed the new facilities, and how glad they were that Concave had survived the transplant. The sentiment was best summed up by Patricia Clements from Nashville who said, "You WILL have Concave here again next year and the banquet WILL be at The Bookstore, or we'll kill you."

The next morning Theresa and Barbara Thomas, the Sales Manager, asked me with doe eyes if we wanted to come back next year. "We have to," I told them, "I am under a death threat if we don't come back here."

We reserved the hotel for both next year's Concave and Concave 22.5: The New Year's Party. The hotel grossed over \$11,000 for the weekend, which is about as much as they did in all the rest of February combined. The 24-hour restaurant across the street did as much business on Friday night alone as they normally do in a week. We tried to warn them, but they ran out of steaks on Saturday night. We also

took up about a dozen rooms in the Budget Host Inn across the street and would have probably taken up more. There was a sheepdog trial going on in Horse Cave the same weekend that filled up the Budget Host by two weeks before Concave weekend.

There were even some people that ended up staying at the old Park Mammoth Resort by choice. Some of the LARP players opted to stay there to get a quiet day's sleep where they were out of danger of getting "staked" in their "coffins." Pat and Naomi took Janice on a tour of the old place just so she could see what she was missing, and the best word to describe it was very very quiet.

Concave topped out at 350 people, which is at the top of the range that I prefer. At 325-350 people the convention is comfortably in the black, although this year we had about \$1000 in extra expenses, so we just about broke even. Next year I think I can eliminate some of those expenses and go up by \$5 a head to get us back into a comfort zone.

Naomi enjoyed being She Who Must Be Obeyed In Order To Get a Room At The Inn and had volunteered to run the room lottery next year. That takes a tremendous load off of me so that I can concentrate on the operational side of things. As it stands, I had to fight for enough time to organize the convention this year as the company kept throwing little trips at me throughout January. By splitting up the responsibility for registration to Corlis and hotel arrangements to Naomi, the whole job becomes much more manageable and less stressful for me.

AND THEN I HEADED TO MEXICO

The week after Concave I made one of the strangest trips to Mexico yet. I needed to make some customer calls to track the progress on some of the projects I have going on, and the only time that fit into both my and the sales rep's schedules was March 7-9. That part wasn't too strange, but the other part of the trip was.

My church supports a missionary family in Mexico City, and in July a group from my church is planning a mission trip to teach Vacation Bible School to the kids there and to work on the expansion of the church into a new building. Someone needed to go to Mexico to make arrangements. Since I am planning to go on the

mission trip, and I was going to Mexico in March anyhow, I volunteered to save the church some money and make the trip on Eastman's dime. It didn't add any cost to the company since I would spend the weekend staying at the missionaries' house and since I was staying over a Saturday night, I could get a really cheap super-saver fare.

I contacted Stephen Carpenter, the mission leader with my plans to visit, and he was a bit hesitant. He explained that there was going to be a meeting of the *Hombres de Integridad* (Promise Keepers) that weekend and that I probably wouldn't get much out of it since it would all be in Spanish. I wrote back that I was fluent in Spanish, and that changed the whole perspective on the trip. Attending a Promise Keepers rally is not a thing that I would choose to do on an open Saturday in my calendar, but it suited the purpose of this trip.

I left home on the afternoon of March 6th and immediately ran into trouble at the airport. This was the day that a big Noreaster was hitting the East Coast, so for some reason the airline schedules were fubared all over the country. The plane I was supposed to take to Atlanta was not going to depart from Tri-Cities with enough time to make my connection in Atlanta. After some frowning at the computer the gate agent found that I could connect through Cincinnati to Dallas and then finally to Mexico City. I would get in at 11:30 p.m. but all those flights were on time. Right.

The theoretically on-time Comair flight was delayed for 1 ½ hours so my two-hour layover in Cincinnati turned into 20 minutes. I ran from the commuter terminal to the plane to Dallas and made it just in time. The gate agent welcomed me on board, and I said that I was here, but too bad about my luggage. He said, "Oh, no. Your luggage was here before you were." Yeah, and little green apples don't give you the runs.

