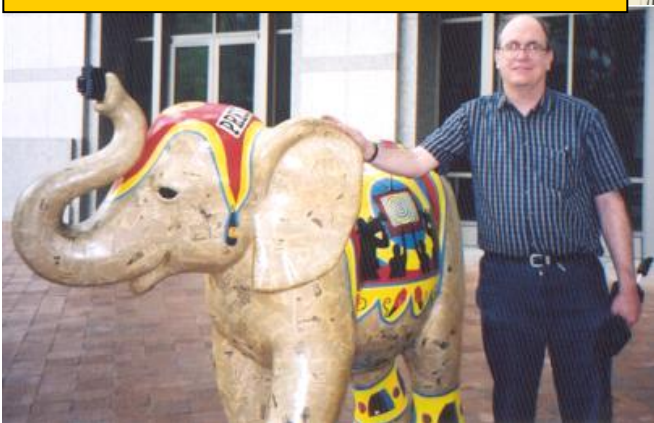




My Back Pages 27

Rich Lynch



My Back Pages 27

articles and essays by Rich Lynch

Well here we are again, still stuck in the pandemic. The past three issues of *My Back Pages* seem like they all belong in the movie *Groundhog Day* – I keep expressing my hope that the world health crisis will be over soon, only to have that thought crushed by the next COVID variant that comes along. It's exactly like what Jean-Baptiste Alphonse Karr once wrote: "*Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.*" ("The more things change, the more they stay the same.") Ain't *that* the truth!

Anyway, I'm really optimistic this time that the end of this thing is finally in sight. Infection rates have been declining everywhere, no more worrisome virus variants seem to be out there, and newly-upgraded vaxes should offer sufficient protection that we can all become more confident about our well-being. For me, back toward the beginning of the year it had really looked like the proverbially light-at-the-end-of-the-tunnel was becoming visible. But first, I had to make it through February.

Rich Lynch
Gaithersburg, Maryland
September 2022

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February

March, the ‘In Like a Lion and Out Like a Lamb’ month, came about four weeks early this year for me. This past February was a month like no other, ever.

It was on Thursday, February 3rd that Nicki and I made the sad decision to euthanize our 14-year-old cat, Joltin’ Joe. I’d brought him in to the cardiology veterinary clinic for what we had hoped was a routine checkup but had feared would result in bad news. And there was. Joe had had a history of heart issues over the last half of his life which had progressed to the point where we’d been dosing him with meds every day in an attempt to preserve as much well-being as we could. But, over the previous couple of months, we’d both observed that Joe had been in gradual decline – by the beginning of February it had gotten to the point where he had mostly quit eating. And his personality had eroded away to the point where he was no longer showing enthusiasm for much of anything.



Joe and Nicki in happier times

Due to COVID protocols, I had to wait in my car while the clinic did an ultrasound heart exam on Joe, and it didn’t take very long before they phoned me with the results: congestive heart failure. I was told that Joe probably had only a day or two left at most. And less than that for any remaining quality-of-life. I passed the news on to Nicki and we both agreed that it was time to let him go.

It was then that I made what turned out to be a bad mistake – I decided that I wanted to be with Joe during his final moments. Before his decline, Joe had been a sweet little guy – he loved attention and liked being near us. But the cat they brought in to be with me, in the visitors room, was nothing like that. He was this orange colored animal whose personality was now entirely gone, stripped completely back to a near-feral condition. And he was not willing to go gently into that good night – when I picked him up, he gave a ferocious snarl and bit me on my right hand.

There was blood everywhere – on my clothes and shoes and all over the floor. The cat clinic people were able to perform the euthanization without any further damage and helped me bandage the wound to stop the bleeding. A very short time after that I was at a nearby urgent care clinic where they gave me a Diphtheria-Tetanus shot and prescribed some oral antibiotics. I had hoped those would be sufficient to stave off any infection but by the next day it was clear that they hadn’t – the finger where I’d been bitten had become somewhat swollen and discolored. So I paid a visit to my GP doctor’s office where the nurse practitioner mostly just recommended that I keep an eye on it over the weekend to see if the antibiotics were having an effect. But come Monday morning it was obvious that they weren’t – the infection had become noticeably worse so I decided it was time for another visit to the urgent care clinic. When I got there, the nurse practitioner took one look at it and told me: “Emergency Room! Now!”

It had been more than a half-century since the only other time I'd ever been through an Emergency Room. The previous time was back in 1967 when I had contracted pneumonia during a high-school senior class trip. I no longer remember much of anything about that, but I don't think I'm ever going to forget my six-hour stay in the ER on February 7th. It didn't take me long to complete the paperwork and then get escorted into the non-COVID wing (though they did a nose-shiv test on me to make sure I was clean). After I was situated in one of the curtained cubicles the ER doctor took a quick look at the finger and immediately had a nurse put an IV shunt into my left arm. And after that came what turned out to be the first of many intravenous antibiotic infusions over the next week-and-a-half.

Only the first one was done in the ER. When that finished I was taken for X-rays to make sure there was no bone damage from the bite (there wasn't) and after I was returned to my cubicle the doc told me they were going to keep me overnight where I could receive additional infusions to see if they would have a positive effect on the infection. But it took several hours before a bed in the hospital became available and during that time in the ER I witnessed some emotionally disturbing things. Several patients there were obviously in a lot of distress, one of them an elderly man who looked like he'd taken a bad fall which had resulted in a big bloody bruise on his forehead. They put him in a curtained cubicle next to the one I was in and even after all the immediate care he received and the presence of several family members it didn't seem (from what I could overhear) that he was able to be interactive other than the occasional moan. But the one that got to me the most was the even more elderly lady who was put in the curtained cubicle on the other side of me.



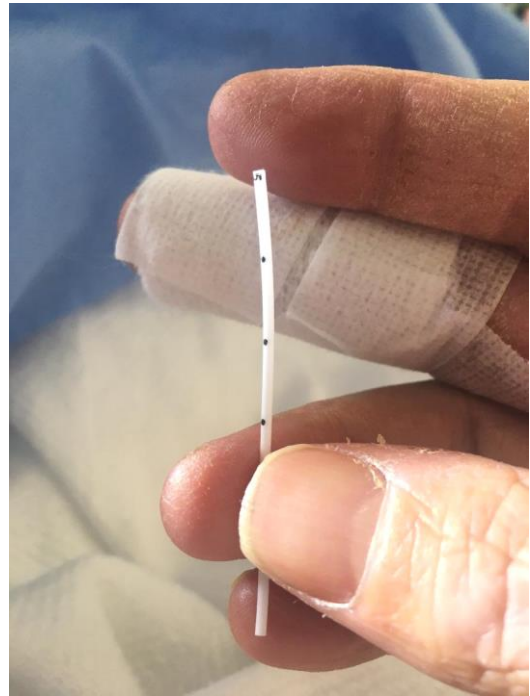
an IV in the ER

From her appearance she looked to me like she must have been in her mid-90s and from what I could overhear she may have been living alone. Her presence in the ER wasn't because of any physical malady, though. That had become immediately evident after she had announced loudly, as they were bringing her in, that she wanted to die. And then, just as loudly, she accused one of the ER nurses of wanting to kill her. He had been trying to get her to take some meds and she was having none of it. But then there was a moment of lucidity – the ER nurse tried to calm her by asking about her late husband and for five minutes or so she waxed poetic about him and the life that they had had together what must have been many decades ago. And then it was into the abyss once again. Living in isolation at that advanced an age must have brought her some truly terrifying night demons that were eroding away what she had left of her sanity.

It turned out that my stay in the hospital lasted more than one day. Including my ER time I was there for 50 hours almost exactly, every eight hours being flooded with antibiotic via an IV drip. It seemed to me there was some noticeable improvement as time went on, but because it was happening so slowly I was informed that once-daily antibiotic IV infusions were going to be an outpatient part of my life for the next several days. To prepare for that the original IV shunt

was removed and replaced with something called a ‘midline catheter’. That turned out to be a very narrow soft plastic tube, maybe six inches long and ending in an injection port, which a specialist nurse expertly inserted into a vein in my upper arm. For the next six mornings after I was discharged from the hospital I returned to its Infusion Center for my daily drip. There were other people there who were also getting IV infusions and after a few days it became almost like *The Breakfast Club*. Except that none of us were teenagers and there wasn’t any breakfast.

