



My Back Pages #16

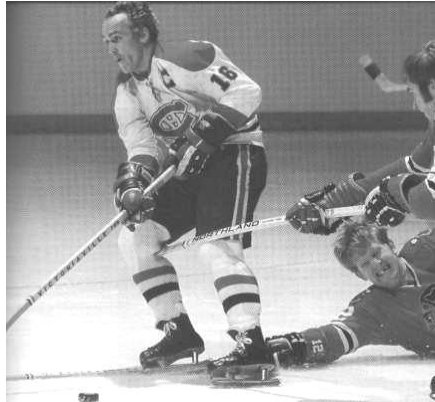
Rich Lynch



My Back Pages #16

articles and essays by Rich Lynch

Issue #16 marks six years and counting since I published the first issue back in the spring of 2010. So in celebration of making it this far I'll pay homage to some of the famous #16s. And there are many:



Henri Richard

Henri Richard, Bobby Clarke, Brett Hull, Roy Keane, Edward “Whitey” Ford, Dwight Gooden, Hal Newhouser, Reggie Sanders, Frank Viola, Greg Biffle, Pau Gasol, Bob Lanier, Jerry Lucas, Frank Gifford, Joe Montana, and Len Dawson.



Whitey Ford

As for me, it's now been fully half a century since I was a #16, er, sixteen. Back then my first airplane ride was still about a year in the future, and it turned out to be maybe the shortest in duration of any I've ever done – just half an hour. So let's

begin this time with a tale from last November about a place that was beyond the far end of my *longest-ever* non-stop airplane ride – nearly 16 hours (after detouring around an active war zone). But even after that, it took me longer still to gain entry into my destination than I had expected...

Rich Lynch
Gaithersburg, Maryland
June 2016

CONTENTS OF THIS ISSUE

Into the Kingdom	3
previously published in <i>Variations on a Theme</i> 108 (November 2015)	
Happy Contrails To You	10
previously published in <i>Variations on a Theme</i> 100 (July 2014)	
Nobody's perfect, not even Scalia	12
previously published in <i>In Search of Enlightenment</i> (April 6, 2005)	
The Day I Became a Space Cadet	14
previously published in <i>File770.com</i> (February 12, 2016)	
West by Northwest	16
previously published in <i>Variations on a Theme</i> 107 (September 2015)	

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

Into the Kingdom

Prolog: Not Yet Into the Kingdom

Nothing like starting off a business trip with a misadventure. I was at the end of about 20 straight hours of airplanes and airports, and midnight local time was rapidly receding into the past. All around me was the chaos of dozens of people milling around in the customs area of the King Khalid International Airport. There seemed to be at least two lines that were forming up, but no clear indication on which one was for visitors to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and which one was for the residents. I didn't see any instructions, in English anyway, and there wasn't anybody there who looked very interested in going out of his way to provide help.

I'm glad I wasn't traveling alone. But my compatriot, Adam, was equally confused, and in the end we decided to jump from the glacially-moving line we were stuck in to a shorter line that was moving along incrementally less sluggishly. This at last caught the attention of one of the security people and it got us some special attention. But for me it wasn't exactly the kind of notice that I'd been hoping for.

When the security person saw that Adam and I had the special red-cover passports that U.S. Government workers use, a new line opened up for just the two of us, and we finally, *finally* made it to the customs officer's booth. He scanned my passport, then he looked at me, and then he motioned to one of the other customs officers to come over. There followed a back-and-forth conversation between the two of them, in Arabic, that went on for several minutes, complete with hand gestures toward me and to my passport. And then I was told, in English, that I was to go over to the holding area (which thankfully had some seats) and to remain there until I was called. He retained the passport.

Adam was next and he sailed right through. Just a minute and a half, and then he was gone into the baggage claim area. But for me it was about another 20 minutes, and all that time I was wondering if I was going to be allowed into the country. After a while, all the others had made their way through and then it was just me and the customs people. Eventually I was called back over, given back my passport and sent on my way. "A systems error", I was informed.

Adam was nervously waiting for me just inside the baggage claim area, and after we found our suitcases it took only a few moments to locate the American Embassy car which had been sent to pick us up and take us to the hotel. It had been the most surreal travel experience for me in many years, made even more so by what had been showing on a large video screen at the far wall of the customs area.

It was the *Shaun the Sheep* animated television series, filled with one comic misadventure after another. Maybe I should have taken that as a warning.

From Bay to Shining Bay

My journey to Saudi Arabia had in effect begun a month-and-a-half earlier, a mid-September trip to Livermore, California and then on to Fort Myers, Florida. There was a two-man Saudi delegation who were in the States to learn about a new kind of fossil energy technology called Enhanced Water Recovery which would store carbon dioxide deep underground in a saline aquifer while recovering brine from the aquifer which would then be desalinized by conventional reverse osmosis. The pressure created in the aquifer by the injected CO₂ would help to power

the reverse osmosis process. A win-win, in other words. Fresh water, in the middle of the desert, is absolutely a valuable commodity.

But things are never as simple as that, of course, and capturing and injecting the CO₂ does cost money. So a workshop meeting was hosted by in California by the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, where we all learned more about the technology and its economics in advance of a more formalized feasibility study.

We didn't stay in Livermore, though. We all had an the oh-dark-thirty flight out of San Francisco the day after the workshop ended, so we instead elected to get rooms at the San Francisco Airport Marriott. Mine looked out onto the airport itself, the main runway only about half a mile away. Great view, but not-so-great noise levels.



San Francisco International Airport from my hotel room



San Mateo Bridge from my hotel room

I could also see the seven-mile long San Mateo Bridge from my hotel room. It's the longest of the five bridges that span San Francisco Bay (the longest bridge west of the Mississippi, in fact), and it was part of our commute to and from the Livermore Valley. From the highest point of the bridge, about 140 feet off the water, I

could just make out the San Francisco skyline way off to the north. But that was as much of the city as I got to see.

It had been about a third of a century since my previous visit to Livermore. That was also for a trip to the National Lab, and what I remember most about it was the post-meeting stopover at one of the two wineries in the valley. There are now many more wineries in the area, I was told, and the National Lab itself has increased in size as well. One of its newest buildings was just a very short distance from our meeting site – the National Ignition Test Facility, where a multi-billion dollar R&D program is underway on laser-based inertial confinement nuclear fusion.



the National Ignition Test Facility at LLNL

From Livermore, it was on to Florida to visit a technology developer which had come up with a promising new way of producing ethanol directly from algae using only sunlight, carbon dioxide, and saltwater. This was also of great interest to the Saudi delegation, but what was of more immediate interest to me was the logistics in getting us all there. There was no direct flight anywhere near where we were going, and if we flew into the Fort Myers regional airport we would have had to contend with a 40-minute connection in Houston. Way too risky – if we'd missed the flight we'd have been marooned in Texas and would have had to cancel the visit. So instead, we flew into Tampa.



