My Back Pages

Rich Lynch

My Back Pages

a mini-collection of some of my articles and essays

My sister Beth convinced me I should do this. She's a cancer survivor, and during the months of her radiation and chemotherapy treatments following the surgery, I began sending her postcards, photos, and travel essays from some of my job-related trips to help her keep a positive outlook. She eventually asked me why I hadn't collected all the essays in one place.

Why not indeed? I have a lot more essays and articles than just travel writing, and it sounded like a good enough idea that a personal anthology project would one day be worth doing. I guess it's an indication of my level of procrastination, or maybe how busy I've been doing other things, that it's taken me about five years to get started.

This collection will be a multiple-issue project. I've been a writer for several decades, and I have way too many articles for a one-off publication. For now I've selected seven, which will give you an indication of some of my interest – sports, music, travel, fan history, and family. There is no real theme, but I'll provide some context as we go along.

So welcome to my world. The long snowy winter is finally over and the opening of the major league baseball season is just a few days away as I write this. Seems appropriate that the first essay is about baseball, about my visit to one of the shrines of the game not long before it was torn down.

Rich Lynch
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P.O. Box 3120, Gaithersburg, Maryland 20885 USA; rw_lynch (at) yahoo (dot) com

The House

I recently found out that the cable television system here has added the new all-baseball cable television channel and that it aired, on the first day of its existence, a complete replay of one of the most famous games ever played – Game 5 of the 1956 World Series when New York Yankees pitcher Don Larsen pitched a perfect game, allowing no hits and not even any baserunners by the opposing Brooklyn Dodgers. No complete recording of the telecast had been thought to exist, but in 2007 one surfaced in the collection of a long time baseball fan in Illinois.

the conclusion of Don Larsen's perfect game

I am also a long time baseball fan, for more than 50 years actually, but how much more than 50 years I'm not really sure. I don't recall seeing the Larsen perfect game on television, but I do remember watching a telecast of the World Series of 1957, when the mighty Yankees were beaten by the upstart Milwaukee Braves, who featured an up-and-coming young slugger named Hank Aaron. Back then, I was a grade school kid growing up in the wilds of far northern New York State, so there was no way to see a major league baseball game in person. The closest major league city was New York, and that was the better part of a day's drive away, even supposing that my parents had the resources to get me there. Which they didn't.

It wasn't for another ten years before I would finally get to attend a major league baseball game. By then I was a high school senior, and my class had earned and collected, over the previous two years, enough funds to finance a four-day trip to New York over Easter recess. I don't remember all that much about the trip except for two things. I came down with a very bad case of pneumonia at the end of the trip, which put me in the hospital for a few days after we returned home. And, on the last afternoon we were there, we all went to see the New York Mets baseball team play the Philadelphia Phillies.

In 1967, the Mets played in what was even then a characterless ballpark named Shea Stadium, which was one of the first of what has come to be called "cookie cutter" stadiums. These were circular and symmetrical in design and had all the charm of a big concrete doughnut, but they could easily function as venues for other sports such as football (both types). To accommodate this multipurpose use, the seats in these stadiums were, in general, not very close to the field and sightlines were usually compromised. But this type of stadium turned out to be so convenient and cost effective that it spread like a plague to many other cities with major league teams.

It took the powerful force of nostalgia to eventually change things. Starting in the early 1990s, a new generation of "retro-style" ballparks were built, replacing many of the cookie cutter stadiums. These new parks were meant only for baseball, with seats relatively close to the field and with designs that paid homage to some of the stadiums that were in use back when I first

became a baseball fan. Shea Stadium was one of the last of the cookie cutters to be retired (at the end of the 2008 season), and I, for one, will not miss it.

But there is another, even more powerful force that's been active in professional baseball. Money. New stadiums are designed to maximize the amount of high-revenue seats such as luxury boxes, and this has proven to be so lucrative that cookie cutter stadiums are not the only ones being retired. A wonderfully quirky old bandbox of a ballpark was Tiger Stadium in Detroit, once the home of the Detroit Tigers. It had seats so close to the field that the upper deck in the outfield overhung the lower deck. But it was so small and old that a major revenue-producing upgrade was never seriously considered by the team owner, and it was replaced in 2000 by a new, modern retro-style ballpark.

Back in the late 1970s, I was in the Detroit area on a business trip and I had an opportunity to go to a game in Tiger Stadium. But the meeting had finished late and I was a bit worn down, and it was the better part of an hour drive to get there from where I was staying. So I didn't go. I figured I'd be back some other time and see a game at Tiger Stadium then. But it never happened.

I still have never seen a major league baseball game in Detroit, but in the years since 1967, I have seen games at many other major league parks. To keep this article in the context of the science fiction fanzine where it will appear, many of these occasions were in conjunction with science fiction conventions I was attending, such as Corflu 5 in 1988 where a group of us from the convention attended a Seattle Mariners game in the now-demolished Kingdome stadium. It's probably a fair indication of my age that I can claim that I've also seen games in many other stadiums that are no longer in use (and in most cases, no longer in existence), including Jarry Park in Montreal, Fulton County Stadium in Atlanta, Candlestick Park in San Francisco, Veterans Stadium in Philadelphia, Three Rivers Stadium in Pittsburgh, Comiskey Park in Chicago, Memorial Stadium in Baltimore, Riverfront Stadium in Cincinnati, and RFK Stadium in Washington, D.C. As of 2009, I can add Shea Stadium to that list. But, as of the beginning of the 2008 baseball season, there was one other stadium that was scheduled for imminent retirement that I had *not* yet visited – Yankee Stadium.

Yankee Stadium in the 1920s

Yankee Stadium is perhaps the most famous place that baseball has ever been played. It first came into use in 1923, back when the legendary slugger Babe Ruth played for the team, and as of 2008 was the third oldest major league park still in use. The playing field dimensions, especially the relatively short distance to the right field fence, were so beneficial to the left-hand hitting Ruth that a New York sportswriter dubbed the park "The House that Ruth Built". Over the decades many celebrated, larger-than-life baseball players besides Babe Ruth have played for the Yankees in The House. And there have been many, many famous moments – world championships won, home runs hit, and no-hitters pitched (including that 1956

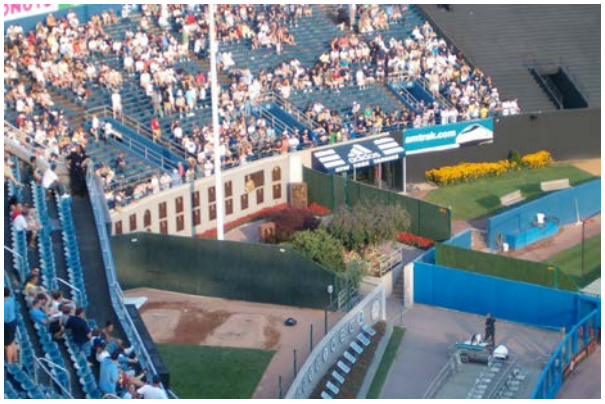
World Series game). Perhaps the most famous of all occurred on July 4, 1939, while the first World Science Fiction Convention was taking place elsewhere in New York. It was on that afternoon that the great Lou Gehrig, in the early stages of the fatal disease that would be named for him, gave his farewell "Today I consider myself the luckiest man on the face of the earth" speech in front of 60,000 people at the stadium.

The place is a shrine, and all my life I had wanted to see a major league baseball game there. And, nearly six decades in, I had almost waited too long. In the middle of 2008, my wife, Nicki, and I decided we'd take a short vacation to New York City to see a couple of Broadway plays and also see a Yankees game, but when I checked the Yankees website there was a nasty surprise. It turned out that it was not possible to get tickets for two seats together, anywhere in the stadium, for any remaining game.

Luckily, there was another option – a ticket resale website called "Stubhub!" where it is apparently legal for people to buy and sell tickets for many different kinds of events, including major league baseball. I was relieved to see that there were plenty of relatively affordable seat pairs available for many remaining Yankees games.

So we picked Friday evening, July 18th, against Oakland, and I bought tickets for two seats high in the upper deck on the left field side of the stadium. We didn't know exactly how high we were until the night of the game. They were *way* up there, two rows from the top – the steep narrow stairs to get there seemed like a mountain trail up to some Himalayan pass. It was so high that we were well above the top of the foul pole, and it was a precarious enough climb that we both had a death grip hold on the handrail all the way up. And yet, there were food and drink vendors climbing those same stairs carrying what must have been very heavy loads. One of them charged up the stairs while using one hand to balance a big crate filled with beer bottles on his *head*! I asked him if he received hazardous duty pay, but he only smiled and said, "You get used to it."

inside Yankee Stadium on July 18, 2008



Monument Park

The one benefit from the altitude of our seats was that the view was very panoramic. The other side of the stadium seemed miles away across a huge chasm. The infield, downward and to the right of us, was far enough away that the players looked no bigger than a set of miniatures from some war game. The left field fence was downward and to the left of us and, just beyond it, Monument Park, where many of those celebrated, larger-than-life Yankee players of decades past have been honored with plaques

and monuments. It used to be, before the stadium was remodeled in the mid 1970s, that all of the monuments were actually in the playing field next to the outfield fence, but so far from the infield that it took a fly ball of gargantuan proportions to reach them. But it was still something that we grade school kids, back in the 1960s, could aspire to in our daydreams. I remember that one of the playground ballfields backed up to a cemetery and once in a while a fly ball would carry into the graveyard, after which the kid who hit it would brag that he had "hit one over the monuments."

the new Yankee Stadium (2008)

It was a beautiful evening for baseball, with clear skies and warm weather, but the game itself was almost an anticlimax. The Yankees got ahead early, scored more runs in the middle of the game, and the outcome was never in doubt after that. There were several home runs, including one by Yankees slugger Alex Rodriguez, and the winning pitcher was future hall-of-famer Mike Mussina.

On the way out of the stadium we could see the new Yankee Stadium looming nearby. I've heard it will be similar enough in design to the old Yankee Stadium that the playing field will look about the same, but in the end, it won't really *be* the same. I won't miss Shea Stadium, but the old Yankee Stadium was a special place that cannot be recreated. It will take many years for the new ballpark to have the same ambience and sense of history. The great Yankees player Mickey Mantle once said, "To play eighteen years in Yankee Stadium is the best thing that could ever happen." But to attend even one game there as a baseball fan must surely come in a close second. ☼

the ongoing razing of old Yankee Stadium (2010)

Afterword:

Nicki and I have yet to visit the new Yankee Stadium, but hope to correct that perhaps later this year. We've been back to New York City, in 2009 and again this year, but both times were in January when hotel and theater prices are in low season.

