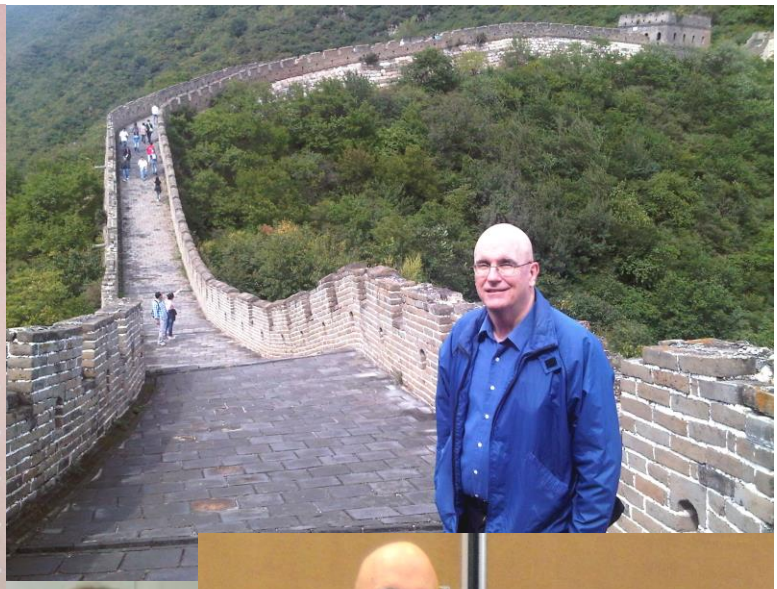

My Back Pages #6

Rich Lynch

My Back Pages #6

articles and essays by Rich Lynch

Wow, two years and counting. I never thought, when I began this publication, that it would run for more than four issues. I wouldn't exactly say that it's achieved a life of its own, but I did discover that my various articles and essays filled a lot more pages than I had thought they would. Anyway, it's actually been a fun thing to do and it has brought me closer to my sister Beth, who originally convinced me to do this in the first place.

Meanwhile, constructing a theme for these personal anthologies is always a work-in-progress and I'm never entirely sure what to include. But since the end of the year is almost here, this issue is being built to withstand some cold weather. Or at least feature some of my articles and essays about experiences in (or leading up to) the cold weather months. I'll begin with one that took place near the end of January 2008, and that brought me to a place previously visited by famous British officer during the First World War.

Rich Lynch
Gaithersburg, Maryland
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The Kingdom

Prolog: In the Land of Lawrence

It was the final morning of an intense three-day international meeting on carbon sequestration, and most of us were starting to wonder what Saudi Arabia was really like outside the hotel. We were soon to find out, as the Saudi Aramco meeting hosts had planned something special for us.

atop one of the tall dunes at Shaybah

The final session of the meeting was part of a field trip. But not just *any* field trip. We were taken to the airport where we boarded a plane for a hour and a quarter flight south to Aramco's Shaybah oil field, located hundreds of kilometers from the nearest settlement out in the middle of the Rub' al Khali, one of the largest sand deserts in the world. Ninety years ago, T.E. Lawrence rode through here, and hardly anybody else did after that until oil was discovered in the 1970s. Now there is a little island of civilization where a large amount of petroleum is being pumped from the ground. But that's not what impressed us about the place. It was the dunes. Huge sand dunes, hundreds of feet tall, towering over everything and truly awesome to behold. Buzz Aldrin once described the lunar landscape as "magnificent desolation". That's also Shaybah.

Al Khobar, rhymes with 'armored car'

It was a behind-the-scenes agreement of some kind at the Paris meeting last March that resulted in Saudi Arabia hosting this meeting. We had all assumed that Canada would be the site, as there had been a related event scheduled for Calgary in November. Instead, it was Al Khobar, a medium-size city located on the Persian Gulf in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province. The immediate effect of this unexpected change was that two of the delegates said they wouldn't be attending. Neither gave reasons but since they both are of the Jewish faith, you didn't have to be a rocket scientist, or even a climate scientist, to figure it out. In retrospect, they may have made a bad decision. There were, of course, many aspects of Islam that were evident to us outsiders to Saudi Arabia, but religion was one of the two topics (the other was politics) that we and the Saudi hosts did not discuss, even informally. The only time religion even came up was on the Saudi customs entry form, where one of the pieces of information requested was the visitor's religion. I wrote in "U.S. Government"; for the purposes of this trip, my job was my religion.

This is not to say that some of us didn't have a bit of apprehension about going to Al Khobar. During the 1990s, it and nearby Dhahran were the site of a U.S. military base, and on June 25, 1996, just a few miles from the hotel where we were staying, nineteen American military servicemen were killed when terrorists exploded a truck bomb outside the apartment building where they were being housed. I was traveling with two others from my office, and soon after

we arrived at the nearby Dammam airport we were met by a driver from the American Embassy who took us to the hotel in an armored Chevy Suburban. The only driveway into the hotel led past an armored personnel carrier and a Saudi soldier holding a submachine gun.

view of Persian Gulf from hotel window

The next morning there was a security briefing by the Embassy's Economics Officer who told us that while Al Khobar was a very safe place, we should consider *not* venturing outside the hotel. And the times that the Saudi hosts were taking us to any events outside the hotel, we were *not* to get onto their bus but instead call for the armored car. After hearing all this, one of the others in our delegation half-jokingly asked if we were eligible for hazardous duty pay while we were in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The answer was that yes, we were.

"There is no tourism in Saudi Arabia"

During the last two weeks before the meeting, the Saudi meeting hosts worked some minor miracles to get people into the country. As expected, some of the delegates did not register for the meeting until the final week. (It turned out that some of them didn't get their travel approved until then.) It usually takes a couple of weeks to obtain an entry visa, but Aramco used its muscle with the Saudi Ministry of Foreign Affairs to shorten the process to just a couple of days. It takes a letter of invitation from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for anybody from the western world to get a visa, and they usually only go to people who have business in country. As the Embassy guy informed us, there is no tourism in Saudi Arabia.

falconer at the Heritage Center

But it turned out there actually *are* places of interest to tourists. The country has a rich history, and some of it has been preserved in a 'Heritage Center' where we were hosted for dinner one of the nights of the meeting. It's a relatively small castle-shaped building housing a museum where various bits of Saudi heritage and culture are on display, from handicrafts to falconry. There are also some shops where some of the handicrafts are on sale, which resulted in one of the more amusing moments of the trip.

The other two guys from my office, Scott and John, decided that they wanted to purchase small ceramic reproductions of the Heritage Center which they saw for sale in one of the shops. The shopkeeper informed them

the price for each was 60 Riyals (about $16). At that point, Scott decided to try out his bargaining dexterity.

ceramic reproduction of the Heritage Center

Scott: "Offer you forty?"

Shopkeeper: "Sixty-five!"

Scott: "Forty-five?"

Shopkeeper: "Sixty-five."

John: "How much for two of them?"

Shopkeeper: "Sixty each."

And with that the deal was done. As they left the shop I congratulated them on their prowess in bargaining the shopkeeper back down to the original asking price.

One of the Saudi Aramco hosts was watching this with me and was greatly amused by this amazing exhibition of American financial wizardry. But it was a very nice ceramic, and as I was admiring it, I told the host that I collect buildings – drawings, watercolors, reproductions of some of the interesting buildings I encounter during my business trips. So he told me to just take one. It was a gift to me from Aramco. Afterwards, when I told Scott and John, they couldn't believe it. But, in the end, maybe the joke's on me. They had borrowed the money from me to buy their ceramics…and I still haven't gotten it back!

How Saudi Aramco solves problems, and other enlightenments

As I'd expected, Saudi Aramco proved to be an excellent host. It had been tasked by the Saudi government to put on an event that showed off the country in a positive light. Whenever Aramco perceived a problem of any sort, the remedy usually used was very direct – throw resources at the problem until it went away. Money was no object.

working at the meeting

This event had been originally scheduled as a two-day business meeting of all the technical people in the organization. (There are more than 20 different countries involved, but the meetings are conducted entirely in English.) They are working on ways to encourage CO_2 capture and storage demonstration projects and also the more basic research that will, perhaps, reduce the cost of the technology. This, by itself, was not a very interesting or newsworthy event for outsiders, so the Saudis made a deal with one of our task force chairmen to include a higher profile event, a capacity building workshop, as part of the meeting. Capacity building, or transfer of knowledge about CO_2 capture and storage technologies, policy, financing, and societal issues to emerging

economy countries such as India, has been a major initiative. These countries will soon be the world's largest source of anthropogenic CO_2, and have many greater immediate domestic issues to contend with than how to reduce their global greenhouse gas footprint. And so there was the dilemma – the workshop was for the benefit of decision makers in these countries, but they couldn't find the travel funds to come to Saudi Arabia on their own. So Aramco picked up the tab, flying them all in by business class and comping their hotel rooms. And, to make sure all the invited speakers for the workshop would be present, they were also brought in, business class, and comped on *their* hotel rooms. Dozens of people.

But there was more than just that. Part of the meeting had been scheduled at Aramco's Shaybah facility, and Aramco made available one of its corporate airliners to get us there and back. There was also a hosted dinner every night of the meeting. I'm guessing that this event probably, in total, cost Aramco well over the equivalent of a million dollars to stage. But for the largest and richest petroleum company in the world, it probably amounted to little more than some walking around money.

disembarking the Aramco jet at Shaybah

The meeting was intended to be "serious and constructive", as the saying goes, but it did have its lighter moments. One of them, near the very end of the meeting during the Shaybah visit, happened when one of the invited observers from India asked a question that almost nobody could understand. It wasn't that the question was complicated, it was just that his Indian accent was so deep that he was nearly unintelligible. The session moderator asked him to repeat his question, and when it was no more understandable, asked him to repeat it again. Still no luck. As the moderator was standing there, helplessly looking out to the audience for some assistance, the Irish contractor the Saudis were using for the audiovisual setup walked up to the stage and whispered into the moderator's ear. There was then a look of enlightenment on the moderator's face, the question was answered, and the meeting went on.

