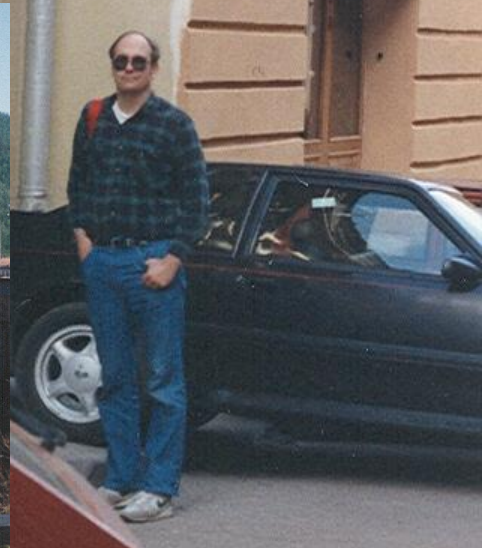




My Back Pages #11

Rich Lynch



My Back Pages #11

articles and essays by Rich Lynch

I don't consider myself a road warrior, but over the years I've journeyed to many different places including 39 of the 50 states and 35 different countries (including two that no longer exist). So a few months ago, just for the fun of it, I came up with a list of states and countries I've been to, in terms of total duration: 10 years or more (New York, Tennessee, Maryland); 5-10 years (District of Columbia); 1-5 years (null set); 6 months-1 year (Kentucky); 1-6 months (lots of places, including several countries); etc. If I wanted to define being on an airliner as a place, it probably would fall into the 1-6 month category.

So this would seem to be a good time for another travel-themed issue, and I've included essays involving oversized pecans, English philosophers, larger-than-life sports trophies, glass pyramids, pain medications, large and small watercraft, total immersion tours, successful marketing strategies, property taxes, strange legacies, failed revolutions, architectural makeovers, famous sculptures, iconic poses, great musicians, entertaining theatre productions, porcelain automatons, film crews, literary researchers...and some unseasonably warm winter weather.

So let's begin. First is an essay I wrote back in September of this year, about one of the more ambitious journeys I've ever undertaken. And it's still in progress!

Rich Lynch

Gaithersburg, Maryland

December 2013

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A Short Update on a Long Walk

A couple years ago I decided to take a walk.

Not just *any* kind of walk, mind you. This one was different. Ambitious. Maybe even quixotic. And by the end of 2015, I'm expecting it will have brought me from my home in Maryland completely across North America. Kind of.

It wasn't exactly a New Year's Resolution, but back at the beginning of 2011 I had decided that I needed to be less deskbound. My workplace is the old Atomic Energy Commission building, built back in the 1950s at the start of the Cold War. There are several long intersecting corridors and it was fairly easy to measure off a one-mile walking loop. So with some determination I began to accumulate miles. One before the beginning of the work day, one at the end, and often a couple during the middle of the day, usually during lunch break. There were some immediate benefits. The moderate exercise has increased my metabolic rate, so it's been easier to manage calories and weight. And I quickly found out that walking was a great way to stimulate my mind – must be the endorphins.

But to keep this from being just a short-term fad, I decided to set a distance goal. With the help of Google's mapping program, it's possible to plot a virtual walking course and that's what I did – all the way to San Francisco. The route goes from my home in the Washington, D.C. suburbs down to New Orleans, then westward through Texas and the Great Desert Southwest to Los Angeles, and then up the coast to the City by the Bay. The total distance is 3500 miles. If I can make it that far.

The walking route, as determined by Google, passes through lots of cities and towns, and it's been fascinating and even enlightening to see what I can find out about some of these places. Back at the end of February 2012, for instance, my virtual Walk Across America brought me to Fayette, Alabama, the home of the late folk artist/musician Jimmy Lee Sudduth, whose paintings are part of many notable



Chef Paul says "hi"

collections including the High Museum in Atlanta, the Birmingham Museum of Art, the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, and the Museum of American Folk Art in New York City. And at the beginning of November 2012, my locus was in Opelousas, Louisiana, the heartland of Zydeco music and birthplace of superstar chef Paul Prudhomme.



Jimmy Lee Sudduth

I've never physically been to those two places, but there were many other communities along the way that *were* familiar. One of them was the city of Chattanooga, Tennessee, where I lived back in the 1970s and 80s. The walking route took me within a couple miles of the house, and Google's "Street View" shows that it looks more or less the same as it did a quarter century ago.



4207 Davis Lane in Chattanooga

Another place my walk has taken me is the central Texas city of Seguin, about 30 miles east of San Antonio. When I did an Internet search to see what was there, I found that it's known as the "Pecan Capital of Texas", and even has a five-foot long concrete nut on a pedestal next to the county courthouse. A place like that *demands* that you go out of your way to visit it in person.

I eventually found other ways, besides all the virtual geographical mileposts, for maintaining my enthusiasm to slog out mile after mile through the corridors of the building. For a one hundred mile stretch through rural Alabama, where there weren't many communities of any significant size, I instead created milestones out of Boeing Corporation aircraft – first at mile 707, then at mile 727, then 737... all the way to the 787 Dreamliner. By the time I ran out of airplanes I was most of the way to Mississippi. But it wasn't until the middle of 2013 when my walk was, as the song goes, deep in the heart of Texas that it became a walk through history.



in Seguin with the giant pecan

By then my total miles walked had increased to 1588 which, as I'm sure we all know, was the year that the Spanish Armada suffered a crushing defeat off the southern coast of England. So just for the fun of it, I checked to see what else happened in 1588 and I found it was the birth year of the English philosopher Thomas Hobbes, who would later establish the foundation for Western political philosophy in his book *Leviathan*. Interesting stuff.

So after that, every mile walked has also been a visit to a corresponding year in history. While I was virtually passing through rural Kerr County on miles 1775 and 1776, I was also reliving, so to speak, the events leading up to the American Revolution. During mile 1808, while in even more rural Kimball County, I was imagining what it must have been like to be at Beethoven's last public performance as a pianist. And during mile 1836, near the city of Junction, I was contemplating the final days of the heroes of The Alamo. When my walk through history reached the mid 1860s, I had the mind-expanding realization that there were prominent people who died in those years who had been born when George Washington was President, and other notable people *born* then who had passed away during *my* lifetime.

So it's one mile at a time, around and around. I'm now looking forward to each successive mile/year, and I've still got about 120 more miles before I run out of recorded history. And after that? Well, it's going to be difficult to find anything that will be as interesting as this virtual walk through the ages.

But I'm sure I'll think of something. ☀

Afterword:

The endpoint of this virtual Walk Across America is going to be at Cafe Zoetrope in San Francisco. I plan on traveling out there and sharing a bottle of wine with my virtual self when I 'arrive'. But there is still a bit more than two years left to go and I'll be ending 2013 in the oil fields of west Texas near the city of Pecos.

Back in 2011, not long after the beginning of the walk, I took a *physical* journey across North America (most of it, anyway) to a much more northerly place.

North to Alberta

Prolog: Larger than Life

It's not every day that you get to see the Stanley Cup, especially a jumbo-sized version.

It's located in the Strathcona section of Edmonton and it's quite a sight, especially when you happen across it unexpectedly. I discovered it during my visit to Alberta in May for an international meeting on carbon sequestration. There was just a single free day available for sightseeing, and the hotel concierge had recommended Strathcona to me and several others who were there for the meeting as an interesting place to have lunch, walk around, and do a bit of shopping. He was right and we did all of that, but the thing I remember most about that afternoon was seeing the Cup.

I've seen the actual Stanley Cup before. It's at the Hockey Hall of Fame in Toronto and stands just about three feet tall. But this larger-than-life reproduction is four times bigger than that and it's much more accessible to the public. Instead of being sequestered in the bowels of a museum, it's right out there at the street – between an auto dealership and an antiques mall.



a much larger-than-life reproduction of the Stanley Cup



statue of Princess Louise Caroline Alberta with tour guide Conner

The Land of the Princess

Edmonton, with a metropolitan population of just over a million, is the northernmost large city in the Western Hemisphere. It's also the capitol of Alberta. When we visited the Capitol Building, our tour guide Conner provided us quite a lot of history about the Province. It's named after Princess Louise Caroline Alberta, the fourth daughter of Queen Victoria. She was the wife of the Governor General of Canada, back in the 1880s, and is also the namesake for several places in the province including the mountain resort Lake Louise.