If only all places we would like to visit were as easy for us to get to as New York! It's an easy three hour train ride which takes virtually no effort, unlike some of the other memorable places we've been. If fact, it took us until 1990 to make our first visit to Europe (for ConFiction, the Dutch Worldcon), partly because we were intimidated by what we had assumed were huge and insurmountable difficulties in making the trip. How wrong we were…

Across Europe on Rail and Plastic

It was mid afternoon in Prague, and we were in the middle of a walking tour of the historic and wonderfully picturesque Prague Castle part of the city, accompanied by Dick's professor friend from the Czech Technological University. We had just finished trading twenty U.S. dollars for the equivalent in Czech crowns at the very advantageous rate of 1:24.6, and had enough money now to not only buy souvenirs and touristy things, but also to take our host and his son out to dinner that evening. Across the plaza from us, there was some kind of commotion going on near the entrance to one of the government buildings; people were gathering, and the noise from the crowd crescendoed. As the door to the building opened, three autos drove up (respectively painted red, white, and blue, corresponding to the colors of the Czechoslovak flag). The crowd separated and broke into applause as a figure strode through the door. He stopped, turned back toward the crowd and waved, then got into the middle auto and the three car procession drove away. We got a better look at him as the procession drove past us, not fifty feet away from where we were standing. It was Vaclav Havel, President of the Czech and Slovak Federated Republic.

In all, we spent two weeks travelling in Europe this past August. It was the first time we'd ever been there, or for that matter, anywhere outside the United States except for Canada. If we had to pick the absolute high moment of the entire trip, that afternoon in Prague might have been it. Bracketed around it, we managed to visit six different countries, pass through five national capitals, go to six art museums, endure two airline ocean crossings, ride on two different city subway and five different city surface train systems, communicate (or attempt to) in five different languages, make ten different international border crossings, and, oh yes, attend one Worldcon.

We also spent over 40 hours on intercity and international passenger trains, which was over ten percent of the duration of our entire stay in Europe. To say we took advantage of Europe's fine rail system is an understatement; we managed to eat, sleep, and be happy along the hundreds of miles we rode the rails. And we learned pretty quickly that you had to be, well, pretty quick to get to where you wanted to be: stopover times are usually quite short and you'd better be ready to either board or disembark, because the trains do run on time, and it's very easy to miss a connection.

That almost happened to us the day we travelled from Amsterdam to Den Haag the first day of Worldcon. We didn't have too much trouble at Amsterdam Central Station boarding the correct intercity train, but we expected the stopover at Den Haag Central Station to be longer than two minutes. Anyway, after the train eased to a halt we gathered our luggage off the luggage racks and had worked our way to the front of the railcar, when the door closed and the train slowly started forward again, on to wherever the next stop was. We looked at each other in helpless frustration; here we were, at last in Den Haag with Worldcon just a short distance away, and now we were

being involuntarily shanghaied off to who knows where. But luckily, it was right at that particular moment that Dick experienced, for the first (and maybe only) time in his life, an out-of-body experience – or at least, his right arm did. Without him looking at it or realizing that he had done it, like magic and with seemingly a mind of it's own, Dick's arm reached up and pulled a length of cable running next to and parallel to the railcar's ceiling. Immediately there was a sound of air brakes, the train slowed to a stop, and the door re-opened. We got out of there quickly, trying to ignore the questioning looks of what appeared to be hundreds of people sticking their heads out of doors and windows along the entire length of the train, wondering what fool had pulled the emergency cord.

After that, we were always very careful to have our luggage off the storage racks and ready to go when the train pulled into our station, and were always among the first to board when our train arrived at the station. And we got plenty of practice – our itinerary after Worldcon took us to Brussels for an evening, morning, and afternoon; we then caught the overnight train to Vienna and took a tram cross-town to a different train station for a six-hour trip north to Prague. Our stay in Prague was unfortunately limited to just two days; even though we managed to pack a lot of sightseeing, there wasn't enough time even to break away from our host to meet with Czech fans we correspond with who live in or near Prague. After that, it was north to Berlin for an evening, then a long ride the next day back to the Netherlands, and the day following, to the airport near Amsterdam for the trip home.

It was in Amsterdam that this whole adventure started. We arrived there three days before Worldcon, after an uneventful overnight flight from Baltimore and a short train ride in from Schiphol airport. Amsterdam is truly an amazing city, probably the most international city we've ever visited. It's a place of multiple languages and multiple monetary currencies, sometimes coming into play all at once. At a souvenir shop not far from the Rijksmuseum we saw an example of this – the shop proprietor in the span of five minutes made transactions with groups of Italian, English, and German-speaking tourists. It was a chaotic babel of exchange rates being figured, currencies being exchanged, and people attempting to make themselves understood. There was no common dialect except for the language of the pocket calculator.

Amsterdam is also a city of bicycles – thousands and thousands of bicycles. We decided it must be due to a combination of the high price of gasoline in Europe, this part of Holland's total lack of anything even resembling a hill, and (worst of all) scarcity of places to park a car in the city. On our first night in Amsterdam, while eating dinner at a cafe we watched cyclists by the hundreds whiz along the streets. The riders seemed to be mostly younger people, with the occasional older businessman, and they didn't appear worried about cars that zipped past them, only a foot or so away. Every street in the city had designated bike paths between the sidewalks and the auto lanes, which seemed to give bicycle riders (in our opinion, at least) a false sense of security.

On the other hand, Amsterdam automobile traffic patterns took a bit more getting used to. Our taxi ride from the Central Train Station to our hotel proved to be quite an education. The taxi driver didn't know a lot of English, but he knew his roads. He wove through streets crowded with pedestrians (who do *not* have the right of way in Europe), bicycle riders and other cars, startling us by occasionally weaving into lanes on the *opposite* side of the street that were marked for buses. It scared the daylights out of us – here we were, our first day in Europe, and we weren't sure we'd survive to see day two. The driver had occasional words with others on the streets, but none of them seemed very angry. It was almost as if they knew one another.

Our hotel was in the museum section of Amsterdam, a relatively quiet neighborhood filled with shops and restaurants. It was an older hotel, with a tiny lift (it didn't deserve to be called an elevator) that could maybe hold four people – if they were good friends. There was also a very steep stairwell that more closely resembled a ladder.

Our room was on the top floor and was only slightly larger than the lift. When Dick entered it for the first time, he stopped dead still for a moment, then pronounced, "Garret, sweet garret." There were two single beds, a night stand and a small desk. The TV was on a shelf over one of the beds, and a small stand-alone closet huddled in a corner. The bathroom was small with a tiny, curtainless shower that one sat in. We also discovered that not all the hotels provide washcloths. (We bought some later on.) We thought it was a quiet hotel at first, but when the rooms around us filled up, we discovered that the walls were made of cardboard – we could hear alarm clocks in adjoining rooms each morning, and even the *clunk*clunk* of the TV sets as they changed channels.

This hotel, as many do in Europe, served a complementary continental breakfast every morning. We would go down to the small restaurant and have a choice of breads with jam, dry cereals with milk, cold cuts and cheeses, fruits, and beverages. However, there seemed to be only one harried waiter on duty, who appeared to be always rushing around but not getting much done. He was very slow to replace food and place settings. This didn't matter much except on the third morning when an Italian tour group staying at the hotel swept in ahead of us and ate everything but the tablecloths. We were left with a few scraps and whatever glasses and cups we could scrounge.

Actually, though, we really did like the continental breakfasts of Europe, which were much more substantial than the coffee-and-sweet-roll morning snack that hotels in North America offer as a free breakfast. And we enjoyed eating out in Europe, although we weren't too adventurous. The food, for the most part, is close to what you'd find in an American-style restaurant (meat, potatoes, and vegetables), with nothing more exotic than endive in Holland. We decided not to eat any American-style fast food (despite learning later than they were the only places with American-size drink servings; European liquid refreshments tend to be doled out in small sizes, by the tenths of a liter), instead opting for 'native' food places as much as possible. It also seemed a good way to get acquainted with local dining customs. Such as sharing your meal with the restaurant's cat. Cat?!

Yes, cat. At home we're used to having Mouse and Mimosa, our two cats, beg for food during mealtimes, but here it was unexpected. It was during dinner at the cafe on our first evening in Amsterdam while watching all those cyclists, that Nicki noticed a small face looking up at her from beside her chair. The cat had a flea collar and seemed clean; we assumed it belonged to the restaurant. So she fed it some meat scraps.

Dick decided that it was just a quirk of that one restaurant to have a cat. But, the cafe we had lunch in the next day also had one – a large orange cat that

sat in a chair near the open door and watched the world go by. When dinnertime rolled around, we decided to take the recommendation of a guide book, and eat at a more upscale place that offered a fixed price meal comprised of traditional foods. When we sat down, Dick remarked that certainly, *this* place couldn't *possibly* have a cat. No way!

During the meal, we met two Canadian tourists who, on their last night in Europe, happened to dine at the same restaurant as us. As they sat down, one remarked, "Oh, what a nice cat" that the restaurant had. It was curled up sleeping in the chair right behind Dick!

After that, we looked for the cat in each restaurant we went to and usually found one. We also saw cats in most of the stores. Apparently, old-fashioned methods of pest control are still popular in Europe...

From Amsterdam it was on to Den Haag and Worldcon, but not before we visited the Rijksmuseum and Van Gogh Museum. The most popular artwork exhibit in all of Amsterdam is of course Rembrandt's famous painting *The Night Watch* (more properly known as *The Company of Captain Frans Banning Coq and Lieutenant Willem van Ruytenberg*) at the Rijksmuseum. Dick, though, was more attracted to another Rembrandt work, *The Officials of the Drapers Guild*. He thought it looked hauntingly familiar, but couldn't think of where he'd seen it before. Nicki pointed out that *of course* he had seen it lots of times before, but in much, much smaller reproductions under its better known alias – *Dutch Masters*.

We went to other art museums besides the ones in Amsterdam. All of them were wonderful, but a bit different from the ones in America. For one thing, the art was exhibited not at about eye level as it is in the U.S., but somewhat lower. There also wasn't any concern about sunlight on the art works, which can cause fading of colors. Museums were also the only places that seemed to be air conditioned in Europe. Most of them were comfortable, but the Beaux-Arts Museum in Brussels was downright chilly.

The modern art section of the Beaux-Arts Museum is sort of a reverse Guggenheim Museum, in that it was built as a spiral, but going down, rather than up, with the most treasured pieces at the bottom. The farther down we went, the colder it got. By the time we got to the bottom and a large exhibit of Magritte's paintings, it was like a meat locker. Somehow, a few sides of beef would have fit in well with his surreal paintings, and probably wouldn't have spoiled, either!

The Beaux-Arts Museum also had a strange schedule which called for the 'ancient' art section (containing works by the Old Masters) to be closed from 11 AM to noon and the modern art section to close between noon and 1 PM. Since we were on a tight schedule, we had to run quickly through the modern art section before it closed. When noon rolled around, several of the museum ushers came through, herding people to a huge elevator for a slow but majestic ride back upstairs. The elevator, complete with comfortable seating along the walls, resembled the interior of a shuttle craft from the Starship Enterprise. All that was lacking was Federation uniforms on the ushers. Beam us up, Scotty!

Den Haag also had an art museum we visited, conveniently within easy walking distance from our Worldcon hotel. It featured original woodcut prints by M.C. Escher, and perhaps the world's largest collection of paintings by Mondrian. There was also an international exposition of fuurverks, er, fireworks, being held in Den Haag during Worldcon weekend, just a couple of miles north of the convention center at the beach on the North Sea. Each evening, there were two or three twenty-minute displays sponsored by different countries, with an international

champion selected at the exposition's conclusion. Many convention attendees, ourselves included, made an evening of it some of the nights we were there, with dinner at a restaurant on the beach followed by fireworks.