By the time of my last infusion I had become so used to the catheter that I had pretty much stopped even noticing the thing’s invasive presence in my arm. But it was still a relief, after that last infusion, for it to be finally removed. And yet, several weeks later, I’m not sure the infection is entirely gone – the finger, near where the bite occurred, is still a little bit sore and slightly red. But at least it doesn’t seem to be getting any worse.



section of tubing from a midline catheter

Another thing that thankfully doesn’t seem to be getting any worse is my heart. I wasn’t so sure of that back in the middle of December when there was a ten-minute cardiac event of some kind where my pulse shot up to more than double its usual rate. I’d been reclining on the bed with Nicki, listening to an audiobook with her, when it became evident that something unusual was happening to me. We have a portable blood pressure monitor which also provides a heart rate, and it gave some alarming readouts of my BP – each one was a lot different, sometimes wildly so, than the previous one. One other physical symptom was that my bladder kept quickly filling with urine to where I had to relieve myself every couple of minutes. Nothing like that had ever before happened to me.

It was my sister Beth, who lives down in Florida and works for a respected heart doc there, who helped walk me back from what had been the start of an anxiety attack. I kept texting her the BP readouts and the first thing she asked was if I had the thing hooked up correctly. Turned out I hadn’t – the cuff was misadjusted, which might well have caused the strange readings. But on the other hand the racing pulse rate was real – I double-checked it the old fashioned way (finger on carotid artery) and it was definitely very high. And then, all of a sudden, it wasn’t. Everything went back to normal, and there hasn’t been a repeat.

After that scare, it was obvious that I needed to pay a visit to my heart doctor. And, as it happened, I already had one penciled in on my calendar for mid-February – it was coincidentally later on the same day that the catheter was removed. After hearing what had happened she scheduled me for both a stress test and an ultrasound ‘heart echo’ test a couple of days later. This was not my first time for those – I don’t mind the heart echo, as all I have to do is lie on my side and breath in-and-out on command while tiny microphones (or whatever they are) taped to various paces on my chest collect heartbeat information. The stress test, on the other hand, is not something I look forward to – spending ten grueling minutes walking on a progressively-faster and increasingly-inclined treadmill is something that only a marathoner could enjoy. I actually

did ask about what they do to achieve an elevated heart rate for athletic types like long distance runners, but I never got a straight answer. My guess is that demonic treadmill must have an ‘overdrive’ setting.

There was also one other test that I was subjected to – two-weeks with a heart monitoring gadget. As I was being prepped by the cardiac nurse I was informed that it used to be an oppressively cumbersome device that had to be worn as if it were a small forward-facing backpack. She must have noticed the expression of alarm on my face because she hastened to add that the technology has improved by a lot in the past several years – heart monitors are now about the size of a USB flash drive, which I guess is partly how they function. It was secured onto my chest with some sort of waterproof plastic tape and I was told to remove it after two weeks and mail it back to the manufacturer using the box it came in. As was the case for the catheter, after about a day I had become so used to it that I had pretty much stopped even noticing the thing’s presence. The only painful part about the entire experience was when I pulled the plastic tape off my chest at the end of the monitoring period – now *that* hurt!

I probably won’t learn the results from the heart monitor until I have a video chat with the heart doc in early April. But for the other two tests there was eventually some good news. Or, make that, non-bad news: I got a telephone call from the heart doc’s office that the results from both the echo and stress test were ‘nominal’. I guess I should ‘take heart’ in that.

For me, February had come in like the proverbial March lion but it did go out in a much kinder and gentler way. As of February 28th I am now retired! For the past six years I’d been putting it off because the work I’d been doing with the multilateral carbon sequestration initiative was too interesting and I just couldn’t bring myself to let go. Back in 2020 I’d finally decided that it was the right time, but then came the pandemic. And once my home became my workplace I pretty quickly concluded that it wouldn’t be in my best financial interest to end my career until the COVID crisis was mostly over. I don’t think I would have held out indefinitely, but it became a really easy decision to leave after I was offered the inducement of a buyout. What made it a really attractive deal was the end-of-February separation date. That allowed me to take my six weeks of accumulated annual leave and still amass time-in-service instead just receiving a lump sum payout for the otherwise unused leave. That made a measurable improvement in my pension calculation.

I had made it clear to my management that I didn’t want any going-away luncheon, assuming one was even possible in these pandemic times. But a virtual Teams meeting was fair game. It happened on the final Friday of my employment and I was surprised by how many came online to see me one last time – lots of people from work and also quite a few of my international colleagues. There was a lot of strolling down memory lane from the people who spoke and when it came my turn, at the end of the event, I did more of the same:

I’m happy to see many of my friends from the Carbon Sequestration Leadership Forum here. Way back in July 2003 I became the most junior member of its Secretariat. And now, more than 18 years later, I’m departing as the most senior person in the entire organization.

As you’d expect, over the years there have been many memorable meetings. One of them was the 2016 annual conference in Tokyo, where there was a super typhoon which threatened the scheduled day trip to Japan’s commercial-scale

demonstration project. It certainly alarmed me, but I was surprised that nobody else was all that concerned even though, for a while, it looked like the storm would be directly in the flight path at the time of the field trip. When I showed the image of the storm track to one of the other meeting attendees, he gave a resigned shrug and said, “It’ll just make it all the more interesting.”

And now the time has come for me to leave. I will miss every one of you – those of you that are here now and many others who are not. I’ll miss all the good times we’ve had together and I wish there had been more of them. And you know what? I’ll even miss all the misadventures that inevitably occurred along the way. They just made it all the more interesting.

All during the third-of-a-century of my Federal Government employment the idea that I’d someday enter retirement had never quite been ‘real’ to me. It was as if I’d been reading through a book and found the sentence: “Rich is now no longer employed.” To which I’d have thought to myself, “Hmmm. That’s interesting. I wonder what will happen next.”

And now it’s finally time to find out. I really hope – expect, actually – that my life post-employment will be just as intellectually stimulating as the years of my working career had been. And perhaps even more so. I’m looking forward to becoming more deeply involved in history-related preservation activities and having more time to read and write. And also traveling more. There are many places yet to see or, for some of them, to re-see. And you know what? I won’t even mind if there will be misadventures along the way.

They’ll just make it all the more interesting. ☀

And a Few Months Later...

I spoke (wrote?) too soon that I should ‘take heart’ about the results of my cardiac check-up. I woke up on the morning of Friday, May 21st feeling a bit odd and a two-fingers-on-the-carotid-artery heart rate check put a bit of a scare into me: more than 140 beats per minute. It had happened once before, back in mid-December, but that episode had lasted for only a few minutes before things went back to normal. Not this time.

Nicki and I have one of those portable blood pressure monitoring devices and it indicated that my BP was close to normal. But the heart rate remained at about 140. So I telephoned my sister Beth, who lives down in Florida and works for a respected heart doc there, and after relaying to her a series of heart rate readouts (all of which were in the 140 range) she recommended that Nicki bring me to an Urgent Care clinic. They did an EKG there, which to no surprise confirmed the high heart rate. But the EKG also found something even more troubling – severe A-fib.

Atrial fibrillation occurs when the heart’s upper chambers (the atria) lose their coordination with the lower chambers (the ventricles). The result is arrhythmia (an irregular heartbeat) and its manifestation is that odd feeling I woke up with. This was not a new experience for me – A-fib actually runs in the family. My two older sisters and my brother have coped with it, as did my mom and probably my dad. I’ve sporadically had very brief, minor episodes of it many times in my life (it’s the feeling that the heart skips a beat), including one at the 2016 Kansas City

Worldcon which had lasted a bit longer than usual and had caused me to check in with the convention center's first aid clinic. But before I had even gotten there the episode had passed. Not this time.

The recommendation from the Urgent Care clinic was that I **right away** head over to the hospital emergency room. Nicki dropped me off there and I told her not to wait – I'd been down this path before, back in February when I'd had an out-of-control infection in my hand that had required a two-day hospitalization to treat – and I was pretty sure this could be a similar experience. It mostly was.

My residence in the ER turned out to be several hours shorter than the previous time but no less emotionally disturbing – a stage-four breast cancer patient in the curtained cubicle next to mine was in bad shape, losing control of bodily functions and not able to keep down any sustenance. And during the check-in, out in the ER lobby, there had been a COVID sufferer who had needed help from a close friend to do the paperwork – she had been barely strong enough to sign her name on the admittance forms. (I was masked and kept my distance, and a COVID nose swab during my ER stay came back negative.) Her friend had shown no fear or reluctance to be near her – he told me that she may have saved his life several months back by getting him quickly to the hospital after a bad fall that had broken his neck and he was doing everything he could to save hers. I hope that he was successful.

There were intravenous infusions galore during my previous hospital stay and it was more of the same this time. The only differences were that I was receiving a heart med instead of an antibiotic, and instead of half-hour infusions every eight hours it was one continuous IV drip that went on for a full day. It started while I was in the ER so they had to bring me up to my hospital room on a gurney with the IV drip stand merrily rolling alongside. I was pleasantly surprised that I ended up in a single-occupancy room, though later on I found out that this is normal for the heart patients wing of the hospital – there has to be easy access to the patient for a crash cart and assorted medical staff when a 'code blue' occurs. It was a sobering realization.



my deluxe hospital accommodations

It took quite a while for the IV meds to start to have an effect. Eventually my heart rate subsided to about the mid 70s but that was while I was supine on the hospital bed. When I got up to use the commode it rapidly increased back into the low 140s. Very discouraging, to say the least. I eventually was paid a visit by the on-call cardiologist who didn't seem alarmed by this news but it did result in me being given some additional meds – one pill (metoprolol) to reduce the heart rate and suppress the A-fib and another (Eliquis) to thin the blood to prevent clots that could result from rampant A-fib. These proved to be far more effective, so much so that the IV infusion was finally ended.