The Capitol Building itself is quite a marvel. Just inside the front entrance is a Great Room that looks upward to a very spectacular rotunda. There are many historical exhibits throughout the building, and my favorite was the display about the Ceremonial Mace. The original was built on short notice by a local plumber from a piece of gold-painted pipe and bits of scrap material; it was used for 50 years as a symbol of the Legislative Assembly's authority to make laws before it was finally replaced by a newer and much, much more expensive version. I'm hoping that's not going to be *my* fate someday.

“Do They Roll Up the Streets in Edmonton?”

The Provincial Capitol Building isn't the only notable piece of architecture in the city. Most of the downtown is dominated by non-descript high-rise buildings that serve as headquarters for energy companies that are making trainloads of money in Alberta, but I did find one structure that was amusingly out of the ordinary. It's home to the Art Gallery of Alberta, which unfortunately was not open the few times I passed by. There's a large plaza that adjoins the museum, but it never seemed that very many people were hanging out there in the early evening. This led one of my compatriots to remark, “Do they roll up the streets in Edmonton?”



the Art Gallery of Alberta



North Saskatchewan River Valley

We had better luck in a different part of the city. Edmonton is bisected by the North Saskatchewan River Valley, which has created one of the largest urban parklands in North America. I had a good view of it from my hotel window, and I was puzzled by the presence of several glass pyramids. Turns out these are the

Muttart Conservatory, a botanical garden consisting of different climate zone biomes, each contained within one of the glass pyramids. It didn't take very long to go through them all, even given that we had to wait to get into one of them because it had been rented out for a wedding.

It was a pleasant enough place to visit, but we weren't exactly overwhelmed. We were just about the only ones there who weren't involved in the wedding. But on the other hand, the weather was warm and pleasant the afternoon we were there. The lady at the admissions desk told us that when the cold weather is raging (which happens there much of the year), city residents who are sick of winter flock to the conservatory to get a head start on spring.

There was one other piece of information she could have told us, but didn't. Our late afternoon visit to the conservatory wasn't all that cheap – we each paid more than \$10 for entrance. But if we'd waited another half hour, we could have gotten in for free. After five o'clock there's no charge.



inside the Muttart Conservatory

Epilog: It's Nice to Be Wanted

I found out that the hotel where I stayed while I was in Edmonton, the Fairmont Macdonald, was originally build about a century ago as one of a series of chateau-style hotel way stations along Canada's transcontinental railways. Just outside the elevator entrance on the floor where I stayed is a small statue of Donald A. Smith, a Scottish-born fur trader who, as Lord Strathcona, became a director of the Canadian Pacific Railway. He drove the ceremonial last spike in Canada's first transcontinental railway in the mid 1880s.



Donald A. Smith drives
the Last Spike

Canada is a really big country! It takes only a bit more than an hour to fly from Washington to Chicago; the connecting flight from Chicago to Edmonton is fully three-and-a-half hours, and Edmonton isn't even as far west as the Continental Divide. It would truly have been a huge adventure to take a train ride across Canada back then. It probably still is.

I will most likely never be back to Edmonton. It's just too remote, too far off the beaten path from where I live and work. In the past two decades my job has taken me to some amazing places of the world, places I never would have gotten to otherwise. I'm not sure how much longer this will continue; I'm already eligible for retirement, and in a few years the numbers will have improved to the point where it will become a good deal. But when I off-handedly mentioned this to one of technical experts who had come to the meeting, he responded with just one word: "Don't." He went on to tell me that I was good at what I do – the organizing, the planning, and especially the follow-up – and that I should keep doing it. I was still very much needed.

It was nice to be wanted, that's for sure. And I've been involved with these meetings long enough that the international experts who attend have become friends. I would certainly miss them. But meanwhile, there's a big meeting coming up in China later this year. No time for retirement just yet. There's too much to do. ☀

Afterword:

Two years hence, retirement is starting to loom on the horizon. But I'm still not quite ready. I keep telling myself, just another two or three years, and maybe this time I'm serious about it. In about another two years my Walk Across America gets me to the endpoint, and there is some synchronicity in the idea of an endpoint to a professional career when that happens.

But for now, there are still things to do and places to go. One of these, in October 2012, took me to a place as far from home as is geographically possible.



the Fairmont Macdonald Hotel

To the Southern City of Light

Prolog: Fifty Shades of Pain

“I’m not sure I can do this,” I had texted to my compatriot John.

It was two days before I was to leave on a business trip. It was also the third straight day of a throbbing headache that had been ever worsening, and now I felt like my left eye was being scooped out. Or that a knife was being stabbed into my left temple. And sometimes both. The pain, in all its nuances, had become close to debilitating. I had spent much of the day in doctors’ offices, and it wasn’t until late afternoon that an ophthalmologist told me what was going on.

“It’s Zoster,” she said.

“Say what?” I responded.

“Zoster,” she repeated. “Shingles.”

I knew what *that* meant. Weeks of continuous pain. Shingles, as television commercials have frequently informed us, is related to chicken pox, and all of us who had chicken pox in our youth have a strong possibility of suffering from shingles much later in life. Most often it causes a painful rash on the torso, but not always. For me, it had begun as a small sore patch of skin high on the bridge of my nose. A day or so later the headaches had started. Besides a skin rash, the Zoster virus causes *postherpetic neuralgia*, which is a long-lasting nerve pain that can be severe and in extreme cases persist for months or even years.

And yet, I felt grateful for the news. There had been other things, some of them ugly, that had gotten ruled out as the day had progressed. Zoster was something I could cope with. Maybe.

I was immediately put on antivirals, and for the next two weeks I was popping ibuprofen like they were breath mints. One every two hours, like clockwork, to keep the ever-present pain down to where it was mostly just an annoyance.

So, in the end, I decided that I *could* do it – make the trip. If I hadn’t it would have caused a big problem, as we were already short-staffed. But even back when I was in best of health, I had expected this trip might to be an ordeal because the destination was as far from home as I will ever be – Perth, Australia.

The City at the End of the Universe

From my perspective, traveling to Perth certainly met the definition of an ordeal. It took a five hour flight across North America followed by a 14 hour flight across the Pacific, and then another 4½ hour flight across Australia. Entirely in coach class, with no stopovers along the way. It was as if I had taken a trip to the end of the universe. Which is mostly true. There is no other major city anywhere in the world that is farther from where I live.



Perth skyline from the Swan River

I had come to this isolated metropolis for a three-day conference on carbon sequestration. The Australia Government was hosting the meeting, and had selected Perth as the venue because that's where it was also holding a week of events to showcase some of its activities and projects related to carbon dioxide capture and storage. Not far from Perth is one of the largest of these projects, which will capture carbon dioxide from several different industrial sources for deep underground storage in a single secure location. Earlier in the year, Australia had enacted a carbon tax that will cause its industries and energy-producing utilities to become more efficient and take a harder look at new technologies such as carbon capture and storage as a means to reduce their emissions costs.

I was there as part of the organization that planned and did much of the groundwork in the several months leading up to the event. Crunch time is usually about a month before the meeting, because that's when the deadline is for finalizing all of the documents for the meeting. But once the meeting actually starts, it usually feels like an anticlimax to me. At that point my role is similar to that of a TV show producer or director, making sure the audiovisuals and other needs of the meeting function as intended, and handling the unexpected. For this meeting I had some minions! The A/V guys contracted by the Australian hosts very competently took care of all the room computers, and all I needed to do was point to what I wanted on screen. I wonder if Marty Scorsese started out this way.



me and my minion at the carbon sequestration meeting

Big Ships and Little Creatures

The entirety of this trip, including travel, was just eight days, and I feel fortunate that I was able to have a day to myself for some sightseeing. So John and I, with two others from the meeting, went to Fremantle. Perth is not really a seaport – it's located upriver, where the Swan River narrows and there are highlands where the British city founders, back in the 1820s, had once planned fortifications for repelling attempts by the French to take over the settlement. The Swan River is only navigable by smaller watercraft where Perth is, so Fremantle, located where the Swan River meets the Indian Ocean, is where the big ships take on and offload cargo.



outer Fremantle harbour and the Indian Ocean

Besides commercial ships, there are also plenty of small sailboats. For sailing enthusiasts, Fremantle will forever have fame as the host site of the 1987 America's Cup regatta, and the Australia II yacht, which brought the Cup down to Fremantle, is on display in the Maritime Museum. Not far from there is the oldest building in all of western Australia. It's the Round House, originally constructed in 1830 as a small prison. *Very* small, actually, as there were only eight cells, all of which open out onto a circular central courtyard.



the Round House

Today the place is an Australian heritage site, welcoming of visitors who have *not* run afoul of the law. There is a 'total immersion' docent tour, as I found out, complete with demonstrations of some of the ways of disciplining prisoners back then.