Confiction itself didn't have any organizational fireworks, we're happy to say. It was competently run and enjoyable, and we wouldn't mind coming back for an encore some year. The international flavor of the convention made it different from any other science fiction convention we've ever been to, and we were finally able to attach faces to many fans we heretofore had only corresponded with through the mail. Our memories of the convention remain somewhat jumbled; time seemed to compress that weekend and everything went by in a blur. The days and evenings sped by all too fast, and soon it was time to move on.

We had decided to leave Worldcon on Monday morning, even though that meant missing seeing Holland sink beneath the waves, or whatever it was that Confiction Chairman Kees Van Toorn hinted would happen to close the convention. Brussels was our next stop. We were looking forward to going there, and we wanted to get there in time to see some of the city before evening.

The most picturesque part of the city is old Grand Place square with its wonderfully ornate architecture and large number of affordable good restaurants. As you'd expect, it's a tourist haven, as is a street corner a few blocks away where there's a famous statue / fountain called Le Mannekin Pis, depicting a naked cherub urinating into a pool of water. We had, of course, heard of the statue, but hadn't realized it was in Brussels until we saw the street sign pointing the way toward it. One of the photographs we took during our trip shows Dick standing in front of the fountain, with the statue in the background. While waiting for Nicki to line up the shot, he grew suspicious when she had trouble keeping a straight face while preparing to press the shutter release. Sure enough, Dick and the statue were lined up just right so that it looked like Le Mannekin Pis was Pis-ing right on Dick's head.

Brussels was also the single most expensive hotel night we had during the trip. Since it was our first trip overseas, we took the precaution of booking all of our hotels in advance through the Holland Approach travel agent; we knew it would be more expensive that way, but it would also prevent us from having to spend valuable vacation time looking for places to stay the night. The place in Brussels came to over 6,000 Belgian francs for our night's stay plus breakfast. When we got there, we were tired from toting luggage through the Brussels subway system, and fran(c)ly, didn't much care what the cost would be when we checked in. We had no idea what the conversion rate was, anyway, so Dick just plunked down his Visa card (something he got a lot of practice at as the days progressed), and said he'd figure it all out later. It wasn't until we changed some money at American Express that it all became clear – that one hotel night would set us back over *t-w-o h-u-n-d-r-e-d d-o-l-l-a-r-s*!! It turned out that the exchange rate between the American dollar and various western European currencies had gotten progressively worse during the month between our booking the room and staying there.

Not all places were like that, though. Prague, for example, was maybe the *least* expensive city we have ever visited. Consider: a full meal for four at a moderately upscale restaurant there, with soup as appetizer, entree, dessert, and drink came to about 350 Czech crowns, which translates to under fifteen U.S. dollars. And that's **total**, not apiece. Two first class train fares from Prague to Berlin (a six-hour trip) came to just under 25 U.S. dollars total. This is all fine and well if you're a Westerner touristing in Prague. If you're a Czech (or a Pole, or Russian, or

other eastern-bloc country citizen suffering under artificial exchange rate) though, it becomes prohibitively expensive to travel to the West – a hamburger costs a week's wages, and one night's hotel more money than is even imaginable. At Confiction, there *were* Czech, Polish, and Russian fans attending in spite of what must have been tremendous financial hardship. We heard that some fans groups were so determined to attend that they chartered buses from within their country, loaded up bedding and a supply of food, and actually lived out of the bus the duration of their stay in the West. It seems clear now that currency rates were probably a much stronger shackle to keep Czechs confined to their homeland during the Cold War than any fence or iron curtain ever could.

And speaking of the iron curtain, there was no trace of it to be seen when we crossed from East Berlin to the West. Dick was watching out the window of the S-Bahn train that took us from Friedrichstrausse train station into West Berlin to see if he could see it, but there was no wall, no barbed wire, no border guards... nothing at all. It was as if the Wall had never existed. In fact, border crossings were never a problem during the entire trip. The most that ever seemed to happen was that uniformed customs officers would board the train at the border, and check passports. The longest wait we had, at the crossing from Austria to Czechoslovakia, took about 20 minutes. We were told by our Czech host that if we'd made the trip one year earlier, we'd have been held up at the border for four hours minimum while various military types went through everybody's luggage, looked under seats, and generally made a nuisance of themselves. As well as asking prying questions in a language we couldn't understand.

Actually, though, we didn't have *too* much difficulty communicating with people during our travels, since almost everywhere we went we found that English was a second or at worst, a third language. In the Netherlands in particular, it seemed that just about everybody was reasonably fluent in English. The one exception was dinner at a canalside restaurant in Utrecht, the last night before our trip home, when the waitress had to resort to sketching pictographs of squid and scallops, to describe what each entree on the menu was.

And we tried, we really *tried* to at least attempt to communicate in whatever the native language was whenever possible, if only to say "danke" in Berlin to someone pointing the way to the right train platform, or "merci" to the sandwich shop waitress in Brussels for helping us figure the correct payment in Belgian francs. Dick claims that his first ever (and so far only) business transaction totally in a foreign language was when he bought subway tickets in Brussels. It went something like this:

Dick (holding up two fingers): "Deux."

Whereupon the ticket vendor gave him two subway passes and change for his 100 franc note. Nicki also had an amusing experience with foreign language transactions, during the train ride from Prague to Berlin. She went to purchase a bottle of mineral water in the dining car, and returned with a bemused expression on her face. She had learned from a fellow traveler the

correct Czech phrase, and had used it on the dining car attendant: *Chci voda mineralna, prosím.* ("I would like mineral water, please.") But after setting the bottle on the counter and taking payment the attendant said, "Would you like me to open it for you?"

The dozen or so Soviet fans that attended Worldcon must have had similar experiences to ours in attempting to overcome language barriers. We first saw them in the basement of the Congressgebauw convention center, where each eastern European fan group was given a table in the area adjoining the huckster room for display and sales. We gave them a copy of *Mimosa* 8 to take back with them; in return, we received a nicely produced Russian-language SF fanzine that we unfortunately can't read a word of. They didn't know very many English words, but at the Atlanta-in-95 bid party the next night we discovered that there *were* two English words that they *all* knew. We had been drafted by our friend Penny Frierson into helping tend bar at the bid party. One by one, Soviet fans would come to the bar, point to a black-labelled bottle, and say, "Jack Daniels." There must be certain words are universal to *every* language.

At the end of the two weeks, we guess we were ready to come home. We had blazed a trail through the heartland of continental Europe, leaving in our wake about a thousand dollars in Visa card charges but bringing back with us a wealth of memories of magical, wondrous things we had experienced and of the people we had met along the way. This report is dedicated to those people, who will never, can never read this essay. We appreciate their warmth, their humor, their patience, and above all their understanding that they showed to two naive American tourists that all too often needed their help.

One person in particular stands out in our memory; she was a sweet little old lady who came up to us at the Vienna train station, who personally assisted and escorted us to the tramline that would take us to another train station cross-town. We couldn't speak to her in German, but she was able to communicate with us in broken English. We were with her for only half an hour, but as we boarded the tram, she waved and called to us, "I will miss you." Five days later, as we were boarding the MartinAir flight home, similar thoughts crossed our minds: Europe, we will miss you. And someday, soon perhaps, we *will* be back. ☼

Artist credits: Alan Hutchinson (page 7); Charlie Williams (page 9); Jeanne Gomoll (page 12)

Afterword:

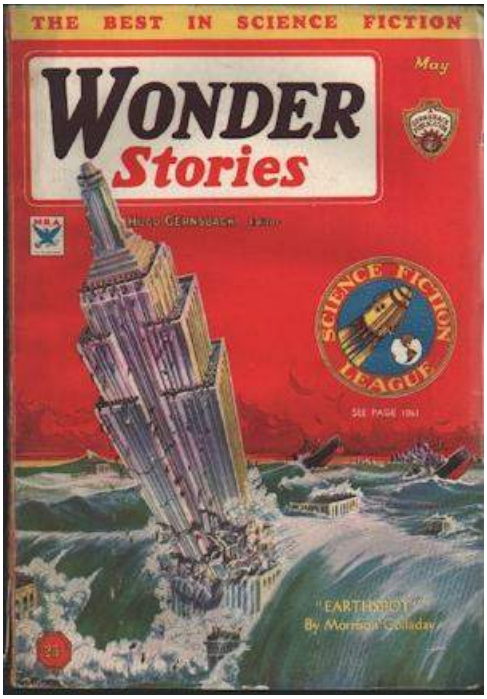
Apparently we were prophetic. It has turned out that Nicki and I, together, have been back to Europe several times since 1990. Also, I transferred to an international activities group at work not long after this article was published in *Mimos*a, and my job has taken me back to Europe (and other continents) at least once every year since then, except for 2003.

Nicki and I received many comments on the article, but the most insightful comment was from Eva Houserová, living in Prague at the time, who provided personal experience that the real barrier to travel was the recently ousted communist government, not the rate of currency exchange.

This might be a good time to mention that *Mimosa*, where the article was first printed, was a fanzine dedicated to the preservation of the history of science fiction fandom. It ran for 30 issues, and won six Hugo Awards for Best Fanzine. Perhaps because of this, in 2006 I was asked to write a fan history article for the upcoming Japanese Worldcon. It was printed in two installments in the convention's progress reports, and it's the first time I've ever been translated into Japanese. Here it is again.

In the Beginning – A Very Abbreviated History of the Earliest Days of Science Fiction Fandom

The history of science fiction fandom in certain ways is not unlike the geological history of the Earth. Back in the earliest geological era, most of Earth's land mass was combined into one super-continent, Pangaea. The earliest days of science fiction fandom were comparable, in that once there was a solitary fan group, the Science Fiction League (or SFL), that attempted to bring most of the science fiction fans together into a single organization.



The SFL was created by publisher Hugo Gernsback in the May 1934 issue of *Wonder Stories*. Science fiction fandom was already in existence by then, but it mostly consisted of isolated individuals publishing fan magazines with one or two fan clubs existing in large population centers. This would soon change. That issue of *Wonder* sported the colorful emblem of the SFL on its cover: a wide-bodied multi-rocketed spaceship passing in front of the Earth. Inside, Gernsback's four-page editorial summed up the SFL as an organization "for the furtherance and betterment of the art of science fiction" and implored fans to join the new organization and "spread the gospel of science fiction."

The response was almost immediate. Fans from various parts of the United States wrote enthusiastic letters, many of which were published by Gernsback in *Wonder*'s letters column. Some of the respondents started chapters of the SFL in various cities, and most of the science fiction clubs that already existed became affiliates of the SFL. Among the first to do so were clubs in Los Angeles and Philadelphia, which still exist under different names. The first branch of the SFL outside of North America was in Leeds, U.K., and although this branch did not survive long, it became important for a fan event it hosted at the beginning of 1937.

However, the SFL was not destined to be long-lived. In 1936, Gernsback ran into financial difficulties that cost him control of *Wonder*, and as a result, the SFL as well. But even before this, the organization had begun to crumble as independently-minded fans in some of the larger SFL branches successfully advocated that their members renounce SFL affiliation. Other smaller branches of the SFL passed from existence due to lack of interest. Leo Margulies became the publisher of *Thrilling Wonder Stories*, the magazine that replaced Gernsback's *Wonder*, and although he publicly stated his support for continuing the SFL, it wasn't the same. Not long afterwards, rival parent organizations, such as Fred Pohl's Science Fictioneers, came into existence, but these too were not destined to play any significant part in the future direction of organized fandom. Instead, a fracturing of fandom began which resulted in dozens of

independent fan groups by the late 1930s. In retrospect, science fiction fandom had evolved during the two years of the SFL's existence. Its future, the fandom of today, was not destined to be a pyramid organization under the control of one person or group of people.

