



My Back Pages #17
Rich Lynch

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articles and essays by Rich Lynch

Welcome to another year-end collection of some of my articles and essays. What started, back in 2011, as a present of sorts to my sister Beth, has long since taken a life of its own. And, at two issues per year, it even appears to be sustainable though more and more of the material I have been reprinting was written relatively recently.

This issue breaks new ground in that one of the essays is so recent that it has not been previously published. But I'd rather you didn't read that one first. Like all previous issues of *MBP*, this one is designed to be as monolithic and seamless as possible – it's all about the transitions. This collection is intended to be read as if it were one long and continuous piece of writing, so start at the beginning.

In the very first issue, back in April 2010, I stated that “I have way too many articles for a one-off publication”. Boy howdy! With this issue the total number of essays I've reprinted is now up to more than 130. If I make it to issue #20, in the next few years, I'll have reprinted more than 150. And as for the next few years, for all of us here in the United States it looks to be a long, strange journey from a political perspective. So let's begin this time with a tale about a long and at times strange journey of a much different kind.

*Rich Lynch
Gaithersburg, Maryland
December 2016*

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‘Worldcon’ is a service mark of the World Science Fiction Society.

A Long Journey Concluded and Other Memorable Walks

May 1, 2011: I've been at it for just about four months and I'm nearing 260 miles walked, which 'places' me on route US-11 in southwestern Virginia near Christiansburg.

It was about 5½ years ago that I decided I wanted to take a walk.

It happened back in January 2011, on an otherwise uneventful day at work. My then-boss had commented to me that she thought I needed to get out from behind my desk more often. What she had really meant was that I should become more interactive with other interagency organizations. But for a few moments I had thought she was implying that I needed to get more exercise.

Actually, she would have been absolutely correct – sitting behind a desk for hours at a time was not doing my overall health any good at all. So I inserted a few one-mile walks, inside the building where I work, into each day. This low-impact daily workout was enough to increase my metabolic rate to where I was able to better manage calories, and the endorphins generated during these walks helped to sharpen my thinking which enabled me to come up with useful ideas for things I was working on.

So to make it interesting I plotted a virtual 'Walk Across America', with short progress reports as I proceeded, to track my total distance walked and to serve as a motivation to keep going even farther. Over the past 5½ years these one-mile walks have added up to 3,500 miles total, or the distance from my home in Maryland down to New Orleans, across Texas and the desert Southwest to Los Angeles, then northward to San Francisco. At some point in the next year or so I intend to travel out to California and meet up with my virtual self at the walk's terminus, Café Zoetrope, to share a bottle of wine. (But I'll probably do most of the drinking.)

###

March 1, 2012: Steady progress in the first two months of 2012 in this virtual Walk Across America has 'brought' me to Fayette, Alabama. It's the home of the late folk artist/musician Jimmy Lee Sudduth, whose paintings are part of many notable 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.

It's possible that I've seen a Jimmy Lee Sudduth painting – I've been to the American Folk Art Museum, back when it was located next door to the Museum of Modern Art. And, no surprise here, MOMA was definitely better. That great museum is the home of many of my favorite paintings, including Salvador Dali's "The Persistence of Memory". Seeing it for the first time, in person, was pretty unforgettable because of the mosh pit of people jockeying for position to line up their keepsake photographs of the work. And also my wonderment on its size – it was much, much smaller than I had expected. But that was not my most memorable interaction with a Dali art piece. No, not nearly...

Back in 1999, during a free evening on a business trip to Slovakia, I almost got myself thrown out of a "Salvador Dali in Bratislava" exhibit. It was in a



gallery of a downtown museum, and most of the display consisted of small bronze sculptures exhibited in free-standing pedestal glass cases. But there was also a collection (around the walls of the room) of signed and numbered artist prints of various subjects (many of them more than a bit bizarre – Dali was a greatly-talented artist, but also one strange character). There were exactly 100 of these prints, and as I walked through the exhibit I noticed that every single one of them was numbered “1/111”. I was leaning over, looking more closely at one, when I noticed I was blocking access from an older lady. I’m generally quite apologetic in such situations, so I quickly straightened up and took one step backward, turned away to move on... and my shoulder smacked hard into one of those free-standing glass cases.