The docent was a retiree who knew quite a lot about the history of Fremantle, and it was all too easy to linger there, just enjoying the day while listening to his descriptions. But there were other things to do, including lunch. He invited us to watch him perform the traditional one o'clock



I've got to stop doing these total immersion tours!

time check – firing off a small cannon – but by then we were at Little Creatures.

The brewpub Little Creatures seemed to be the most popular place for lunch in Fremantle. It's located on the waterfront near one of the marinas, and to get to the dining area you have to walk past the place where the beer and ale is brewed. It was here that I ate the only truly Australian food of the trip –



kangaroo, yum!

kangaroo. It was served in skewers and was quite tasty, similar in consistency to steak and with only a slight gaminess. One of the others ordered pickled octopus and after I sampled it, I found that it exceeded my expectations. But on the other hand, I guess there's really no way it couldn't have!



interior of Little Creatures brewpub

Enjoying the ‘Free’ in Fremantle

Unlike Perth, there is a lot of ‘free’ in Fremantle. You don’t need to spend a lot of money there to have a pleasant day. I collect interesting buildings – in drawings, watercolors, and photographs – and Fremantle is a treasure trove of them. Many of the buildings in town, such as the town hall, are more than a century old and have been well taken care of.



chess in the plaza

Fremantle also impressed me as being very laid back, a place where people spend time slowly. There are many green areas and plazas where

lunches get eaten and games of strategy are played. I will probably never be back, but it’s a place I would like to see again.



Fremantle Town Hall

Epilog: In Search of the Southern Cross

Back in 1962, Perth became known to the world as ‘The Southern City of Light’. It happened as John Glenn, in his Project Mercury ‘Friendship 7’ spacecraft, passed directly over Perth. It was during the night, and the city messaged its greeting to him by leaving all its lights ablaze for him to see. City residents even stood in their backyards and waved flashlights toward the sky at the time of Glenn’s overflight, and he radioed back to Mission Control his thanks for the welcome.

Fifty years later, Perth is still a city of light. So much so that I was unable to locate any of the constellations of the southern sky. On my final night in town I found what I thought was a relatively dark area to look for the Southern Cross, but it was hopeless. There was still more than enough light to wash out even the brightest stars. In a few years from now, my professional career will be done and I’ll be able to make trips on my own terms. If so, Australia will be near the top of the list of places to go. And I’ll make sure to bring a star map. ☀

Afterword:

The trip home was only slightly less of an ordeal, with about 24 hours of flight time and only slightly less pain than during the outbound trip. But you know, I don’t classify it as a horrible experience. I didn’t get stranded anywhere, no luggage was lost or damaged, and there were no screaming children. And I arrived home safely, without incident, before the Superstorm Sandy blew through. I’ll take that every time.

And now for an essay about something that happened much closer to home. This one describes a couple of mid-day forums down in D.C. that I attended, back in 2003 in the middle of the George W. Bush era.

Georgia on My Mind, and Other Taxing Thoughts

There's a very successful real estate agent who works the area where I live, and the reason she's so successful is because she's not only very good, she's also very visible. And the reason she's so visible is in large part because she's married to a very successful marketer of a different sort. Her job is to market real estate. His job is to market her.

From my previous descriptions of other luncheon forum events, you've probably guessed that most of them really don't seem to have all that much relation with what I do at work. And you'd be right. It's not easy, for instance, to conjure up a connection between international energy-related issues and, say, national space policy. I'm clever enough where I could probably do that if I had to, but it's not really necessary. All the justification I need for all those free lunches is that I'm marketing myself, or rather, myself as the developer of an Internet-based information resource.

I don't do it in any obnoxious way. In fact, it's rather subtle. All I have to do is trade business cards with anybody who's amused/intrigued/appalled by some of the politely snarky questions I've asked at some of these events as I've innocently tried to yank a few people's chains. On the back of my card is the website address and a short blurb that describes the site: "Business- and energy-related information about regions and countries of the world for researchers, exporters, and project developers." This type of approach, with the resulting word-of-mouth trickle-down, is probably the second-most usual way people discover my website (after the ever-popular Google fishing expedition).

Before you get the impression that the only events I go to are ones where I can chow down, though, I'll quickly add that there *are* many other meetings I attend (including the dreaded telephone conference calls) that are of much more direct interest. You don't read about them from me because they're also, for the most part, boring (sometimes mind-numbingly so). But there *are* exceptions...

One of them was at the Commerce Department recently, where several businessmen from Georgia (the country, not the state) were here to help give people a warm-and-fuzzy feeling about business and investment prospects over there. One of the things that made it interesting was its no-bullshit nature – the delegation had nobody from any government agency, just three guys who, with luck and determination, had been able to find some success in a small country that's in need of much more. Their outright candor was refreshing, and the three of them held nothing back – Georgia is still a strange and at times scary place to do business, with part of the country under control of Chechen insurgents and a national government that Still Doesn't Get It in terms of removing bureaucratic hurdles for potential investors. The most intriguing story was by the bank president – back in 1992, not long after Georgia regained its independence from the former Soviet Union, he, two friends and \$500 started the country's first independent bank. Ten years later it had assets of about \$120 million and had become the largest bank in the country. The meeting changed a lot of preconceptions I'd had about the country – I guess you could say that I now have "Georgia on My Mind".



I didn't ask a question (snarky or otherwise) at that meeting because nothing I heard there was particularly self-important or self-serving. But that certainly wasn't the case the very next day at the conservative libertarian Cato Institute's luncheon meeting, where the topic was "Tax Limitation 25 Years after California's Proposition 13". For those who might not be familiar with the so-called "taxpayers movement", California's 'Proposition 13' was a direct ballot initiative, overwhelmingly passed back in 1978, that rolled back property taxes in California and places a strict limit on any annual increase. The immediate effect was to wipe out a budget surplus and force the state into decisions, some of them a bit draconian, on what types of things it was willing and able to fund. The tax limitation proponents have claimed that there have been no dire consequences of Prop. 13, as had been predicted, because a lot of fat in the budget actually needed to be cut and lower taxes allowed the local economy to flourish. While this is perhaps debatable, the one thing about Prop. 13 that cannot really be challenged is that it resulted in many people being able to afford to buy homes (not only due to the lessening of taxes, but also because the property tax burden was now much more predictable) where before they couldn't.



Representative Doug Ose

But enough background. The Cato event consisted of a panel made up of four right-wing conservatives, including a U.S. Congressman (Rep. Doug Ose from California). The tone of the event was pretty one-sided – the tax limitation movement (which has since been active in other states besides California) had done tremendous good for the country, there was lots of new jobs created, blah blah blah, and all the credit belonged to blue-blooded conservatives and not those scurrilous tax-and-spend Democrats (one of the panelists even made a bad joke that took a gratuitous cheap shot at the Democrats). Congressman Ose went so far as to say that what

worked at the state level ought to also work at the Federal level, and that Constitutional amendments that would limit federal spending and the ability to raise taxes, and require a balanced Federal budget ought to be on the table. This, to me, presented an obvious opening for a question. But before I could, something unexpected happened: Ose left in the middle of the event to go back to Capitol Hill.

It turned out to be fairly easy to get called on during the Q&A session that followed, so I decided to ask my question anyway:

"Representative Ose proposes that spending constraints at the Federal level are needed, but from where I sit I've noticed no real difference in spending trends between Democrat and Republican controlled Congresses. No matter who is in control, there are always directed expenditures, many of questionable worth or which benefit only small constituencies, that are inserted into spending bills by various members of Congress. From this, it would be easy for any outsiders to conclude that the desire for getting re-elected seems to be more important than doing the right things for the good of the country. So what would make anybody possibly think

that Congress could conceivably achieve the supermajority vote needed to agree to a constitutional amendment that would place limits on Federal spending?”

I would have loved to hear a response from Ose but by then he was long gone. So I directed the question to his empty *chair* (for the lack of a better idea) and requested that the panelists decide among themselves who wanted to ‘channel’ the Congressman. It was the moderator (the Chairman of the Cato Institute) who answered, and his answer was actually surprising – he allowed that the best way, for now, to prevent Congress from running amok each year during the annual budget battle was for a divided government to exist (i.e., no single political party in control of both houses of Congress and the Presidency), and specifically pointed to the Clinton presidency as an example of how such checks and balances could effectively work.