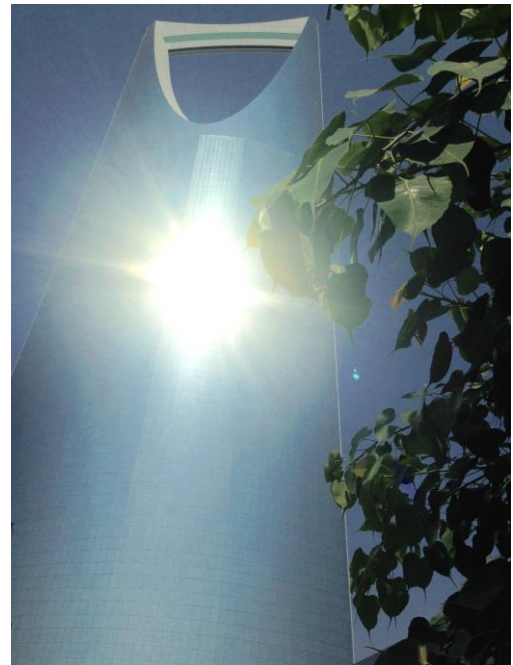
the Sunshine Skyway Bridge over Tampa Bay

It was only about a two hour drive down to Fort Myers, but it seemed longer than that because of all the heavy rainstorms. Which probably should not have come as a surprise – Fort Myers has more thunderstorms per year than any other city in the United States. The drive south went across a long causeway bridge between Tampa and St. Petersburg, and then over the imposing Sunshine Skyway Bridge which spans the entrance to Tampa Bay. This prompted the head of the Saudi delegation to comment, “There is quite a lot of water here!”

In the Kingdom (Center)

There was far less water in Riyadh. Hardly any at all, actually, as it is located out in the middle of a desert plateau. In the middle of summer the daily temperature gets as high as 120°F, but at the beginning of November, when I was there, it was a balmy 90°F.

It was another meeting about CO₂ sequestration that had brought me to Saudi Arabia. A big meeting, one that brought in the Energy Ministers or their representatives from more than two dozen countries. I didn't have oversight on everything that happened at that elevated a level, but I *was* one of the lead organizers and preparing for the event had taken up a big chunk of my life over the previous year. The Saudis, as hosts, had used a considerable amount of resources to put on the event and the venue was spectacular – the grand Kingdom Center. It's the tallest building in the country, 99 stories high with a 'Sky Bridge' that spans the uppermost levels.



the Kingdom Center in Riyadh

After dark turned out to be the best Sky Bridge viewing time, at least from word-of-mouth accounts from some of the meeting attendees. For me, there was no choice because the evening of my first day in town was pretty much the only chance I had. From that high up the view was panoramic, to say the least, and I was surprised to see how utterly flat the



the view from the Sky Bridge

region was. Riyadh has a population of several million, and the city lights seemed to go on forever, all the way out to the horizon. One other thing that I noticed was how stable the structure was. There was no noticeable sway at all. I've been atop other structures, like the St. Louis Gateway Arch, where structural flex in even a light wind makes for a very disconcerting experience and as a result, a very short stay.

Much of the Kingdom Center is occupied by a Four Seasons Hotel, and that's where I stayed. My room was on the 42nd floor, only about halfway to the top of the building but still the second-highest (from the ground) hotel room I've ever stayed in. The view from my window wasn't quite so grandiose as from up top, but it was still pretty impressive.



view of downtown Riyadh from my hotel window

Also impressive were the sunrises. There was a haze in the early morning that the sun always burned off by mid-day. But it turned the 6:00am sunrises into colorful spectacles. It was one of the few benefits from jetlag-caused sleep deprivation.

What a Difference a Day Makes

The CO₂ sequestration meeting went pretty well. It was a five day event but after all the months and months of planning and organizing with a seemingly endless series of time-sensitive deadlines, I was really looking forward to getting my life back.

My direct involvement at the meeting occurred mostly on the first two days. I was Secretariat / Advisor to the Chairman for both a task force meeting on the first day and the meeting of the Forum's Technical Group on the second day. I gave two presentations that were well received and both meetings ran smoothly. After that I had a much lower profile. For the Policy Group's meeting on the third day, another person was acting as Secretariat so I mostly hovered around the edges of the meeting, making sure everything went okay. But even so, I still had one more brief moment of relatively high visibility.



during the meeting of the Technical Group



welcoming Romania's Minister of Energy

The Forum, prior to this meeting, was comprised of 23 different countries. But at the meeting, both Romania and Serbia joined. The Romanian Minister of Energy was in attendance, and after the pro forma vote was taken to admit his country it was my job to welcome him into the organization. He was enthusiastic and vocal in the next day's Conference of Ministers, and by all accounts was having a good time of it. But then...

Just as the Conference of Ministers was ending there was a news report out of Romania that a series of street protests had caused the Prime Minister to resign and dissolve the government. As a result, its Minister of Energy was now a Former Minister of Energy. This did not affect Romania's membership in the Forum, as the Minister had signed the Charter while he still had a job. But if the meeting had occurred a day later, or if the Prime Minister had resigned a day earlier, the Forum might now have one fewer member. What a difference a day makes!

A Dignified Contest

The meeting wrapped up with a gala dinner event, complete with swordsmen, after the Conference of Ministers ended. I had one last role, as the host of the awards ceremony. Three recently-concluded projects were being recognized by the Forum for their advancement of CO₂ capture and storage technologies. I read from a script I had written, and the awards were jointly presented by the Saudi Minister and the American Secretary of Energy, Dr. Moniz. He has been

my uppermost-level boss since the beginning of 2013, but this was the first time I had ever met him. It only took a trip of about 6,700 miles to make it happen.

There was one other gala dinner during the meeting, the evening of the Technical Group's meeting, and for that we were taken to the National Museum of Saudi Arabia. We had a guided docent tour of the place, and there was a lot to see. The museum was a walk through time, from the pre-Islamic era of ca. 400 BC to the pan-Arab revolt against the Ottoman Empire in the early part of the 20th century that led to the formation of the modern Saudi state.



inside the museum



my attempt to look more dignified
than a falcon

The dinner itself was held in a separate building which had been designed to look as old as the hills but actually only dates back as far as the end of the 1990s. Nevertheless, it presented some great ambience for a nice evening of food and conversation. Especially the food, as various kinds of meat and seafood kept appearing on my plate faster than I could consume them. Prior to the dinner there were displays of traditional Arabian culture, including basketry, wood carving, hand-milling of grain into flour, and sewing. But most intriguing was the falconry.

The room was way too small for a demonstration that would have let loose the bird, but there were no lack of people, myself included, who wanted a chance to hold the falcon on a gloved hand. Up close, the bird looked very stately and noble, and when it became my turn, I made the photo-op into a contest of who could look more dignified, me or the falcon.

I'm pretty sure I lost.