It was the only time in my life I've seen an Indian translated by an Irishman.

Epilog: In search of the 'real' Al Khobar

All the events outside the Al Khobar hotel that were arranged by Aramco were essentially 'scripted' – things that we did and things that we were allowed to see were tightly controlled. I eventually did get outside the hotel, 'unscripted', but it wasn't until my final day in Saudi Arabia. There is an area in the city for visitors where there are shops selling all kinds of things, from carved figurines of camels to ceramics to hand-knotted carpets. None of them were actually *made* in Saudi Arabia, though. The figurines were imported from India, the ceramics from China, and the carpets from Afghanistan. I didn't find anything I was interested in, so I mostly window-shopped while two of the others who came along with me tried to negotiate, without success as it turned out, a lower price for a few of the Afghan carpets. It all seemed mostly for show to me – the shopkeepers were probably being at least partially subsidized (most

likely by Aramco), and didn't have any real incentive to bargain. Aramco was doing business with many different countries and there would be plenty more westerners where we came from. It was easy to see that this was not the 'real' Al Khobar.

Before that I had walked along the waterfront area near the hotel. It had been developed as a green space, and was quiet and pleasant. There were flamingos wading in the shallows looking for food and a few Saudi families picnicking on the grass. But it all looked relatively new to me, and it was separated from the rest of the city by a four-lane highway I had to scamper across to get there. This was obviously not the 'real' Al Khobar, either.

flamingos wading in shallows of the Persian Gulf

But on the way back from the waterfront I saw three Saudi men trying mightily to get an older American-make car free from a loose sandy area just off the edge of a big parking lot. They weren't making any progress, and were so involved they didn't notice me approaching them. I don't speak any Arabic and they didn't speak much English, but with a few hand signals, I was able to get the driver to straighten the wheel and put the car into low gear. From there, some pushing by three of us got the car back onto the parking lot surface. We smiled and waved to each other and I walked back to the hotel.

On the long voyage back home I decided that, in the end, I never did manage to find the 'real' Al Khobar. But in helping those three Saudis, maybe I *did* see at least a glimpse of it. ☼

Afterword:

Being one of the meeting's planners made me only too aware of some of the behind-the-scenes machinations going on between the Saudis and several of the delegates who were having difficulty getting their entry visas. What caused me the most heartburn was that the meeting's Chair, who is female and a Vice President of Statoil, almost was not able to attend. Saudi protocol seems to be that men get their visa requests processed first. Also, the Saudis apparently do not have an embassy in Norway (where she is from), so she had to schedule a special trip to Stockholm (where there *is* a Saudi embassy) and it wasn't until two days before the meeting that I knew for sure she would be there. (She is also a babe, if that's the proper technical term. Slender, 5-foot-3, yellow blond hair, and blue, blue eyes. During the visit to the Heritage Center, while we were all browsing the shops there and sipping non-alcoholic fizzy drinks, one of the other Scandinavian delegates remarked in jest, "I wonder how many camels we could get for her?" It was the closest I've ever come to doing a spit take.)

I've taken a January trip every year since that amazing visit to Saudi Arabia, but they've all been short vacation getaways with my wife Nicki to New York City. The sights we've seen in New York are perhaps not *quite* as spectacular as Shaybah, but as you will read about our trip there this past January, we've still found some pretty terrific things to see and do.

A New York State of Mind

birthplace of Teddy Roosevelt

Prolog: "I don't care if it's Chinatown or on Riverside"

Hey, I *love* New York! It's a great place for a short vacation, no matter what the weather is like. Hotel room rates are low right after the New Year, so Nicki and I have made a trip to New York City part of our annual midwinter plans for the past three years. There's a lot to see and experience there and in previous trips we've been to many fascinating parts of the city, like Chinatown, Chelsea, and Greenwich Village. And there are still many places, like the Cloisters up near Riverside Drive, which we will get to see sooner or later.

But on *this* early January afternoon in Manhattan we were just off Broadway on East 20th Street, looking for the home of a famous American. And there it was, from the outside a nice but fairly undistinguished four-story brownstone townhouse. It was the place where Teddy Roosevelt was born.

political cartoon from the Roosevelt museum

The building is actually a reconstruction, dating back to the 1920s, and the rooms have been restored to their appearance of the late 1860s with original furnishings. It's now a historical museum and is part of the National Park Service, but tours were not available at the time we were there so we only got to see the ground floor. It consisted mostly of a large exhibit, illustrated with political cartoons, which retraced Roosevelt's political career from cattle rancher to New York City politico to Governor of New York and eventually to the Presidency.

It didn't take very long to see what we could, and then it was back out on the street. We decided it was fifteen minutes well spent.

"Been high in the Rockies, under the evergreens"

But not all things to do in New York are worth the time or cost. A case in point is the NBC studio tour. It costs $20 per person, and what you get for that money is a 10-minute video of the history of the National Broadcasting Company, followed by a no-photos-allowed walking tour led by a couple of interns to three of the TV studios. We were allowed inside the *NBC Nightly News* studio (though not very close to the news desk), but for the other two studios, including the one for *Saturday Night Live*, we had to be content to look in from the outside. It would have been nice to sit, even for a few minutes, in seats that *SNL* audience members once had to waitlist for up to two decades for a single show. But no. Big disappointment.

Rockefeller Center Christmas tree and ice rink on a chilly evening

The NBC studios are located in the '30 Rock' tower in the middle of Rockefeller Center, which covers several square blocks in area. The holiday season centerpiece of the Center is the big Christmas tree, and we were in New York early enough in January that it was still there in the plaza overlooking the ice rink. It was quite a sight, about 75 feet tall and nearly half that in width, and decorated with lights more traditionally than the National Christmas Tree in Washington. We found out that none of the huge Spruce trees that annually grace the Rockefeller Center plaza are forest trees, as a forest-grown tree doesn't generally have as nice a shape as an ornamentally planted tree that has grown up over many years. I had imagined such a tree would have been shipped in from the mountainous areas of Colorado, but this one came from the front yard of a New York City firefighter's home just north of the city.

"It comes down to reality, and it's fine with me cause I've let it slide"

Rockefeller Center is also loaded with retail shops including the NBC Universal Store, which carries everything from coffee mugs to bobble head dolls for the dozens of television shows aired on NBC and its cable television networks. But much more fun was the Lego Store, which featured a miniature reconstruction of the Rockefeller Center plaza and ice rink as well as Lego recreations of some of the statues in or near the Center. The big attention-getter, though, was the large and surreal Lego dragon which loops in and out of the store's ceiling and walls, at one place even leaving the store entirely. It was so amazing that even close-up it looked lifelike, if that's the right word to use for a mythical beast.

a small part of the Lego dragon

the Orange County Choppers NHL Bike

Just a couple blocks away was another fabulous beast, though it was a mechanical one. I've been a fan of the cable television reality show *American Chopper* for many years, and even though I am not a motorcycle rider I do enjoy the creative process involved, warts and all, in making a bad-ass custom motorcycle that's also in some ways a work of art. When Nicki and I were walking past the NHL Store we saw that Orange County Choppers, the company that makes many of those amazing motorcycles, had a

wonderful hockey-theme bike on display there. It certainly made for a good photo-op but the asking price killed even the faintest daydream of getting a machine like that someday. One hundred large. For me, at least, affordable only in some alternate reality.

"Out of touch with the rhythm and blues"

There was more alternate reality to be seen at the north end of Times Square. The TKTS discount ticket booth for Broadway shows is located there, and just behind it is a statue of Francis P. Duffy, a Catholic priest and soldier who during the First World War became the most highly decorated cleric in the history of the U.S. Army. But for a few days, while we were in the city, Father Duffy had also been transformed into a TV character. NBC was getting ready to premiere *The Cape*, a new offbeat superhero television series, and was promoting the show by 'cape-ifying' statues of prominent people.

Nicki and the caped statue of Father Duffy

The TKTS booth is where we spent a good amount of time getting discounted tickets for Broadway shows. Our first night in town we went to see the musical comedy *La Cage aux Folles*, partly because of all the positive reviews and partly because the cast had plenty of star power, with Kelsey Grammer and Douglas Hodge in the two lead roles of a gay couple who are the owner and star performer of a Paris drag nightclub. It was greatly entertaining, with some good songs, and the entertainment value extended even beyond the performance itself. It was the first time I've ever been to a play where there was a warm-up act – an understudy actor, dressed in drag, came out to banter with the audience and do a comic put-down of *A Little Night Music*, which was playing right across the street ("…a three hour snoozer").

outside the Longacre Theater on West 48th Street

Nicki and I were able to check that out for ourselves the very next evening. We had actually wanted to see *A Little Night Music* last year while Catherine Zeta-Jones and Angela Lansbury were still in the cast. But we couldn't get two seats together even at full price, so we went to see *South Pacific* instead. A year later, things were a lot different. The play was in the final week of its run and Zeta-Jones and Lansbury had left the production several months earlier, being replaced by Bernadette Peters and Elaine Stritch. And half-price tickets were easy to get at the TKTS booth. It wasn't exactly a snoozer, but it went on for so long that the plot moved glacially in places. The play's musical high point, Sondheim's "Send in the Clowns", didn't happen until most of the way through the second act.