It turned out that the metoprolol did too good of a job – it ended up lowering my heart rate a bit too much, down into the 40s and sometimes as low as 39. I had thought this might cause the cardio doc to keep me in the hospital another day for observation, but it was not causing me any duress and all my other vital signs were good. So they released me. But it's not over. No, not even close.

It looks like I'll be on the two oral meds perhaps indefinitely. And if so, I'm glad that my medical insurance is picking up most of the tab. The metoprolol is a generic and doesn't really cost that much, but the Eliquis is still protected by patent coverage and ounce for ounce might be about as expensive as gold – it's as if every time I swallow one of those little cream-colored pills I'm actually chewing down a ten dollar bill. A few days after my hospital stay I had an office visit to the cardio doc, and I was put on another one of those small portable heart monitors and told that I could resume normal life activity. Mostly. But there are some changes that were impressed upon me, including cutting back on alcohol intake (it interacts with the metoprolol).

Meanwhile, there is still A-fib going on. It never persists very long but it happens often enough that it should be immediately evident when the data readout from the heart monitor is examined. All this wasn't enough to keep Nicki and me from attending Balticon at the end of May and driving up to New York State in early June for our niece's wedding. But I won't be surprised if an outcome from my next visit to the cardio doc will be that a more aggressive (and invasive) treatment may be needed. I'm not looking forward to finding out. ☀

Afterword:

It was good to finally take a couple of trips farther from home than Washington, D.C. Balticon was nothing special, but it did allow us to connect up with several friends we'd not seen in a long time. And the trip to New York went pretty well – it was nice to reconnect with relatives on Nicki's side of the family and the wedding turned out to be a super-posh event that must have made a big dent in the pocketbook of whoever paid for it.

As for my return visit to the cardio doc, it was mostly good news. Or make that, non-bad news. The heart monitor read-out did show some instances of A-fib but they were fairly brief and relatively infrequent. So even though I'll remain on the two heart meds, there's no immediate need for an invasive procedure such as an ablation. But the news was not so good for Nicki, who has her own cardiac issues to contend with. They were severe enough that, near the end of August, she had to have a pacemaker implanted.

What this meant was there was no Worldcon for us this year. (The trip already had been in doubt because of the continuing COVID pandemic.) We had been looking forward to being back in Chicago, and what I think we missed most about not attending Chicon 8 was the camaraderie of friends we'd expected to see there. As you will read next, there were good opportunities for that late last year during our abbreviated stay at Discon III.



Nicki (in the blue dress) with some of her relatives
at the wedding reception

My Day at Discon

I *like* Worldcons, I really do! And one of the main reasons is seeing familiar faces – Worldcons are usually the only events where I can cross paths with fan friends from far-off places. But Discon III was different. Being staged, as it was, in the year of a global pandemic no doubt caused many people to reconsider their plans to attend. As did some convention committee actions which had angered many of our Southern Fandom friends (Nicki and me too, for that matter). Heck, if the convention was any farther than about an hour's commute away, we might also have given it a pass. But we decided to go there anyway so that we could drop off some fanzines at the giveaway table and to pick up convention publications (including the Souvenir Book). And yeah, also try to find some of those familiar faces.



part of Discon's concourse

were familiar faces to be seen there. But it was a lot more difficult than usual to identify them because everybody was wearing masks.

Discon III did several things egregiously wrong in my opinion (and I'm not going into them here), but one of the things it did right was to take extreme measures to minimize attendees' potential exposure to the COVID-19 virus. This included making it an absolute requirement for everyone to show proof of vaccination. And also to be facemasked at all times except when eating or drinking. So there we were, at the Washington Science Fiction Association's information table near the entrance to the concourse, when a big fellow walked over to say hi. It took me several seconds, as well as some timely clueing-in from Nicki, before

I finally figured out who he was: Warren Buff, who had been the Chair of the 2010 NASFiC. We've known each other for probably the better part of 20 years but wearing his facemask made

As it was, we only were there for a few hours and we stayed mostly in the largest function area of the convention – a repurposed underground parking area that connected to the lowest level of the venue hotel. This had become transmogrified into Discon's concourse which included the dealers room, exhibits, site selection voting, and information tables for various special interest groups. It was a good place to be because, as it turned out, there



Nicki and the difficult-to-recognize Warren Buff

it damn difficult for me to recognize him. The previous time we'd seen each other was in April 2016 at the FanHistoricon that was held in Williamsburg, Virginia. My memory is that back then he was living somewhere out in the wilds of western North Carolina, so it was a pretty big surprise when he told me he had relocated to the D.C. area. If and when this world health crisis finally abates to the point where social distancing stops being the new normal, he and I will have a lot more catching up to do. Over craft beers somewhere, no doubt.

Someone who was much easier to recognize was my friend from Los Angeles, John Hertz. I knew he'd be at Discon because we'd been corresponding prior to the convention and he'd gotten me to agree to be the Official Editor for the 46th collation of the Worldcon Order of Faneditors, which is usually better-known by its acronym WOOF. It's an amateur press association, or 'apa', and is one of the lesser-known features of a Worldcon. Prior to last year, WOOFs had been collections of printed fanzines that were laboriously collated into individual packets, or 'mailings', with one of each fanzine to a mailing. But with the onset of the COVID pandemic, the 2020 Worldcon had to be transitioned over into a completely online event so the annual WOOF distribution also transitioned – from print to PDF. This was all orchestrated by John, in his annual role of WOOF's behind-the-scenes organizer-in-chief, and it was successful enough that PDF became the preferred way to proceed for 2021. And that was just fine with me.



me and my 'old-school' friend John Hertz

But I digress. I didn't have any trouble recognizing the esteemed Mr. Hertz because I knew exactly what to look for – his propeller beanie. In many ways John is a traditionalist in his fan activities, and that includes paying homage to what used to be a "universal symbol of fandom" (according to **Fancyclopedia 3**) by wearing one of those throwback caps at every science fiction convention he attends. The propeller beanie has been around a very long time – it dates all the way back to 1947, when a fan named Ray Nelson first made one for a Michigan science fiction club meeting. The propeller beanie's first appearance at a Worldcon happened a couple of years after that, so John (whether or not he was keeping count)

was celebrating the 72-year anniversary of its presence at World Science Fiction Conventions. And may there be many more.

But again I digress. John and I only crossed paths one time, as it turned out. He was mostly frequenting other areas of the convention than the concourse, and that we met up at all may have been because I had left him a message that I was looking for him. What I had wanted to do was show him the glorious cover that artist Tim Kirk had emailed me for the new WOOF but I was less than successful in finding it on my iPhone (that's what happens when an email is archived in the wrong place). But while I was haplessly scrolling through various folders, I took the opportunity to try to find out more about John's ability – or *non-ability*, make that – to receive

and read electronic communications. My belief has been that John is so firmly embedded in the era back where interconnected personal computers were the stuff of science fiction that email is a total anathema to him. To me, corresponding back and forth via postcards and letters is admirably traditionalist and very old-school, but it's also damned inefficient. I wouldn't do it for just anyone, so you can use that as an indication of how strong I consider my friendship with John to be. But at any rate, I was once again unsuccessful. I didn't learn anything new, other than that he reads PDFs at **efanzines.com** using a computer at a branch of the L.A. County Public Library. I guess that's where he's gonna finally get to see Tim Kirk's WOOF cover. As well as the rest of the apa.

No doubt I wasn't the only one who had trouble recognizing masked-up friends – I imagine that I wasn't any easier to recognize than Warren Buff was for me. Probably even less so, given that I'd grown a full beard in the many months the pandemic has been raging. So it was maybe a tiny bit of a surprise when my anonymity was pierced by Andy Porter when he purposefully strode up and said hello. (And yeah, on further consideration it's entirely possible that it was Nicki, not me, who he recognized from about halfway across the width of the concourse.)



at lunch with Andy Porter

After Andy and I spent what Nicki must have thought was an interminable amount of time chitchatting about cameras and indoor photography, we all decided to do lunch in the hotel's restaurant. And nice guy that he is, he picked up the bill. As we'll do for him the next time we see him next, hopefully in Chicago for the 2022 Worldcon.