Epilog: The place I didn't get to go

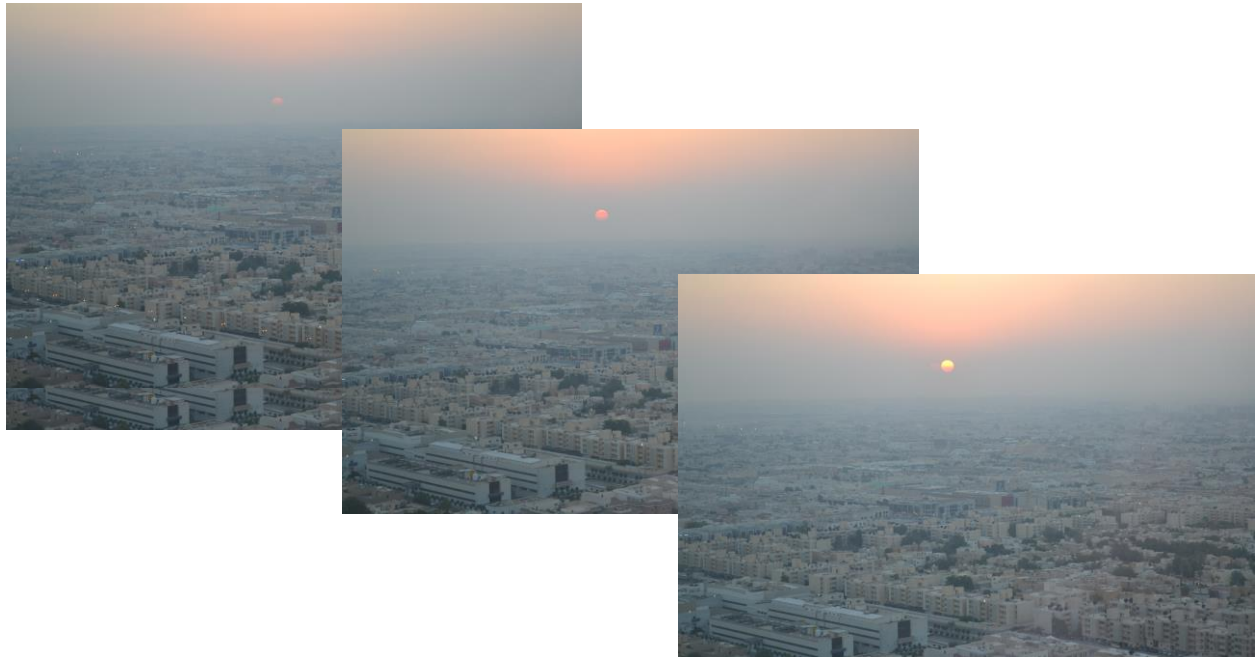
A week or so prior to the trip, I was visited in my office by someone from the Department's Counterintelligence Office for a security briefing. At the end of the meeting I was given a document which contained a list of "dos" and "don'ts". Most of them were "don'ts". What I construed from this was that the American Embassy didn't want me to leave the hotel for the duration of my stay in Riyadh. I was not to use taxis to go anywhere, and there would be a hefty fee for any transportation provided by the Embassy.

So, except for the two offsite dinner events (where there were buses and a police escort), I gave in and didn't stray any farther than the front gate of the hotel complex. This prevented me from going to the one place that I had really wanted to see. The Masmak, a clay and mud-brick fort which dates back to the mid-1800s, was less than five miles from my hotel room. It is an important part of the history of Saudi Arabia as the place where, in 1902, Abdulaziz of the House of Saud captured Riyadh on the way to unifying the country. There are a couple of open-air markets near the fort, and it would have made for a pleasant morning of activity on my last day in town.

I only have a few years, at most, left in my professional career, which means that I probably will not be going back to Riyadh. But I'm not done yet, and there are other places still to see and experience. Next year's meetings of the Forum will be in the United Kingdom and Japan, and after that there may be a meeting out in the middle of China. Every time I mention to my management that retirement is looming, they keep giving me interesting projects and activities that cause me to further postpone any decision on when to leave. It's almost as if they are scheming to find ways to keep me around.

Maybe I should take that as a warning. ☀

Sunrise over Riyadh



Afterword:

This year has turned out to be even busier than 2015, so much so that, except for February, I have been out of town either on business or vacation at least once every month. And it will continue for the rest of the year. And possibly next year, too. Retire? Who has time to retire??

Anyway, most of my trips are to much closer places than Saudi Arabia. One of them was back in 2014, when Nicki and I drove down to Bristol, Virginia for a DeepSouthCon science fiction convention, the first time a DSC had ever been held in Virginia. But by only about a mile!

Happy Contrails to You

It was closing in on noon and we had not yet even gotten as far as Front Royal. Traffic was creeping along a detour from Interstate 66 to avoid an accident involving an overturned gasoline tanker truck. Bristol was still hundreds of miles away. I looked at the long line of cars and trucks ahead of us, and then at the completely empty lane heading back toward Washington. Nicki turned toward me and I could tell she was thinking the same thing as I was: Should we bail?

But we did not, and once we finally got to Front Royal we were rewarded for our stamina by discovering an alternate way south that avoided all the traffic back-up. It took us through the picturesque Page Valley of Virginia, following the meandering South Fork of the Shenandoah River to Luray, then up and over Massanutten Mountain to the Shenandoah Valley and Interstate 81. By the time we finally reached Bristol the weather had deteriorated to where there were late afternoon thunderstorms and one of them produced a spectacular double rainbow over the parking lot of the convention hotel. Inside was the gold at the end of the rainbow and what we had come to Bristol for – Contrails, the 52nd annual DeepSouthCon.

Back in the day, when Nicki and I were living in Tennessee, the DeepSouthCon was an annual event for us. It's the premiere event for science fiction fandom of the southern states, and it does not have a permanent home – the right to hold the DeepSouthCon is decided by vote, and DSCs have been hosted by fan groups as far west as Dallas, as far south as New Orleans, and as far north as Louisville. Most of them take place in Tennessee, Alabama and Georgia, which are now too far off the beaten path for us to attend – Nicki and I had only been to four of them since we moved to Maryland at the end of 1988. So it was an easy decision for us to add Contrails to our calendar when Bristol was selected as host site for the 2014 DSC. It's the first time a DSC has ever been held in Virginia (but not by very much!) and the closest a DSC has ever been to where we now live.

It turned out to be an enjoyable but very small DSC. For whatever reason – spotty publicity, lack of a large fan group in the area, and many other even higher-profile conventions the very next weekend – there were only about 60 people in attendance. Not good for the convention chair, who told us he sustained a four-figure loss on the event, but it did make the evening room parties much less claustrophobic. There was a reasonable amount of programming – two full tracks with one focused on 'sercon' aspects such as writing and book publishing, and the other a more fan-oriented track including things like the "50 Years of Southern Fandom" panel. For that, the six participants could trace their activity from starting in the 1960s (Rick Norwood) to starting in the 2000s (Grace Molloy), and it was entertaining to hear (and in some cases, re-hear) tales of conventions and fan gatherings that happened decades ago. Now *that's* timebinding!



double rainbow over Bristol



"50 Years of Southern Fandom" panelists

We had been interested in coming to Bristol for more than just the DSC. Bristol claims the honor as the 'Birthplace of Country Music' and is the location where, in 1927, one of America's greatest songwriters, A.P. Carter, brought his family to record a series of songs inspired by the traditional folk music of the southern Appalachian region. But

all that happened over on the Tennessee side of the border.

Bristol is actually two cities in one – twins separated by the state line which runs right down the middle of State Street. There are several music venues along State Street along with the occasional historical plaque, but the downtown area seemed mostly to be cafes and curio shops. The most active place, on the Saturday morning we were there, was the farmers market.