Wow! A right-wing forum that *praised* Bill Clinton! And here I’d thought I’d seen about everything! (On the way back to my office I had to check the newspaper headlines to see if there had been any sightings of demons on ice skates.) Unfortunately, there were very few people besides myself who witnessed it all – no C-Span cameras this time, and I don’t even think they were recording it for a webcast. The potential audience, I’m sure, would have been thousands.

I’m beginning to think they could use some better marketing there! ☀

Afterword:

Stuff happens. Just one month after these events, the group where I was working at my Agency was reorganized out of existence and I was reassigned into the area where I now work. I wasn’t in favor of this at first, but I’ve long since come to realize that it was the best thing that could have happened to me. The change got me involved in some hugely interesting work for a multilateral international organization whose meetings have taken me to many different parts of the world – including Edmonton and Perth.

As for my website, it lasted about another year before management took it offline when they decided they wanted to go in a different direction on international outreach. While I was disappointed by the decision, it *did* eliminate a large amount of work to keep the site updated and allowed me to focus on the new responsibilities. Which I really needed to do.

But websites, like cats, have more than one life. Before mine went offline it apparently was archived by several web crawlers, and the information, obsolete as it now is, can still easily be found by a search engine. To this day I’m averaging one or two email inquiries per month on content I had developed a decade ago. And there’s more...

When I was reassigned, back in 2003, my office location moved from downtown Washington out to Germantown, Maryland (near where I live), which got me a new work telephone number. My old number (which had been shown on the website) was also eventually reassigned, and earlier this year I got a call from its new owner, complaining that people were constantly calling her about a defunct website I had created, and would I *please* do something about it. I couldn’t, of course, and the only solution was that my old telephone number has now been permanently retired. A strange legacy, perhaps, but one that I’m actually proud of.

The relocation of my office prevented me from attending very many luncheon seminars down in D.C., but I was still able to get to some evening events, many of them hosted by Embassies. One of the more fascinating ones, in September 2006, happened at the 50 year anniversary of a failed revolution.

The Failed Illusions of Fifty Years Past

Fifty years ago there were Soviet tanks rumbling through the streets of Budapest.

A few nights ago, on September 20th, my wife Nicki and I attended an event at the Embassy of Hungary that commemorated the failed Hungarian Revolution of 1956. The main speaker was Prof. Charles Gati from Johns Hopkins University (and a Hungarian émigré), who had written a history of sorts titled *Failed Illusions* that looked at the failed uprising from the perspectives of Hungary, the United States, and the Soviet Union. His assertion in the book is that the revolution failed for a number of reasons, including a belief by the Eisenhower administration that the Soviets would decide to withdraw from Hungary the same manner they had pulled out of Austria a decade earlier, and the overreaction by the Soviet leaders on what had started out to be a peaceful request for reforms that would not have changed Hungary from a socialist state.

Prof. Gati stated that the biggest “failed illusion”, though, was the belief by the leadership of Hungary’s insurgency that the revolution had to result in a totally free nation. This, according to Prof. Gati, was pie in the sky; a much more realistic and very achievable outcome would have been the creation of a Tito-like state similar to what Yugoslavia had become – total freedom could possibly have been achieved at a later date.

Not many people in the audience believed this, as Prof. Gati found out when it came time for questions. Most of the people called on for questions had their own memories of 1956 to share, and practically all of them stated (in one way or another) that the fervor of the people taking part in the uprising made it impossible to “stop halfway”. In fact, it turned out that there were very many people present who had lived through the revolution (including Prof. Gati), and it was fascinating to listen to their first-person accounts. And there were politicians there too, including Hungary’s Foreign Minister Kinga Gónz, the U.S. Secretary of Commerce Carlos M. Gutierrez, the Director of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency Gen. Michael Hayden, and the National Security Advisor during the Carter presidency Zbigniew Brzezinski. (If I’d thought to bring my camera, I could have photographed Nicki standing with Brzezinski afterwards.)

There was a very nice food event afterwards, including an excellent creamy Hungarian goulash served over spaetzle, Hungarian wine, and a chocolaty dumpling-like desert that I’m still trying to identify. All in all, a thought-provoking and at times even entertaining evening, even if I never did get to ask Hungary’s ambassador what it’s like to jam with Bruce Springsteen.

Oh well, next time for that. ☀

Afterword:

Hungary’s Ambassador, at that time, was András Simonyi. He had learned to play guitar back in the Iron Curtain days of the 1970s and gained a bit of fame about a decade ago when he participated in a jam session with Bruce Springsteen at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. He now works in Washington as managing director of the Center for Transatlantic Relations in the School of Advanced International Studies at the Johns Hopkins University, and still plays rock and roll in a local band that includes ex-Steely Dan guitarist Jeff “Skunk” Baxter.

Most of my travel is not been business related, of course, and one of the more memorable trips was to Philadelphia in September 2001 for the 59th World Science Fiction Convention. But it was overshadowed by a terrible event that occurred just a few days later.

Welcome to the Future

Well, it's *finally* the new millennium, but in many ways it sure seems a lot like the old one to us. The Washington traffic has been as bad as ever, most of the tourists this summer still seemed pretty clueless with no sense of direction, and we had the same crappy February weather, with all the mist and rain, as last year. The one thing we *didn't* have was all the hoopla and fireworks celebrations at the end of last year, like there was at the end of 1999. The beginning of the *actual* first year of the new millennium, like Rodney Dangerfield, "just don't get no respect".

One other thing that's unfortunately the same in this world-of-the-future is that it's no less dangerous a place to live than it was in the previous millennium. If anything, we've learned that it's even more so...

Rich:

September 11th was a bright, clear day in Washington. I was at my desk at work that morning, doing website development and listening to the local classical music station, when the hourly news had a report that an airplane had crashed into one of the World Trade Center buildings up in New York City.

I was able to get to the CNN web site before it was overwhelmed by the number of people trying to do the same thing; it had a photo showing *much* worse damage than I had expected to see; clearly this hadn't been just a terrible error by a pilot of a small plane. The radio station soon carried another breaking news story that the second World Trade Center tower had been hit by another airplane, and then from down the hall there were people saying the Pentagon, about two miles away from us, had been attacked. I went to the office across the hall (mine looks only onto an interior courtyard), and I could see huge billows of dark black smoke coming from across the Potomac.

We were told to evacuate the building and go home soon after that; there were reports of explosions up on Capitol Hill, at the State Department, and at the Old Executive Office Building. All hoaxes or runaway rumors, luckily. There was also a report that the subway was not running, again false – if it had shut down, I'm not sure how I would have gotten home. The next few days after that had a feeling of unreality about them, as if I had been stuck in the middle of a Tom Clancy novel, hoping to quickly reach the end and return to the real world. Some of the images from the attacks were terrible to see. I think the most disturbing ones were the shots of people jumping from the upper floors of one of the World Trade Center towers – there was a couple who held hands just before they jumped, and another of somebody who had transformed his death leap into almost an art form, head first with legs crossed as he fell. And there was a photograph of the upper floors of one of the towers, of people at the windows desperately looking out for the help that would never arrive; the photo was taken just before the tower came down.

Nicki and I were relieved to find out that nobody we knew was harmed on September 11th, either in New York or here in the Washington area. The same cannot be said for my sister, who used to work at the Pentagon, in the same part of the building where the attack occurred, in fact – she had been moved offsite when that section of the building had been scheduled for renovation. Sixteen people she knew, including two friends, didn't make it.

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Just a bit more than one week prior to that terrible day when the world changed, we had been in Philadelphia attending the 2001 Worldcon. This was the first time a Worldcon had been held in the City of Brotherly Love in nearly 50 years and it was only the third Philadelphia Worldcon ever, but because of the year it was held, the organizers did away with numbering and instead officially titled it ‘The Millennium Philcon’ (with no apologies to George Lucas).

MilPhil officially began on Thursday afternoon, August 30th, but for practical purposes it actually started the previous evening. It only takes about three hours to drive to Philadelphia from where we live in Maryland, and we made it to the hotel by late Wednesday afternoon, in time for the Boston and Charlotte bid parties that evening. There were some problems getting there. Even though Philadelphia isn’t that far from us, we don’t often go there, and we don’t know the city nearly as well as perhaps we should. So we relied on the driving instructions that were in MilPhil’s final progress report. *That* was a mistake. It turned out that Pennsylvania had recently renumbered the Interstate exits; when we left I-95 at the recommended place, none of the directions made sense after that. Luckily, the exit we’d taken was Broad Street, which leads directly to the city center, so it actually didn’t cause too much of a delay; when you make a wrong turn in Philadelphia, you usually end up across the river in New Jersey!