The next day in line at the TKTS booth, when I was asked if I had liked the performance, I said that it was a good show but the title was misleading. At three-and-a-quarter hours long, we didn't just get a little night music, we got a *whole lot* of night music!

Much better was the musical we went to on our last night in town, and except for a bit of providence we wouldn't have seen it at all. Nicki and I had gone back and forth, during the chilly half hour wait in the TKTS line, about what show we wanted to attend, and just before we got to the ticket window we finally decided on *Billy Elliot*. We'd both seen the movie on one of the cable TV channels a month or so earlier, and while I thought it was an okay film I wasn't wholly enthusiastic about it. But the Broadway production did have some dance, as well as songs written by Elton John, so that became our first choice for the evening. It turned out, however, that good seats were not to be had. The ticket booth attendant told us that the best he could do was some obstructed view seats, so we decided to change over to our 'Plan B' option – *Million Dollar Quartet*.

In retrospect, that should have been our first choice because it was a terrific production. It's the recreation of a legendary session the night of December 4, 1956 in the studio of Sun Records in Memphis, and was the only time that Jerry Lee Lewis, Carl Perkins, Johnny Cash, and Elvis Presley recorded music together. The musical was filled with many hit songs, including "Blue Suede Shoes", "Folsom Prison Blues", "I Walk the Line", "Great Balls of Fire", "Hound Dog", and "Whole Lotta Shakin' Goin' On", and the actors (who played their own instruments) were able to channel their musical legend counterparts without it all devolving into caricature.

from the production of *Million Dollar Quartet*

After the show, Nicki and I stayed for a while and talked with the actors. I asked Jared Mason, who played Carl Perkins, about the one "oops" moment in the production – during "That's All Right" a string broke on Elvis's guitar and Eddie Clendening, who played Elvis, made a nice recovery to get it restrung without disrupting the song. Mason laughed and said that had actually happened many times, so often that it's almost a surprise when it doesn't happen. And I found out that Levi Kreis, who played Jerry Lee Lewis, had met The Killer himself when Lewis was in New York back in September. Lewis, who in his 70s has never been out of touch with the rhythm and blues that made him a rock and roll legend, even came to one of the performances and jammed with the cast during the curtain call. Now *that* would have been a great show to see!

"It was so easy living day by day"

But there are many great shows of all kinds to see in New York. One of them was at the American Folk Art Museum on West 53rd Street. It's not very large as museums go – only 30,000 square feet spread out over eight floors, which doesn't allow for large exhibitions. Nicki and I had been there a few years ago and had come away mostly unimpressed, but we were lured back by an exhibition of antique American quilts dating as far back as the late 1700s. The museum was displaying these in celebration of its declaration that 2011 was the 'Year of the Quilt'.

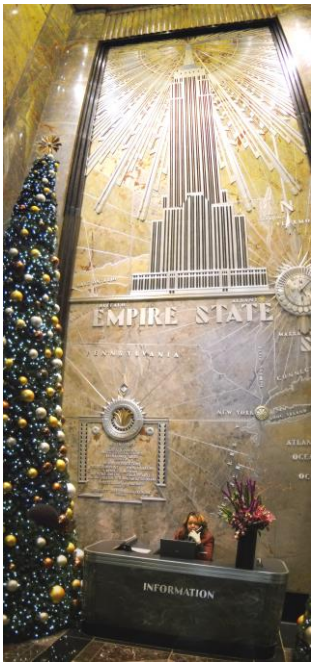
The exhibition was absolutely worth seeing. The quilts, almost all of them beautifully preserved, were keepsakes from a time long ago. Back then quilting was almost exclusively a

women's activity, and from the end of the Civil War forward it gradually evolved from a utilitarian craft into the art form that it has now become. Almost all of the quilts on display were gifts from individuals, often as a way of honoring great-great-great grandmothers who were the makers of the quilts. Walking through the exhibition was like traveling back through time to an era back when day-by-day living was so much simpler than it is now.

Nicki and an antique "whole cloth" quilt at the American Folk Art Museum

Epilog: "I don't have any reasons, I've left them all behind"

The walk north on Broadway from the Roosevelt home takes you past both residential and business areas. But it leads you inevitably to the Empire State Building. It, more than anything, is the iconic symbol of New York City and it has become even more so in the aftermath of the fall of the twin towers. The weather was too cold to even consider going up to the breezy 86th floor observation deck, so Nicki and I did the next best thing and spent some time admiring the three-story-high lobby of the building. It's quite impressive. The space is dominated by a tall relief sculpture that shows the appearance of the building before the radio transmission mast was added, and one of the corridors features a series of illuminated panels that portray the building as the 8th Wonder of the World, together with the other seven.



lobby of the Empire State Building

The three hour train ride back to Maryland the next day provided plenty of time for me and Nicki to talk about our favorite moments of the trip, and there were many. And it made me consider why is it that I look forward so much to spending what is usually three bone-chilling days in New York. I really don't have any good reasons, except that maybe I consider New York *itself* to be the 8th Wonder of the World. And this wonder is close enough where we can visit it again and again. Just thinking about next year's trip has already gotten me into a New York state of mind. ☼

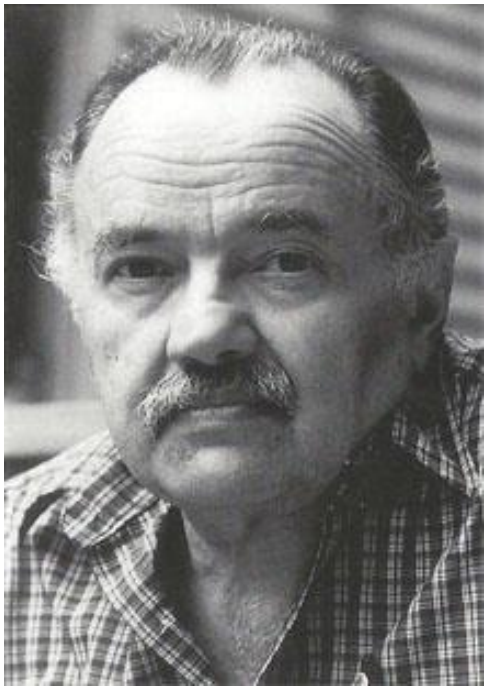
(All chapter headings for this essay are lyrics from Billy Joel's song "New York State of Mind" ©1976)

Afterword:

January has usually been an active month for me. For the last few years, Nicki and I have had some memorable adventures in New York City. But back in the mid 1970s, when Nicki and I were living in Tennessee, we were two of the founders of the Chattacon science fiction convention which is still going strong and is coming up on its 35th anniversary in January. It was for the 1988 Chattacon that I was asked, a day before the Program Book's printing deadline, to provide a short appreciation of the convention's Guest of Honor. Lucky for them I work well under pressure!

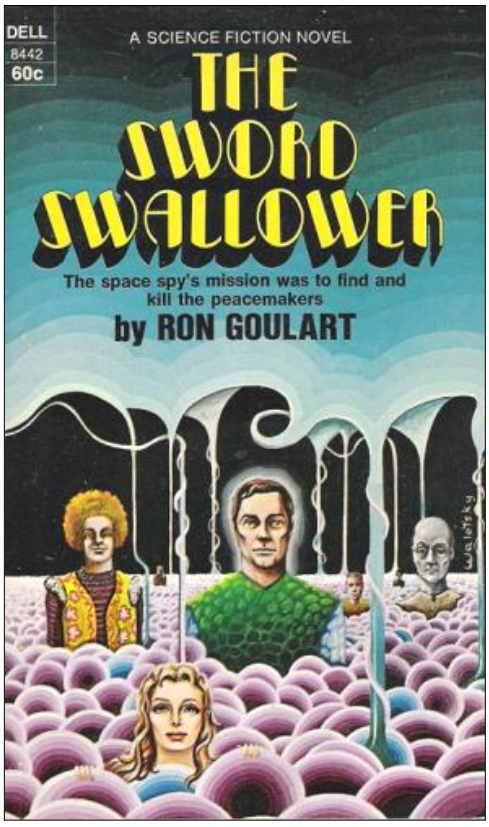
An Un-Bio Sketch of Ronald Joseph Goulart

What to do, what to do, when you're asked at the last instant to provide a biographical sketch of an author you admire, but have never actually met? It's a dilemma, to be sure, but fortunately there's an easy way out for the well-read essayist: consult your personal book stacks and see what somebody *else* has written about the man.



Ron Goulart

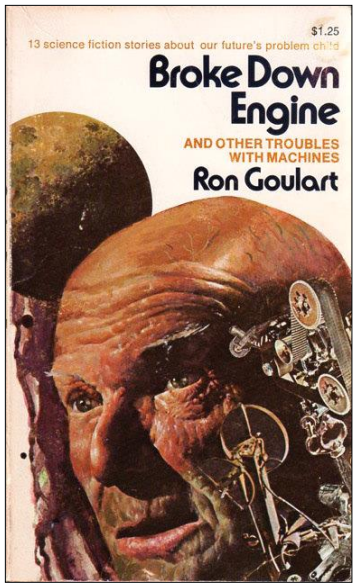
For someone like Ron Goulart, that's pretty easy. Turns out there's a wealth of information about him in print, if only you know where to look. First stop for me was Peter Nicholls' *Science Fiction Encyclopedia* (Doubleday & Co., 1979), where he's described as having been born in California during the Great Depression, and having worked in an advertising agency for a time before turning to writing as a full time vocation; the busy, sometimes convoluted California lifestyle and the concise, brash, and yet polished writing style that's required for the advertising business are reportedly a large influence on Goulart's unique brand of fiction. So says the book.