There's way more to see and do in Bristol and the rest of southwestern Virginia than what we had time for, of course. I'm not willing to put up with all the crowds and chaos to experience a NASCAR race at the Bristol Motor Speedway, but Virginia's 300-mile long heritage music trail, The Crooked



building mural in downtown Bristol



state line marker in middle of State Street

Road, passes through Bristol and along its length there are various festivals throughout the year. That alone will be enough to bring us back in a few years, when retirement will provide me unlimited time for such things. Until then, it's probably going to be "Happy Trails to You, Until We Meet Again" for this part of the country. But for *this* particular occasion, it was "Happy Contrails to You". We had a good time. ☀

Afterword:

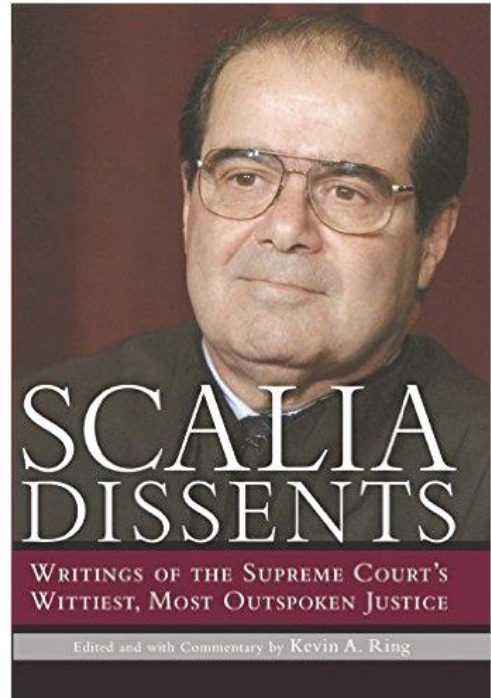
My shortest trips of all are down to Washington, D.C., which is a convenient 25 miles away. I worked there for seven years during the 1990s and early 2000s, but nowadays it takes a special event such as an interesting luncheon seminar to get me there. One of those happened back in 2005, the topic of which was one of Washington's most famous people.

Nobody's perfect, not even Scalia

It was a very pleasant spring day here today, just the kind of day to be out of the office for a while. The FOSE computer trade show down at the D.C. Convention Center (which was boring and mind-numbing) gave me that opportunity, but it turned out there was also a luncheon forum at the Heritage Foundation, so I went to that first.

The Heritage Foundation event was titled “Scalia Dissents: Writings of the Supreme Court’s Wittiest, Most Outspoken Justice” and the speaker was Kevin Ring, who had edited a new book of the same name. Turns out, not surprisingly, that Mr. Ring is a conservative Republican (he was formerly counsel to the U.S. Senate’s Constitution Subcommittee), and he made no secret of his open admiration of U.S. Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia – in his opinion, the best thing that could happen to the Supreme Court is for Scalia to be appointed Chief Justice and to preside over eight other Justices who are Scalia clones.

His book, as the title suggests, is a collection of Scalia’s writings and legal opinions from various Supreme Court decisions since Scalia joined the Court in 1986. Scalia is certainly the most quotable of the nine Justices and much of the talk was a series of sound bites using, in effect, in Scalia’s own words. For example: “In a big family the first child is kind of like the first pancake. If it’s not perfect, that’s okay, there are a lot more coming along.” And: “The Freedom of Information Act is the Taj Mahal of the Doctrine of Unanticipated Consequences, the Sistine Chapel of Cost-Benefit Analysis Ignored.” And: “A law can be both economic folly and constitutional.”



Kevin Ring

Mr. Ring went on to cite examples of how Scalia supported a more black-and-white interpretation of the U.S. Constitution than other Justices, and this gave me an idea for a question. So when the talk ended, I asked:

“Justice Scalia will no doubt be remembered as one of the more colorful figures in American politics and for his stance against judicial activism. One topic you did not discuss in your talk was the Supreme Court case

of Bush v. Gore in 2000. In that case, Justice Scalia came up with a novel interpretation of the 14th Amendment's equal protection clause, which had originally been intended to ensure the civil rights of former slaves, as a means of putting a stop to the Florida presidential vote recount. To many of us, Justice Scalia did himself a disservice with that interpretation because he came across as someone who would do whatever it took to make sure Bush prevailed in Florida. So how do you square this with your view of Justice Scalia as a strict interpretationist?"

The response surprised me a bit in that Ring agreed with me, at least to a point – he said that he thought that the use of the 14th Amendment in that case was “a perversion” but that this was only one case, an aberration. In short, nobody was perfect. And then he went on to say that even though he was a conservative and a Republican, he was not happy in the way that the Republican Congress is itself being too activist, in that it was intruding in places (such as the recent Terry Schiavo law, for example) where it should leave well enough alone.



protests at U.S. Supreme Court following the 2000 Presidential election

In the end, I came away a bit impressed by Kevin Ring, who did not seem to have any personal agendas to promote other than his open admiration of Justice Antonin Scalia. My politics are not nearly his (I'm a slightly left-of-center moderate, actually), but he gave me the impression that, like me, he values consistency above ideology. Too bad most politicians, from both the right and the left, are not a lot more like that. ☼

Afterword:

U.S. Supreme Court Justices are appointed for life tenure terms, and Justice Scalia's ended this year in late February. He will certainly be remembered as perhaps the most polarizing person who ever became a Supreme Court Justice. But yet he could certainly be entertaining, as well as very quotable, in some of his judicial opinions. As in this one, a Dissent in the 1984 U.S. Court of Appeals case, *Community Nutrition Institute v. Block*: “This case, involving legal requirements for the content and labeling of meat products such as frankfurters, affords a rare opportunity to explore simultaneously both parts of Bismarck's aphorism that ‘No man should see how laws or sausages are made.’ ” Too bad he never had anything to say about Space Cadets.



funeral of U.S. Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia

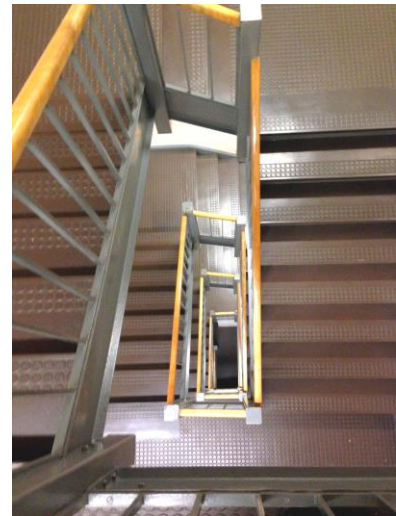
The Day I Became a Space Cadet

Those of you who know me are probably aware of something that I've been doing since about the beginning of 2011. During an otherwise uneventful day at work I had misinterpreted a comment by my then-boss that I really needed to get out from behind my desk more often. She had been wanting me to be a bit more interactive with other interagency organizations. But for a few moments I had thought she had meant that I needed to be getting more exercise.

And she would have been right – I was way too deskbound. So I decided to break each day up with a few one-mile walks within the building where I work. This increased my metabolic rate, which has helped me to manage calories and weight, and the endorphins generated by this mild exercise have helped to sharpen my thinking while I'm at work.

But to make things interesting, I plotted a virtual "Walk Across America" to keep track of my total distance walked and to serve as a motivation to keep going even farther. Five years of these one-mile walks have "brought" me more than 3,200 miles, or the distance from my home in Maryland down to New Orleans, across Texas and the desert Southwest to Los Angeles, then up the coast toward San Francisco.

And there's more – each mile walked includes more than 100 feet of stair climbing. And as of February 3rd, I reached a milestone – my total distance climbed passed the 62-mile mark, the so-called Kármán Line which represents the internationally-recognized boundary between the earth's atmosphere and space. Years ago at a meeting, someone not-entirely-in-jest accused me of being a space cadet. I can now claim to have officially fulfilled that prophesy!



Atop the Stairwell to Space!

But, truth be told, I've probably been a space cadet for most of my life – I was nine years old, when I discovered science fiction. This was back in the autumn of 1959, and it was before I found out there were science fiction books in the school library – it would be about another year before I would read Arthur C. Clarke's *Islands in the Sky*. No, my first exposure to science fiction was on television.