Hugo Gernsback

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Hugo Gernsback was also, in large part, the person responsible for the existence of science fiction fanzines. Nearly a decade earlier, in the June 1926 issue of his *Amazing Stories* magazine, Gernsback had noted that there were many science fiction enthusiasts who were buying the magazine but who probably had never met many (if any) other fans. The reason was obvious: the number of fans of the genre was probably only a few score, and since letters printed in *Amazing*'s "Discussions" section did not include addresses of the correspondents, it was unlikely that fans would happen across any other fans they didn't already know. In one stroke, Gernsback changed all that – he began publishing names and full addresses for all letters he included in *Amazing*. Almost immediately, fans started writing letters to other fans rather than just to the magazine. Correspondence networks began to form between fans. It was the birth of modern day science fiction fandom.

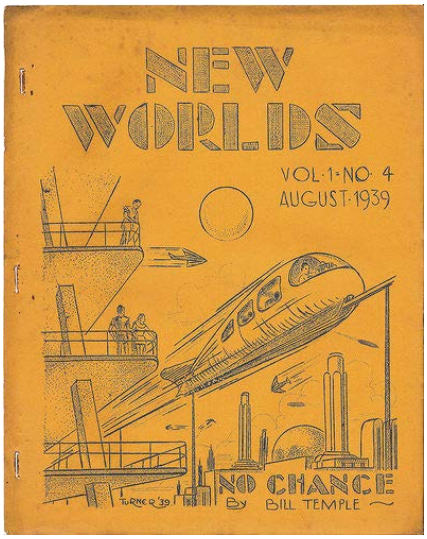
Raymond A. Palmer

It was inevitable that fans themselves would strive to emulate Gernsback and other magazine publishers by editing and producing their own publications. What's surprising is that it took nearly four years before the first of them appeared. The first science fiction fan magazine may have been *The Comet*, edited by Raymond A. Palmer, which appeared in May 1930. It was the official publication of the Science Correspondence Club, a proto-fan organization located in New York City, that included other such notables as P. Schuyler Miller and Aubrey McDermott. *The Comet* (which was subsequently retitled as *Cosmology*) and the Science Correspondence Club itself, for that matter, were not really aimed at the advancement of science fiction, though; instead, the club was devoted to "the furtherance of science and its dissemination among the laymen of the world," an aim that was mirrored in *Cosmology* by publication of such articles as "Chemistry and Atomic Theory" and "What Can Be Observed in a Small Telescope." It had been Gernsback's belief that his young readers should be nurtured into becoming scientists, and that science fiction was just one means to accomplish that goal. Given that backdrop, it's not really surprising that the first fan magazines had a strong science emphasis.

Cosmology eventually did publish material related to science fiction and even some science fiction stories before it ceased publication in 1933. But by then, amateur publications aimed exclusively at the interests of science fiction readers had started to appear. The first of these, in July 1930, was *The Planet*, edited by Allan Glasser. This was a publication of The Scienceers fan club of New York City, that also included in its membership such notables as Julius Unger, Mort Weisinger, and Julius Schwartz. Unlike its predecessor, *The Planet* reported on activities

of interest to science fiction readers, such as the expected lineup of stories in Gernsback's next magazine and reviews of stories in magazines that had already been published.

The Planet did not have a very long life – it only lasted for six issues, partly due to dissension that caused a schism in the club that persisted for more than a year. But at the beginning of 1932, The Scienceers, under the co-editorship of Glasser, Schwartz, and Weisinger, published an even more groundbreaking fan publication, *The Time Traveller*, which, because of its larger page count and greater circulation, is sometimes given the honor as the first 'true' fan magazine. It, too, had an emphasis on things of interest to readers of science fiction, rather than the encouragement of young scientists, and featured biographical material about science fiction authors, news, bibliographical listings, and fiction. *The Time Traveller* also encouraged its readers to write letters of comment, and many of them did. Two of the most famous and notable fans of all time first became known in fandom from the letters section of *The Time Traveller*; they were Forrest J Ackerman and Wilson "Bob" Tucker.



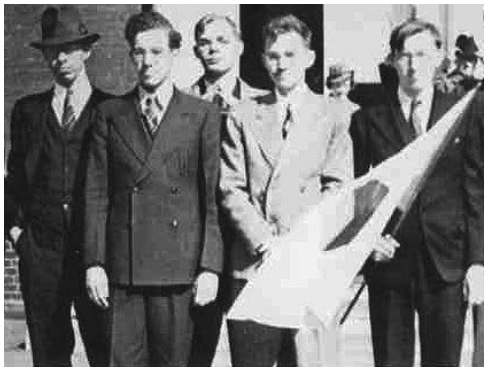
It took another couple of years following the demise of *Cosmology* before science fiction fan publications started to appear outside the United States. The first of these originated from perhaps an unexpected place when two issues of *The New Zealand Science Fiction Bulletin* were published near the beginning of 1935. The first notable fan publication from outside the North America, though, was *Novae Terrae*, edited by British fans Maurice K. Hanson and Dennis A. Jacques, which came into existence in early 1936 as a publication of the Nuneaton, U.K., branch of the SFL. *Novae Terrae* ran for 28 issues before the editors handed over the reins in 1939 to a fan from Plumstead, E.J. "Ted" Carnell, who promptly changed the name of the publication to *New Worlds*. Carnell was only able to publish four issues before the onset of the second world war impacted fandom in the United Kingdom, but the experience was the inspiration for him to try again as an editor after the war, this time with a professional science fiction magazine of the same name.

By the end of the 1930s, fan magazines had mostly replaced personal correspondence as a way of communicating between fans. The example set by *The Planet* and *The Time Traveller* was widely emulated, in that fan magazines became almost exclusively about science fiction. There were some, such as James V. Taurasi's *Fantasy News*, that served as a frequent (often weekly) source of news of fan activities, and others, such as Sam Moskowitz's *New Fandom*, that contained articles and other material of a more general interest. In general, fan magazines of the 1930s could be called enthusiastic, or unpolished, or informative. But they couldn't be called 'fanzines' because the term hadn't yet been invented. In October 1940, a fan from Charlottesville, Virginia, named Louis Russell Chauvenet suggested that term as an alternative to 'fanmag', which had begun to come into common usage. Other fans, most notably Harry Warner, Jr., soon championed the new word, and it quickly became not just the preferred term for amateur science fiction fan publications, it became the *only* term.

In the decades since the first fanzines appeared, hundreds of thousands, if not millions, have been published – nobody knows exactly how many. The last attempt at a comprehensive checklist of science fiction fan publications was done between December 1952 and November

1959 by two Washington, D.C. fans, Bill Evans and Bob Pavlat, which built on an earlier checklist compiled in the 1940s by another fan, R.D. Swisher. The lack of knowledge about the expanse of fan publications didn't stop people from collecting them, however. Almost as soon as they started appearing, fan magazines became collectable items. At some of the earliest science fiction conventions, fan publishers were encouraged to produce special editions of their journals; the success of these early conventions was due in part to the presence of fans who just couldn't stand the thought of having a dozen or more new fan magazines missing from their collections.

The rapid growth of science fiction fandom during its earliest years made it inevitable that there would be events where fans from different cities could meet face-to-face. The first science fiction conventions were held in the 1930s, although the date and sponsor of the very first convention is a continuing source of controversy. It may have taken place on January 3, 1937, when members of British fandom convened at Leeds, in an event hosted by the Leeds branch of the SFL. There were twenty attendees, including Arthur C. Clarke, Ted Carnell, Walter Gillings, and Eric Frank Russell. The event had been planned and promoted, apparently, for several months prior to the meeting date.



some of the attendees of
the 1936 Philadelphia convention:
(l-r) Don Wollheim, Milton Rothman,
Fred Pohl, John Michel, and Will Sykora

Another contender for the title of 'First Convention' had occurred several months earlier, in Philadelphia, on October 22, 1936, when members of one of New York City's many fan clubs, the International Scientific Association, visited Philadelphia fandom. In all, there were about fifteen attendees, including such well-known fans as Don Wollheim, Bob Madle, Dave Kyle, Milton Rothman, John Baltadonis, and Fred Pohl. This event was much less planned than the later Leeds convention but it still could be considered as a convention, as one of the orders of business was to elect a convention chairman (Rothman, whose home was the convention site) and a secretary (Pohl). There has been some speculation that the actual purpose of the Philadelphia gathering was to upstage the forthcoming Leeds event, though one of the participants, Madle, later stated that none of the attendees were aware the British fans were even planning a convention.

A third possibility for the 'First Convention' occurred even earlier, in late June of 1935, when the Chicago chapter of the SFL sent a small delegation of three fans to New York City for a meeting at the offices of *Wonder Stories*, which served, in effect, as SFL world headquarters. They were to be met by fifteen members from some of the New York SFL chapters, but fate intervened. The Chicago delegation was delayed, and arrived on June 29th, one day later than planned. So instead of an inter-city convention, *Wonder Stories* editor Charles Hornig decided to hold the meeting on June 28th, as planned, with just the New York fans, which included Wollheim, John Michel, Frank Belknap Long, Julius Unger, and Julius Schwartz. When the three Chicago fans arrived on June 29th, only Schwartz was present from the previous day, and the inter-city meeting consisted of him, Hornig, Mort Weisinger, and the midwest visitors. Still, there is cause for claiming that this meeting, or for that matter, the previous day's meeting, was in fact a convention; there have been conventions in subsequent decades that have had as low an

attendance as these meetings and *many* conventions in the history of fandom that have had as informal a program.


Forry Ackerman
at the 1939 Worldcon

Whatever the claims for the first convention, there can be no doubt that these get-togethers were a success, or that fans really liked having the opportunity to meet with other fans. In 1938, Sam Moskowitz and Will Sykora held what later became known as the First National Science Fiction Convention, in Newark, New Jersey, that brought together an astronomical 125 fans and pros, including the new editor of *Astounding Science Fiction*, John W. Campbell, Jr. It was at that convention where plans were laid, under the leadership of Moskowitz, for what was hoped to be an even bigger and more widely-attended convention the following summer, to be held in New York City at the same time as the World's Fair there. There are reports that there was originally the glimmering of an idea to have that 1939 convention actually be part of the World's Fair, or at least be recognized by the World's Fair, but in the end, the 1939 convention only unofficially appropriated the name – it was called the "World Science Fiction Convention."