The case came very close to toppling over – it rocked once and wobbled quite a bit, but it remained standing. Two of the museum attendants, who had been passively seated nearby, nearly jumped out of their skins – they leaped to their feet with looks of sheer horror on their faces. After everything had settled down they had a brief, hushed conversation then took their seats again, but I noticed that my actions were being very closely observed the rest of the time I was there. As for me, I didn’t visit china shops any time soon thereafter!

###

November 1, 2012: As of the beginning of November, my virtual Walk Across America has brought me to the central Louisiana city of Opelousas, the heartland of Zydeco music and birthplace of superstar chef and restaurateur Paul Prudhomme. The total distance walked since January 2011 is now up to 1,288 miles, which is not quite 37% of the total distance that I plan to cover. Will I make it to the Texas border before the end of the year? Stay tuned!

It was in Texas, back in 1997, when the term “Rich Lynch Death March” came into being. My wife Nicki and I were in San Antonio for a large convention, and one evening I was ‘elected’ by some friends to organize a restaurant expedition for dinner. There had been a relatively high degree of difficulty involved because nobody had a car and there were about ten of us. And it was also a very warm late August afternoon. By the time we had walked to the restaurant (which was a bit more than half a mile from where we started) most of us were drenched in sweat and some were starting to wonder if we were re-enacting the 1838 Trail of Tears. But it turned out to be an awesome dinner, filled with good food and great conversation. And ever since then, on any dinner expedition where there is even a smidgeon of walking involved, those same friends do not hesitate to gently remind me of that afternoon in south Texas. As they look forward to another memorable meal.

###

*November 1, 2013: My virtual Walk Across America has brought me to the oil fields of western Texas, about 10 miles east of the small and isolated community of Iraan (population about 1,200). The place was named for Ira and Ann Yates, whose ranchland the town now occupies, but its most famous resident was Vincent Trout Hamlin who in 1932 created **Alley Oop**, a comic strip about a time-traveling caveman. Texas is a BIG state! After 10 months of slogging out miles, I still have about 300 miles before I ‘reach’ the New Mexico border.*

In 1994 I visited a place much more isolated than the high prairies of west Texas – a central Siberian “secret city” named Krasnoyarsk-26. I was there as part of a ten-person U.S. Government team that spent two weeks in Russia to assess power generation alternatives to a nuclear reactor that was scheduled for retirement. And about a week of that time was spent out in the hinterlands of central Asia where the unexpected was often commonplace. I happened to be sitting in the very back of the small bus our Russian hosts had brought to pick us up at the

Krasnoyarsk airport and when we hit a huge bump on the road to K-26, I suddenly found myself covered with pieces of luggage that had formerly been stacked up around me. I yelled out, and one of our Russian hosts quickly helped free me from the avalanche. As he was moving suitcases and travel bags away from me, he told me, apologetically but unnecessarily, “There is an old expression we have: In Siberia there are no roads, only directions.”



me (tiny figure at bottom) and the mighty machine

On our last day in the Krasnoyarsk area we were taken by bus upriver to tour a large hydroelectric power plant on the Yenisei River, and it was there that the misadventure of the trip took place. That dam, at over 400 feet tall, was one of the largest in Russia and is too high for a conventional lock for river traffic. So instead, there is an unusual cog railway transporter that carries barges from the river up to the reservoir above the dam. I and another person in the delegation had walked to the end of the railway to photograph this mighty machine, when all of a sudden two angry-looking women appeared and started gesturing wildly and talking very loudly.

At that point I decided the best place for me was back down the path with the rest of the group, but the two women followed me and were intercepted by our Russian hosts. More loud talking and gesturing ensued... a *lot* more. The gist of the conversation, according to one of our translators, was as follows:

Woman #1 (pointing toward me): “This man is a *spy*!”

Woman #2: “We *demand* that he be detained, and his camera confiscated!”

I got back on the bus and tried to look as innocent as possible. Evidently, I had annoyed the security people and now there was hell to pay. Thoughts of concentration camps in the dead of winter swirled coldly through my mind. I could almost taste the salt I’d soon be mining in Siberia. Suddenly, with horror, I realized that the *least* of my worries should be about being shipped off to Siberia – I was already there!



Woman #1 on the warpath

After more agitated conversation, the two women stalked off with scowls on their faces. Our Russian hosts got back into the bus, and as we drove off I started to breathe a little easier. It was all over, I thought. But I was wrong...