It was a show titled *Men Into Space*, televised in 1959 and 1960 at the very end of the Eisenhower administration, back when the Space Race with the Soviets was becoming a national priority. It depicted the U.S. Space Program as a part of the Air Force – the main character was Col. Edward McCauley, who was portrayed as being the number one U.S. astronaut. He took part in practically all manned space missions, many of them to the moon.



on the moon with Col. McCauley (at right) in *MIS* episode #37, "Mystery Satellite"

Seeing an episode of *Men Into Space* was a true sense-of-wonder experience, before I even knew what that meant. In the course of its single season, manned space flight progressed from the building of a space station, to the first test of an

orbital flight around the moon, to a moon landing, to a moon base, to a trip to a near-earth asteroid, and ending the series with a trip to the planet Mars! Along the way there were episodes that addressed the question on whether we are alone in the universe. Great stuff to a kid who was about to turn ten years old!

Episodes were only a half-hour long, so the plots were pretty direct: a team of astronauts, headed by McCauley, is sent off into space for some purpose. Something unexpected happens, often imperiling the crew, and McCauley has to quickly find a way to save the day. It all worked because the actor William Lundigan, who played McCauley, was a military man himself, having served in the U.S. Marines during World War Two. On screen he comes across as an in-charge authority figure who is nevertheless very likeable. And it helped that Lundigan believed that all the space science depicted in the series was attainable someday in the real world without the need for any huge leaps in technology. He was reported to have said that: "What helped me to make up my mind [to be in the series] was the fact that this was not some Buck Rogers type show. It was not a science-fiction series, but a science-fact series. You might even say it's a combination of a public service show and a dramatic series."



from *MIS* episode #38,
"Flight to the Red Planet"



from *MIS* episode #30,
"Emergency Mission"

One other thing that has reserved *Men Into Space* a place in my memory for all these years was how realistic the series seemed to be. And there was a reason for that – visual backdrops and spacecraft designs were created by the famous space artist Chesley Bonestell. There was also extensive technical assistance provided by the U.S. Air Force's Space Medicine Office, which helped give the series a sense of humanity in amongst all the space technology.

Men Into Space ended its run more than half a century ago but since then I have always remembered how amazing it had seemed to me. So it was a pleasant surprise when I discovered that the new cable television network Comet TV, amongst its offerings of Grade-Z monster movies and 1990s sci-fi, had found room to include it in their schedule. The evening of my ascendancy into Space Cadet-hood I watched an episode – it guest-starred a very young-looking Robert Vaughn five years before he became famous as *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* The plot, about a radioactive cloud of gas in a lunar crater, was a bit retro but you know what? It still held together pretty well.

Anyway, I'm pleased that after 56 years I finally got another chance to watch what had been my favorite television show. And I'm still a fan. ☼

Afterword:

Men Into Space lasted only a single season but it did make the shortlist as a finalist for a Hugo Award (in 1960), losing out to *The Twilight Zone*. And speaking of the Hugo Awards, we are currently in the midst of an attempt at a hostile takeover of them. It was all part of a very dramatic Worldcon out in Spokane last year, but for Nicki and me that convention was only part of an even larger trip of adventure.

West by Northwest

Prolog: Esoteric Kinds of Collections

I'll begin this essay by admitting that I am a chronic collector. Always have been, actually. It started back in the 1960s with Silver-Age comic books and continued with low denomination coins (I was not affluent enough back then to collect quarters and half dollars). During the 1970s and 1980s, it was science fiction digest magazines. At one point I had near complete runs of both *Galaxy* and *F&SF*, and an unbroken run of *Analog/Astounding* that extended all the way back into the 1940s.

It was only the reality that I didn't have infinite resources and unlimited space that changed my mindset. The comic book collection was given away (a decision that I continue to regret) when I went off to college in the late 1960s, the coins were sold to another collector during a career transition in the mid 1970s, and all the digest magazines were donated to a Florida-based science fiction club when Nicki and I moved to Maryland in the late 1980s. Nowadays, the things I collect are a bit more esoteric: suspension bridges, baseball stadiums, U.S. counties, and state capitol buildings.

It was over the July 4th Independence Day holiday weekend that I added a new capitol building to the collection. It happened during a visit to Nicki's mom who lives in Schenectady, and Schenectady is only about a dozen miles or so west of the New York State Capitol in Albany. I'd seen the building many times before (I'm originally from New York State) but had never been inside.



a panoramic view of the New York State capitol building



the "War Room"

The Capitol dates back to 1899, and is actually a mishmash of architectural styles – the ground floor is Classical Romanesque, the next two tiers are Renaissance Classical, and the top levels are Victorian Romanesque. It was originally supposed to have a dome, but that idea went away when it was found that the structure of the building wouldn't support it. Nicki and I weren't able to get in to see the grand Assembly Chamber, at one time the largest open arched-span room in the world, but we did get to see the so-called War Room (now the Governor's reception room) with its splendiferous ceiling murals. The place is magnificent, certainly worth taking the time and effort to see on what was a busy weekend for us. And it whetted my appetite for adding more capitol buildings to my collection. In particular, one located about 2,350 miles to the west-northwest.

The Emerald City

Seattle is by far the largest city in Washington. The only previous time that Nicki and I had been there was back in the 1980s for a Corflu fanzine fans convention, and we never did get to see very much of it. It's known as "The Emerald City" because the coastal weather patterns bring a lot of rain to the area, especially in the late autumn. But this was August, and what we observed were a lot of brown hillsides. A dryer summer than usual, we were told.

Nicki and I were in Washington for the 2015 World Science Fiction Convention, Sasquan, but that was way over on the other side of the state in Spokane. Early on, while planning for the trip, I found that getting to Spokane was more difficult and a lot less convenient than I had thought. It would have involved leaving home at a very early hour and enduring a long layover somewhere. Instead, we decided to do what we did four years earlier when the Worldcon was in Reno – find the nearest non-stop from D.C. and spend a couple of enjoyable days there before renting a car and moving on.

It turned out to be a good idea. Our two days in Seattle were filled with things to do, and we even found an opportunity to learn first-hand about some of its history. The area where the city now stands was originally inhabited by Native Americans more than four millennia ago, but it wasn't until the 1850s that European settlers relocated there. The lumber industry almost immediately provided Seattle both prosperity and poverty – a ramshackle shantytown that sprang up near current-day Pioneer Square, along the road where logs skidded down a hill toward a sawmill, originated the expression 'Skid Row'. Thirty blocks in that area of the city were destroyed by a disastrous fire in 1889, and a strategic decision was made to regrade the area as part of the rebuild. The street levels were raised by one or two stories to allow a redesign of the sewers so that they wouldn't back up when toilets flushed.



during the docent history tour of
"Underground Seattle"



looking upward at glass prisms set into
a street-level sidewalk

The newly-raised streets were lined with concrete walls for stability, which formed narrow subterranean alleyways at the original lower elevations between the streets and buildings. These were covered over by new sidewalks which created, in effect, an "Underground Seattle", with glass prisms set into the upper-level sidewalks to bring ambient light into this urban netherworld. Nicki and I took a docent history tour of the place on our last day in Seattle, and we learned that while much of it had become dilapidated over the decades there were gentrification plans in progress for some of the spaces. The tour

visited many dark places, but it was also enlightening. It was like stepping downward into the past, revisiting a time that predated the birth of our parents.

Journey to the Center of Seattle

The subterranean tour wasn't really very much like a Jules Verne-esque "Journey to the Center of Seattle", but it was very easy to actually visit the Center of Seattle. Or, make that, the Seattle Center. It's the site of the 1962 World's Fair which in the half century since then has evolved into an arts and entertainment complex.