And there's more: much of Goulart's science fiction examines the human condition from sometimes unusual perspectives, and often makes "... sharp satirical points about human nature and about contemporary America", and that quite often his story settings are "... urbanized, California-like planets, populated in large part by comic stereotypes". Well, it's no secret that the man writes delightful, funny, rapier-wit fiction, especially about how modern day man *homo sapiens* has been turned, not entirely willingly, into the future man *homo mechanicus*. However, over-simplified encyclopedia articles tend to make a person or a topic seem excessively dry; it's time to turn to a better source of information about Ron Goulart: his wealth of fiction.

Even for the casual book reader, it's not unusual to find that you have ten or even more Goularts in your 'permanent' SF collection. A quick inspection of my collection reveals the breadth of talent he's shown in the different types of books he's written. For instance, up there on the top shelf is *The Sword Swallower*, already a classic, that introduces Ben Jolson and the Chameleon

Corps; it's a sharp, zany, yet introspective view of late `60s America taken to an extreme. And over here is *Broke Down Engine*, one of the best short story collections ever about future encounters between man and the increasingly complex mechanical world, especially at the Moment of Truth when things just don't seem to be working according to plan. And here, right within easy reach, is one of my favorites, *When the Waker Sleeps*, a wonderfully zany novel about what an unwilling time traveler might find the world has evolved into at increments of fifty years into the future. And there's much, much more: besides the science fiction genre, Goulart has done murder mysteries (*Ghosting* and *Too Sweet to Die* are in my stacks), novelizations (*Capricorn One*, among others), and even delved into comics (*Star Hawks*, with Gil Kane). Among his non-fiction are histories of the pulp magazines and comic strips of the `30s.



You see, there's a lot more to Ron Goulart than can be described in a necessarily flimsy sketch of the man like this essay. It's pretty obvious that he's one of the best SF writers there is; just the act of writing this piece has made me want to get to know the man and his work even better, and as I said, I haven't even met him yet!

But I will, right here at Chattacon. In fact, I intend to have him personalize quite a few Goularts in my permanent collection, and I'll be there early at each of the scheduled autograph sessions. Hey, there; the line forms to the right!

Right behind me. ☼

Afterword:

Ron Goulart turned out to be a splendid guest. He was greatly entertaining and even appeared in the "Live Fanzine" that Nicki and I hosted at the convention which was later transcribed as the 4th issue of *Mimosa*.

Ron Goulart at Chattacon 13

This is a good time to mention that Mr. Goulart is long overdue a career honor for science fiction authors – being invited to be a Guest of Honor at a World Science Fiction Convention. He may be the only living professional science fiction author of significance whose fiction dates back as far as the 1960s and who has not yet been a Worldcon Guest of Honor. It's truly a disgrace that he's been overlooked for this long.

I'm resisting the urge to climb up on my soapbox for a rant about all the deserving fans who have not yet been honored as Fan Guest of Honor at a Worldcon, mostly because there are so many of them. Instead I'll direct your attention to the next article about my friend Bob Madle, who *was* a Worldcon Fan Guest (in 1975). He was also a Special Guest at the 1996 Boskone and the convention committee asked me to write an appreciation about him for their Program Book. As you will read, there was a lot about him to describe!

Bob Madle: A Fan for the Ages

with Bob Madle at his home, in 2008

Recently, I read somewhere that an average American's life span is now over 72 years, up something like 100 percent over what the average life expectancy was for people who lived way back in the Middle Ages. Mankind doesn't have the longest life span in the animal kingdom, of course; great land tortoises are reported to live well over 100 years, for example. Even longer lived, one of the bristlecone pine trees out in the Sierras was calculated to have lived for about 2,000 years, but even this *pales in comparison* to the ancient creosote bushes of the Mojave Desert, some of which are reportedly *over 20,000 years old*!

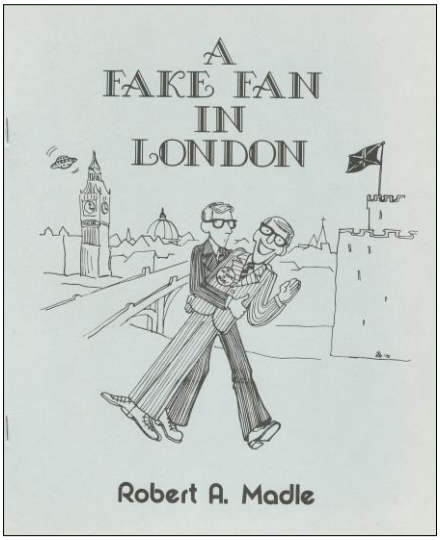
And then there's Bob Madle...

Now, wait just a minute! Before you think I'm having a little cheap fun at your Special Guest's expense, I'll hasten to tell you that no insult is intended. In fact, I meant it as a compliment! You see, Bob Madle is a member of that fabled Dinosaurs of Fandom organization, First Fandom, which he helped found back in the 1950s. To be a member of First Fandom, you had to be active as a fan no later than January 1, 1938, by taking part in such activities as writing letters, publishing a fanzine, or attending a fan gathering. Actually, Bob's involvement in fandom dates back even further than that; he discovered that there was a fandom way back in 1933 when he found that letters from other fans were being published by Hugo Gernsback in *Amazing Stories* (Bob's first published letter to *Amazing* appeared in the August 1935 issue). Once he discovered there were other fans, he was part of the vanguard to organize them: in 1935, Bob was one of the founders of the world's second oldest continuing science fiction organization, the Philadelphia Science Fiction Society. And in 1936, Bob was one of the attendees of the very first science fiction convention ever held, when PSFS hosted a contingent of fans from New York City.

1953 Hugo Award

Now that alone is a pretty impressive resume, but it doesn't nearly end there. The first World Science Fiction Convention was held in New York City, in July of 1939. Bob was there. He was also at the second, in Chicago in 1940, and the third, in Denver in 1941. He even attended the very first Boskone, in 1941. After World War Two finished interrupting just about everyone's fan activities, Bob became involved with the running of Worldcons, as part of the committees for the Philadelphia Worldcons in 1947 and 1953. And there's more: he was one of the decision-makers of that 1953 Worldcon committee that came up with the idea for the Hugo Awards, which were presented for the very first time at that convention.

But there's still more! I can't end this appreciation without mentioning that Bob did much to organize fan groups in other places besides Philadelphia. In the early 1950s, for instance, he was a founder of a fan club in Charlotte, North Carolina, which led to some of the first science fiction conventions ever held in the southeastern United States. Much of today's very active fandom in that region can be traced back to these origins. And in 1957, Bob was elected North American delegate for the still-new Trans-Atlantic Fan Fund, which had been conceived just a few years earlier. TAFF brought Bob to the very first non-North American worldcon, which was in London that year. (This resulted in one of the best fan trip reports ever written, which he titled for obscure reasons, *A Fake Fan in London*. But that's another story...)



Anyway, it's only because Bob has spent much of the past few decades as a dealer of rare and hard-to-find science fiction books and magazines that his fan activity has finally slowed by just a bit. Not by so much that *I* can keep up with him, though! Even now, sixty years after that first science fiction convention, he still gets to more conventions each year than most other fans, myself included. So when you talk with him, ask him about some of these adventures. You'll find he's easy to chat with, and who knows? You might even find yourself buying a book from him that tells all about some of those yesteryear exploits of fandoms past.


Bob Madle, Forry Ackerman, and Sam Moskowitz at the 1957 Worldcon

I began this introduction of your Special Guest with a metaphor; I'll finish it with another. Even though the dawn of science fiction fandom happened way back in the 1930s, we should remember that fandom is really still quite young; the fact that many of its founders are still active is something we can treasure. Bob Madle *is* such a treasure; he's living history – a fan for the ages. ☼

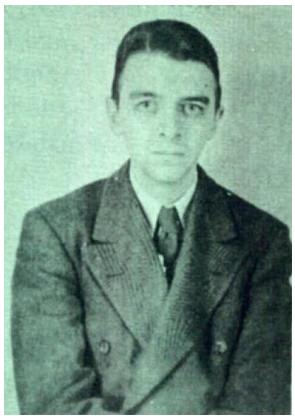
Afterword:

It turned out that the convention didn't take great advantage of Bob Madle's presence. He appeared on just four program items, only one of which related to the early days of science fiction fandom. So two years later, at the 1998 Baltimore Worldcon, I was able to persuade the convention to let me interview Bob about his memories of those early days. I made sure there was an audio recording, and the transcription was edited into a two-part article that appeared in the 27th and 30th issues of *Mimosa*.

Bob Madle lives only about 15 miles from me, but he's not the most famous science fiction fan who has ever resided in Maryland. That would be Harry Warner, Jr., the famous 'Hermit of Hagerstown', who lived nearly the entirety of his life in that small city. I visited him often in the last decade of his life and after his passing in February 2003, I wrote the following remembrance.

Remembering Harry

Harry Warner, Jr., perhaps the best-known stay-at-home science fiction fan of all time, died on February 17th of natural causes at his home in Hagerstown, Maryland.



Harry Warner, Jr.
in the late 1930s

Harry was a lifelong resident of Hagerstown and a fan for most of his life; his fan activities began in 1936, when he was in his early teens, but by then he had already been a science fiction reader for several years: "My father got a couple of Jules Verne's novels from the library for me to read [and] I read a little science fiction in the Big Little books, which were popular a long, long time ago. But I didn't discover the prozines until 1933 – I bought my first *Amazing*s and *Wonder*s in that year."