Our hotel, the Clarion Suites, was in the heart, literally, of Philadelphia’s Chinatown. We’d chosen it partly because of its (marginally) lower cost than the other hotels in convention’s room blockings, partly on the (mistaken) belief that the entrance to the convention center was just half a block away (only to discover that for most of the convention, the only way into the convention center was a door at the opposite end of the building, three blocks farther on), and partly because we’d very much enjoyed a stay at another hotel in that chain when we stopped in Cleveland last year on the way to the Chicago Worldcon. However, this hotel wasn’t nearly as nice as the one in Cleveland – it had the smallest elevators we’ve ever seen outside of Europe, each floor seemed to be designed pretty much as a narrow-corridor rabbit warren, and the view from the our room looked into somebody’s small kitchen window (where a big pot of soup was simmering for the entire weekend). One thing the hotel *did* have, though, was character – the building the hotel occupied had formerly been a mill that had produced bent-wood rocking chairs, and there were huge wooden structural beams in many of the rooms, including ours.

Despite our letdown about the hotel, staying in the middle of Chinatown was actually pretty fascinating. Unlike the rest of the city, it never seemed to shut down, even in the middle of the night or on Labor Day. There were almost always shops and markets open, and people out on the street. And there were many, many restaurants.

Chinatown proved to be a good place for food, and several of our dinner expeditions with friends went there. The most interesting restaurant was the Kosher Chinese Vegetarian one (complete with a letter of certification by a local Rabbi), where there were dishes with faux meats made from seasonings, tofu, and other vegetables of various kinds. Eve Ackerman, who was there with us, ordered one of the ersatz pork dishes; afterwards she had some fun telling people that she’d found a way to eat pork without violating Kosher.

Nicki:

We had some good meals in Philadelphia, but I didn’t manage to get a Philly cheesesteak at all. The closest I came was at the Reading Market, a huge indoor marketplace next door to the convention center that was subdivided into dozens of little produce and meat markets, and also many ethnic and specialty restaurants. The place that sold the cheesesteaks had a

very long line so we opted instead for a Greek place. (I love Greek food!) Given our hotel's location, we also had Chinese food during the convention, but not as often as you might think. One of the places we did go was an Asian Fusion place not far from the convention center, as word had gotten around that it was not only very good, but also a bit different. And they were right – where else could you get a lunch of a grilled salmon Peking duck taco? And in addition to that Kosher Chinese Vegetarian restaurant, we also went to what would have been a more typical Chinese place, except for the tank of live frogs in the entryway. It was kind of unnerving seeing them hop and climb all over themselves. If anyone had ordered frog legs, I would have been out of there!

We never tried to fill ourselves during the dinner expeditions because there were usually a dozen or more parties to go to in the evening. For more than a year, Boston and Charlotte had been staging an increasingly tense and unfriendly campaign for the rights to host the 2004 Worldcon (which Boston won, after all the votes were counted on Saturday night). They got started early, on Wednesday evening; the Charlotte crew had a suite up on the 21st floor of the Marriott and were doing their usual hot barbecue-for-the-masses, while the Boston people had all kinds of things to eat and drink, and were staging their event down on the 6th floor of the Marriott, where they had arranged five rooms in a row in an attempt to lower the population density. Besides those, the Japanese fans gave out samurai headbands and sake as they hosted two nights of parties to promote their 2007 Worldcon bid, the Los Angeles bid party for the 2006 Worldcon made us 'Space Cadets', and the Brits were once again pouring single malt Scotch for their Scotland-in-2005 bid. And there were more yet! Some of the parties were somewhat indescribable in theme – there was even one whose theme appeared to be 'worship of sugar' and had a table piled high with all kinds of sugary treats. If you were looking for anything other than pixie sticks, gummies, hard candy, and other sugary delights, you had to go somewhere else.

The parties were mostly in the Marriott Hotel, which attached itself to the Philadelphia Convention Center by an elevated walkway that ended in a large atrium just before merging into the Center. The atrium was an amazing place in its own right, complete with representations of constellations on the ceiling and a long, winding metal tubular lattice sculpture that possibly was intended to be a 'wormhole' to get to those far-off places. Perhaps the sculptor was a science fiction fan?

The Convention Center was where just about all the programming took place. The evening before the convention began, we had looked over the schedule and marked what we each wanted to see and what we each were committed to attend as participants. There was a lot of good-sounding discussion panels and we made most of them, even though it often meant dashing from the Convention Center to the Marriott and back again. There were also some interesting films and Anime scheduled, but they were either shown at a bad time (such as three o'clock in the morning) or else in conflict with some other programming event we wanted or needed to be at. The descriptions of the Anime were fun to read, though.

Nicki:

I was on five panels, one of which I had suggested (and as a result, was appointed moderator). The programming was very well done and both Rich and I found so many panels to attend that a couple days we only met up at dinner time. My first panel was titled "Camera Obscura: SF and Fantasy Films You Haven't Heard Of". This was the second time I've been on a panel of this title and I still don't really have much of an idea on what to say (I brought a few notes on a movie I'd seen recently, *Six String Samurai*, that seemed to

qualify). Still, the panel had people who did know movies and there was a lively discussion of the difference between ‘unknown’ and ‘obscure’; one of the other panelists even came prepared with a list of his favorite obscure films and why they were noteworthy.

I was on only one fanzine-related panel, “The Well Read Fan: What Current Fanzines Should All Well-Read Fans Be Reading?” Again, an organized fan – two of them, in fact – were on the panel; Brad Foster had a list of all the fanzines he had received, so could talk to the health of the activity, while Leah Smith had a list of the ‘good stuff’ and some opinion as to why she thought so. We also talked a bit about fanzine production, so next year I think I’ll ask for a panel on starting/sustaining a fanzine – a “Pub Your Ish” panel, perhaps. At a different fanzine panel, a person in the audience announced about having published her first zine right there at MilPhil, and was given on-the-spot advice on how to distribute it at the convention. It was a clear indication that people are still interested in publishing, whether online or on paper.

The panel that I moderated, “Xena: Warrior Princess Farewell”, was one of the last ones of the convention. I wasn’t really expecting a large crowd, but it turned out there were more than enough followers of the Warrior Princess to have a good panel. But, while I had hoped to have a panel that praised the show, it turned into a gripe session about what went wrong in the final episode and in the series in general. At least we did end on it on a positive note by having the crowd give the Xena battle yell!

Rich:

Last year, at Chicon 2000, I hadn’t been on any programming at all, but there really hadn’t been much that I would have been interested or able to contribute to, anyway. This year was different – I was able to find so many interesting panels that I was having trouble finding free time to do other things. I moderated two panels, one on the Heidelberg Worldcon of 1970 (I had some good panelists in Tony Lewis, Waldemar Kummig, and Robert Silverberg), and another on present and future means of energy production (with Jordin Kare, Vicki Warren, and Greg Benford). The latter had more than 200 attendees, which made it the most well-attended programming event I’ve ever directly participated in. Except, of course, for the Hugo Awards.

For the 11th year in a row, we had been nominated for a Hugo Award for *Mimosa*. And for the second year in a row, we finished second behind Mike Glyer and his excellent newszine, *File 770*. Dave Langford won two Hugos this year, one (as usual) for Fan Writer, and the other for his Short Story, “Different Kinds of Darkness”. Another winner was Jack Williamson, who at 90+ years old, is now the oldest person (while still alive) to ever win a Hugo Award.

Nicki:

We were allowed to bring two guests to the Hugo nominees reception prior to the Awards Ceremony and to the Nominees Party afterwards, so we asked Cathy Green and Sheri Bell, two of the newer members of our local SF club, WSFA, to be our guests. But we also had another person to be on the lookout for – our friend Sheryl Birkhead, who was a first-time nominee for the Fan Artist Hugo. Sheryl originally had not planned to come to MilPhil, but a few weeks before the convention decided she’d take the train to Philadelphia on Sunday and be at the convention for about a day to attend the Hugo Ceremony and see what she could of the rest of the convention.