That first Worldcon was sparsely attended by today's standards – only about 200 people were there, and it was nothing like the multi-tracked extravaganza that Worldcon has become and that thousands of us now travel around the world to attend. There have more than sixty Worldcons since that first one in 1939, but 2007 will be the first time a Worldcon has come to Asia. For that reason alone, Nippon 2007 will be a historic event, but the history of science fiction fandom itself is still a living, breathing entity and there is still much to be written about it and preserved. So while you are treasuring the moment in Yokohama, you can also be part of the preservation process. Please do meet and take photos of other fans and writers, and write summaries of your experiences and favorite program events in your online journals and fanzines for the rest of us to enjoy. You are invited to be part of the history of this rich and still very young genre. Even though science fiction fandom began 80 years ago, it is by no means crotchety with age. To the contrary – we are still very much in the beginning. ☼

Afterword:

This essay was assembled, in part, from information I had gathered for a fan history project-in-progress about science fiction fandom in the 1960s. I've been interested in the history of fandom ever since the 1979 NorthAmericon, when Dave Kyle (who had been active in fandom since the 1930s) had casually mentioned to Nicki and me that he didn't think that there was enough fan history in fanzines. This interest eventually led me, in the early 1990s, to take on the editorship of a different book project, the hardcover publication of *A Wealth of Fable*, Harry Warner's book about fandom in the 1950s (which in 1993 brought Harry a Hugo Award for Best Related Book).

This interest in fan history also led Nicki and me to start publishing *Mimosa*, mostly to preserve bits of fan history, especially from the First Fandom "dinosaur" era, that were then only fragilely kept in the memories of some of the older fans. But we also published articles about things fans do, such as my remembrance about some of my job-related visits to the hills of western Kentucky that were once described as…

Paradise

I remember the day well. It was a warm late-summer day in 1980. I had recently taken an engineering position with a large, government-owned utility company (the Tennessee Valley Authority), and this was my first trip to the coal fields of western Kentucky. I had hopped a ride with a fellow worker, and after a long drive we had stopped by this little greasy spoon diner for lunch just outside the coal-fired Paradise Power Plant where we were scheduled to be that afternoon. I was still pretty green to my new job at that point; before TVA, I had worked as a process development engineer in a research laboratory where the biggest concerns were keeping whatever hazardous chemicals you were working with inside the fume hood, and making sure your monthly progress reports got to the secretary on time. Not here, though. I had always wanted a job that put me out in the field a little more, doing something a little more interesting and with a little more practical applications than developing chemical processes that nobody seemed interested in. Well, I had gotten my wish.

The little car we'd requisitioned from the TVA motor pool had been one of those no-frills Pintos that Ford had made in the last year they were built. With hard hats, overnight bags, and equipment we were bringing to the plant, it was a tight squeeze to fit just the two of us in there. It kind of reminded me of the limerick about the Young Man from Boston / Who Bought Himself an Austin; the car was a little bigger than that, but not by much.

This car was even more no-frills than most, because it lacked basic human necessities like air conditioning and a radio. The lack of air conditioning we managed to cope with; we just used the old stand-by: two-fifty-five air conditioning – two windows down at fifty-five miles an hour. Having no radio, though, presented an inconvenience we couldn't overcome; even conversation tends to peter out during a long, four-hour drive. There was one other thing a radio could have provided us – the news. Lots can happen in a four-hour stretch when you're effectively cut-off from humanity. In this particular four-hour stretch, something *did* happen that had we known about it, we would have probably have turned the car around and headed directly back to Chattanooga. Because there are some things in the world you just don't want to mess around with, and one of them is a coal miners' strike.

The United Mine Workers in recent years seems to be losing some of the clout that it once had. Coal prices have been on the decline worldwide for several years; mines have closed or curtailed their work forces, and miners are moving on to different, less backbreaking, and safer professions. They're no longer such a feisty lot, either; it takes a lot more nowadays to enrage them as a group where organized action takes place. One of the things that *will* set them off, though, is when a utility brings in coal produced by non-union mines. TVA had done just that, and now there I was, right in the middle of a wildcat strike that was just starting to get ugly.

The little roadside diner was called the Red Rooster; turned out that it was UMW Central, at least as far as this little disturbance was concerned. Coal miners are usually depicted as big, dumb, hulking brutes; these guys looked to be no exception. I was in favor of leaving right there and then, but Bill, the fellow engineer I was traveling with, insisted that he was hungry, and By God, he was going to have something to eat.

We had just placed an order for hamburgers, which looked to be the least disgusting thing on the menu, when Bill saw two guys near the doorway, reading what a third guy had just tacked up on a bulletin board. I'll say one thing for Bill – cats have nothing on him in the curiosity

department. So before I could grab him to pull him back down in his chair, he grabbed *me* by the arm and as he was pulling me over toward the bulletin board said, "C'mon, Rich, let's go see what's going on."

With a great sense of dread I followed him, if only to be a little closer to the door. Bill, though, knew no fear. The object of interest on the bulletin board turned out to be some newspaper clipping that was sympathetic to the UMW, which had previously lodged complaints about importing coal from non-union mines into an area where union miners were being laid off. There was a big placard, in fact, right next to the clipping that read "This Is a **Union** County." As Bill read the clipping, he started chuckling to himself, undoubtedly about how unbiased local reporters and editors had become lately. He didn't seem to realize that all the while, his antics were starting to draw attention from some of the miners who heretofore had been pretty much minding their own business. Finally, two of the bigger fellows seated not too far away put down whatever delicacies they were eating, looked at each other, looked at us, then started easing their chairs back from their table a bit, as if they were getting ready to get up, come over, and check us out to see just what was so funny. It was obviously time to take some drastic action, so I turned and gave them what I hoped was my broadest, friendliest smile while talking to Bill out of the side of my mouth: "Okay, Bill, let's get *ou-u-u-t-ta* he-e-e-re!"

TVA's Paradise Power Plant

It was very soon indeed after that we were back in the Millennium Pinto and headed for the plant. Bill groused a little about not being able to eat his lunch, but didn't have an answer when I pointed out that two big guys almost had us for lunch. As we approached the plant, signs of labor unrest were more obvious – groups of people, some carrying 'On Strike' placards hanging around the plant entrance highway, a state police car or two watching the situation, and a big coal-haul truck by the side of the highway without a windshield (the cop said it had been shot out). Somewhere, about halfway down the plant entrance highway, we decided we didn't *really* need to stay overnight in the area, after all, so we just dropped off the equipment we had brought with us, turned around, and headed for home. It wasn't until we had gotten all the way to the county line that Bill laughed, turned to me and said, "Well, Richard, you've just been to Paradise."

And you know, we never *did* get anything to eat that afternoon.

# # # #

But wait! There's more...

I had originally intended to end this article here, but I find that I can't yet. I've lost count, but after that first trip to the Paradise Power Plant, I must have returned there maybe a hundred times more. And each time I returned, I found out there was something new and interesting about the place I'd previously missed. There's lots more to tell about it. For instance, there's how it got its name...

Old-timers at the plant told me that once, maybe thirty or forty years ago, this part of Kentucky was indeed a wonderful place, with hills and valleys, beautiful forests everywhere, and the Green River as a source of water and transportation. It was off the beaten path, and relatively undisturbed. Right on the Green River there was a town named Paradise that had been settled by the deliberate, slow-talking kind of people that still live in that neck of the woods. There's still enough wilderness around there that I can imagine what it must have been like; the original settlers must have thought they'd found their equivalent of the Promised Land.

Paradise, Kentucky ca. 1950

Then, back when the nation was in a period where new energy reserves were needed for the war effort and ensuing population explosion afterward, some mining geologists from the Peabody Coal Company discovered there were large coal reserves in that part of the state. So the coal company moved in and bought up all the land, then moved everybody out, razed the town, and strip mined the land for the coal. A songwriter named John Prine even wrote a song about it:

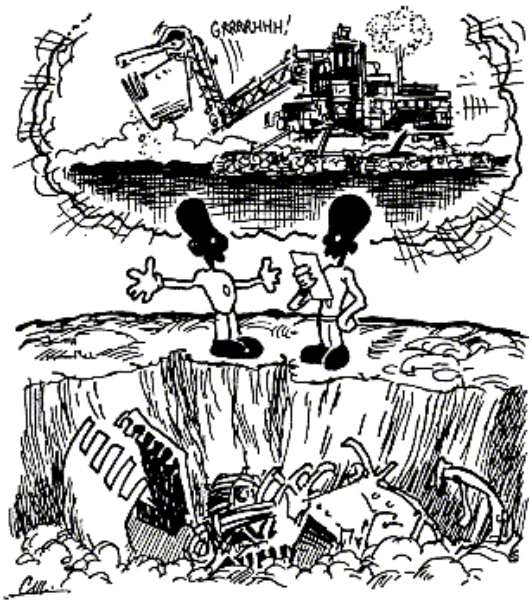
And the coal company came with the world's largest shovel;
And they tortured the timber and stripped all the land.
Well, they dug for their coal til the land was forsaken;
Then they wrote it all down as the progress of man.

And daddy, won't you take me back to Muhlenberg County;
Down by the Green River where Paradise lay.
Well, I'm sorry, my son, but you're too late in asking;
Mister Peabody's coal train has hauled it away.

"...the world's largest shovel"

Once, I was in the right place at the right time to be invited to visit the world's largest shovel referred to above. It was used to remove the 170-or-so feet of what is euphemistically called 'overburden' so that the eight foot thick seam of coal could be mined. The result was one of the largest holes in the ground I've ever seen. It was so large, in fact, that the first time I went to the mine, I didn't grasp the scale of the place until I saw a tiny section of rock at the lip of the mine fall lazily in slow motion to the bottom. Only it wasn't *really* in slow motion; the depth of the mine and the distance of the fall only made it seem so. Once the true perspective snapped in, I could see little toy vehicles down on the floor of the mine that were actually bulldozers the size of a bus.

The shovel itself had to be one of the mechanized wonders of the world; it was taller than a 20-story building, as wide as an eight-lane highway, and could remove 115 cubic yards in one scoop. One gulp from that monster, and your whole front yard is gone. Another, and your house disappears, too. When I got inside, I was astonished to find that it was controlled by a single operator, located in a cupola about five stories up. When we got to the 'roof' of the cab, at about the ten-story level, it was like being on a ship in a storm from the constant back-and-forth motion of the shovel while it continued to remove dirt and rock. I was told that if I had been crazy enough to climb all the way out to the end of the shovel boom, I would have experienced about one-and-a-half gravity centrifugal force as the boom swung round.



It was the mightiest machine – the largest self-powered mobile land machine ever built (at that time). And it doesn't exist any more. About three years ago, the strip mine finally ran out of a usable coal supply, after some 30 years of production. The big shovel was such a dinosaur that it was cost-prohibitive to move it to another mine. So they just salvaged all the electrical parts that were of any value, lowered the big boom one last time, and covered the whole thing over when they filled in the pit. I can imagine that some far-future paleontologist will think that metal monsters once roamed the earth, when the metal bones of this behemoth are uncovered again someday.

There was also an underground coal mine in addition to the strip mine in the vicinity around Paradise; the place is *very* rich with coal. And, with some trepidation, I and a couple of co-workers took a trip down there. I don't think I could ever be a miner. I wasn't particularly scared up on top of the big shovel; just awe-struck from its immense scale. Down underground, I couldn't help wonder in that particular section of rock ceiling was just about ready to come down, right on top of me. And the miners seemed to take particular pains to point out parts of the ceiling where there had been rock falls. I guess they found it an instant cure for visitor cockiness.