About five miles down the road, the bus was halted by the military. (One of the women had apparently radioed ahead.) The soldiers motioned our Russian hosts out of the bus, and once again there ensued a long, heated conversation with all kinds of arm waving and gesturing. And once again our Russian hosts proved to be silver-tongued, because we were allowed to proceed. But not before the head of our delegation speculated, loud enough for the rest of us to hear, “Hmm... I wonder if they’ll let us go if we give him up.”

###

*May 1, 2014: At long last, El Paso. Inspiration for a famous song by Marty Robbins. Birthplace of Gene Roddenberry, Phil Ochs, and Sandra Day O'Connor, boyhood home of F. Murray Abraham and Anthony Quinn, and the place where **Manos: The Hands of Fate** was filmed. My virtual Walk Across America has finally gotten me to the far end of Texas. Total distance walked so far in this quixotic journey is now up to 2,288 miles, which 'places' me at my closest approach to Mexico, no more than a few hundred yards from the border. "Out through the back door of Rosa's I ran, out where the horses were tied. I caught a good one, it looked like it could run. Up on its back and away I did ride." It seems like I've been walking through Texas forever, but New Mexico is now just a few miles in the future.*

The view from the highlands to the north of El Paso is said to be superb, and I will have to go there in person one day to experience it non-virtually. But as superb views go, one of my favorites is from the northern headland of Sydney Harbour in Australia. I most recently visited it in 2008. It's not very far from Manly, one of Sydney's more affluent suburbs that is known for its miles-long Pacific Ocean beach. Manly consists mostly of touristy shops and restaurants, all along the very narrow neck of a peninsula that gradually rises in elevation as it extends southward to the headland.

It's a tough two mile mostly uphill walk to get from Manly Wharf to North Head, and along the way Manly morphs – you go from a business district through a residential area, past the International College of Tourism and Hotel Management, through the grounds of a former military base, and finally into the wild heathland of the protected North Head Sanctuary. It was a real effort to get there, but it's such a special place that I hadn't wanted it to be easy.



Sydney Harbour and skyline from North Head

The view from North Head is truly wonderful. To the west is the harbour with hundreds of sailboats, while to the east is a 300-foot drop down to the Pacific Ocean. Spectacular, just spectacular. Manly touts itself as "seven miles from Sydney and a thousand miles from care" and I can see why. It's very easy to pass time slowly there.

###

May 1, 2015: The beginning of May has brought my virtual Walk Across America to south central California. Total miles walked since the start, back in January 2011, are now up to 2,916 with another 584 left to go before the endpoint in San Francisco. The route over the past 60 miles has been along the Bradshaw Trail, which Wikipedia describes as a graded dirt road that was once a historic stagecoach route that connected southern California to a gold-mining area near present-day Ehrenberg, Arizona. The Bradshaw Trail traverses mostly empty desert, so anyone who would be crazy enough to physically walk the length of the road would need a large supply of water. And also a Kevlar vest, as the road skirts the northern boundary of the Chocolate Mountain Aerial Gunnery Range, which has been in use for decades by the U.S. Navy and Marines as a practice bombing range.

The scariest walk I've ever taken didn't involve aerial bombings or crossing a parched desert. It was actually very short, only a few hundred yards (though it seemed longer), and it happened during the early spring of my Senior year in high school.

In retrospect, it was also one of the stupidest things I've ever done. A few months earlier my mom and dad had sold the house we had lived in since before I had even been in kindergarten, and we had moved into a rental that had a shore front on a small inlet of Lake Ontario. Plenty of winter that far north, with January temperatures at times as low as -40 degrees. The inlet froze over at the end of December and by March, during the beginning of the spring thaw, there was still a significant layer of ice. From that house it was a mile walk, around the inlet, to get to school. But it was also a straight line distance, across the ice, of perhaps a third of a mile. So on a foggy morning in March, I decided to take the short cut.



my alma mater, Lyme Central School

There was enough fog and mist that by the time I got just a short distance off-shore, it became difficult to see either shoreline. By the middle of the inlet it was just me all by myself with nature – no signs of life anywhere that I could see. And then, I heard the ice crack.