I was the last one on board and there was no overhead space, so I had to cram all my carry-ons under the seat. Luckily the nice man sitting next to me offered to put my laptop case under his seat. I was not in a mood to socialize, so naturally the guy next to me wanted my life story. I mentioned to him that I was going to Mexico City on business for three days and then was meeting over the weekend with a

missionary. Oops, big mistake. It turned out the guy in the next seat was a Pentecostal minister. He started quizzing me on my church's doctrine and then proceeded to try and save my soul all the way to Dallas. I got up to pee a lot.

At least the Comair flight to Mexico city was only half full, so I got two seats to myself and spent the rest of the trip reading Terry Pratchett. The only good thing about getting into Mexico City at 11:38 is that there was no line at Immigration. I then grimly proceeded to the baggage claim to wait for my luggage not to arrive. Much to my surprise it must have been the last bag on the plane, but after 30 minutes of waiting my suitcase actually did make it! Another advantage of a late arrival is that there was not any traffic on the way to the hotel.

I tried a new hotel this time in Mexico City and was very happy with the choice. Most of the best hotels in the city are in the center which is fine if you are meeting in the financial district or with the government, but for visiting paint factories they are not at all convenient. During my last trip I stayed at a pretty crummy hotel that was right beside the *Pereferico*, the busiest highway in Mexico. This Tennessee Boy does not do well with traffic noise. While calling at one customer, however, Oscar Lagos, the sales rep I was travelling with, noticed a very nice-looking hotel right in the center of Tlanepantla, the northern industrial district. I checked it out on the Internet, and it looked decent, so I gave it a try.

It turned out to be a great decision. Not only was it within walking distance of two customer's plants, but the room was also huge, comfortable, quiet, and half the price of one of the downtown hotels. As an added bonus, the hotel was only 10 minutes away from Oscar's house and 15 minutes away from the Carpenter's. By selecting this hotel, I avoided at least six hours of crawling through Mexico City traffic.

The first day Oscar had managed to pack in three customer calls. That's a really good day's work for Mexico City. The only problem was that it didn't leave much time for lunch. We ended up eating at a little hole-in-the-wall restaurant in one of the industrial neighborhoods and ended up with a pretty good meal. We did, however, make a mistake by taking a table away from the door and out of sight of Oscar's car.

There was a small auto shop next to the restaurant. We didn't give that a second thought while we ate. You can get an idea of just how good the roads are in Mexico City in that we drove for three blocks before Oscar was sure that we had a flat tire. Someone had knifed the sidewall of the rear driver's side tire while we were eating. My guess is that the guys in the shop next to the restaurant were trying to get some business. Boy did we fool them by driving off! We then got the thrill of changing a tire at the side of a busy street with bussed and semis missing our legs by at most a meter. We drove the rest of the day on the temporary spare.

That night, I called the Carpenters and had dinner at their house. I got to see the church a bit and had a good time getting to know them and exploring how we would squeeze in a dozen gringo missionaries from Tennessee into the available facilities. I will have no trouble, but the others may be a bit put off.

The next day I had another three calls and once again had to settle for a rather inelegant lunch. Oscar had tried to get a replacement for the flat tire only to find that it was an uncommon size and could only be had at a Continental or Michelin store. We killed a lot of time that day stopping at tire stores. By the time of our last appointment the only thing we had time for was a roadside taco stand, *Taquitos del Cuñado*, or Brother-in-Law's Tacos. At least at this shack the car was never out of sight. The food was a bit greasy but demonstrably well-cooked. I ended the night again with the Carpenters and returned to the hotel early because I needed to work on my presentation for the next day.

Oscar was almost an hour late on Friday morning, but he had a new set of tires on the car. He found a place that had 195/65 tires instead of 205/65's. The place he found them had a two-for-one sale on, so he had a pair of the tires replaced and put both new ones on the front. It was good that we had new tires because that day's customer was 120 km to the north of Mexico City and we had to make good time after the late start.

We made it to our meeting only 15 minutes behind schedule, and we didn't feel too bad because this is a customer that always keeps you waiting at least a half-hour just so you remember your place in the

scheme of things. After the visit we had lunch at another roadside stand, *Barbacoa del Cuñado* which means that either it's the fastest-growing chain in Mexico or there are lots of brothers-in-law investing in taco stands. This one was the best of the bunch, serving barbecued mutton something called *pancito* (Mexican chitlins) with tortillas and several types of salsas. Amazingly, none of the culinary adventures made me sick either during or after the trip. Either it was too short of a trip to pick up enough bugs or the food is actually cleaner at the roadside stands than in the restaurants.