The trip down there was pretty eventful in itself. I guess I had expected something safe and boring like an elevator, or at least a walkway. Instead, we got the tram ride from *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*. I kid you not; there were enough twists and turns, low ceilings, and stomach-churning drops to put any amusement park to shame; they should have sold tickets for that thing. When we got down there, we found that the depth of the coal seam being mined was only five feet. This meant that six-foot people like me had to adopt to a new way of walking around – like Groucho Marx in *Duck Soup*, we grasped our hands behind our back, bent over forward slightly with our chins jutting out, and did a sort-of bent-knee waddle. The only things missing

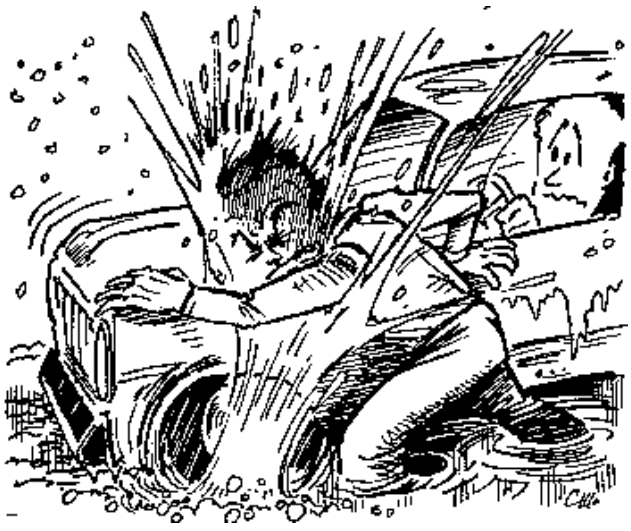
were bushy eyebrows, horn-rimmed glasses, and cigars. Dave, one of my co-workers, later asked me if he looked as foolish down there as I did to him.

And speaking of foolish, it always seemed that whenever something bizarre or surreal happened while I was at Paradise, Dave, Bill, or Dave *and* Bill were somehow also involved. Like the time we were snowed in there one weekend. Dave was driving around a rental front-wheel drive Toyota, and was surprised at how easily it got through even the deep, packed snow that snowplows throw into the front of driveways. The car was making it look so easy that Dave was losing all fear of getting stuck. So of course, we did.

Bill was staying at a place a few miles from our hotel, and we were to meet him for dinner, since his place had a kitchenette and ours didn't. By the time we reached the parking area in front of Bill's motel room, Dave was of the impression that there was *nothing* this car couldn't do. I guess we should have been suspicious of the lack of tire tracks in the white snowy expanse of the parking lot, but we weren't, and Dave blithely pulled the car straight in. Or tried to, that is. We got within about 15 feet of what looked to be the curb when the car suddenly sunk about six inches, followed by a noisy crunching sound. And it wouldn't go any farther. When we got out, we discovered that there was at least one thing that car couldn't do – it couldn't swim. The parking area turned out to have such poor drainage (Bill had forgotten to tell us) that it wasn't unusual for several inches of water to accumulate. Dave's car had just broken through the icy crust under the snow, and had sunk down to where its bottom was flush against the ice. We had to wade through five-inch-deep icy slush to make it to shore.

Getting the car free was just as exciting. We wanted to call for a tow truck right then and there, but Dave wanted to give it one good try to free it by muscle-power before we gave it up. So, with much apprehension and fortified with three new pairs of tall rubber boots, we waded out to the car to give it our best shot. Bill claimed the driver's spot, since he had played no active part in getting us into this mess. Dave and I stationed ourselves at the front of the car at each headlamp; we would do our best to push the car out, while Bill kept a steady foot on the accelerator with the car in reverse gear. It was probably one of the most hopeless plans we had ever come up with, seeing as how the car was completely bottomed-out; yet it just might have worked except for one thing we didn't know about.

After being immersed in icy water in sub-freezing temperature for an hour or so, the right front wheel – the one I was stationed in front of – was frozen solid. All the engine's torque was going to the other front wheel, where Dave was. The result was predictable: when Dave gave Bill the signal to press down on the accelerator *e-e-easy now*, Bill naturally stood on it with both feet. And as Dave bent his shoulder to the front of the car in one last valiant attempt to push it free, all that torque applied to the one free drive wheel spun it so fast that it shot a geyser of ice-cold water twenty feet in the air.



And Dave, poor Dave, was standing right in the middle of it. It was quite a while before he in good humor again.

# # # #

But wait! There's *still* more...

After eight years of working in the area, the sights and sounds of the place don't want to go away very quickly. A co-worker once told me as we passed the county line on the way home that one of the greatest sights in the world was seeing the Muhlenberg County sign in your car's rear-view mirror; the dirt and filth from coal mining and the obvious signs of poverty in the area just tend to wear you down after a while. Even poverty itself seemed to fit the paradoxical nature of the area; whole families lived in shacks so run down and decrepit you'd feel guilty about keeping livestock in them, yet they would have a satellite dish antenna in their yard and a bright new four-by-four pickup truck in the driveway.

There were the trips to little beer and liquor package stores just across the county line (Muhlenberg County was dry) – on one of them we had an Indian visitor with us; when we ran into what looked to be a group of backwoods redneck woodsmen at a beer store I had a terrible sinking feeling that one of them would say something about the visitor that would lead to a complex series of events that could only end with someone beating the crap out of me (luckily, they didn't). There was the Noah's Ark of hardware stores in a nearby village, that had in its cluttered aisles just two of practically anything you might ever need. There was a parade of all sorts of memorable characters, places, and events. In fact, one reason why this article has been kicking around inside me for about five years is that I couldn't decide what things were memorable enough to write about.

Like the Polish visitor we had not long after the Solidarity union had been outlawed. He was here to learn about new advances in coal technology; I hosted him for a day in Kentucky, then drove him back to the TVA Office of Power headquarters in Chattanooga. He was outspoken about his concerns for his family and friends, some of which were union supporters, but he was still interested in the rolling hills of the countryside that were passing by in front of him. Not far from the plant, we passed through the one remaining grove of trees that somehow had escaped the strip mining from years before. It was where part of the town once stood. I explained to him that here it was still possible to see hawks hunting rodents, and even catch an occasional glimpse of a deer. He turned to me in wonderment and asked, "What is this place called?"

And I just smiled. "This place here?" I said. "This is Paradise." ☼

Artist credits: all illustrations by Charlie Williams. *Excerpt from the song "Paradise" ©1971 by John Prine*

Afterword:

This was both the least successful and most successful essay I've ever written. It got almost no mention in the letters of comment we received for the issue of *Mimosa* where it appeared, but it was selected to appear in the Fanthology of best fan writing for 1989. Go figure.

I worked at TVA from July 1980 to September 1988, and in that time traveled to Paradise maybe fifty times. To this day it remains the place I have visited most frequently on business trips. Since then, as I mentioned earlier, my business travels have taken me to places much, much more remote than rural Kentucky. One of the farthest happened in April 2008, when I traveled to the very edge of the world as part of an organization that was staging an international meeting on carbon sequestration.

The Road to Cape Town

Prolog: At the World's Edge

Cape Point, South Africa

So this was what the edge of the world looked like. All around me, the land dropped away. The ocean was about 700 feet down and from the way it was crashing against the cliff side, out on the water was no place to be. This was Cape Point, the tip of the peninsula that extends southward from Cape Town, South Africa. It's not the geographical location where the Indian Ocean meets the Atlantic (that's at Cape Agulhas about 150 kilometers to the east-southeast) but it is, in effect, the dividing point between the two oceans – a cold Atlantic Ocean current meets a warm Indian Ocean current near there, resulting in some freakish weather and rough seas that have caused many shipwrecks at the southern tip of Africa over the centuries.

the Cape of Good Hope

As spectacular as Cape Point was, though, my attention was drawn to a different part of the coastline about a mile away. It was a less imposing headland that projected southward into the ocean, and in my mind's eye I could imagine someone standing out there, back in November 1497, watching as a small fleet of ships from Portugal sailed past. It was the Cape of Good Hope.

It's possible to walk all the way out to the end of the Cape's promontory, and on a different day I might have been tempted. But there really wasn't enough time, which probably saved me from myself as I was still recovering from a nasty cold and feeling a bit weak. The only way out there was by a footpath that looked in places to be a bit precarious. The edge of the world was not a good place to be in need of help.

The road to Cape Town passes through Amsterdam

It actually took some help to even make it to Cape Town. Back in 2007 at the international carbon sequestration meeting in Paris, Cape Town was chosen as the site for the 2008 meeting.

But Cape Town is so far off the beaten path, at least for North Americans, that there is no easy or inexpensive way to get there. One option is to fly direct from Washington to Johannesburg on South African Airlines and then catch a connector flight to Cape Town. But the flight to Johannesburg is greater than 14 hours, which would mean that business class travel could not be refused if requested. Except that there wasn't enough travel money to send everyone to Cape Town business class, so instead we were all routed through Europe – an 8-hour flight followed by a 12-hour flight, all in economy class with, as it turned out, no opportunity to use any accumulated miles for an upgrade.

in Amsterdam

It would have been brutal, except that one of the people traveling had the bright idea of reviewing all the travel rules to see if it breaking up the trip with an overnight stay in Europe was allowable. And it was!

So I ended up with one-night stays at the Amsterdam Marriott, both on the way to Cape Town and on the way back. Even better, the hotel turned out to be located in the museum district, just a short walk from the Rijksmuseum.

The Rijksmuseum is one of the great art museums of Europe and is probably one of the top ten worldwide. But it's also mostly closed down for construction. Only one wing of the museum was open, and the museum has moved most of its famous works there, including Rembrandt's masterpiece *The Night Watch*. My co-worker John, who took that same Amsterdam connection, talked me into doing an audio tour and it was worth it. There were several available and we both chose the one narrated by Dutch actor Jeroen Krabbé, which turned out to be a thoughtful docent tour of some of his favorite and some of the more familiar artwork on display.

Amsterdam is certainly a nice city and with any luck I'll be back there again, as the Netherlands volunteered to host the 2010 meeting. But for now it was on to Cape Town.

There are no robins on Robben Island

When South Africa was chosen as the site for the 2008 meeting, its delegation was at first undecided where to hold the event – Cape Town or Johannesburg? The meeting was being hosted by the South African government and most the government offices are in or near Johannesburg, but some of the delegates who had been to South Africa before thought it a bad choice. There is apparently a lot of street crime there, and some of the descriptions of the city sounded a bit scary. In contrast, Cape Town is a safe place to be, especially around its

picturesque waterfront area with Table Mountain looming in the background. In the end, it was an easy choice.

Cape Town waterfront with Table Mountain in background

Cape Town's waterfront is the main tourist area of the city. It has been developed into a huge money-making machine, with many, many places to shop and dine. And there are no lack of tourists to fuel that machine with their euros, dollars and pounds sterling. As a result, Cape Town is not an inexpensive place to visit.

There are historical and heritage attractions there as well, and the very first day I was there I visited the most significant one – Robben Island, located about seven miles out from the harbor. There are no robins on Robben Island, but there are a lot of other creatures there and under different circumstances it would probably be a world class wildlife sanctuary. But in 1959, the South African government constructed a maximum security prison there for confinement of political prisoners during the apartheid era, the most prominent of these being Nelson Mandela.

a description of life as a prisoner on Robben Island

The prison was closed in 1996 and is now a museum, receiving the designation as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1999. The tour to Robben Island gets you there via a ferryboat that, in a previous lifetime, had cruised the Rhine in Germany. You get to see Mandela's cell during the tour, but what really made the experience memorable for me was that the docent for the tour was a former internee. His name was Itumeleng Makwele, and he had been arrested in 1982 for hiding weapons for the ANC and imprisoned at Robben Island for seven years. He said there were frequent beatings to try to extract whatever information he had. One of the others on the tour asked him what it was like to talk to visitors about what must have been a horrific ordeal, and he said that he actually looked on it now as a mission, and talking about his time as a prisoner was even a kind of therapy.