Earlier, I had intervened on Sheryl's behalf for space in the Art Show for her; she had found out about two weeks before the convention that the Fan Artist Hugo nominees had been allotted free space in the Show, but she hadn't been previously informed because she wasn't on the Art Show list. (I guess the assumption is that any fan artist who is nominated will already be in the Art Show.) I was able to help clear things up, and we brought Sheryl's hastily collected artwork to Philly for display. Later, the Hugo Ceremony organizers didn't have a picture of Sheryl to show at the Hugo ceremony when the nominations were read, so they decided to show one of her cartoon illustrations instead. But the Art Show refused to let them photograph any since they didn't have Sheryl's permission. (Life is just so complicated!)

At any rate, Sheryl showed up at the Hugo Awards Ceremony with only moments to spare and vanished from the post-Hugo party almost as soon as she got there, not to be seen by us again.



Rose and Guy Lillian

Our friend and fellow fan publisher Guy Lillian had also been nominated for a Hugo award, for his fanzine *Challenger*. We think he's going to win one eventually, though Mike Glycer will need to end his hot streak first (and Mike will be tough to beat next year, out in San Jose). Meanwhile, let's repeat the mantra: "It really *is* an honor just to be nominated!" Believe it.

It was good to see Guy again, and especially nice to see his wife Rose. We had felt bad about missing their wedding, back in June, but we did manage to spend a bit of time with them, taking them to lunch one day at the Asian Fusion restaurant and taking a photo of them (for a wedding quilt Nicki will make for them) in front of one of Philadelphia's more famous sculptures. The subject of the sculpture seemed entirely appropriate.

There were quite a few memorable moments at MilPhil. Rich got to meet a fanzine editor from the early 1950s, Joel

Nydahl, who became famous back then not only for the spectacular two-volume 'annish' of his fanzine *Vega*, but also in the rather abrupt gaffiation he made soon afterwards, attributed to burnout (though he now claims there were other reasons, as well). We also got to meet a Russian fan, Dr. Yuri Mironets, who had been brought to the convention by a special fund administered by Philadelphia writer/fan Catherine Mintz. Yuri has been a recipient of *Mimosa* for several years but we never thought our paths would cross, as we're not likely to ever go to Vladivostok. And even though we didn't win a Hugo, we still shared in the thrill of the moment; fan artist Teddy Harvia (a.k.a David Thayer) did, and his 16-year-old daughter, Matilda, was present to see it – MilPhil was her first convention!



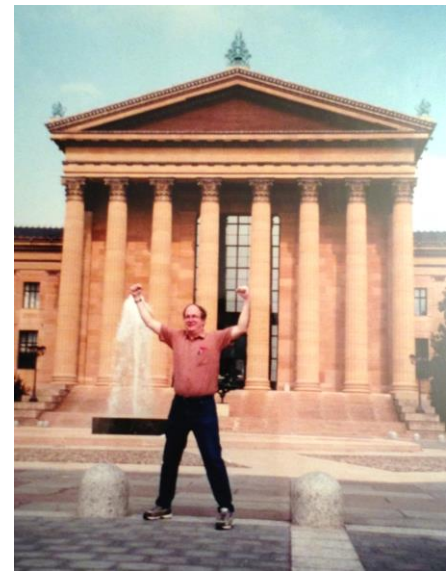
Teddy Harvia and his Hugo Award

Rich:

The most memorable moment of all for me came early Saturday evening. For the past three years, the Bucconeer people have been using leftover resources from the 1998 Worldcon to fund an annual student science fiction essay, story, and artwork contest. There have been dozens of entrants each year, and the awards presentation is held at the Worldcon. I sat through about half of this year's ceremony (I was one of the readers for the essays) and then I left to go talk to my friend Bruce Pelz, who was sitting near the entrance to the main concourse of the convention center. Not long afterward, there appeared a man and his wife and their little girl; they had driven from Maryland to Philadelphia so the young lady could accept her award and recognition as one of the finalists.

It seemed to me that neither the man nor his wife were SF fans; I don't think they had convention memberships and they were late because the woman had to work that day. They didn't know where in the convention center the ceremony was being held so I hurriedly brought them there, and it turned out that the ceremony was still going on and the young lady was able to go on stage, shake hands with author Hal Clement, and receive her certificate after all. Afterwards, before they left to go home, the man took a photo of his wife and their daughter beneath the 'World Science Fiction Society' banner in the convention center, and you could see how happy the young lady was. They spotted me, came over and thanked me, saying I had "gone the extra mile" to get them to the ceremony on time. It was just a little thing, but it made my weekend. Losing a Hugo wasn't such a big deal after that.

There are other memories of Philadelphia we've brought back with us. The city itself was well worth a day's sightseeing, and there are two pretty good bus tours available to do so (though one of them is disguised as a trolley). The historic part of the city has the Liberty Bell (in its own pavilion) and Independence Hall, of course, but there's more in Philadelphia than just that. The Rodin Museum has one of the few castings of 'The Thinker', right out there at the streetside entrance. The U.S. Mint is there, too, and we took a tour, with some other fan friends, on Tuesday morning just before we left to drive back home. And, up on a hill at the far end of a long, wide boulevard is the Philadelphia Museum of Art, made famous in the movie Rocky when Sylvester Stallone charged up the stone stairs in front of the museum and threw his arms in the air in triumph, a pose that many visitors to the museum have no doubt emulated. Philadelphia is a good city, and MilPhil was a good convention. ☀



emulating Rocky Balboa

Afterword:

It was nearly a decade before Nicki and I returned to downtown Philadelphia, to see a museum exhibition during the holiday season of 2010. And since this publication is being assembled during the 2013 holiday season, it seems appropriate to include a couple of holiday-themed essays. You can't make it to the end of the year without listening to at least *some* holiday music, so back during the 2002 holiday season I wrote a short essay describing one of my favorite holiday music CDs.

I Hear Those Sleigh Bells Jingling

It's deep into the Holiday Season as I write this, and I hope everybody will have a happy and safe end of year 2002. It's been mostly, but not entirely uneventful here, and for once I didn't completely mismanage my annual leave, so I've not had to scramble to take all my use-or-lose this year. Holiday lights have gone up around the neighborhood and the annual barrage of holiday music has also long ago started, even on one of the classical music stations. There's also been an early season snowfall. I guess it really *is* getting close to Christmas.

All the holiday music makes me think this might be a good time to say a few good words about a couple of CDs that contain some of it. The first is an excellent collection of acoustical guitar music by the late John Fahey, a Takoma Records collection of holiday music titled *The New Possibility*. It's actually a combination of two of Fahey's earlier Christmas albums, and what makes the music interesting is how it's performed. Fahey was the originator of the so-called "American Primitive Guitar" style – a rather eclectic mix of mostly down-home folk with a little bit of blues. Fahey, who was originally from the Washington, D.C. area, had been come onto the scene in the late 1950s; his first album, *Blind Joe Death*, is now a real collectors item (only 95 copies were pressed).



John Fahey (in the early 1960s)

Fahey became known as an eccentric, eventually ending up in Oregon where he reportedly was living in near poverty for a while, paying his rent by reselling rare classical records and pawning his guitars between live appearances and studio sessions for occasional new albums. He was long gone from this area by the time I got here and I never got to see him live. People I know who did say it was a roll of the dice which Fahey you would get any given night – everything from an erratic drunken spaced-out introvert to an outgoing humorist, but the excellence of

his playing was never variant. He died about two years ago from complications to heart surgery, but his influence on other musicians remains large – Leo Kottke, for one, owes quite a bit of his stylistic inspiration to Fahey. He's really worth discovering; he was a real talent. One other CD

by Fahey I can recommend is the two-CD Rhino Records collection *Return of the Repressed*, an anthology of selections from many of his albums. It's an outstanding two hours of music.

There's no John Fahey music on the classical station I listen to, of course, but there are quite often compositions by another eclectic American composer, the great Leroy Anderson. I'm guessing his name is vaguely familiar to most of us, but his compositions would be instantly familiar. He was famous for short semi-classical pieces (a collection of which is available from Naxos Records); the one you will hear most often this time of year is "Sleigh Ride", but there were many, many other of his compositions that were, and still are, equally popular – "The Typewriter", "The Syncopated Clock", "Bugler's Holiday", "The Waltzing Cat", "Sandpaper Ballet", "Jazz Pizzicato", etc.