The dominant feature is of course the iconic Space Needle, a 600-foot tall observation tower that was once the tallest structure in the United States west of the Mississippi River. It's a bit pricey to take the ride up to the observation deck so we didn't. But perhaps we should have. The Space Needle has the appearance of a flying saucer perched atop a tall skinny tripod, and it would have been the only time in my life where I could half-seriously claim to have been inside a spaceship.

Maybe because of the tall price there was only a short line of people in line to buy tickets to the top. But really, the view from up there can't be all that good – it's the only place in Seattle where you can't see the Space Needle!



International Fountain and Space Needle

There was a lot more to see at the Seattle Center than just that tall tower. The International Fountain, a sculpture that spouts streams of water in programmed cycles, looked to be a popular hangout on a warm and lazy Sunday afternoon. The center of the Center is occupied by the Armory, originally the home of the U.S. Army's 146th Field Artillery but long since repurposed into a multiuse facility for events such as community fairs. And on that day there was one in progress. When we entered, we saw that we had become part of...Brasilfest!

I would never have thought that the Pacific Northwest was such a hotbed of South American culture. But here we had literally stumbled across a jubilant festival of Brazilian food, crafts, demonstrations, and music. We stuck around to listen to a performance by a mellow jazz group named 'Passarim' that was very smooth and polished, and if weren't starting to get late in the afternoon we might have stayed longer. But there was one other place in the Seattle Center that we had really wanted to see...



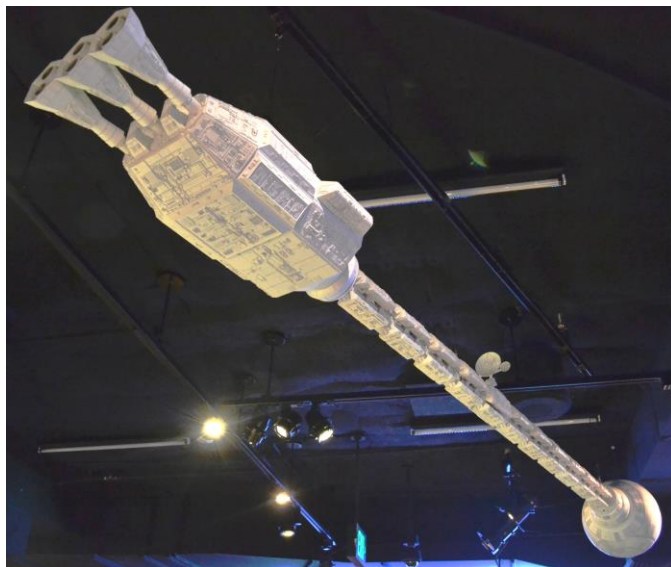
Passarim at the Brasilfest

Of Spaceships and Guitars

Seattle's EMP Museum, according to its website, is "a leading-edge nonprofit museum, dedicated to the ideas and risk-taking that fuel contemporary popular culture". It's been in existence only since about the year 2000, and back then it was known as the "Experience Music Project and Science Fiction

Museum and Hall of Fame". We had heard that the science fiction part of the EMP Museum had been downsized a few years ago, but it was still high on our list of places to see. After all, no matter how good or dismal it might turn out to be, how could we not visit a science fiction-themed museum while on a trip to attend a Worldcon?

But we didn't exactly have great expectations, and to a certain extent what we saw lived down to them. The Science Fiction and Fantasy Hall of Fame turned out to be an electronic display housed in an alcove about the size of a walk-in closet. There were dozens of writers,

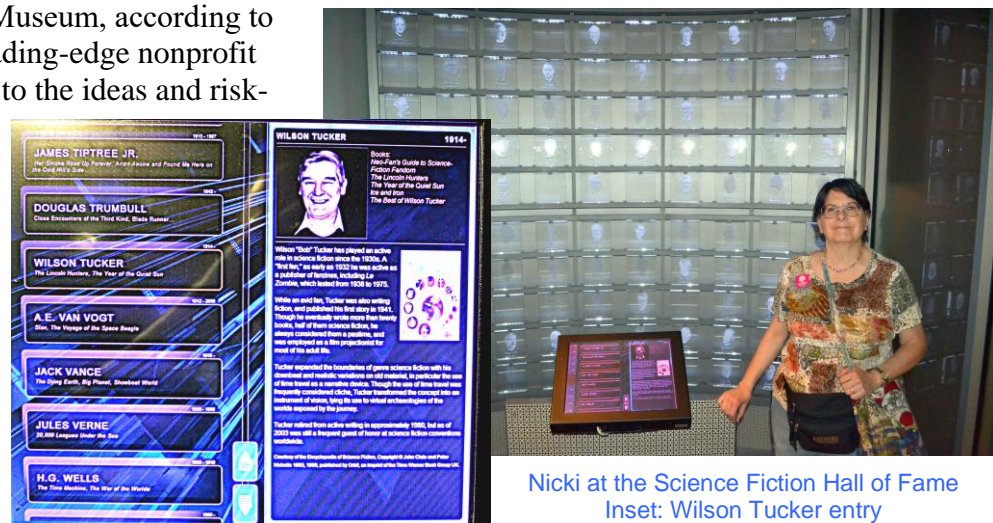


model of Spaceship Discovery from the movie 2010

artists and editors who have been inducted, along with a smattering of filmmakers and even some media personalities (the most unlikely being David Bowie). Each inductee had a one-page description of his or her career. And that was pretty much it for the written word. Everything else in the science fiction gallery was media-related.

To be sure, the all the media stuff was very well done. There were costumes, spaceships, props, and gadgets from all the high-profile movies and television series dating all the way back to *The Wizard of Oz* in 1939. It was all interesting enough that we stuck around for the better part of an hour taking it all in, and then it was on to the other parts of the museum. And it turned out that the other parts of the museum were better.

The 'M' in the museum's name stands for 'music' and there were several really nice displays related to that. One gallery covered the career of Seattle native son Jimi Hendrix, or at least the final four years of it after he had become an international pop music superstar. Another exhibit



Nicki at the Science Fiction Hall of Fame
Inset: Wilson Tucker entry

explored the history of the Seattle-based grunge band Nirvana with posters, photographs, guitars played by band members, and video recordings of performances by the band. But the music-themed gallery that I found the most interesting was one titled “A Quest for Volume” that was actually a walk through the history of the guitar from the late 1700s to the present.

There were some *vintage* guitars on display, absolutely exquisite. My favorite was the 1927 National Steel, one of the first ever produced by the company. Truly gorgeous, and who would have ever thought that the instrument was originally developed by a Vaudeville guitarist and made famous by a Hawaiian music star. Some of the other guitars were vintage for a different reason – a few were first-of-a-series prototypes from Orville Gibson, Les Paul, and Leo Fender while others had been owned and played by famous guitarists such as Eddie Van Halen, Ray Davies, Duane Allman, and Bo Diddley. When they were on stage it was performance art...in more ways than one.



the exquisite 1927
National Steel Guitar

The Golden Age of Animation

The most entertaining exhibit in the EMP Museum, however, was the one titled “What’s Up, Doc? The Animation Art of Chuck Jones”. Jones, as we are all well aware, was a cinematic genius and perhaps the most talented of all the many famous artists and directors in the so-called Golden Age of Animation of the late 1940s to the early 1960s. He created Marvin the Martian for the Bugs Bunny series of cartoons, and Wile E. Coyote and his speedy nemesis the Road Runner. Jones was director of arguably the best animated cartoon short that has ever been made, *What’s Opera, Doc?*, which was being continually screened in one corner of the gallery.



my encounter with an Acme Corporation anvil

As you might expect, the exhibit featured many storyboards, sketches, animation cels, and photographs. Together, these were a narrative that described how Jones and the other Warner Bros. cartoon animators created the short masterpieces that amused us so much when we were growing up. But it was the interactive displays that were the most popular, especially with youngsters. One of them made you the ‘star’ of the iconic Looney Tunes ‘bulls-eye’ closing logo, and another brought you into peril from one of the Coyote’s Acme Corporation anvils. On second thought, these weren’t *exclusively* for just the young after all.