Even not counting lunch, Nicki and I didn't spend 100% of our time in the concourse area – being a repurposed car park, there were no restrooms in there so once in a while we needed to take our leave into the hotel proper. It was on the way back to the concourse from one of those pit stops that I spotted someone who's been my friend for more than 30 years – Mike Walsh. I'm pretty sure he was one of the first fans I met and talked to during my first Washington Science Fiction Association meeting, at the end of 1988. And although our fan interests are not identical (he's a small press publisher and bookseller as well as a past Worldcon Chair, while my interests gravitate toward fan history) we've had so many enjoyable conversations in the decades since then that we're about to the point where we consider each other almost-brothers. And we'd even look nearly the same, now that I've grown a beard, if he ever decided to shave his head.

Discon III was all about camaraderie, as far as I was concerned. Nicki and I attended no programming at all, preferring instead to spend quality time with out-of-town friends whenever we happened to find them. We had a very pleasant extended conversation with Chris Barkley and Juli Marr, who had come from Cincinnati, on topics ranging from Worldcon site selection voting to the 2022 Major League Baseball season (assuming there is one). Pat Molloy, whom

we'd first met when he was a student at Western Kentucky University, had come up from Huntsville, Alabama apparently to spend most his time processing ballots at the site selection table – he was so deeply embedded there that it took a bit of effort to pry him away for a few minutes. And Brad Lyau, all the way from California, surprised us not so much with his presence at Discon as by his ability to quickly recognize people through their facemasks. Maybe that's his superpower.

Those moments were a far better use of our limited amount of time at the convention than attending programming panels could ever have been. And also, no doubt, safer from a 'staying healthy' perspective.

In spite of Discon's strict proof-of-vax and masking requirements, there were still more than 25 positive tests for COVID from convention attendees – just about all of them for people who had been in much smaller rooms than the concourse, where various programming events had been held. Nicki and I are both triply-vaxed so I hadn't thought we were in jeopardy of contracting the virus at the convention. But after reading the convention's infection statistics I'm now considering it a real accomplishment that we avoided becoming ill with COVID.

Maybe the world will head back toward at least a degree of normalcy in the coming year, where just being out in public doesn't make one so concerned about personal well-being. Let's hope so. In the end, Discon proved to be a memorable experience but not one I'd ever want to repeat. Attending future Worldcons under such surreal circumstances should only take place in science fiction. ☀



Brad Lyau and Mike Walsh

Afterword:

As I mentioned earlier, there was no Chicago Worldcon for us, at least in person. But the convention did have some 'virtual' programming panels that were streamed out to Chicon members who were not on site. I found several that I was interested in – a panel about Polish fandom past and present, a remembrance the late Erle Korshak (a Chicon 8 Guest of Honor who had died several months prior to the convention), a panel about the very first Chicon (held way back in 1940), two media-related panels (one about 1970s television/movies and one about the popular space opera TV show *The Expanse*), and of most interest to me, an interview of the two Fan Guests of Honor, Joe Siclari and Edie Stern. All of them were pretty good, and it makes me wonder what programming events I'd have wanted to attend if I'd been there in person.

Next Worldcon opportunity for Nicki and me will be a couple of years from now when it comes to Glasgow, Scotland for the third time. We're definitely looking forward to that and who knows? The pandemic might even be over by then! So for now we'll be attending more regional conventions like the upcoming DeepSouthCon. As you'll read next, the previous time we went to one of those (back in 2017) it was a weekend with good friends, good food, and even a photo-op with an unusual roadside attraction.

High Times in High Point

I'm of the opinion that practically every city and town in the United States is home to some relatively obscure roadside attraction. For instance, Gaithersburg, where I live, has one of the six international latitude observatories which were established in 1899 by the International Geodetic Association to precisely measure the wobble of the Earth's axis of rotation. The building still exists and is a National Historic Landmark. But it's not much of a photo op.

The city of High Point, North Carolina does a lot better. It's known as the 'Furniture Capital of the World' – for many decades it has been the center of the North Carolina furniture industry, with the downtown and nearby environs dominated by very large exhibition halls which host major furniture and home furnishings trade shows. So it's not surprising that the most famous roadside attraction in High Point is furniture-themed.

It's the world's largest chest of drawers. The structure dates back to the mid-1920s, commissioned by the local Chamber of Commerce and built as a monument to the city's status in the home furnishings industry. It's absolutely a photo op, made even more so by the pair of socks whimsically dangling from one of the drawers, but it was not the reason that Nicki and I had traveled to central North Carolina. We had come for the 2017 DeepSouthCon.



me pondering the world's largest chest of drawers

The origin of the Deep South Science Fiction Convention dates way back to July 1963, when six science fiction fans got together in Huntsville, Alabama at the home Dave and Katya Hulan for what was described as "a very enjoyable party". Ever since then the DeepSouthCon has been a yearly event which has been hosted by different fan groups throughout the southeastern United States. Back in the 1970s and 80s when we lived in Tennessee, DSCs were invariably stand-alone conventions. But that is no longer the case. Nowadays the economics of trying to stage a one-off convention ranges from difficult to impossible – the last time it was tried, three years ago, there was a substantial financial loss which had to be covered by the convention chairman. So the norm has become that the DSCs are almost always combined with existing conventions to take advantage of existing fan bases. And this year's DSC was no exception – it was an add-on to the annual High Point convention, ConGregate.

Last year, when the DSC was combined with an Atlanta-area convention, the results had been less-than-optimal. Instead of integrating the DSC into the convention's overall multi-track program, it was provided just a single room down at the far end of the hotel's function space.



Mike Pederson accepts the Rebel Award

presentations of the Phoenix Award (to an editor, author, or artist with connections to the South), the Rebel Award (to a deserving fan for service to Southern Fandom), and the semi-facetious Rubble Award (to a person or entity which has done the most *to* Southern Fandom). This year's there were two winners for each of the service awards: Simon Hawke and Aaron Allston (Phoenix) and Bob Ellis and Mike Pederson (Rebel). As for the Rubble, it's originator and proprietor, Gary Robe, named a Chattanooga hotel as this year's winner – it had been the venue for several previous science fiction conventions but was no longer viable as such because it was converting many of its rooms into apartments. How dare they!

What stood out about this year's DSC, and what made it a DSC at all for that matter, was that it brought together many fans from different places and different eras – people who have been to other DSCs over the past six decades and whose presence make a DSC the special event that it is. George Wells was there, all the way from Arizona. He's been going to DSCs for so many years that he's been adopted into Southern Fandom. Sitting in the lobby and talking to him and his buddy Richard Dengrove (another long-time DSC attendee) is almost a program event in itself – the always entertaining conversation ranges in many, often disparate, directions, and Nicki and I usually feel a bit worn out by the time we finally move on to other activities. And Bill Plott has started coming to DSCs! His fan activity dates back to even before that very first DSC, and, indeed, a published description of that 1963 event indicates he was there! This will be something we'll have to delve into at a future DSC. Assuming we can get some Southern Fandom-specific programs onto the schedule, that is.

And there hadn't seemed to have been a lot of thought for what do to with the DSC in terms of programming. There had been generic titles for what had turned out to be unmemorable panels, which resulted in none of the DSC programming items having more than a handful of people in attendance. And none had added much of any real value about the unique entity that is Southern Fandom. I was really hoping that this year's DSC would be different.

Well, it was and it wasn't. The DSC was not ghettoized this year into its separate space and there was plenty of programming – panels about science fiction and fantasy in print and in the media, and even some panels related to various aspects of science fiction fandom. But I didn't find that any of it was particularly inspired by the presence of the DSC. The only truly DSC event, other than the business meeting, was the



Gary Robe presents the Rubble Award



Nicki and Bob Burleson at Kepley's Barbecue

There were many such enjoyable conversations during the three days of ConGregarate, but the most memorable one didn't happen at the convention. For dinner on Saturday evening we went to a highly-recommended barbecue restaurant, Kepley's, and were almost immediately introduced to its owner, Bob Burleson. For the next ¾ hour, while we enjoyed some excellent North Carolina `cue, he regaled us with tales of himself and his business. He's been the owner since 1962, and in that time has come to know practically everybody in the city. Or at least everybody who came in to eat that evening. After more than half a century he's finally kicked

back and has become the official greeter. And also the official storyteller – it's something he's good at.

Next year's DSC will be at a date and location too inconvenient for us to attend. But in 2019 it will be back in North Carolina. And most likely, so will we. We had a good time. ☀

Afterword:

In case you're wondering, here's what that international latitude observatory in Gaithersburg looks like. It's located in a quiet and spacious park only about four miles from where Nicki and I live. But I've been there just once, and only then because it was very near to the early voting center that I used for one of Maryland's elections. It's a bit of local history and I'm glad I went to see it, but it's pretty non-descript – I found the park where it's located to be the more interesting part of the visit.