In all, including the ferry rides to and from the island, the tour lasted about four hours and it went by fairly quickly. I would have liked to see a bit more of the island itself, but the ferries ran

on a set schedule and there just wasn't enough time to stay longer. Later that afternoon was the first of many meetings over the next several days. It was conference time.

"I was just doing my job!"

This turned out to be one of the more difficult conferences for me, but not because the work is getting any more complicated. No, it was because I had caught a bad cold the first day of the meeting, and it affected my stamina. Worse, I had come unprepared, without any aspirin or cold meds, and I was so busy that at first I didn't have any time to find a place where I could buy some.

working at the conference

I was not at my best, and it was obvious enough that many of the people at the meeting were going out of their way to avoid me. But not everyone. At the closing dinner on the last night of the conference, I was sitting by myself at a table way off on the side so I could at least try to keep my cold to myself. I probably shouldn't have gone to the dinner at all, and I might not have if the dinner had been held somewhere other than the conference hotel – I'd already had to miss the dinner at the winery the previous night.

a gift from Amir

I wasn't having a very good time and was thinking of getting out of there when one of the meeting attendees came up to me and said, "Rich! I have been looking for you!" It was Amir from Iran. Unlike me, he *was* having a good time. This was his first meeting, and a few weeks earlier I had helped him get in contact with the meeting hosts so he could get his entry visa into South Africa. I had been happy to help and it was really just a little thing, but Amir was so grateful that he had brought a gift for me from Iran. It was a small reproduction, carved from limestone, of a fluted column with the head of an eagle. The much larger original (which I think is located in Persepolis) dates back to the Achaemenian Dynasty in ancient Persia, from about the time of Cyrus the Great in 500 BC. It was wonderful! I was so taken aback that the best I could do was blurt out, "I was just doing my job!"

Things I did and didn't get to do in South Africa

I probably also should have dropped out of the field trip to Cape Point, the day after the conference ended, but there was no way I was going to miss seeing the Cape of Good Hope. The bus trip down to Cape Point was almost as spectacular as the point itself. The roadway down the west side of the Cape Point peninsula is a worthy rival to California's Highway One. And just as scary. The return trip was north along the more protected eastern side of the peninsula, where the bus stopped at Boulders Beach so we could see the colony of South African penguins there.

South African penguins

The second half of the field trip was to the Vergelegen Estate, a fine winery now owned by an international mining company, but I skipped it in favor of a visit to the top of the rock. The signature image most people who visit Cape Town come away with is Table Mountain, a 3,500 foot high mesa just south of the city. The way to the top is via a cableway, and it was not a ride for anyone with acrophobia. The top of the mesa was not nearly as big as I'd thought it would be – it was just a two minute walk to the other side. The views were splendid, but as ill as I was, it wasn't long before sensory overload set in and it was time for the ride back down.

Cape Town (and cableway bottom center) from Table Mountain

The departure flight was the next day, but it was a late evening flight. This would have left enough time, if I had been well enough, for a safari at one of the wild animal parks a couple hours drive north of the city. John, who had avoided getting my cold, did book the trip and he told me it was worth the time and cost – he was taken through the park in a semi-enclosed vehicle, and there were some relatively close encounters with rhinos and cheetahs, and some longer distance views of lions, elephants, and water buffalo.

And speaking of wild animals, I should mention that some of them are on the menu at many of the restaurants at the Cape Town waterfront area. But they didn't seem all that exotic to me. Springbok, a small antelope, didn't really taste all that much different from beef, and neither did kudu, a larger antelope. I wasn't enthusiastic enough to try crocodile (in case you're wondering, yes, somebody *did* say it "tastes like chicken"), but warthog was quite tasty. The best of all was the free range lamb, but that probably doesn't *quite* qualify as a wild animal.

Epilog: Fear and Loathing in Dulles Airport

We were in the Dulles Airport mobile lounge, about 15 minutes after the flight back to Washington from Amsterdam had landed.

"So," I asked one of the KLM flight attendants, "does that happen very often?"

It was a few seconds before she answered. "Once in a while."

The landing had been far from routine. It was raining and the airplane had been swaying a bit as it made its final approach to the airport, just enough that I had been starting to feel a bit edgy. And then, just a few hundred feet off the ground, the engines roared back to full thrust and the plane banked to the right. Through one of windows I could see trees rushing by, and after a few seconds that seemed like an eternity the plane started gaining altitude. The second attempt at the landing, a few minutes later, was uneventful.

It wasn't the pause before her answer that caused me a slight inner chill, it was her expression. Or rather, lack of one. She had seemed distant and hollow. Her eyes had looked beyond me, and only her lips had moved. She had been scared.

We had been informed, during the second approach, that the "go-around" had actually been caused by airport traffic not clearing the main runway fast enough. I'm grateful that we had been in a three-engine Boeing MD-11, which KLM was now using on the Washington-to-Amsterdam run in place of the much nicer but two-engine Airbus A-330. The MD-11 had responded quickly. I'm not sure how a two-engine plane would have done.

Just before heading into customs, I spotted the flight crew. "Hey, Captain!" I called. "Good landing!"

He looked over at me and smiled. "I was just doing my job."

And I smiled back. "Me too." ☼

Afterword:

I mentioned at the beginning of this collection that one of my interests is music. One of the things I had originally intended to include in this essay was a short description of one of the evening events of the trip – a dinner at the Castle of Good Hope, a fortress dating back to the 1670s (built by the Dutch East India Company) that's located right in the middle of Cape Town. There was live music accompanying the dinner by a youthful South African group, mostly unmemorable covers of pop music songs, but just before we were about to leave they played one traditional and very melodic South African song. It was breathtakingly wonderful, so good that we all stopped practically in mid-stride to listen. I may have been the most captivated of all, because I never did write down the name of that song, or even the name of the musical group.

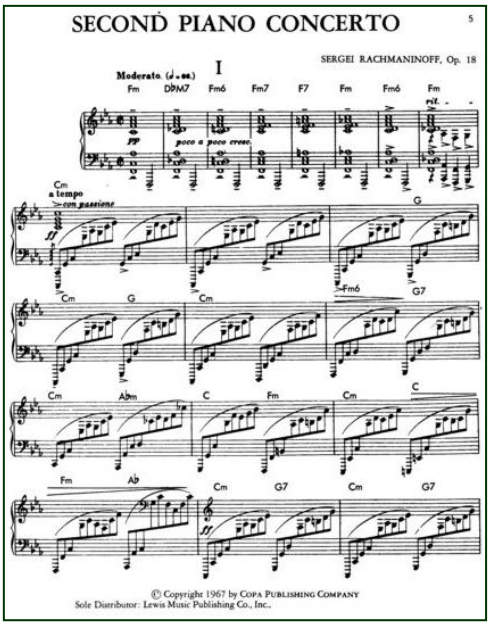
And speaking of music, several years back I wrote a series of biographical essays, just for the fun of it, about classical composers. Here's one I wrote on April Fool's Day, seven years ago.

No foolin', it's Rachmaninoff's birthday!

Sergei Vassilievitch Rachmaninoff

The great Russian composer and pianist Sergei Vassilievitch Rachmaninoff was born on this day 130 years ago, and the local classical music station is celebrating by playing one of his compositions every hour. The one on right now is one of his best, the great 3rd Piano Concerto. That work is kind of the holy grail for concert pianists – some regard it as the most technically difficult piano composition in current repertoire (it was featured in the movie *Shine*, where pianist David Helfgott was told that anyone who wanted to learn it must be insane). Much of classical music can be described as "variations on a theme" and the Rach3, especially its opening movement, is a good example – it starts out as a simple melody, and gradually becomes more and more complex, almost to the point where the melody is no longer recognizable, and then resets and starts over with a different set of variations. It's a very complex piece but yet, it's also a thing of beauty, with a very powerful ending. Seeing a performance live (and I've only done it once, in Estonia in 1999) is a special event – it's an intense experience and you can see that it's almost a contest of wills between the pianist and the music, if such a thing would be possible.

No less intense was Rachmaninoff himself, born into a wealthy Russian family but the money didn't last – Sergei's father squandered most of his wife's inheritance and the family was soon reduced to selling off their estate to pay off the debts. Sergei had shown a talent as a pianist and was enrolled in a St. Petersburg conservatory, where he failed most of his exams and was sent off to Moscow to live with a music teacher who attempted to bring a bit him more discipline. It worked, and Rachmaninoff's skill as a pianist grew even as he started becoming known as a composer. By the time he was 24 he had completed his first symphony, which unfortunately had a disastrous debut (mostly because the orchestra conductor was drunk). This put Rachmaninoff into a depression which lasted several years, and was broken only when his therapist suggested that he write a new piano concerto and hypnotized him into believing it would be world famous.


SECOND PIANO CONCERTO

SERGEI RACHMANINOFF, Op. 18

I

Moderato

Fm DbM7 Fm6 Fm7 F7 Fm Fm6 Fm

poco a poco cresc.

rit.

Cm a tempo con passione

G Cm G Cm Fm6 G7

Cm Abm C Fm Cm C

Fm Ab Cm G7 Cm G7

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It was all of that and more – the result was the Rach2, his second piano concerto, which is usually considered among the top dozen or so best classical compositions of all time. (The melody from the middle section was much

later borrowed and made part of the pop music song "All By Myself".) Rachmaninoff later toured extensively as a pianist, coming to America in 1909 and liking it so much that he later settled there (in New York City, on Riverside Drive) after the Russian revolution of 1917.

Rachmaninoff later in life

Following his move to America, Rachmaninoff found that had a choice of careers – he declined an offer to be conductor of the Boston Symphony, and composed very little after that, choosing instead the life as a concert pianist to support his family. He had previously debuted the Rach3 himself in Carnegie Hall, but it had received somewhat uneven reviews, partly because the music critics thought that only Rachmaninoff himself would be capable of performing it! He himself was never quite sure he made the best choice – about 10 years before his death he looked back on his career and said, "I have never been able to make up my mind as to what was my true calling – that of composer, pianist, or conductor ... I am constantly troubled by the misgiving that, in venturing into too many fields, I may have failed to make the best use of my life."

Rachmaninoff was once described by the composer Stravinsky as "a six-and-a-half foot scowl," a reference to his intensity as a pianist. But there are some anecdotes to the contrary. Once, during a concert recital with his friend, violinist Fritz Kreisler, in the middle of the recital Kreisler lost his place and urgently leaned over and whispered to Rachmaninoff, "Where are we?" To which Rachmaninoff calmly whispered back, "Carnegie Hall!" Rachmaninoff died in 1943 and perhaps should have been buried in Carnegie Hall; he was one of the performers that made it such a famous place for classical music. But he's really no less famous today than he was when he was alive – his music has made him immortal. Would that we should all be able to aspire to such heights. ☼

Afterword:

This essay was first published in my online LiveJournal blog, but a couple of years ago I finally gave up on using it as a creative outlet. LiveJournal is not really a good place for longer, thought-out essays; most of the stuff that appears and gets comments there are short communal conversational postings for the benefit of one's online circle of friends.