The path that Harry took into fandom was via the prozines. When he was 13 years old, he wrote a letter to *Astounding*'s "Brass Tacks" letters column, printed in the October 1936 issue, which mentioned that he would like to "correspond with someone of my own age or a little older". Soon afterwards, he received about a dozen letters as well as a few fanzines (called 'fanmags' back then) in response, and began a letter exchange with some of the people who had written to him. One of these was James S. Avery, a fan from Maine, who convinced Harry they should co-edit their own fanmag, and in November 1938 the first issue appeared. This was *Spaceways*, a general interest fanmag which became one of the best fan publications of the pre-war years.

Spaceways was not destined to be a collaborative effort – it turned out that Avery never did contribute any material or effort to the publication so he was soon dropped as co-editor. As for Harry, it turned out that one of his talents was in persuading good writers to contribute to *Spaceways*; this included such notables as H.P. Lovecraft, Jack Williamson, Bob Tucker, Fred Pohl, Forrest J Ackerman, Sam Moskowitz, and Robert Lowndes. Harry also took great pains to keep *Spaceways* (and himself) above the fan politics and feuds that were endemic to the fandom of the late 1930s and early 1940s. By doing this, he made many friends and very few enemies.

Harry gained a reputation in fandom as 'The Hermit of Hagerstown', this from his reluctance or inability to travel far from home. As a result, he was frequently visited by those who were passing through the region on their way to or from various fan gatherings. One of these, in 1943, was the notorious fan freeloader Claude Degler, whom Harry described as actually behaving like a gentleman, but: "He left Hagerstown without getting into my home, an accomplishment for which I have never been sufficiently recognized."

Over the years, Harry actually did leave Hagerstown to attend a few science fiction conventions, including the 1971 Worldcon where he was the Fan Guest of Honor. He was never very happy with the large crowd scenes, though, preferring the written word as his way of communicating with other fans. In the last decades of his life, he limited his contact with other fans to groups of two or three at the largest, so if you wanted to meet him you had to go visit him in Hagerstown. All of his fanac then was done from home, either by publishing fanzines, writing articles for other fanzines, or as a correspondent. His prozine letterhack days were pretty much over by the time he became a fanzine publisher, but he remained a prolific letter writer for the rest of his life, usually in response to the myriads of fanzines he received in the mail. Harry

always found positive, constructive things to say about even the most abysmal of crudzines, and it was always a badge of honor for a fanzine publisher to include a Harry Warner letter of comment in the Letters Column. Many volumes could probably be published of the entertaining letters he wrote to fanzine publishers; at least partly for this prolificacy he was voted the Hugo Award for Best Fan Writer twice, in 1969 and 1972, winning out over such notables as Walt Willis, Terry Carr, and Susan Wood.

Harry also received one other Hugo Award, in 1993, for Best Non-Fiction Book. His large accumulation of fanzines provided him a resource from which to research the fandom of the 1940s and 1950s, and resulted in two books that he referred to as "informal histories" – *All Our Yesterdays* (Advent, 1969), about fandom of the 1940s, and *A Wealth of Fable* (SCIFI Press, 1992), about 1950s fandom. The Best Non-Fiction Book Hugo did not exist in 1970, or both books would likely have won the award.

Harry with his 1993 Hugo Award

Harry's influence as a writer and historian on fandom is huge, and not only in the United States. Noted Swedish fan and writer John-Henri Holmberg wrote that: "What struck me about [Harry's] letters, as well as his many fanzine essays, was his reasonableness, his sense of proportion, his quiet humor and good sense. In many ways, I suspect that Harry Warner was the ideal fan, in the sense that he managed to avoid both the wild-eyed fanaticism and the angry disillusionment which devour so many of us. He could see both sides to most conflicts, but even more importantly, he could also see that neither was particularly important."

Harry leaves behind no relatives; only his writings survive him. Reportedly, his fanzine collection will become the property of the University of California at Riverside, whose fan publications catalog also incorporates the large collections from the estates of Terry Carr and Bruce Pelz. He will be missed; even though he was a lifelong bachelor, he was as much a patriarchal figure as has ever existed in science fiction fandom. Fan historian Moshe Feder noted that: "[Harry] may not have any surviving blood kin, but we are his family, and his proper mourners, as is any faned anywhere who will never again receive a Harry Warner letter of comment." And he's right. ☼

Afterword:

It doesn't seem like it's been nearly nine years since Harry's death. The disposition of his fanzine collection was decided in court (a letter requesting that it go to UC Riverside was ruled not part of his will) and after many months of machinations it ended up in the hands of a collector in Texas. This essay also appeared in *Locus* magazine but with some additional unaccredited material about Harry and his life in Hagerstown. (I wasn't all that thrilled with the enhancements, but I *did* cash the check.)

Harry didn't often travel outside the city limits of Hagerstown, but he did he welcome visitors. Some of us in the D.C. vicinity paid him a visit from time to time, and in his later years, Harry became elevated to a kind of honorary 'Elder Statesman' membership in the Washington area's thriving fan community. In that regard, several years ago I wrote an abbreviated history of Washington-area fandom, and this would seem to be a good place to reprint it.

A Condensed History of D.C. Fandom

Although Washington, D.C. fandom is not usually regarded as strongly "serious and constructive", or "sercon", in character, it didn't start out that way. The first known pseudo-fan organization in the city, The Outsider Club of the late 1930s, was literary in nature and so strongly dedicated to supernatural fiction that it considered science fiction and its fandom undeserving of interest.

The first true science fiction fan organization in Washington was the World War Two-era group known as The Washington Worry-Warts. It consisted mainly of notable fans such as Jack Speer, Elmer Perdue, and Milton Rothman, who had been assigned by the military to the city as part of the war effort. It was a bit too loosely organized to be called a club, and when the war ended so did the Worry-Warts, as there was not yet enough interest among locals to keep the organization going after the fans on temporary duty returned to their home cities.

Jack Speer

In the end, it fell to the local fans to form a lasting science fiction fan club in the nation's capital. In 1946, Charles "Chick" Derry began contacting fans he knew in the city with the idea of eventually forming a fan club, but a club did not come into existence for about another two years. It took a nearby Worldcon, in Philadelphia in 1947, to provide the needed momentum. Derry met another active Washington fan, Bob Pavlat, at the 1947 Philcon, and together they were able to generate enough enthusiasm from five other D.C. fans to form what turned out to be a lasting organization. The result was the Washington Science Fiction Society, which changed its name a few months later to the Washington Science-Fiction Association, or WSFA. Meetings were held twice monthly, and the first meeting site was a public building in downtown Washington.

By 1950, WSFA had grown enough that more activities were possible than just meetings every first and third Friday. It held its first convention, called the 'Conclave', that year; it was a one-day event that drew about 75 fans and was successful enough that it was repeated the next year under the name of 'Disclave'. WFSA in the 1950s gained its character as a club with an emphasis on socializing, which it retains to this day. The meeting place moved to members' homes, and each bimonthly meeting became the equivalent of an extended room party at a convention, a tradition that also persists to this day.

By the early 1960s, Disclaves had become multi-day events and were starting to become multi-interest, so WSFA decided to try something *really* interesting: sponsor a World Science Fiction Convention. It's only

other serious bid to host a Worldcon (for 1950) had garnered only enough votes to finish third of the four bids considered by the business meeting of the 1949 Worldcon. But by 1962, things were different. The club had the wherewithal and active membership base to support a bid, and also an influential fan (George Scithers) to act as chair. The bid won broad support at the Chicon III business meeting and the city of Washington was host to its first Worldcon, the Discon, in August 1963.

That first Discon was memorable for many reasons, not all of which involved science fiction. It was held just days after an event staged nearby that had helped to shape the world of the 1960s – the "I Have a Dream" speech of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., at the Lincoln Memorial, only about a mile from the convention hotel. The convention itself honored Isaac Asimov with his first Hugo Award, Philip K. Dick with his only Hugo Award, and E.E. "Doc" Smith with the inaugural First Fandom Hall of Fame Award. But the person who was honored the most was its very deserving Guest of Honor, Will F. Jenkins, who wrote science fiction under the name of Murray Leinster.

E.E. "Doc" Smith and his First Fandom Hall of Fame Award

The attendance of that first Discon was about 600 people, and the fallout was that the attendance of Disclaves steadily grew after that, reaching almost 1,500 by the late 1970s. But before that, Washington fandom (under the chairmanship of Jay Haldeman) won the right to host a second Worldcon, this time in 1974. In the decade that had elapsed since the first Discon, Worldcons had dramatically increased in size. Discon II, at more than 3,500 attendees, was the largest science fiction convention ever held at that point in time. The professional Guest of Honor was a writer who had burst upon the scene, to great fanfare, only a few years earlier: Roger Zelazny. Hugo Awards were presented to some of science fiction's most notable writers: Arthur C. Clarke, Harlan Ellison, James Tiptree, Jr., and Ursula K. LeGuin.