That afternoon we didn't have enough time to make another call, so we headed back to the office. This gave me a chance to catch up on e-mail and more importantly visit with all my friends in the Mexico City Office. Coincidentally, that Friday was the birthday of Jimmina Graf, one of the sales assistants and a good friend after all the hours we have spent in booth duty at the Paint Show. The first question the office staff had for me was how my Taekwondo studies were going. Since I had just tested for my blue belt, I was able to report some progress. Limme3na, Marisol, Olinca, Gabriela, Elda and Christina all demanded a sample, so I performed *Taeguk* five in an open space in the office. It's not a bad thing for the 44-year-old male ego to have half a dozen Mexican ladies admiring your physical prowess.

After work that night we went to Jimenna's birthday party at a cantina in the Zona Rosa. There were about 20 people there, and we started out innocently enough diluting the tequila with Fresca. Pretty soon, however, my Fresca ran out and the hosts insisted on changing to straight tequila. It was also insisted that the first shot had to be chugged. I was very glad for my heavy bellyful of greasy street *barbacoa* was sitting there to adsorb the shock. Over the next four hours three bottles of tequila went to meet their maker.

For most of the time the group didn't pay much attention to me, and I was able to chat with my friends at one end of the table without being expected to drink a lot. As the crowd began to dwindle, however, I became more of the focus of attention and was being drawn into a game of "kill the gringo" with many toasts and tequila shots. Oscar came to my rescue at midnight and announced it was time to go. Although Limmina and her friends begged Oscar not

to take me away, none of them knew where my hotel in Talplanetla was, let alone being in any shape to get me there. Oscar managed to only drink a couple of weak tequila and Frescas, so he was in remarkably good condition to drive us back across the city.

God must smile on travelers with good intentions because I woke up the next morning feeling fine. This was a good thing because I needed to be checked out of the hotel by 7:45 to meet Stephen Carpenter and the delegation from the church attending the *Hombres de Integredad* rally. For a while it appeared that we were going to skip the meeting, but after the birthday party of Friday night, Karmic balance demanded that I spend all day Saturday in Worship.

When I started making arrangements to meet with Stephen, this rally was supposed to have 15,000 men signed up to attend and it was to be held in the soccer practice stadium of the Mexican National University (UNAM). Those plans got changed when *Marcos*, the leader of the Chiapas Zapatista rebels decided to come to the capital to meet with President Vincente Fox. The had the city in a state of agitation, and the UNAM students are famous for their leftist politics and willingness to demonstrate at a moment's notice. It was quietly decided that 15,000 Christian men descending on the campus would not mix well with the Marxist Zapatistas and students that were flooding the city. It was descreetly decided to move the rally to a smaller meeting hall.

The next dilemma was that the venue they found only had seating for 3,000 people for an event that was supposedly drawing 15,000. When I visited with the Carpenters on Thursday evening, they were not sure they wanted to fight the crowd. I wasn't sure until Stephen called at 7 A.M. on Saturday morning that the decision had been made to attend the meeting.

As it turned out only about 2,500 men showed up for the meeting, so there was plenty of space in the meeting hall. I was less thrilled when I got the program and saw that the meeting was scheduled to go on for 12 hours! They had set up quite a production complete with three Christian rock bands, eight speakers, video production, and large screen projection. At least I got to develop a whole new Spanish vocabulary because somehow my study of the language concentrated on scientific and business jargon, not religious terminology.

I have never been really comfortable with the Promise Keeper's basic premise that most of the decadence and decay of modern society comes from the infidelity of men. The preachers all had lots of statistics to quote demonstrating that the absence of fathers and the prevalence of divorce is directly linked to the fall of Western Civilization. I was not looking forward to 12 hours of hearing this message preached. Is I suspected the preachers had pretty much made all the points they were going to present by lunchtime and after that it message just got more and more boring, repetitive and strident.

Just before lunch the sermon was on the evils of modern society. One does not have to look far in Mexico City to see that the culture there is different than in the US. The *Pereferico* is lined with thousands of billboards selling everything from Internes service to ladies' lingerie. Lots of women's lingerie. Fifty feet high and leaving nothing to the imagination. A trip through Mexico City is *fun* unless you choose to be disturbed by such things. Most of the preachers that day made a lot of points about the decadence surrounding the city and the degradation of men and women inundated by this toxic environment. I tend to say to them "lighten up and have a bit of fun!" Life in Mexico City can be pretty depressing with the poverty, pollution and crowed, I would much rather see a billboard with a beautiful woman almost not wearing a black negligee than the city it's hiding.