Even though his compositions have sometimes been dismissed as 'classical music lite', he was actually a brilliant composer; he worked for the U.S. military for part of his life and composed in his spare time. Anderson graduated from Harvard with both a B.A. and a M.A. in music, and in the early 1930s became director of the Harvard University Band.

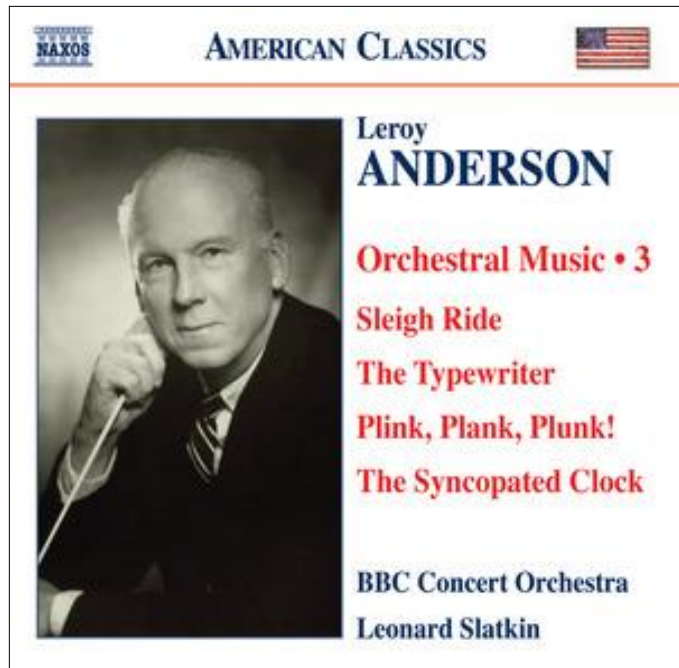
He was 'discovered' later in the 1930s by Arthur Fiedler, then only the musical director for the Boston Pops, who liked Anderson's clever arrangements and encouraged Anderson to compose music specifically for the Boston Pops orchestra. This alliance lasted to the very early 1950s, when one of Anderson's compositions, "Blue Tango", became a #1 *Billboard* hit and broadened his horizons after that.

Anderson actually did write longer, more 'conventional' classical pieces; his most ambitious composition was a piano concerto that he was never fully satisfied with, and intended to eventually revise. He also co-wrote a Broadway musical, *Goldilocks*, that was staged in the late 1950s. Anderson died in 1975, and was posthumously elected to the Songwriters Hall of Fame in 1988.

Composer and Boston Pops conductor John Williams said of Anderson that "though we have performed his works countless times over the years at the Boston Pops, his music remains forever as young and fresh as the very day on which it was composed". And you know what, he's right! ☀

Afterword:

There's room for one more essay, so here's an article about what Nicki and I did during last year's holiday season. It began by attending a musical theater production I'd been wanting to see for years and along the way included encounters with a political icon, a Polish king, a porcelain queen, a recumbent lion, a stately castle, and a fetching mob of mermaids.



The Holiday Season

Prolog: Do You Hear the People Sing?

Russell Crowe can *sing*!

Nicki and I had been looking forward to seeing *Les Misérables*, and we weren't disappointed. It's a great musical, with a very stirring story set over a 20-year period leading up to the anti-monarchist Paris Uprising of 1832. And there were many memorable songs that really *stay* with you afterwards. It was one of the finest two-and-a-half hours I've ever spent in a theater. But it wasn't a *movie* theater. On a very pleasant mid-December afternoon, we had decided to treat ourselves to a holiday season live performance of *Les Mis* at the National Theatre in downtown Washington.

Russell Crowe wasn't in that cast, of course. We saw the movie version, in which he was one of the stars, about a week later and we thought it was so good that in some ways it was even better than the stage production.

The five weeks from the beginning of December through the beginning of January have always been a good time to enjoy live theater, at least for Nicki and me. That time of year the regional Actors Equity theatre in nearby Olney, Maryland always has an entertaining family-oriented musical (this year it was Rodgers & Hammerstein's *Cinderella*). And there was also Paul Morella's splendid one-man adaptation of Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* as well as a community theater production, competently staged as a radio play, of *Miracle on 34th Street*. It left us wanting more, and we knew just where to find it...

At the End of the Day

New York's Theatre District lies in Midtown Manhattan, extending from 41st Street north to 53rd Street and from 6th Avenue over to 8th Avenue. In all, there are more than 35 different theaters, many of them designed to accommodate musical productions. The beginning of January is actually a good time to see Broadway musicals, as crowds are down and discount tickets are plentiful for almost all the shows.

It's partly for that reason that Nicki and I make an annual pilgrimage to New York for a mid-winter mini-vacation. We always go before the middle of January because many shows end their runs about then. If we'd postponed this year's vacation until February, all three of the shows we enjoyed would have wrapped by then.

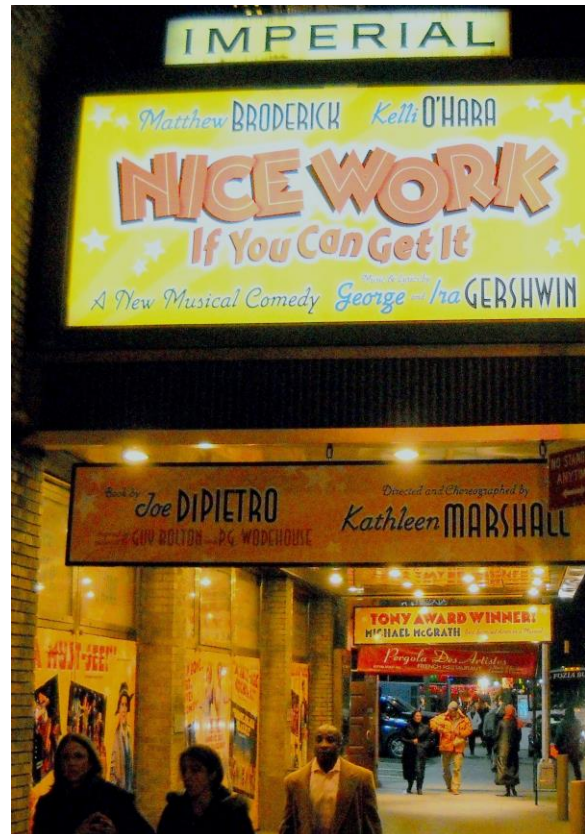
With so many shows to choose from, it's never easy to pick just three to see. The website **broadway.com** does a pretty good job of presenting information about all the plays and musicals currently in production, but at the end of the day it still took some careful deciding. One was an



outside the National Theatre on Dec. 20th

easy choice – Matthew Broderick and Kelli O’Hara were headlining *Nice Work If You Can Get It*, a relatively new musical comedy, set in the prohibition era, with many familiar songs by George and Ira Gershwin from the 1920s and 1930s. It turned out to be about what we expected – an evening of pleasant song and dance, featuring two of Broadway’s brightest stars.

Another relatively easy choice was to see was an evening performance of Andrew Lloyd Webber’s *Evita*, a musical based on the life and death of Argentine political icon Eva Perón. It has one of the great songs of musical theatre, “Don’t Cry for Me, Argentina”, and this production also featured some star power, the popular Puerto Rican singer Ricky Martin. Except that his role was sung by an understudy the evening we saw the play. We later heard that Martin had been victimized by the raging flu epidemic and missed several performances. But it turned out that there was more star power in the cast than we had realized. Afterwards, when we were perusing through the *Playbill* for the show, we saw that the role of Juan Perón was played by Michael Cerveris, who has found steady work in the science fiction television series *Fringe* as the Observer named ‘September’.



outside the Imperial Theatre on West 46th Street



Peter Pan. Even though neither broadway.com nor TKTS considers the show a musical, it certainly passed the ‘duck’ test as far as I was concerned. There were several good songs, especially the vaudeville-style revue, sung by “a fetching mob of mermaids” (according to *Entertainment Weekly*), that opened the second act.

But the thing is, in a slightly different universe Nicki and I probably wouldn’t have seen the show at all. A revival of *Annie* had opened at a Times Square theater several months earlier, and we most likely would have wanted to see that in preference to *Peter*. Except that we’d *already seen* a good performance of *Annie*, a couple years earlier, at the Olney Theatre back home in Maryland. The world is overflowing with karma, I’m tellin’ ya!