As for the 2019 DeepSouthCon, Nicki and I decided to give it a pass. We weren't happy the convention's website seemed to imply that because of North Carolina's 'open carry' law, attendees could bring loaded firearms if they so desired. And we also skipped the next two scheduled DSCs after that because of the COVID pandemic. But we *will* be attending the 2022 DSC – the pandemic seems now to be on the wane and the newly-upgraded COVID vaccines will give additional levels of protection. Not only that, it's the 60th DSC and Bill Plott is one of its guests! I'm really looking forward to it.

Another convention I'll be looking forward to attending is Midwestcon, held in Cincinnati during the final full weekend of June. But there hasn't been one since 2019 because of the...well, you know. That con unfortunately turned out to be the final time I crossed paths with my friend Roger Sims, who died back in January. Here's a remembrance I wrote about him for File770.com.



the international latitude observatory
in Gaithersburg

Remembering Roger Sims

I read the news about him today at the **File770.com** newsblog: “*Past Worldcon chair and First Fandom Hall of Fame inductee Roger Sims died January 23 at the age of 91 after a long struggle with Parkinson’s Disease.*”

My memories of Roger go back to 1987, when I first met him at the Corflu fanzine convention in Cincinnati. We only talked for a short time, but it was enough to cement a friendship that had its roots about a year earlier when I had contacted him about being on the program at the 1986 Atlanta Worldcon. My wife Nicki and I were organizers of the Fan Programming track at ConFederation, and we wanted to see if he would be available to introduce the highly-entertaining video production *FAANS*, where he played a hotel detective during a fictional science fiction convention who became drawn into much intrigue involving iconic fannish myths and legends. Alas, I didn’t actually see him at ConFederation because I missed the panel due to a scheduling conflict. But after that, Nicki and I were looking for opportunities to preserve some of Roger’s memories about previous fan eras in our fanzine *Mimosa*.



a screen capture from *FAANS* with Roger Sims as the hotel detective and Larry Tucker as “Uncle Albert”

And it turned out there were many. Roger was a good writer and the articles he authored or co-authored for *Mimosa* were both entertaining and informative. They ranged from stories about 1950s science fiction conventions (including the now-famous Room 770 party at the 1951 New Orleans Worldcon) to recollections about nearly-forgotten fan organizations (such as the Morgan Botts Foundation). From a tale about a memorable fan dinner to a recollection of an even more memorable few months sharing an apartment with Harlan Ellison. From a story about the possibly apocryphal Second Fandom to a heartfelt remembrance of his closest friend, Lynn Hickman, written not long after Lynn’s passing. It was our honor and privilege to have published Roger’s essays about his fandom, and I wish there had been more of them.

Even after *Mimosa* ended its run in 2003, Nicki and I maintained our friendship with Roger and his wife Pat. Strengthened it, actually. We crossed paths only a few times each year at Midwestcons and Worldcons, but always looked forward to times where we could sit down and talk as well as opportunities to dine together. In particular, Midwestcons were essential fan activities for us because it was a fannish nexus – we knew we could reconnect with Roger & Pat as well as other fans from storied eras of the past.

I can’t remember for sure which Midwestcon it was when I noticed that Roger seemed to be having mobility issues. Pat informed me that he’d been diagnosed with Parkinson’s Disease which I knew would eventually result in his death at some indeterminate point in the future. And every year after that he seemed a bit more frail, though far from fragile – fandom had been a big part of his life for many decades and my impression was that it would take something truly dire

to prevent him from being at his favorite fan gatherings. And unfortunately, about two years ago, there was.

One of the many things I despise about the pandemic world of 2020 and 2021 was that it curtailed in-person fan events. The last time I saw Roger, at the 2019 Midwestcon, his well-being appeared to have worsened to the point where his attendance at future conventions probably seemed questionable. But you know, I never really thought that – he was such a constant at Midwestcons that, to me, it seemed inconceivable that he wouldn't be back. And then COVID happened.

I wish I could recall what Roger and I talked about during that final Midwestcon for him. We did have some quality time together and probably shared some memories about recent and long-ago fan happenings. But I just can't remember for sure. So instead I'll let my mind travel back to a much-earlier Midwestcon. It was back in 1988, not long before the New Orleans Worldcon where he was the Fan Guest of Honor, that Nicki and I tape-recorded a Saturday night 'bull session' where Roger and his friends Howard DeVore, Lynn Hickman, and Ray Beam had a grand time reliving their fabulous fandom of the 1950s. There was a small crowd of fans who had gathered around and I have an image frozen in my mind of all the pleasantness and amusement on faces of people who were there. And that's how I'm always going to remember Roger – a good friend who had many memorable experiences that he was happy to share. And in doing so, made them a permanent part of the legendry of fandom. As is he. ☀



me and Roger at the 2011 Worldcon

Afterword:

Roger wrote or co-wrote eight articles for *Mimosa* and later this year, or early in 2023, I'll be collecting them in a one-off fanzine that will be made available at both fanac.org and efanzines.com. As for *FAANS*, it can be found at the fanac.org YouTube channel or, even easier, via Google (search on "FAANS mystery"). It's an entertaining 35 minutes, especially if you're already familiar with some of the fannish references and in-jokes. And if you're not, there's a detailed **Fancylopedia 3** page about *FAANS* which explains everything.

I should also mention that in addition to *FAANS*, the fanac.org YouTube channel has, as of this writing, another 132 video and audio recordings that have been uploaded, some of them dating back as far as the 1960s and 1970s. One of them, an interview of author Fred Pohl on the topic of "Science Fiction as Social Criticism", was recorded in 1963. As for me, I had not yet been introduced to science fiction fandom in 1963 but it was about that same year when I had my first real-world sense-of-wonder experience. As you'll read next, it was really colorful!



another screen capture of Roger
from *FAANS*

In Living Color

It happened about a half century ago, back in 1962 or 1963 I think. My parents had brought me, along with my brother and sisters, on a visit to my aunt and uncle. They had lived in the northern New York town of Adams Center, about 20 miles from where we were in Chaumont, and it was far enough away that we really didn't see them very often. And sometime in the interval between that visit and the previous one they had gone out and done something that my 12-or-13-year-old self back then had probably considered to be almost science-fictional. They had purchased a device which had brought them into what I had thought of as the World of the Future.

I remember that we all gathered around it when my uncle turned it on. It sprang to life, showing the cartoonish image of a multi-colored bird as it spread its tail feathers. And then a disembodied voice solemnly proclaimed: "The following is brought to you in living color on NBC." It was the very first time I'd ever watched a color TV.



the NBC Peacock as it appeared in the early 1960s



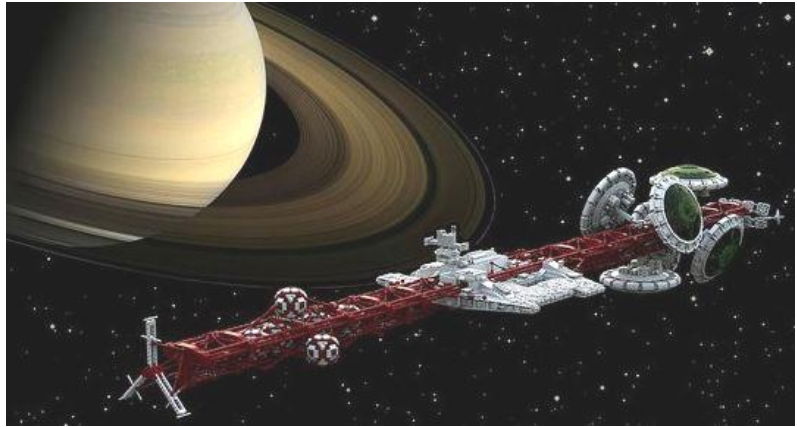
an RCA color TV from 1963

Until then my television viewing had been limited to the black-and-white set my parents owned which had brought us TV programs from just three television broadcast stations – one in nearby Watertown and two in Syracuse. I'd been aware that color television sets existed, of course, but they were expensive and not something that my parents felt they could afford. And for that reason I don't think that I or any of my siblings had ever campaigned for them to get one – saving up for holiday gifts and summer activities was a far greater priority. That the situation was different for my aunt and uncle was, I guess, a revelation to me – I hadn't realized they were that better off than us. Or maybe it was just a different set of priorities for them. In the end it hadn't mattered – I'd just been happy that they'd shared the experience with us.

It wasn't until sometime in the early 1970s that a color television finally came into my parents home and I remember that I was the instigator – there had been a spectacular NASA Apollo launch scheduled during a week when I was going to be home from college and I had used that as an excuse to convince my older sisters to help me underwrite most of the cost. My first color TV came a few years after that, after I had married Nicki and we were living in Chattanooga, Tennessee. The inducement was an even more grandiose space spectacular,

though it was a movie and not real life: one of the broadcast networks was going to show *Silent Running* and I had thought, you know, the planet Saturn would probably look *glorious* in color. And hey, it did!