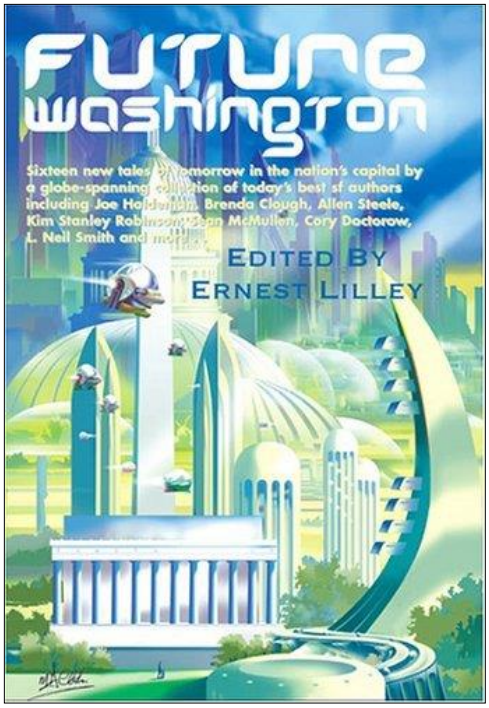
Roger Zelazny at the 1974 Worldcon

Over the years, WSFA has hosted other notable conventions besides the two Discons, including the 2003 World Fantasy Convention, the 2004 SMOFcon, and a 1999 writers conference co-hosted with the Smithsonian Institution. The smallest but one of the most entertaining of these special conventions occurred on February 29, 1980, when a one-off 'Datclave' was held in commemoration of a February with a fifth Friday (WSFA often hosts parties on fifth Fridays in months where there is one). Disclave itself was discontinued after the 1997 convention following a now legendary incident at the convention hotel, in a room occupied

by people who were not members of the convention, which resulted in a large amount of water damage to several floors of the hotel. Disclave got the blame, and it became impossible to have serious negotiations with any suitable D.C.-area hotel for several years after that. It was not until 2001 that WSFA was able to once again host a convention. To accentuate the break with the past, the new convention was given a different name, Capclave, and emphasis was narrowed to highlight the science fiction short story. The first Capclave was deemed successful enough where it has become an annual event.

The mascot of Capclave ("Where reading is not extinct")

There are now more science fiction-related clubs and organizations in the D.C. metro area than just WSFA, including anime and gaming communities. The oldest of these is the Potomac River Science Fiction Association, which was founded in 1975 by WSFA members who wanted more sercon each month than the typical WSFA meeting delivered. And it turned out that WSFA's influence extended even beyond the immediate D.C. metro area: the Baltimore Science Fiction Society was founded in 1962 by five WSFA members on their way home to Baltimore from a WSFA meeting. WSFA itself lost its hyphen in 1980 and is now just the Washington Science Fiction Association. The strength of WSFA has always been its membership, and over the years there have been many accomplishments by its members, including thirteen Hugo Awards, two John W. Campbell Awards, one Skylark Award, one British Fantasy Award, and one Locus Award. WSFA sponsors a monthly fanzine, *The WSFA Journal*, that first saw publication in 1965, and WSFA members are involved in a monthly cable television show about science fiction, *Fast Forward*, and two specialty book publishers: Old Earth Books, whose publications have received both Locus Award and World Fantasy Award nominations, and the WSFA Press, which has previously published collections of stories by Disclave guests and recently published a short story anthology, *Future Washington*. ☼



Afterword:

This was originally written on request from the editor of the *Southern Fandom Confederation Handbook*, but he moved out to the west coast soon afterwards and it never did appear there. It was eventually published a few years later as part of the *Capclave 7 Program Book* in recognition of the 60th anniversary of the founding of WSFA.

Nicki and I have not been very active in D.C. fandom in the past few years. We still attend Capclave but our WSFA attendance this year has dwindled down to just a single meeting, the upcoming December 16th holiday party. This year the date of the party coincides with the birthday of one of classical music's greatest composers...or maybe it doesn't!

Happy Birthday (We Think) to a Great German Composer

Joseph Karl Stieler's 1820 portrait of Ludwig von Beethoven

A joyous day today – it's the birthday of Ludwig von Beethoven, born on the 16th of December, in Bonn, Germany, in 1770. Or maybe it isn't...December 16 is the assumed date because he was baptized on December 17; no actual record apparently exists of his birth. Beethoven's father and grandfather were both musicians, and it was apparently their will that young Ludwig would follow in their path. The history of classical music is filled with stories about famous composers who began as child prodigies, but Beethoven was actually somewhat of a late bloomer. Even though he was apparently very talented and a fast learner with a spark of precociousness, there are only a few records of any early childhood performances; those were only because his demanding father tried to exploit young Ludwig as the next Mozart, which he was not. His father's musical teaching ability was limited, and by the time Ludwig had reached age eleven his tutelage had passed to the city of Bonn court organist for several years of apprenticeship. From there it was on to Vienna in 1787, where he met Mozart. Beethoven was not destined to study under Mozart, however – shortly after arriving in Vienna he had to hurriedly return to Bonn upon news his mother was dying, and he did not make it back to Vienna until 1792, the year after Mozart's death.

By then, though, Beethoven had become proficient as a violinist and especially as a pianist. His tutelage in Vienna, under such notables as Antonio Salieri and Franz Joseph Haydn, served more to hone his growing ability for musical composition. Beethoven lived in Vienna for the remainder of his life, supporting himself first as a skilled pianist then as a composer. His first published work, a trio for piano, violin and cello, came in 1795, but his real breakthrough as a composer was perhaps the first of his most famous piano sonatas (the "Pathétique") in 1798.

Beethoven was eventually able to obtain a secure income from the city aristocracy while still maintaining his artistic independence, but by then his compositions had made him famous. That fame, however, did not lead to a happy personal life. Beethoven was said to have a quick temper and sometimes used it even on his benefactors; he was plagued by chronic inner turmoil which often manifested itself in his compositions, sometimes as if he was venting his hostility through his music. Beethoven was also not a ladies' man, and never married. Women were not impressed by his storminess; he fell in love several times, but was rejected each time. One such occasion resulted in one of the most famous solo piano works ever composed, which was dedicated to a young noblewoman. Years later the first movement of the composition was compared, by a poet, to "moonlight shining on a lake" and since then it has been known as the "Moonlight" sonata.

In 1802, Beethoven discovered he was slowly going deaf. It became progressively worse over the next decade of his life, and by 1812 had reached the point where he could no longer

perform music. The last major concert of his life (and perhaps one of the greatest in the history of classical music) was in December 1808, where he gave the first public performance of his wonderful 4th Piano Concerto. That same evening saw the premiere of two of his most famous works, the 6th ("Pastoral") Symphony and the grand Symphony No.5. Beethoven only composed nine symphonies, but all remain in current orchestral repertoire. The most famous of these, of course, is his 9th ("Choral") Symphony, especially the final "Ode to Joy" movement which features a melody he had previously used years earlier in another composition, setting to music the words of Frederich Schiller from four decades earlier. It was composed in 1822, and by then Beethoven was completely deaf. He was present for the hurriedly arranged first public performance, on stage near the conductor so he could indicate the tempo of each movement. He was still facing the orchestra when the symphony ended, and only when the soloists physically turned him toward the audience did he realize all were on their feet applauding. It was one of the few times in his life that he was ever emotionally moved by the reaction to one of his compositions.

Beethoven gravesite in Vienna

Beethoven died in the early spring of 1827 from what might have been a case chronic lead poisoning. More than 10,000 people attended the funeral. By then, as one of Beethoven's biographers wrote, "He had become a public figure, as no composer had done before. ... He had never been a purveyor of music to the nobility: he had lived into the age – indeed helped create it – of the artist as hero and the property of mankind at large." Beethoven also helped create a new era, or at least a new period, in classical music. Compositions became more cutting edge and demanding, not only of the performer but also of the instrument. Beethoven's piano compositions such as the "Moonlight" required the pianist to hammer the hell out of the instrument and as a result, the design of the piano had to evolve to what it is today. Beethoven's cutting edge influence even extended to the 1980s and the design of the audio compact disk. There is a story, perhaps apocryphal, that the famous conductor Herbert von Karajan insisted to Sony Corporation that the design of the CD allow for sufficient recording time such that the entirety of Beethoven's 9th Symphony could fit on a single disk. (And it does.)

What's not apocryphal is the huge influence one troubled man had on the world of classical music and the fame it brought him. Through his compositions, Beethoven became revered by the entire world. He still is. ☼

Afterword:

I found out after I'd finished this essay that it was actually Sony Corporation executive Norio Ohga, and not von Karajan, who had insisted that the capacity of an audio compact disk be large enough for the entirety of Beethoven's 9th Symphony. Or maybe it was *both* Ohga and von Karajan, since they were friends.

At any rate, a great many of Beethoven's compositions can certainly be figuratively described as groundbreaking. But back in August of this year some *literal* ground breaking, or at least building breaking, occurred right here in the Washington area.

The Earth Moved!

It wasn't huge by west coast standards, but the August 23rd magnitude 5.8 earthquake was certainly big enough to create lots of chaos here in the D.C. area. The epicenter was less than 100 miles from here and with the duration of the event (it went on for about 15 seconds) there was damage to some structures, the most significant being the cracks in the Washington Monument that shut it to tourists.

location of epicenter for the August 23rd earthquake

Nicki was home, sitting at the computer when the quake hit, and for a few seconds didn't realize what was happening. But the two cats knew something was very wrong from the way the house was shaking. She told me they raced around for a few seconds and then found places to hide. In the end, it was mostly sound and fury – there was no damage to the house except for a minor crack in the basement wall that may already have been there.

As for me, I and a co-worker were coming back to the office from lunch in his big Honda SUV when the quake happened. Neither of us felt anything, and it wasn't until we saw the building where we work had been evacuated that we realized something unusual had occurred. While we were waiting for the building engineers to determine that the structure was safe, we heard dozens of descriptions of what had happened from other co-workers, many of whom had never experienced an earthquake before. It was ironic – this was by far the biggest earthquake I've ever been through, and I didn't even notice it.

You know, in a way, I feel cheated! ☼

Afterword:

As of the beginning of December, the Washington Monument still has not re-opened to visitors. The National Cathedral also sustained about $15 million in damage and full restoration will take years to complete. Meanwhile, I've caulked the crack in the house foundation. And I'm wondering if I should upgrade the home insurance policy by adding coverage for damage by earthquakes!