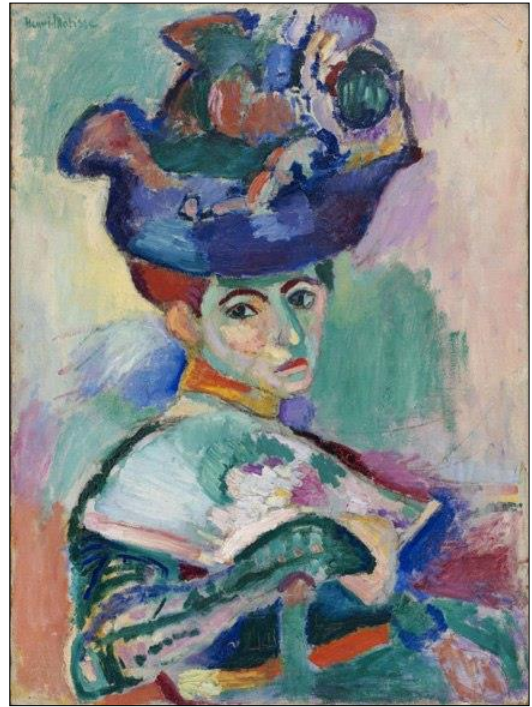
The most entertaining musical we took in was the one we saw on our final evening in New York, and when we bought the discounted tickets for it at the TKTS booth in Times Square it was not even listed as a musical. It was *Peter and the Starcatcher*, a loopy Pythonesque comedy based on the novel by Dave Barry and Ridley Pearson which provides the back story on how a young orphan became

Lovely Ladies

Nicki and I did a lot more than just take in evening Broadway shows during our time in New York. Unseasonably warm weather had blessed the city the week of our visit, which allowed us to stray farther from subway stations than in previous years. So we took advantage of the conditions and went to the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

The headliner there was an exhibition of works by the great French modernist Henri Matisse that chronicled his evolution as a painter, illustrating how he in effect used completed paintings as tools toward generating new ideas for future works of art. The exhibition did a good job of showing the process of creation through the canvases of a master painter, and showcasing some lovely ladies that he used as models.

There was a lot more at the Met than just the Matisse exhibition, of course, and we didn't come close to seeing it all. We did take some time to check out a fascinating exhibition of late 18th century



Henri Matisse's "Woman with a Hat"



music box automaton of Marie Antoinette

furniture created by the workshop of German cabinetmaker Abraham Roentgen. These were not only exquisite examples of cabinetry, they were also very sophisticated in design, incorporating mechanical components that allowed the piece to literally unfold to reveal hidden drawers, writing surfaces, and secret compartments. But the star of that show was the “Automaton of Queen Marie Antoinette”, a functional hammered dulcimer music box that is played by a porcelain likeness of the queen. Truly sublime.

One other thing the Met is noted for is its extensive collection of Egyptian art and artifacts. Nicki and I were only able to take in a small amount of it in the time we had at the museum, but what we saw was pretty spectacular, some of it dating back nearly 5,000 years. One of our favorites was the Recumbent Lion, dating back to about 2500 B.C., that had been discovered during a British archeological dig in 1891. It looked in superb condition, and I can only hope for the same when I get to be that age.



Nicki with the Recumbent Lion (ca. 2575-2450 B.C.)

Castle on a Cloud

The unseasonably warm weather also allowed us to see some of Central Park, as crossing through the Park was actually the most direct way back from the museum to the nearest subway station. Even in the dead of winter the Park is very active with joggers and sightseers, and there are many places for photo ops along the park's many trails. A popular one is the equestrian statue of Poland's King Jagiello, which was originally commissioned for the 1939 World's Fair and was later moved into Central Park. It's actually a replica of a much older statue that once graced an avenue in Warsaw, Poland. But that older statue no longer exists, having been melted down and converted into bullets by the German army during World War Two.

An even better place for photographs is the Belvedere Castle, which dates back almost to the time of the Civil



Belvedere Castle in Central Park

War. 'Belvedere' translates from the Italian to 'beautiful view', and that's certainly true. The castle turret is the highest point in the entire park, and even the view from the intermediate-level balconies is pretty special. From there, on grey winter days, New York is transformed into a cloud-shrouded urban landscape that emerges from the background mists in the distance.

Back in the 1960s, the castle had been closed down and was sinking into decay. But in the 1980s, the newly-formed Central Park Conservancy was able to restore the structure and re-open it as a nature observatory. Today the place is also a visitor center, and occasionally has cameo appearances in television shows and movies. Of which there are many that film in New York.

I Dreamed a Dream

Nicki and I watch a lot of television, and we've recognized some of the places where New York-based shows are filmed. *Smash*, for instance, has done shoots in Times Square near the TKTS booth and in front of the Brill Building, *White Collar* once filmed in front of Trinity



statue of Poland's King Jagiello



the view from Belvedere Castle

Church, and *The Good Wife* (where New York doubles for Chicago) set a scene on 6th Avenue.

But all of that was done in the warmer weather months. In all the January visits we've made to New York we had never happened across a television or movie shoot. Until this time. On our way back to the hotel from dinner on our last evening in town, we observed that a film shoot of some kind was being set up in Times Square near the TKTS booth. One of my 'bucket list' lifetime goals is to be 'Baconizable', and daydreams of being a background-scene extra in some movie or television show flashed through my head as I walked over to find out what was going on. But it turned out that it was only a CNBC news segment for a future show about the economics of producing Broadway plays.



CNBC film shoot in Times Square

A lesser life goal is to keep accumulating hotel and credit card points, as that certainly makes it easier for Nicki and me to make these annual pilgrimages to New York. This year we had enough points where we could stay at a really nice hotel, the Marriott Marquis right in the heart of Times Square. The place seemed almost a city within itself, and there is even a large theater inside its walls. That's where we saw *Evita*, and it was very pleasant to just take an elevator down to where the show was being staged instead of trudging several blocks out in the cold. This also provided me the opportunity for a new life experience...

It was the first time I'd ever gone to a Broadway show in my bedroom slippers.

One Day More

The warm spell of weather also allowed us to go to one other place that we'd not managed to see in prior visits to New York. The United Nations, for all its prominence, is not all that close to a subway station and it had always seemed just too far of a walk on more usual wintery January days.

It was actually a last-minute decision to go there. The day in the Met and Central Park was enjoyable, but that evening we found ourselves in doubt on what to do with our one last day in the city. Eventually we want to see some of Brooklyn and also go to The Cloisters up in northern Manhattan, but after some discussion we decided that this was not the year for either of those places.



the United Nations

January is a good time to visit the U.N., for many of the same reasons that make New York itself a good destination that time of year. Not only are crowds way down in number, the U.N. General Assembly has concluded its session so that part of the complex can be visited during a tour. The tour itself was nothing really very special, though the people in the tour were about as multicultural as you could get, representing South America, China, Africa...and Maryland!

It was a good trip. Nicki and I are already looking forward to seeing more of this great city next year, but it will be a long 51 weeks until then. And it's already time to start planning!



Nicki at the U.N. General Assembly Room

Epilog: Master of the House

One other holiday season event we always look forward to, besides the New York trip, is the annual 'Black-Eyed Peas' party down in Washington hosted by Rusty Burke and his wife Shelly Wischhusen on New Year's Day. It seems largely a Tennessee ex-pat get-together, as most of the attendees have connections, if not prior residency, in that great state. (Nicki and I included!) There's always lots of good food and drink, and this year we stayed a lot longer than usual because of all the pleasant conversation. This has become one of our favorite parties of the year, and that it happens during the holiday season makes it that much more enjoyable.

Even though Nicki and I have been friends with Rusty for, gosh, more than a third of a century, we only met Shelly about seven years ago, even though she, too, is originally from Tennessee. They are a great match for each other, neither being the 'master of the house'.



Shelly and Rusty

The party invitation this year included some eye-opening information – Rusty, who has always been a scholar of the celebrated writer Robert E. Howard, appears in the new documentary movie, *Barbarian Days*, which is being billed as “a civilized look at the modern-day fans of the creator of Conan the Barbarian”. It was filmed during annual “Howard Days” festival in Cross Plains, Texas, where Howard once lived, and follows Rusty and three other Howard scholars during that weekend.

At the party, it was fascinating to learn about the production and the weekend that surrounded it, even if the film itself probably will be available only on DVD. But it wasn't until we were on the way back to the Metrorail station that I asked Nicki the question that she may also have been pondering:

“I wonder if Rusty is Baconizable...” ☼

(All chapter headings for this essay are titles of songs from *Les Misérables*)