T-shirt logo from 2004 reunion

One more article before I close out this collection. Later this month is my annual family reunion which will be a weekend of enjoyment, good food, and pleasant remembrances of times past. I'll see my sister Beth again and, as usual, there will be plenty of beer, barbecue, and baseball. So here's an essay about last year's reunion, which was out in Arizona. It was the first time Nicki and I had been there in nearly a third of a century.

Reunion 2009

Prolog: Low Season on the High Plateau

March is a great month to visit the Grand Canyon.

In front of a lot of empty air

Nicki and I hadn't really been aware of that, but it's true. The Grand Canyon is one of the most popular national parks and attracts about five million visitors every year. That's so many people that no matter when you go there, there's going to be a crowd. I don't know if there's a "low season" for the Canyon, but chilly Mondays in March might qualify. There were parking spaces to be found if you were patient and looked a bit. If we'd tried to visit the Canyon on a weekend in June we might have had to park the car in Flagstaff.

A day trip from Phoenix is not the right way to see the Canyon. The round trip alone took about eight hours driving time, which allowed us only about three hours in the National Park. But it was a *good* three hours. If we had time to stay longer, we would have experienced more views of the Canyon that were different from the ones we had seen, but probably not any better.

On the drive back south we decided that all views of the Canyon are created equal…and all of them are Grand.

A Short History of the Lynch Family Reunion

It was about ten years ago that my two older sisters came up with the idea for an annual family reunion.

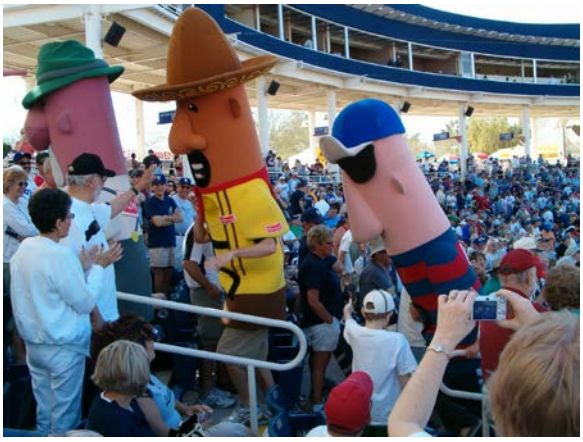
me and my baby sister Beth

In retrospect, I'm amazed it took as long as it did for the idea to surface. But maybe I shouldn't be. Back then my mom was living in a retirement home in Inverness, Florida, but I and my brother and three sisters were spread out across the country. We all visited her individually from time to time, but it eventually dawned on us that while we made sure we visited my mom, we never saw each other. Just prior to the first reunion in 2000, I had realized, to my dismay, that I had not seen my baby sister Beth in more than 20 years.

The reunions have always been in March, because that's when Major League Baseball has its spring training in Florida. We are all baseball fans, but none as much as my mom. She was a huge fan of the Atlanta Braves, so much so that she once even had a letter of comment printed in *Chop Talk*, the Braves' official monthly magazine. So every spring, Nicki and I would make that long 900 mile drive south to the Tampa area for a long weekend of baseball and barbecue. The first few years we would see two and sometimes three games during reunions. After that, my mom started to get noticeably frailer and we limited our ballpark outings to a single game.

Last year's reunion was held in Ocala and there was no baseball, because my mom had become ill and was unable to travel far from the nursing home there where she had moved to receive full-time care. And now that she has passed away, my brother Thom stepped up to the plate, so to say, and offered to host this year's reunion out in Phoenix where he lives. He has five daughters, and the last time I had seen them all together was way back in 1994. Now they are grown, and I have become a grand uncle many times over. There's an old saying, at baseball games, that you can't tell the players without a scorecard. That was just about true for all the grand nieces and nephews. I'm happy there wasn't a quiz.

There is spring training baseball in Arizona as well as Florida, and many major league teams play their preseason games in the Phoenix area. So Saturday afternoon found all of us at Maryvale Park in northwest Phoenix to see a game between the Milwaukee Brewers and the Los Angeles Dodgers. It turned out to be a pleasant afternoon, but the game itself was the least memorable part of the day. Both teams were playing mostly younger players who were trying to make it to the major leagues. The most interesting thing that happened on the field was a between-innings footrace of the Brewers racing sausages mascots.



three of the Milwaukee Brewers racing sausages: Bratwurst, Chorizo, and Polish Sausage

And speaking of sausage, there was a lot of food consumed during the reunion, as is usually the case. We are fortunate that there is a lot of culinary talent in the family (including a nephew who graduated from Johnson & Wales culinary school in Miami), so our group meals are invariably excellent. My brother took advantage of the reunion to christen a new backyard barbecue grille. Food is life.

the Lynch family

There was a memorial gathering for my mom with many stories from years past. Even though she will not be attending any more of these reunions, she will still have a presence. Lynch family reunions are a celebration of life. Always have been, always will be.

Phoenix, We Hardly Knew Ye

Nicki in front of Arizona's Capitol Building

This was not Nicki's and my first visit to Phoenix, but it had been more than 30 years since the previous time. We had come to Phoenix over Labor Day weekend in 1978 to attend a big convention. We didn't have a rental car, so we were pretty much stuck in the city center. Or make that, in the hotel we were staying in, as my memory of that trip to Phoenix is of 110-degree outdoor temperatures.

But part of that convention, including the awards ceremony, art show and the dealers room, was located in the city's convention center, which was a very long walk across a broad empty concrete expanse that the convention attendees began referring to as "The Sun's Anvil." Back then, when the weekend arrived, the city pretty much rolled up the streets and the only place to eat outside the hotel within walking distance was a Wendy's.

Nicki and statue of Navajo Code Talker in park near Arizona State Capitol

The 2009 Lynch Family reunion took place in the far northern part of Phoenix, and the drive there from the Phoenix airport took a route that mostly avoided Friday afternoon rush hour traffic but also any view of the city center. It turned out that we had some time to ourselves on Sunday, so we decided to drive into downtown Phoenix to see how it had changed after all these years. The first thing we noticed is that the city still pretty much rolls up the streets on the weekend. We visited the area around the Arizona State Capitol Building, and except for a couple of homeless people sleeping in the park across from the Capitol, we were the only ones there.

We drove into the city center and saw that 30 years of development had made the place mostly unrecognizable. The Sun's Anvil was gone, and we weren't even sure that the Convention Center itself hadn't been replaced with a bigger and better version. There are also now two huge sports venues, taking up a lot of the downtown, that didn't exist back in the late 1970s. The baseball stadium, in particular, is an impressive structure, and even has a retractable roof to protect against inclement weather – in this case, hot weather, not rain. I'm sure it would be pleasant to experience a major league baseball game there someday, assuming my next visit to the city would be sooner than another 30 years.

We also observed that there are now a lot more restaurants in downtown Phoenix, with plenty of choices for anyone who was staying the weekend there.

And from what we could see, not a single one of them was a Wendy's.

In the Heights (of Northern Arizona)

When my brother Thom and his wife Cindy learned Nicki and I were going on a day trip to the Canyon, they told us that we *must* also visit Sedona, which was just a short detour from the interstate on the way north. They showed us photos of some stunning vistas with sandstone buttes and steep canyons. It looked to be a spectacular place to visit.

But in the end, we reluctantly decided to give it a pass because we needed to be back in Phoenix at a reasonable time, given that we had an early flight home the next day. If we had gone through Sedona, it would have greatly reduced what few hours we had at the Canyon. One thing we've learned from our travels is not to try to pack too much into a day, especially one with hundreds of miles of driving. We hope to be back someday.

Saguaro cacti growing near I-17 north of Phoenix

But it turned out that the drive north was in itself an interesting experience. There is an elevation change of more than a mile between Phoenix and the South Rim of the Canyon. I had naively thought that all of Arizona was pretty much one big desert, but the large elevation change results in several different climate zones. Just north of Phoenix is the realm of the giant cacti – there are hundreds and hundreds of the iconic Saguaros growing on the hillsides. But at about 3,000 feet they are gone and the dominant vegetation is prickly pear cacti. At about 4,000 feet, the topography changed over to dry grassland with some scrubby-looking brush here and there. And at about 5,000 feet and upward, there was a dramatic change to pine forest, complete with occasional patches of snow, that persisted all the way to Flagstaff. Just west of Flagstaff was the high point of the trip – more than 7,300 feet above sea level. At that point the forest departed the scene and it was back to grassland and scrub brush the rest of the way to the Canyon.

"*It winds from Chicago to LA,*
More than two thousand miles all the way.
Get your kicks on Route 66."

We briefly stopped in Flagstaff before heading on to the Canyon, but we did not get our kicks on Route 66. That historic highway once ran through Flagstaff before it was officially decommissioned in 1985, but there wasn't much to see. There were some historical markers here and there, but in Flagstaff, at least, the road has become little more than a four lane bypass.

There are other places we'd like to see in and near Flagstaff, someday, that are more impressive than old Route 66. Percival Lowell's observatory, located on a hill just west of downtown, is one of them. It's where he made his observations of Mars, back in the late 1800s, that led him to believe there was a great network of canals on the red planet. And it's also the place where, in 1930, a young astronomer named Clyde Tombaugh discovered the existence of the dwarf planet Pluto.

And speaking of the cosmos, less than an hour's drive east of the city is the site of a cosmic collision – the famous Arizona Meteor Crater. And just to the north of the city is Humphrey's Peak, an impressive snow-capped extinct volcano that dominates the horizon. It's supposedly hikeable, but that would be farther than I'd want to go in the heights.

the view at the end of the hike

Epilog: Breathless!

A quarter mile hike to the edge of the Grand Canyon's rim from the Park's visitor center left me breathless, and not just from the spectacular view. At a mile and a quarter above sea level, I didn't have quite the stamina for walking that I do at home in Maryland. But what *really* made me breathless was watching how close to the void some of the other visitors to the Park put themselves for the sake of a panoramic view. Sheer idiocy. One stumble and it would be several hundred feet down to the next solid ground.

There was also a breathless moment on the flight home. About an hour before the airplane landed at BWI Airport, I glanced out the window and saw a strange cloud formation – long, narrow and straight. It looked a bit like…

Contrails! All of a sudden there was another jet aircraft visible that had crossed below our flight path just a second or so earlier. It was close enough that my view of it half filled the window I was looking through. And then it was gone. The entire encounter had happened so fast that I may have been the only passenger on the plane who witnessed it.

After the landing in Baltimore, the pilot came out of the cockpit and stood there, smiling politely at the passengers as we deboarded the plane. As I walked past him I took the opportunity to ask how close the two planes had come to each other.

He told me, "We're allowed 1,000 feet separation." Which didn't exactly answer my question, but I let it go.

"Mighty close," I said.

He nodded. "Mighty close."

Next year's Reunion will most likely be in North Carolina, where my oldest sister lives. It will be a long drive to get there, but I'm looking forward to it, and to seeing my brother and sisters again. In the past ten years of reunions we have again become close as a family. Mighty close. ☼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Cafe Kylemore