It was all a long time ago and I guess I'm a bit surprised to realize that my two sense-of-wonder color TV experiences bracketed a time span of only about a dozen years – Nicki and I have had our flat screen TV for longer than that! And now I can only wonder what televisions will be like a half century from now. Already we're being inundated with promotional material for advanced TVs with newer technology than what was available when we had bought our flat screen: first there was 4K, 8K and UHD; now there are the even more cutting-edge OLED and QLED, whatever the heck they are. I have no doubt that decades from now we'll have media streaming technologies that will make even these current-day innovations seem very old-fashioned in comparison. But you know, I'm still pretty sure there's always gonna be one thing that will *never* change. Whatever the technology turns out to be, it will always be presented...in living color. ☀



a still from *Silent Running* showing Saturn in glorious color

Afterword:

I look forward to sense-of-wonder experiences whenever and wherever I can find them. I'm pleased there have been many in my life, and quite a few of them have happened during visits to various museums of the Smithsonian Institution. The most recent case in point was back in April, when the Smithsonian's Arts and Industries Building became adorned with a futuristic sculpture by Korean-American artist Soo Sunny Park, crafted from metal and dichroic glass, that served as a portal to the future! Or more precisely, to a special exhibition titled 'FUTURES'. It was the Smithsonian's largest-ever exploration of what may lie in the future for all of us and, as you'll read next, it didn't disappoint.



sculpture by Soo Sunny Park that's a portal to the future!

A Day at the Museum

“The future is already here. It’s just not very evenly distributed.” – William Gibson

Let me tell you about my favorite building in Washington, D.C. It’s the staid old Arts and Industries Building, the second-oldest of all the Smithsonian Institution buildings, which dates back to the very early 1880s and owes its existence to the Smithsonian’s then urgent need for a place where parts of its collection could go on public display. Its first event was the inauguration ball for President James Garfield but once it officially opened to the public it has hosted a multitude of exhibitions and displays on the arts, industry, and the sciences. It was the place where dinosaur fossils and the Smithsonian’s extensive gems and minerals collection were displayed until the National Museum of Natural History was constructed in the early 1900s. It was the place where cultural and social items preserved throughout the existence of the United States were displayed until the National Museum of American History was constructed in the early 1960s. And it was the place where historic aircraft and spacecraft were on display until the National Air and Space Museum was constructed in the middle of the 1970s. But that’s not why it’s my favorite D.C. structure – I greatly admire it because of its design and appearance.



the wonderful old Arts and Industries Building

It was an architectural creation of Adolf Cluss, a prolific German-born immigrant who specialized in the design of churches and markets. The Arts and Industries Building contains elements of both: a four-cloistered cathedral-like cross-section with a central rotunda and three-story-tall interior pavilions with a roof supported by iron trusses. But it’s the exterior of the building that makes it special, with all its spires and geometrically-pattered brick façades. It’s an iconic structure which has rightfully been designated as a National Historic Landmark. But for the past three decades of its existence it has been in disrepair.



‘Futures’ exhibition at the Arts and Industries Building

So much so that it was closed down in 2004 for stopgap architectural stabilization which, due to limited funding, took more than ten years to complete. But even after that was wrapped up the building has seen only sporadic use, and it’s scheduled to close indefinitely for major renovations starting in the second half of 2022. But until then it’s host to a special exhibition, one that Nicki and I had very much wanted to see. It’s all about the future.

Or make that ‘Futures’. Depending on one’s outlook there are many possible futures, and this exhibition is a noble and ambitious attempt to explore some of them. The Smithsonian’s website describes it as: *“Part exhibition, part festival, [with] nearly 32,000 square feet of new immersive site-specific art installations, interactives, working experiments, inventions, speculative designs, and ‘artifacts of the future’.”* There was quite a bit to take in, easily enough to fill the entire building with the each of the four cloisters having a different focus: ‘Futures that Unite’, ‘Futures that Inspire’, ‘Futures that Work’, and ‘Futures Past’. What immediately grabbed our attention was the ‘Inspirational’ one because it provided an answer to the question that all science fiction fans inevitably ask at some point in their lives: “Where’s my flying car?” It was right there in plain view!



Hey! Here’s my flying car!

It’s a prototype concept vehicle, the ‘Nexus’, built by Bell Textron (the same company that 75 years ago developed the experimental X-1 aircraft that propelled Chuck Yeager beyond the speed of sound), and the ‘Futures’ exhibition is its first D.C.-area public showing. It was actually developed to be an air taxi, not a private car that flies, and that seems appropriate since it’s entirely battery-powered – there’s no telling how long it would take to recharge that thing at home using wall socket power. And even if that was actually feasible, where would you park it? Nicki dryly commented that: “I don’t think it would fit in our garage.” To say the least!

There was much more in the ‘Futures that Inspire’ wing of the exhibition than just the flying car. The overall intent (according the Smithsonian’s website) was to *“...encourage you to think adventurously about what might lie ahead. In the brave world of the future, what seems impossible today may become totally commonplace tomorrow.”* And to that end there was lots of interesting stuff, such as the immersive virtual reality installation “ReWildAR” by media artist Tamiko Thiel which remade that part of the building into a rural meadow with dozens of virtual wildflowers and insects. There was even some superhero presence – Marvel Studios had loaned the exhibition the costumes from *The Eternals* movie under the guise that: *“Five original costumes showcase how evolutions in storytelling and cinema technologies can illustrate new futures in incredible ways.”* I guess I’ll have to take their word on that.

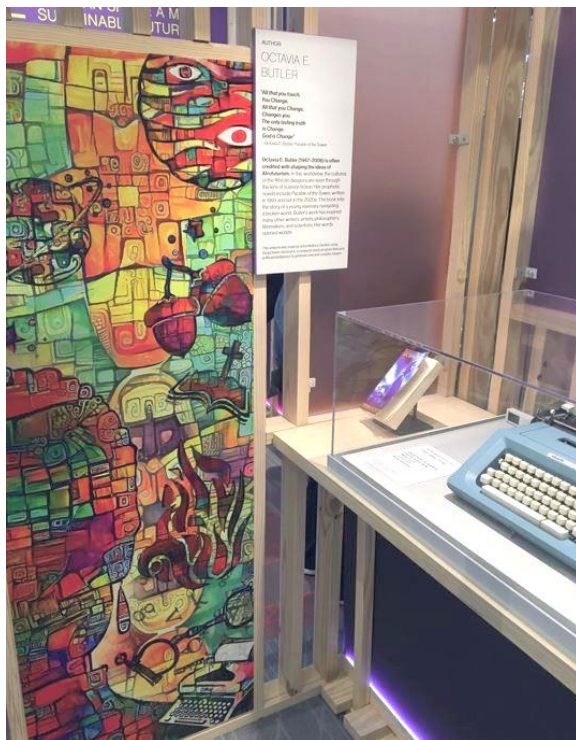


The Eternals pay a visit to the Smithsonian

The other three parts of the exhibition, while perhaps somewhat less visually impressive, were just as interesting from a forward-looking perspective. The centerpiece of ‘Futures that Unite’ was a detailed display on the concept of ‘Citizen Science’, where basically any interested individual with a computer and fast Internet access can contribute to the world’s knowledge base by helping to sift through huge amounts of data from various scientific endeavors that’s been collected and archived over the years. Or, for some projects, add to the amount of useful data that exists. This was the most obvious manifestation of the ‘Unite’ wing of the exhibition, as it exemplified the overall theme to: *“Explore new ways to connect and collaborate that all aim for the same goal: to tap into our collective humanity.”* But, as we observed, there were also other ways to epitomize that theme. One of them was showcasing a topic that’s near and dear to the hearts of many current-day science fiction fans: Afrofuturism, which the Smithsonian accurately describes as being how *“...the cultures of the African diaspora are seen through the lens of science fiction”*. For that there was a small but prominent display which honored the person who has been credited with the literary concept of Afrofuturism: the late Octavia Butler.



the ‘Citizen Science’ display



the Octavia Butler display

There were only a few items, the most colorful being a really nice large-panel work by artist Nettrice Gaskins using a computer program that utilizes AI to generate detailed and complex images. It was inspired by Butler’s *Parable of the Sower* novel and includes, among other images, a depiction of Butler’s typewriter. And not to be outdone, that same typewriter was also an integral part of the display. Overall, it was a praiseworthy tribute to a groundbreaking author.