The beginning of December also marks the onset of snow season here in the mid-Atlantic region. But the really bad stuff probably won't get here for at least another month, like it did a year ago...


earthquake damage at the National Cathedral

Zen and the Art of Shoveling Snow

out in the January 26th winter storm

The January 26th storm wasn't terrible by last year's standards but it *was* a nasty one, with a biting wind accompanying all the snow. The final total was more than eight inches here, a bit less down in Washington, and it was more than enough to create quite a bit of chaos. The heavy stuff started coming down right at about the beginning of rush hour. The Federal Government gave us two hours early release, and if they hadn't I'm not sure I would have made it home – rain earlier in the day had washed the snow-melting chemicals from the roadways and the city's plows were not yet out and about to clear away the snow. It took only about half an hour for the roads to become almost undriveable. I can handle two inches of snow on the highway but a lot of other drivers in this area cannot, and it would have taken just a single spin-out to turn the highway home into a parking lot. That's what happened in Virginia, across the river from D.C., and some drivers were caught for so long that they eventually abandoned their vehicles.

This was a heavy and wet snow, great for making snowmen but not very easy to shovel. It's a tiring and intimidating job, no doubt about that, and I found that the easiest way to do it was to take a Zen-like approach and focus only on the small picture – clean a few square feet at a time, repeat, repeat. With just the wind and snow keeping me company it was simple to do and after a while, I became oblivious to the passage of time.

Once in a while something equally Zen-like would happen to briefly draw my attention away from the work. A man taking his small dog for a walk trudged past on the sidewalk, the snow up to the dog's chin; a short while later they came back, the man carrying the dog. The tree directly across the street broke with a loud bang, and a large limb came crashing down across the sidewalk; up the street a bit earlier the same thing had happened and had almost taken out another driveway shoveler. Every so often the sky would briefly light up as if someone was taking a flash photograph; Nicki, who had come out to help with the shoveling, identified it as lightning. Thunder snow! It was the first time I've ever experienced it, as far as I can remember. Except that there was no thunder – the noise was totally absorbed by the falling snow.

At any rate, a couple of hours of work and the driveway was clear. At least until the city's snowplows finally appeared. ☼

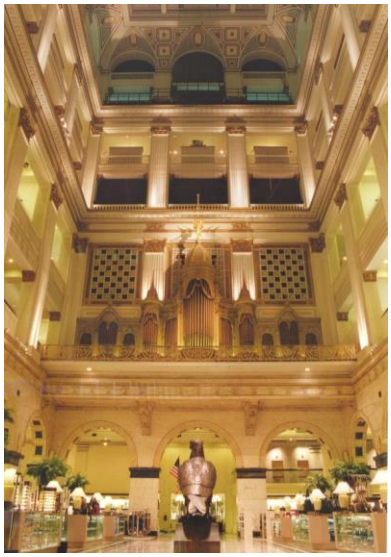
Afterword:

After years of procrastination, I've finally done what Nicki has been urging me to do – buy a snow blower. It's a small one, electric powered, but it should handle most if not all snowfalls we can expect. At this point I'm ready to say to the weather gods, "Bring it on!" But that's probably not very Zen-like.

It's time to close this collection, but before I do here's an article about what Nicki and I did during last year's holiday season. We had hoped that a couple of short trips to Philadelphia and Washington would be pleasant and perhaps even enlightening. It turned out they were all of that. And a whole lot more.

Visits to the Worlds of Yesterday and Tomorrow, and Other Holiday Season Travels

Prolog: The World's Largest!



the wonderful Wanamaker

Nicki and I had come to Philadelphia to see an exhibit about ancient Egypt, but it was a more modern marvel that had our attention that evening. It was the Wanamaker, the largest operational pipe organ in the world and, as a result, the world's largest musical instrument. The thing is mammoth – it has more than 28,000 pipes arrayed in more than 450 ranks. From what I could observe, the distance from the base of the organ to the top of its tallest pipe was well over 100 feet. But what was even more mindboggling about the organ was its location. Most large pipe organs are installed in cathedrals or concert halls, but not this one. It was right there in downtown Philadelphia, in the Grand Concourse of Macy's Department Store.

There are two recitals daily, one at noon and one at 7:00pm. Fewer than ten people, including Nicki and me, were at the evening recital and I wish I could tell you it was memorable. It wasn't really, but it *was* a pleasant and sedate 45-minute respite at the end of a busy day. There were only a couple of compositions I could identify, neither of which had been originally composed for pipe organ. It wasn't until the final piece that the organist let loose some of the power of the organ, and even then it seemed restrained. Which is probably just as well for all the shoppers in the store who weren't even aware they were in the presence of greatness.

In the City of Brotherly Love

Robert Indiana's iconic "Love" sculpture

Philadelphia is only about a three hour drive from where Nicki and I live, but it's not been a place we've visited very often. Philadelphia has much in the way of greatness besides the Wanamaker, but the narrow and very congested city streets are not one of them. It took an unpleasantly long time, once we reached the downtown, for us to navigate our way to the hotel.

We had come to Philly in the middle of November to see the "Cleopatra: The Search for the Last Queen of Egypt" exhibition at the Franklin Institute and the half mile walk from the hotel took us through the city center, where the famous "Love" sculpture resides. Only there wasn't much love going on there that day – two big guys were having a loud argument not far from the sculpture, and a minute or so after we'd passed through we heard police sirens.

The Franklin Institute

We had expected the Franklin Institute to be a highbrow historical museum, but, apart from the Cleopatra exhibit, it seemed to be mostly a young adult hands-on place to discover science. There are several floors of displays, including something that looked like the physics of basketball (one of the exits from the gift shop led to a small basketball court where some kids were practicing shooting hoops). The biggest attraction for the kids, though, was the Sky Bike, located about 30 feet above the atrium where tickets to the Cleopatra exhibit were being sold. It's a two-wheeled bicycle that traverses the atrium space across a one-inch diameter steel cable – a heavy weight suspended below the bike keeps it from tipping over and spilling out the passenger, though there is a safety harness as well as a net. Most of the other exhibits were not much in use, but there was a line of people who wanted a chance at human-powered 'flight'.

In Search of Cleopatra

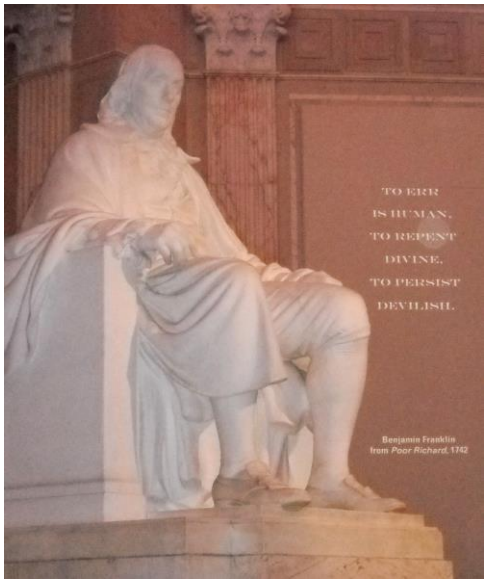
small Sphinx artifact from the Cleopatra exhibition

But the reason Nicki and I were in Philadelphia was to 'join' the search for Cleopatra. The National Geographic Society, with cooperation from the Egyptian Supreme Council of the Antiquities, has assembled an impressive exhibition of artifacts discovered at the bottom of the Bay of Aboukir near present-day Alexandria, Egypt. The relics on display are the results-in-progress of a concerted effort, ongoing for more than a decade, to locate the tomb of Egyptian queen Cleopatra. There were stone statues, household implements, and jewelry, as well as videos of these same artifacts on the bottom of the Mediterranean Sea where they were discovered. The exhibition attempted to show off these artifacts in the context of a brief history of Cleopatra and her times, but the recorded audio tour which came with the price of the ticket seemed mostly an ancient soap opera. It was narrated by 'Cleopatra' herself, and seemed as much about her very active love life as the politics of trying to coexist with a burgeoning Roman Empire.

In the end, we decided it was worth the trip and the expense to see the exhibition. The 2,000+ year old relics on display were incredible, and in spite of the lame commentary we did learn a lot about a period of history we're interested in. Next time: Marc Antony's viewpoint?

The City of Mr. Franklin

Even now, more than 200 years after his death, it's still fairly evident that the city of Philadelphia is more or less 'owned' by Benjamin Franklin. His name and image are everywhere, and he himself is easy to find. His permanent 'home' is in the Christ Church Burial Ground, not far from Independence Hall. Franklin's final resting spot is easy to spot – it's the one with all the pennies on top of the tomb. There is a local tradition that leaving a penny on the tomb will bring good luck, though Franklin, who originated the phrase "A penny saved is a penny earned", would probably be appalled.



Ben's statue in The Franklin Institute

In all, Nicki and I were in Philadelphia for less than 24 hours, and shortly before we headed for home we paid our respect at Mr. Franklin's grave. We also took the time to visit Independence Hall where we took part of a very entertaining docent tour by a retired Park Service employee that provided a historical background to the events of July 1776 as well as a look at the rooms where the workings of a few zealous men transitioned America from a colony to a country.


the tour of Independence Hall

And no trip to Philadelphia is really complete without a view of its most famous artifact, the Liberty Bell. It's located in its own pavilion right across the street from Independence Hall, and even early on a Saturday morning there was a large crowd of people there to see it.