Lunch with the Hobbits?

There was some synchronicity involved with the Chuck Jones exhibit. Back at our hotel I did an Internet search and found out that he had been born in Spokane, where the 73rd World Science Fiction Convention was being held. We were headed there the next day, but first there was a state capitol to see.

As I mentioned, I collect state capitols. They're spectacular buildings and the times that I have been inside a Capitol I have never been disappointed. The Washington State Capitol, sixty miles south of Seattle in Olympia, more than lived up to that expectation. It's a relative youngster as capitol buildings go, dating back to 'only' the late 1920s. The prominent feature, of course, is the dome, and at 287 feet high it is the tallest self-supporting masonry dome in the United



inside the Washington State Capitol

States and fourth tallest in the world. Inside, there are arches and columns, and a grand rotunda formed by the dome. Suspended from the top of the dome into the rotunda is a 5-ton bronze chandelier that is large enough to encapsulate a small automobile. It was designed and made by Louis Comfort Tiffany and was his final large commission.

But Nicki and I had driven down to Olympia to see more than just the Capitol. My brother's daughter and her family live near there, and the last time I had seen them was back in 2008 when they were still residing in Phoenix.

Seven years passing doesn't subjectively seem like all that much any more, but in that time my grand-niece had changed from a cute little girl into an elegant young lady. And my grand-nephew had become a budding sports star (complete with foot injury). Nicki and I had a pleasant lunch with them, after which a meter-maid parking enforcement officer took our picture. When Nicki saw the resulting photo she broke out laughing, as the perspective made it look like I was being accompanied by four Hobbits.



the Washington State Capitol



post-lunch photo with our niece
and her son and daughter

The Two States of Washington

The driving distance from Olympia to Spokane is 320 miles, and it took us to nightfall to get there. The Cascade mountain range separates the state into two different climate zones and the passage up and over them, through the picturesque Snoqualmie Pass, was something that I'm glad I didn't have to do in winter.

The Cascades are high enough that they have a rain shadow which affects the climate for the parts of the state that are east of the mountains. And it was a dramatic and abrupt change. At Cle Elum, where we stopped for a



on the road in the Cascades

snack, the roads were lined with evergreen trees. But just 25 miles to the east, at Ellensburg, there were only grasslands.



Nicki at the Wanapum Gorge scenic overlook

Most of central Washington turned out to be a dry plateau with a long succession of farms and brown sagebrush, but about two hours out from Spokane the Interstate highway dropped down to cross the Columbia River. A 600-foot deep gorge is just upstream from there and the road designers thoughtfully included a scenic overlook on both sides of the road. The westbound turn-off

was closest to the gorge and had the best views, but for those headed east there was an added delight. Up on a ridge overlooking the highway and river is public art sculpture titled "Grandfather Cuts Loose the Ponies". It consists of 15 life-size steel horses running at full gallop, and was apparently intended as a homage to the wild horses that once roamed through this part of the state.

I've read that the sculpture is still incomplete – there is also supposed to be a 36 foot-high tipped basket with two horses still inside, but funds ran out before it



the "Grandfather Cuts Loose the Ponies" sculptures

could be constructed. The basket was to be decorated by local artists using traditional designs of the First Nations peoples who inhabit Washington, and the overall concept, according to the designer, was that the horses were a gift from the Grandfather Spirit: *“Creatures of this planet, behold, a Great Basket! I send this basket, bearing the gift of life, to all corners of the universe!”* A sentiment that seemed appropriate for an upcoming Worldcon.

My Own Private Idaho

Spokane had its own share of things to see and do. It has also hosted a World’s Fair, in 1974, and what remains is a riverfront park with paved walkways that extend along both sides of the Spokane River from the University district downriver to the falls. There is a gondola “SkyRide” that goes directly over the falls, and that proved to be a popular thing to do for Worldcon attendees.

For the more down-to-earth types, there was a series of sculptures along the river walk, more than twenty in all. These ranged in theme from the serious (a tribute to Astronaut and Spokane resident Michael P. Anderson, who perished aboard Space Shuttle Columbia in 2003) to the whimsical (a metal goat which consumes small pieces of trash with the help of a built-in vacuum system). There was also the obligatory moose sculpture, which was amusing but not as witty as one we had seen in Coeur D’Alene.



aboard the Spokane Falls SkyRide



kicking back in Coeur D’Alene

One of the reasons we had decided to have an automobile during this trip was so that we could go into Idaho. The state line is not far to the east of Spokane, and the city of Coeur D’Alene was said to be charming. Barbara Walters had once referred to Coeur D’Alene as “a little slice of heaven”, and once we were there it was easy to see why. On a warm August day it was a very pleasant place to spend a few hours, with a nice breeze coming in off the nearby large and scenic lake. We had lunch there and then kicked back with some huckleberry-flavored ice cream. Earlier, Nicki had spent some quality time browsing through Bear Paw Quilting, one of the top ten quilter stores in the country. By the time we headed

back toward Spokane it was mid afternoon, and in my opinion we left Coeur D’Alene just in time. There was a realtor storefront on the street where the ice cream shop was located, and when Nicki saw how affordable the area was she was contemplating looking at property.

Coping with the Puppies

And then it was time for Sasquan. This was our 30th World Science Fiction Convention, and it was by far the most contentious Worldcon we have ever attended. Prior to the convention, a block voting campaign had in effect hijacked many of the categories for the Hugo Awards, the annual science fiction achievement awards that are voted on by Worldcon members. The so-called “Sad Puppies” and “Rabid Puppies” campaigns, after mostly unsuccessful attempts the previous two years, had finally managed to saturate most of the voting categories with hand-picked slates of novels, short fiction, editors, and publications. These Hugo finalists were, as a whole, much more ideologically conservative in nature than in previous years, which the Puppies campaigns had perceived as having been dominated by liberal-agenda “Social Justice Warriors”.

After the Hugo finalists were announced back in early April there was an ensuing uproar which continued right into the convention – several proposals were put before the Sasquan’s business meeting which would make it harder for future Worldcon block voting campaigns to succeed. Or so the proponents claimed.

I was not on any programming items this year, so I decided to sit through several of the business meeting’s sessions to see what would happen. The chair was a long-time fan who is skilled in parliamentary procedure, but there was no way to expeditiously work through all the machinations of amendments and counter proposals. In the end, the business meeting lasted about ten hours spread out over four days. Two proposals for reforming the Hugo nominating process were moved forward toward final ratification at next year’s Worldcon, but one of them is so complex and difficult to comprehend that it seems to me as bad as what it is purporting to cure.

Of the programming items that I did attend, the ones I found most interesting were related to science and history. There was a pretty decent astronomy-related program, with panels about the latest findings of the Pluto “New Horizons” mission and the “Dawn” mission to the asteroid belt. And there were a few panels about preserving the history of science fiction fandom, including an ongoing project by the University of Iowa to digitize a collection of fanzines bequeathed it by the estate of one of the attendees of the very first Worldcon. These scans will be hugely important source material for the continuing effort to learn more about what fandom was like in its earliest days more than eight decades ago.