Over lunch Stephen and the pastor of the church had a lengthy discussion about whether it was acceptable to minister to people who had divorced. I listened for a while and then had to jump in. I said that the job of ministry is to reach out to people trying to grow spiritually. Yes, I agree the divorce is not desirable and should be avoided if at all possible, but there are plenty of cases where it is the best solution for all concerned. It seems to me that the ministry is often more willing to forgive murderers than divorcees. A minister's job is NOT forgiveness or judgment. Only God can judge and forgive.

Yes, there are people who marry and divorce like others date, but most are just people who made a mistake and are trying to get past it. Our church has a food pantry program through which we distribute food to needy families. There are some who are playing the system and taking a free ride. The

majority, however, are in desperate circumstances and genuinely need the help. The Christian ethic is to minister to all who ask for help in this life. Besides, I said, if you cannot associate with divorcees, you should take me to the airport right now because I'm one of them. That kind of stopped the conversation.

Thankfully, the rally did not last for the whole time advertised in the program. They cut out a speaker and ended 90 minutes early because they had to give up the meeting hall to make way for a banquet that was moving in. The last speaker was especially repugnant because he was loud, angry, and not very pertinent to the theme of the day. We headed back to the north side of the city carefully taking note of all the billboards on the *Pereferico* that were corrupting our manhood all the way.

The next morning, I awoke with the Carpenters and prepared to visit *Iglesia Cristiana del Norte*, or Northside Christian Church if you prefer. That was my main objective to observe for the upcoming mission trip since we plan to use this church for housing and teaching in July. I took along my video camera and shot over an hour of footage that shows the church and its neighborhood. One big limitation of using the church is that there is one primitive shower and a 100-liter water heater. I hope that my report does not cause some of our missionaries to drop out.

The ICN is well-located for a missionary church in the Altizapan district of northern Mexico City. Just below the church is a comfortable upper-class neighborhood surrounding the Country Club and golf course. Uphill from the church is a much poorer neighborhood. This allows the church to draw in members from a broad base of the community and throws together a cross-section of Mexican society that would normally not mingle. The biggest problem they have is that they have outgrown their building.

They are currently searching for land to build a new, larger church that is still within walking distance from the current location. This is a tough limitation because almost half of the congregation must walk or rely on public transportation to reach the church. Even though the neighborhood on the heights above the present location is quite poor, the land is still very expensive. A 500 m² lot that is nearly vertical starts at \$40,000.

The current building started out as an auto service station and was then converted to a martial arts school. In its current incarnation the sanctuary is covered by a tent-like ceiling with side flaps that can be lowered if it is cold or raining. I did not get to see much of the service because I had to leave for the airport, but that which I did see was really lively. I would have stayed for more of the service, but the Zapatistas were planning on demonstrating in the afternoon and I might not have made it later. This turned out to be a wise decision because the demonstrations became big enough to be mentioned in the US press on Monday. Since the ICN is on the northwest side of the city and the airport is in the southwest, demonstrations in the city center would almost certainly have closed the roads within a couple after I passed through.

TAEKWONDO UPDATE

On March 5th the entire Robe Experience took our next belt tests. Nick promoted to red stripe and the rest of us promoted to blue belt. Corlis had been dreading the board break for this test because it is a straight punch, and her arthritic wrists were not likely to work well. I had prepared some test boards before, and she had been practicing with six and eight-inch boards but was still not able to break the full 12-inch board that was required. During the test, Master Grosso allowed her to use a palm strike instead of the punch and she broke it on the first try. He then threw me a curve by making me break a stack of two boards. I visualized my fist passing through both boards, and I made the break look easy on my first try and could have probably done three. I am now only four steps away from achieving a black belt in Taekwondo. Those, however, are big steps and it will probably take me at least two more years to make it.

We are going to the Tennessee State Taekwondo tournament on March 31st, and I have talked myself into competing. My expectation is that I'll get the living crap beaten out of me but on the other hand I could take home a state tournament medal! Either way I get to experience the agony of victory or defeat and I'm paying for the privilege!