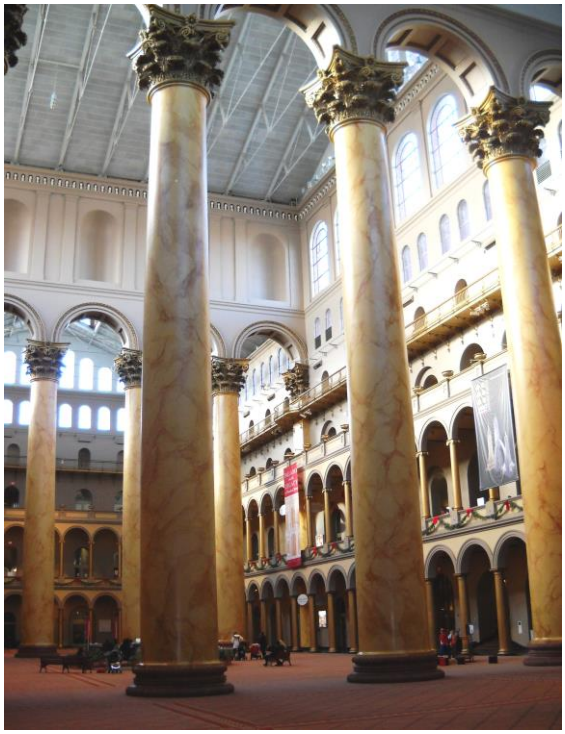

Nicki and the Liberty Bell

I was surprised to find out that the Bell is significantly older than the United States as a nation. It was originally commissioned by the Pennsylvania Assembly more than two decades before America's Declaration of Independence, in commemoration of the 50th anniversary of William Penn's 1701 Charter of Privileges. The crack in the Bell developed sometime in the mid 1800s, the inevitable result of a mistake in its alloy composition which nearly caused it to be broken up for scrap long before it became an iconic symbol of freedom.

It was a satisfying trip. We found a lot to do during our short stay in Philadelphia, and I'm glad we went there.

Building a Better Tomorrow

Not surprisingly, the Liberty Bell does not do road trips. The last time it was outside the city limits of Philadelphia was way back in 1915, when it traveled to the Panama-Pacific International Exposition in San Francisco. In the 1930s, both the Chicago and New York World's Fairs tried to arrange for a visit by the Bell to no avail.



interior of the National Building Museum

Those 1930s depression-era World's Fairs have become the stuff of legend for their futuristic visions of what was then the 'world of tomorrow'. There were some amazing architectural wonders created for these Fairs which were completely dismantled and lost after the Fairs closed. Models and drawings of some of these buildings, as well as other artifacts from these Fairs, are part of an exhibition titled "Designing Tomorrow" at the National Building Museum in Washington.

The National Building Museum is my favorite building in the city. It dates back to the 1880s and was originally the Pension Bureau for Civil War veterans. Back then it was the largest brick building in the world and even today it remains an impressive structure, with a truly wonderful 160-foot tall Great Hall that encompasses much of the interior. I remember being awe-struck the first time I went inside years ago, and it's still that way every time I go back there.

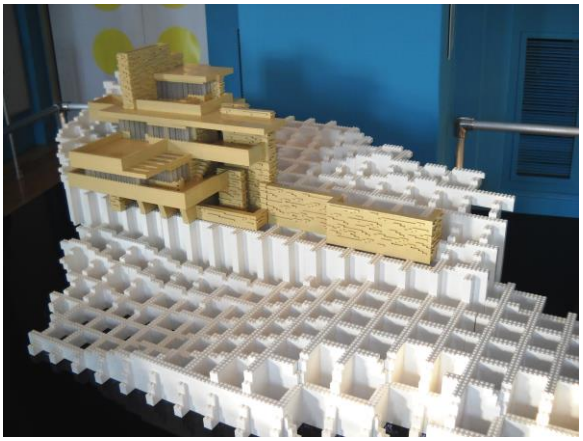
Elektro the Moto-Man

There was a lot more in the "Designing Tomorrow" exhibit than I had expected. The United States was working its way out of the Great Depression back then, and the World's Fairs of that era were relentlessly optimistic in depicting what the future would hold. The thousands of visitors to these Fairs were provided rosy visions of speedy mass transportation and superhighways, of homes filled with new and exciting electricity-powered accessories and conveniences, and of what the metropolises of the future world of 1960 might look like. There were detailed models, photographs, and remnants of many of the famous buildings, such as the Trylon and Perisphere at the 1939-40 New York World's Fair with accompanying architectural plans and newsreels that showed the interiors. The star of the exhibit, though, was Elektro the Moto-Man. It was a motorized robot created by Westinghouse for the New York Fair that walked, talked (via a recorded voice), and smoked cigarettes. A newsreel showed Elektro in action and it was almost like a comedy act, complete with a human straight-man.

Smaller than Life

There was one other exhibition Nicki and I visited at the National Building Museum, but this one was quite a bit smaller in scale than the World's Fair exhibition. It was titled "Towering Ambition" and was a display of more than a dozen iconic buildings from around the world, constructed in miniature from Lego blocks by one of the eleven Lego-certified architects worldwide. Included were mammoth skyscrapers like the John Hancock building in Chicago and the Empire State Building in New York, but also some smaller structures like the Frank Lloyd Wright 'Fallingwater' house in rural Pennsylvania.

Lego models of the Hancock and Empire State Buildings



'Fallingwater' in Lego

It was all very pleasant and more than a bit impressive, but it was a relatively small display and it only took about 15 minutes for us to see it all. The adjoining room was a play area for kids to make their own Lego structures to be placed on a large-scale city grid. There was a lot of activity going on in there from what we could see, but it seemed more like chaos theory in action than anything even remotely organized.

Much better was an exhibition at the Smithsonian's Natural History Museum that was titled "The Hyperbolic Crochet Coral Reef". This was a textile project created by the whimsically-named 'The Institute for Figuring', which is (according to its website) "an organization dedicated to the poetic and aesthetic dimensions of science, mathematics and the technical arts".

The Institute apparently specializes in creating physical models of geometric 'hyperbolic space', in this case using the craft of crochet. Many marine organisms, including corals, apparently have anatomies that can be described by hyperbolic geometry (which maximizes surface area in a limited volume) and one of the stated goals of the Institute is "teaching others around the world how to crochet hyperbolically". It obviously worked, as craftspeople from many countries contributed. The result was a small-scale simulation of a coral reef, populated with sea creatures of all kinds and with amazing amounts of detail considering the materials of construction.

Nicki and some of the 'reef'

Epilog: It's a Hard Knock World

my world-famous *moai* imitation

There was way more to see in Washington that was possible the one afternoon Nicki and I were there in December. The Natural History Museum has one of only about a dozen *moai* stone statues that have been removed from Easter Island, and if it had not been conveniently located just inside the museum's entrance we would have missed it. We hadn't been in the Smithsonian's American History Museum since it reopened a couple years ago after a major renovation. There's a new pavilion for the Star-Spangled Banner, the flag that flew over Fort McHenry, and the middle of the building has been opened up to remove the cramped feel of the museum.

If there were more time we would have explored the museum to see what's on display. But it was beginning to get dark, we were starting to tire after miles of walking, and there was one other thing we wanted to see before daylight completely ran out.

National Christmas Tree and Washington Monument in late December

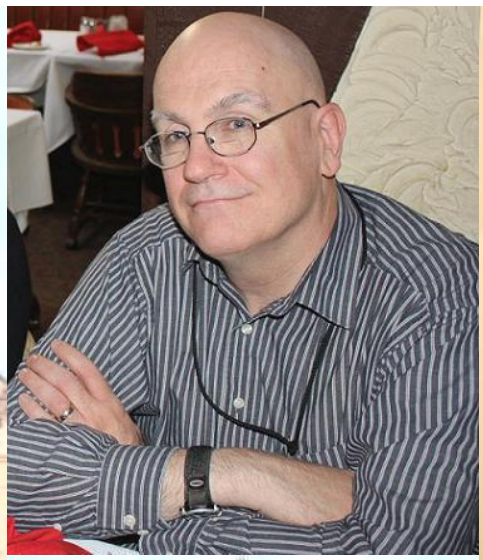
It was the National Christmas Tree, a live 50-foot blue spruce that dates back to the Jimmy Carter era. It's quite a sight at twilight with the White House or Washington Monument as a backdrop. Late December is the heart of the holiday tourist season in Washington, and there were hundreds of people surrounding the tree, so many that we had to just about muscle our way in to take a few photos.

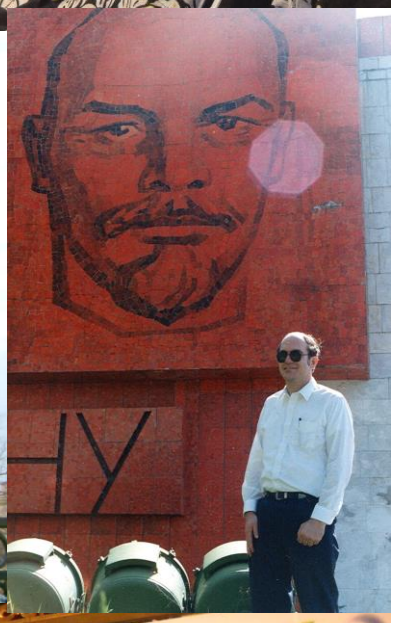
The one other excursion Nicki and I took during the holiday season, perhaps the most entertaining of all, also featured a Christmas tree. It was to see the musical *Annie* at the nearby Olney Theater in early December. We expected the performance to be a good one and we weren't disappointed – the Olney Theater operates through Actors' Equity and the result was a very polished staging. I had never seen it before, and it was fun and uplifting with several good songs. After the show the actors sat in the lobby and signed playbills for the all the kids who were in the audience.

from the Olney Theater production of *Annie*

The tradition there seems to be staging a famous Broadway musical at the end of the year. Last December it was *Camelot*, and next year will be *The Sound of Music*. It's getting harder and harder to get good seats at the Olney Theater, so it actually might not be too early, even now, to reserve tickets.

After all, it's a hard knock world out there! ☼



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