I take some pride that I played a small role in the Iowa project. Back in 2013, at the San Antonio Worldcon, I had lunch with Peter Balestrieri, the curator of the University’s popular culture collections, and convinced him of the importance of digital



the Sasquan business meeting



Peter Balestrieri and me

preservation of the old fanzines. And this high-profile effort is what has resulted. Peter was at Sasquan, and we spent a long time talking about the digitizing project and how the resulting archive could be accessed. This will be a model for other universities to follow with their own fanzine archives, even if it will probably be several years at least before it all ultimately comes to pass.



1939 and 1940 issues of Olon F. Wiggins' *The Science Fiction Fan* from the University of Iowa collection

Smoke on the Water

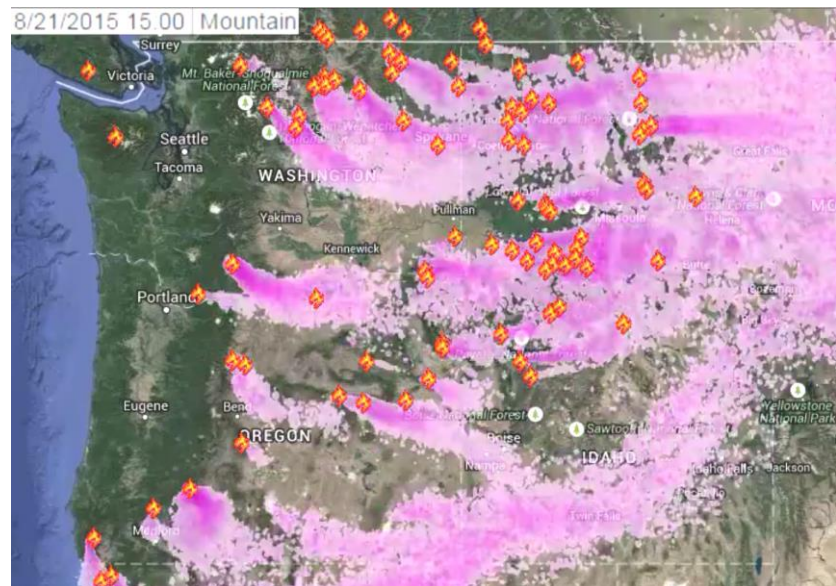
One thing that I immediately noticed about eastern Washington is that the skies were much hazier than on the western side of the Cascades. Some of this was no doubt due to the overall lay of the land, where late summer breezes had caused dust from dry fields and hillsides to become airborne. But August is also wildfire season for that part of the country and there were no lack of them in eastern Washington, some very large and serious enough to put firefighters in jeopardy.

None of these fires were close enough to Spokane to where the city was in any danger, but on one of the days of the convention the prevailing wind shifted and brought smoke from one of them directly over the city. It was bad enough that visibility was down to much less than a mile and it was deemed a health hazard to be outdoors.

It became obvious that something extraordinary was going on when the convention center's indoor smoke alarms started going off. Even before that a smoky odor had

pervaded the air inside the convention center. By the middle of the day, being outside for even a short time made my eyes sting. Many of the locals we observed at the river walk were prepared and had surgical particulate masks but most of the Worldcon attendees, Nicki and me included, had to improvise. Damp paper towels were a popular alternative.

If these conditions had persisted for the entirety of the convention, we might have had to pack up and get out of there. But luckily it was only a one-day problem for the convention. Overnight the wind shifted and when we woke up the skies were blue again.



National Weather Service smoke plume model for August 21, 2015

From the Progressive Era to Middle Earth

We were thankful that we didn't need our rental car to find breathable air, but we did need it to get to the place where all the evening parties were being held. They were in the historic and ornate Davenport Hotel, built more than a century ago at the end of the Progressive Era and restored in 2002 to what it was like back near the beginning of the 20th century. Truly glorious. But the hotel was about a ¾ mile walk from the convention center and even farther from where we were staying. Yet another good reason for having a car during a Worldcon.



with Mr. Davenport in his hotel

It was at these room parties that we learned about the big news stories of the convention. There were four different cities in the running for the 2017 Worldcon, including Washington, D.C. The general consensus going in to Sasquan was that it was probably the favorite, though there was strong competition from the European bid in Helsinki. Nicki and I have many friends who were on the D.C. bid committee, and we shared their disappointment when word filtered down that Finland had won the site selection vote. At least they will get a chunk of their lives back in not having to plan a Worldcon, and Nicki and I were spared the dilemma on deciding if we should reserve a room at the convention hotel or just commute there daily from home.

I was at the Helsinki celebration party the next evening when the Puppies controversy was finally settled, at least for this year. The Hugo Awards ceremony was being live-streamed from the convention center, and it was way more convenient to watch it on television from their party suite. None of the non-media Puppies finalists won, but the downside was that “No Award” was the winner in five different categories. This was unprecedented, to say the least. In the entire history of the Hugo Awards (which stretches back to 1953), until this year there had been only five instances *ever* where “No Award” had aced out all the other finalists in a Hugo category.

And so the cycle continues. There were Worldcon bid parties for years beyond 2017 that have yet to be decided, all the way out to 2020. For that year the New Zealand bid is currently running unopposed, and its party was certainly unique. Where else could we get our photo taken in the doorway of a Hobbit's home? Next year's Worldcon will be in Kansas City, the first time it's been there since 1976. It will be a five day human kaleidoscope of literary and media panels, parties, and reconnecting with fan friends too seldom seen.



a visit to Middle Earth at the New Zealand party

And Nicki and I will be there.

Epilog: Thirty-Six Views of Mount Rainier

With the exception of the one day that was impacted by wildfire smoke, the weather for the trip was splendid – there wasn't a single day where there was a threat of rain. This was a big contrast to what I remember about our only other visit to the Pacific Northwest back in 1988. Many times during that week in Seattle we had been told how impressive the view of Mount Rainier was, if it only weren't so cloudy/rainy/foggy/hazy/etc. Before the skies finally cleared on our last day in town, I had just about come to the conclusion that Mount Rainier was a colossal hoax being perpetrated by the Seattle Chamber of Commerce.



Mount Rainier from Seattle

We didn't have any trouble seeing Mount Rainier during this trip, but we did have some difficulty getting a presentable photo of it. The best view we had in Seattle was on an Interstate highway overpass, but there were foreground obstructions. There



the mountain from just south of Tacoma

were also dozens of obstructed views of the mountain on our way back from Olympia, where we could see it peeking over the buildings on the right side of the road. The best view, and it was spectacular, was from a distance of

about 25 miles away on a shortcut that took us to Interstate-90. But the unobstructed clearing came upon us so suddenly that there wasn't enough time to take the photo before the mountain became hidden again by trees and hillsides.

I had just about given up, by the time we arrived back at the Seattle airport hotel the evening before the flight home, that we'd ever get a decent photo of that imposing peak. But the next morning, not more than an hour before we were to catch the airport shuttle, I happened past a hall window twenty feet from the door to our room and there it was!



Mount Rainier from the hotel window

There's no danger that I'm going to add mountains to my list of unusual collections – I'm not a mountain climber and a scenic 25 miles from Mount Rainier seemed just about right to me. But I *am* collecting Worldcon memories and there were a bunch of them from Sasquan that I've added to my mental filing cabinet. Lots of friends were there, and the dinner on the last evening with some of them was so pleasant that Nicki and I skipped the dead dog party because we wanted that meal to be our last image of Worldcon.

Until the next one, at least. ☀