Octavia Butler’s typewriter

The ‘Futures that Work’ wing of the exhibition had as its main display piece another corporate construct, one which has gotten a lot of press in the past few years – a transport pod for the proposed Virgin Hyperloop. This was originally envisioned as a very high-speed magnetically-levitated underground transport, initially conceived as a people-mover but recently (and more realistically) re-imagined as a cargo transport. Besides that there were a lot of eco-

friendly ideas being showcased, all of them innovative and a few (like the egg-shaped pod which eventually converts a corpse into a tree) a bit out on the fringe. But my favorite part of ‘Futures that Work’ was the ‘Sailing on Sunbeams’ display which advanced the concept of light sails as a means of space propulsion. It had caught my attention because it featured a reproduction of the



the ‘Sailing on Sunbeams’ display

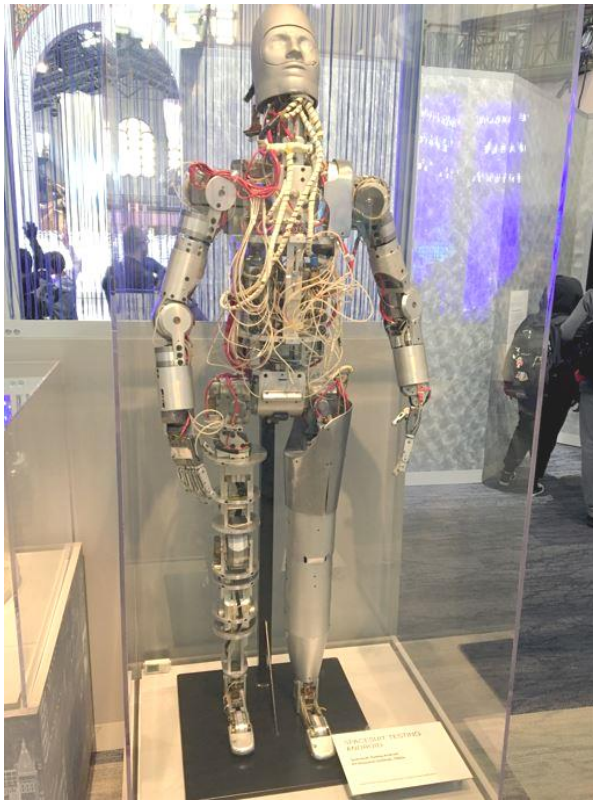


1933 Chicago World's Fair poster and artifacts

1960 painting of a science-fictional solar sail by the great Robert McCall, whose artwork has in past years been a part of many space-related ventures – everything from postage stamps to NASA mission patches to movie posters to large murals (including a famous one just inside the south entrance of the Smithsonian’s Air and Space Museum). But I don’t think I’d ever seen this *Solar Sails of the Future* painting before, even though the original is owned by the Smithsonian. It was a nice bit of retro-future.

There was more retro-future in the last of the four focal areas, ‘Futures Past’. A big display case contained posters and historical objects from long-ago World’s Fairs and Expositions. Back then, a common World’s Fair theme was to attempt to portray the so-called ‘world of tomorrow’, which as it turned out none of them were really able to do. But on the other hand, maybe one of them actually did, in a synchronistic way. Some of ticket proceeds from the 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia, which was

the first World's Fair ever held in the United States, helped to fund the construction of the Arts and Industries Building.



It can't be a 'Futures' exhibition unless there's a robot!

There was more of interest for 'Futures Past' than just memorabilia from old World's Fairs. The intent was *"...to illuminate the many ways that people have tried to make a brighter tomorrow"*, and the Smithsonian used that as an opportunity to show off a few seldom-seen items from its collection. One of them was the chemical reactor that back in the very early 1900s was used to produce the world's first synthetic plastic, Bakelite. And there was also a robot! I'm guessing this was specifically included because you really can't have an exhibition themed on the future without including a robot, right? Except that this one was labeled as an 'android' – it was built by NASA, back in the 1960s, as a humanoid platform for testing astronaut space suits. This was one instance where I wished there hadn't been an explanatory description – it would have been way more fun to let my imagination roam.

There were even more science-fictional parts of 'Futures' than just what was contained in the various individual exhibits. There was also an anthology of sorts. Eight of the Smithsonian's

research teams were asked to imagine what the future, fifty years from now, would look like in their areas of expertise. And then two science fiction writers, Tochi Onyebuchi and Madeline Ashby, were commissioned to write short stories which incorporated those visions. The result was a poster display, all of them stylistically similar to Robert McCall art, with each poster having a QR code link to the story it depicts.

The one I naturally 'gravitated' to was of a space museum, in space! The accompanying story, "In Pursuit of Extra-Terrestrial Life", was written by Ashby and imagined *"...the world of 2071, in which an international crew of researchers, scientists and museum professionals learn how to safely bring a fetus to term on the Moon, ushering in a new generation of humanity among the stars"*. After reading it, it's probably not going to be something that I'll nominate for a Hugo Award. But I *will* give it an A+ for its futurism.



poster for the 2071 Smithsonian Museum in Space

One other noteworthy thing about the ‘Futures’ exhibition was all the quotes from an eclectic cross-section of famous celebrities – everybody from Carl Sagan to Kermit the Frog – about possible futures and what they could contain. Some of the usual suspects were there (such as Arthur C. Clarke’s “Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.”) as well as others which were less familiar (for example, William Gibson’s “The future is already here. It’s just not very evenly distributed.”). I’ve read some reviews that would try to convince you that the ‘Futures’ exhibition itself is not very evenly distributed, tilting too much toward eco-pessimism and fawning too much toward corporate interests, but I’m not in that camp. I liked it a lot and actually came away with a newly-strengthened sense-of-wonder from everything that I took in.



Nicki and the Gibson quote

On the way home, in the subway car, Nicki and I shared our thoughts about the exhibition – what we liked and what we *really* liked. And, in the end, it was pretty easy to reach consensus: This was a *splendid* way to spend a day at the museum! ☀

Afterword:

Turns out there’s another building in Washington that was designed by Adolf Cluss. And whereas the Arts and Industries Building in some ways resembles a market, this one was intended for use as an actual marketplace. It’s known as ‘Eastern Market’ and it dates back even a bit further than the A&I Building. Nicki and I went there back in May, mostly just to take a look at it and grab some lunch. Inside are not only some prepared-food sellers but also a lot of meat and produce vendors, so many that if Nicki and I lived in that part of D.C. we’d be doing a lot of our weekly grocery shopping there.



the Eastern Market building on a sunny afternoon

Our next day trip happened about a month-and-a-half after our visit to Eastern Market, this time to the Olney Theatre Center for a matinee performance of a famous musical. And as you’ll read, it was staged so differently that it had been featured in a national news broadcast.

Right There in River City

So I'd been corresponding with my friend Guy Lillian, back in the middle of June, about memorable things done in one's life. And also things yet to do. He had mentioned that during his recent European trip he'd knocked off the #1 item on his personal bucket list – visiting The Louvre and seeing Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*. To which I'd commented that I didn't really have a handle on what might be the #1 entry on my own personal bucket list. But then I'd gone on to qualify that remark by mentioning that there were some things that could enter into the discussion, for example famous Broadway shows I'd not yet seen. Truth be told, I don't really have anything like a bucket list of those. But if I did, I'm pretty sure I would have told Guy that #1 would be Meredith Willson's *The Music Man*.

It's a terrific musical. And, as it takes place in 1912, also very retro. It first came to Broadway way back in 1957 with the great Robert Preston playing the slick con man, Professor Henry Hill, who arrives at the small Iowa community of River City with the intention of fleecing townspeople of their money by claiming that he could train their children as musicians and form them into a marvelous marching band. But before he can skip town with most of the upfront money he collected, he develops a liking for the town's librarian, played by the equally eminent Shirley Jones, which in the end makes him realize that there's much more to life than just money. It's a plotline we're probably all familiar with. But like many classic Broadway shows, it's the music which makes it truly memorable – there are some great songs, including “Seventy-Six Trombones”, “The Wells Fargo Wagon”, “Gary, Indiana”, “Till There Was You”, and my favorite, “Ya Got Trouble, Right Here in River City”. That brisk little tune, near the beginning of the show, nicely displays the overall character of the glib, fast-talking Henry Hill, and we all know what to expect of him after that.

A revival of the show is now playing up in New York City and the cast is a really good one, featuring two of musical theatre's brightest stars – Hugh Jackman and Sutton Foster. Nicki and I had expected to see it at the beginning of 2021 as part of our annual January mini-vacation to the Big Apple but the ongoing COVID pandemic unfortunately put the kibosh on that. We may yet get to attend a performance if it's still in production several months from now when we're next in New York. However, it turned out that there was another option for seeing it, one that was much, much closer to home.

The Olney Theatre Center is located less than half an hour's drive from where we live. Shows staged there are highly professional in every aspect and feature Actors Equity casts. It's entirely accurate to claim that OTC productions are the equivalent of high profile Off-Broadway shows up in New York – they're that good. So it had been a very pleasant surprise when we discovered that OTC had included *The Music Man* as part of its 2022 schedule.



But then we realized that it wasn't going to be a conventional staging of the show. Back in 2017, Artistic Director Jason Loewith had been swayed by a request, during a meeting with a hearing-impaired actor, for OTC to incorporate both deaf and hearing players into a production of a prominent musical such as *The Music Man*. The idea was tried out in a workshop a couple of years later and Loewith came away impressed by how well it worked – there was a strong fellowship between all the actors which he described as being “powerful in and of itself” and the combination of American Sign Language with the spoken (and sung) word was “much more than the sum of their parts”. This was not a unique undertaking, of course – there are plenty of deaf actors and even an entire hearing-impaired repertory theatre out in Los Angeles (the Deaf West Theatre). But it was different enough that it caught the attention of news media including the nationally-broadcast *PBS News Hour*. After all that, the show became must-see for us.



OTC's *The Music Man* is featured on the *PBS News Hour*

I have to admit that I was more than a bit skeptical that I'd get as much enjoyment from that kind of staging for *The Music Man*. But after attending a performance with Nicki on the First of July I can say that my doubts ended up being mostly unfounded. It just took a little getting used to – having to read some of the dialog (displayed on a screen at the top of the stage) instead of listening to it. I had also wondered how the songs would be performed by hearing-impaired mute actors, and it was handled in an interesting way: the deaf/mute actors had their singing voices ‘dubbed’ for them real-time by other hearing/speaking actors in the cast who were also onstage for those scenes. It worked!

That said, I don't think I'd want to see this kind of production very often. It was a very worthy endeavor, true, but there were many times during the show where dead silence reigned throughout the theatre while ASL dialog was happening, and it seemed to me that dampened the underlying energy of the show. And *The Music Man* is certainly a musical where that kind of energy is supposed to exist. So in the end, yeah, I'm happy that I saw the show. But I'll be even happier if Nicki and I can make it up to New York before that glorious Broadway revival closes. *Damn* this pandemic! ☀

Afterword:

Nicki and I have gotten the updated COVID vax that's optimized against the contagious omicron variants of the virus, so a January vacation trip to New York City seems pretty likely. As of mid-September *The Music Man* is still being staged (at the Winter Garden Theatre) and even better, Hugh Jackman and Sutton Foster are still in the cast. Our fingers are crossed that it'll stay that way for the next several months.

Now that retirement has happened for me, scheduling vacation trips is much easier. But truth be told, the path to retirement hadn't been as simple a process as I'd expected. As you will read next, the final day of my professional career turned out to be pretty hectic.

The Last Mile

It almost seems too incredible for me to believe but after 49 years and 5 months of continuous and gainful employment over the course of my professional career, I am now retired! Huzzah, huzzah, hurray for me!

Most of that time I was a U.S. Government employee, first with the Tennessee Valley Authority (which counts itself as a Government Agency when it wants to be) and, since September 11, 1988, the U.S. Department of Energy. That makes more than a third of a century at DOE and I've gotta tell you, way back in 1973 when I transitioned from a graduate student to a professional engineer, I never thought I'd end up at the Energy Department – I think I probably had aspirations to work for the U.S. Government but space cadet that I was back then, I was thinking more about NASA.

I actually held on for about a year longer than I had originally intended, and I blame (or maybe I should credit?) the COVID pandemic for that – it had caused a mandatory work-from-home situation back in March 2020, which had made me realize that it was not really in my best financial interest to retire until the world health crisis had subsided. By the end of 2021 that had still not yet happened, but by then it had seemed obvious to me that the upper management in the Division of DOE where I worked was interested in nudging me toward the exit door so that my headcount 'slot' could be used to bring in some younger talent. I don't think they would ever overtly admit to that, but actions often speak louder than words – to help me make up my mind to leave, they offered me a buyout. It didn't take me any time at all to accept.

What followed was a few months of me getting my affairs in order, with lots of archiving of digital records and emails, and by the last day of February (which was the final day of my Government employment) I had finally reached the point that I could go to the building where I had worked one last time to turn in my Government-issued iPhone and to clean out my office. I think I probably bent the rules in doing that because the work-from-home edict was still in effect, and since I didn't have any 'essential personnel' special status I was disobeying specific instructions to stay away. But, I figured, what were they gonna do, fire me?

My office was never the tidiest place. Far from it, actually, and it took a lot longer than I had expected to sift through all the stuff I had accumulated over the years. I left behind all my books and journals, including a 1969 edition of the *CRC Handbook of Chemistry and Physics* that I'd acquired as a near-penniless community college student (I'd borrowed money from my parents to buy it) and a textbook that more than 30 years ago had helped me re-learn enough economics to pass the tests for my Professional Engineer license. I left behind my copy of the issue of *Analytical Chemistry* where my first technical paper was published. I left behind all kinds of meritorious achievement certificates, name badges from various conferences, and a bunch of other stuff directly related to my DOE tenure.



some of what I left behind

All of which will no doubt be discarded by whoever comes in to finish clearing my presence from that office. What I did save were mostly odds and ends, things like my old hard hat I'd brought with me from my TVA days and a few souvenirs and tchotchkes from some of my business trips.

And then, finally, it was time for the Last Mile. During the first half of the 2010s I had undertaken the most unusual journey of my life – a Walk Across America. By the time I'd finished it I had walked a total of 3,500 miles, all of it inside that same building where my office was located. Just to get a bit more much-needed exercise in my life, I had mapped out a one-mile circuit within the building and then hopped on the Internet to plot, via a mapping app, a walking route that went from my home down to New Orleans, then west to Los Angeles, then back north to San Francisco. I kept track of my progress on the map, which allowed me to virtually visit (again, via the Internet) all of the towns and cities along the way. And the time spent walking refreshed my mental processes (you know, endorphins and all that) to where, in the end, I worked more efficiently. It took me about six years to complete the walk, a few miles every work day, and I do consider it one of the noteworthy accomplishments of my life.

I'd actually been planning this last mile for a while and had hoped that, for my final time around, I'd have the company of at least a few of my co-workers. But because of the pandemic it was just a solo excursion. Nevertheless, it allowed me to bid farewell to several sights along the way that I had seen literally thousands of times before: the office on the second floor of the building where the Human Genome Project had been conceived; the bulletin board at the far end of the building where there was still in place a flyer advertising a nature walk that had happened 20 years ago; a stairwell wall where paint had flaked off leaving a bare spot which looked a bit like the country of China; the office of a co-worker friend who had retired a couple of years earlier; and finally, my own office.

I took one final look in there as I picked up the box of salvaged items on my way out of the building, and I almost, *almost* decided to take that *CRC Handbook* along with me. But nah, I knew I would never need it again – that part of my life is now over. The Last Mile had ended and it had finally come time to take the next step. ☀



the 20-year-old nature walk flyer

Afterword:

Upon further consideration, quite a few of those souvenirs and tchotchkes that I had brought home ended up in a box of stuff that was donated to a thrift store organization. These included a baseball that I had caught at a Giants game in San Francisco in the early 1980s and hockey puck that had nearly taken my head off during a Clarkson College game in the early 1970s.

There's room for one more short essay, and I'm staying home for this one. Earlier this year there had been an insect invasion that occurs once every 17 years. But there's another somewhat less noticeable invasion that's been going on, continuously, for a very long time!

It's an Invasion!

Practically every day, for the past few weeks, the local TV newspeople have been more-or-less breathlessly describing the upcoming invasion by millions if not billions of otherworldly-looking creatures. This is the time for the coming of the 17-year cicadas.

Last time that happened was back in 2004 and I've already written about it (the essay was reprinted in the 10th issue of *My Back Pages*) so instead I'll use this space to tell you about *another* alarming invasion – one that's been happening, probably, since about the previous time the cicadas appeared. It's the bamboo.

There's been a slow but progressive incursion of the stuff, down at the bottom of the hill where the backyard ends and state-owned undeveloped parkland begins. I first became aware of it maybe ten years ago, when the next-door neighbor cut down some of it to make a fence of sorts around a flower garden next to her house. But cutting it down doesn't kill it, and every Springtime after that I've noticed that new bamboo shoots (the stuff propagates by underground runners) have continued to increase the size of what's now become a small forest. It reached the edge of the backyard a few years ago and has been spreading laterally along the property border since then, gradually displacing a thicket of wineberry bramble that used to grow down there. And now it's starting to move up into the backyard. This year there have been a lot more new shoots that I remember in years past, and some of them have sprouted a couple of feet up the hill from last year's boundary. I'm not alarmed, yet, because the land being assimilated has suffered erosion from storm water run-off and any bamboo that grows in that area will provide some stabilization.

On the other hand, there doesn't look to be any end in sight. Left to its own devices, that forest is no doubt going to continue to spread and at some point I may have to make a stand. This is one really successful plant – some of the older stalks are at least 15-feet tall – and I fully expect it's going to take an innovative approach to hold the line against it. So on that note...

Hey, anybody out there got a panda that I can rent? ☀



the ongoing backyard bamboo invasion