I kept going, which may not have been the right thing to do. But by then the other side of the inlet was closer and it was sheer willpower that finally got me there. I remember that I kept telling myself, over and over, “I am going to make it...I am going to make it...” The ice held. What probably happened was that I had traversed over a thinner spot in the ice – a creek fed into the inlet and it's possible there was a current which had prevented the ice in that spot from being as thick as in other places.

If the ice had broken through I am not sure what I would have done – I would have been on my own to try and save myself. I'm fortunate that it never came to that, and indeed, I was scared enough by the experience that I never mentioned it to anyone. And since that day, nearly a half century ago, I have never again gone out on natural ice.

###

July 1, 2015: The beginning of July has brought my virtual walk across the United States to the San Geronimo Pass in south central California, one of the deepest mountain passes in the lower 48 states. If I were actually there I would be able to see mountains on either side of the pass rising to nearly 9,000 feet above it. As of the end of June, I have now walked a total of 2,998 one-mile circuits of my office building since January 2011. According to Google Maps, this places me in the city of Banning, named in honor of a 19th century American businessman who operated a stagecoach line between there and Arizona. But the city is perhaps more notable as the place where the great American composer Irving Berlin wrote the classic holiday song “White Christmas”.

The central European country of Slovakia certainly has white Christmases. And also some tall mountains. The High Tatras, a section of the Carpathian mountain range, forms part of the border between Slovakia and Poland. I have been fortunate to have visited Slovakia a dozen times, always on business, and I've taken walks up in the Tatras on a couple of those occasions. But it was a hike in one of Slovakia's lesser mountainous regions, back on a warm early summer afternoon in 1999, which has reserved itself a prominent place in my memory.

The first business meeting of the day (in Žilina) had ended early, so we had time to do some sightseeing. Diana, our translator, said she'd really like to see the nearby *Súľovské skaly* again (the Súľov rock formation – we'd been there a year earlier), and so our four-hour interlude between business meetings quickly turned into a mountain climbing expedition. Now, hiking up a relatively steep 300 meter rise in elevation while dressed in your business suit may seem like a dumb stunt (and it is), but the view from the top (there's a natural bridge up there) and the freshness of the surrounding pine and beech forest made it worth all the sweat equity. I only hope our hosts in the later business meeting thought so too!



the natural bridge at Súľovské skaly

##

March 1, 2016: As of the beginning of March, I have walked a total of 3,320 miles, which positions me a bit northwest of Parkfield, the self-proclaimed Earthquake Capital of the World!

Parkfield has a total population of less than 100 people but its location, on an active section of the San Andreas Fault, has brought it prominence in the scientific community as a place to gain knowledge in the physical science of earthquakes. I've never been to Parkfield, but I *have* been to a different section of the fault, north of San Francisco in a rural part of Marin County.

That part of Marin, near the community of Olema, was once considered as the location of the epicenter of the Big One – the earthquake that nearly destroyed San Francisco back in 1906. A half-mile walking loop (the Earthquake Trail) crosses the San Andreas in several places, and there's one spot along the trail where a wooden fence still exists that had been pulled apart by the big quake – an 18-foot gap pretty dramatically indicates the point where the fault slipped. It's a quietly powerful place to visit.



the gap in the fence

Nearly twenty years have passed since the last time I was there. I was shepherding a delegation of energy specialists from Slovakia, and we stopped by the trail after an earlier meeting elsewhere in Marin ended early. Walking the Earthquake Trail, in amongst all the tall redwood trees, is a pleasant experience just for its own sake and is made even more so by the markers along the way that explain what happened there. When we reached the fence, four of us stood, arms outstretched, fingertips touching – our combined double arm-widths was just about enough to bridge the gap. The energy released by that quake was enormous – enough to power the city of San Francisco for decades. You don't always have to look all over the world to find a powerful source of energy – sometimes it's right beneath your feet!

###

July 1, 2016: This will be my final update! The virtual Walk Across America is now 99% completed, with just 35 miles left to walk before the endpoint at the Café Zoetrope in San Francisco. This 'locates' me in the heart of the Silicon Valley, specifically in the city of Palo Alto, a couple of miles from Stanford University.

Perhaps the most significant walk of my life happened when I was attending university. But not Stanford – no, back in the early 1970s I was a student at what is now Clarkson University, up in the wilderness of far northern New York State.

There was a time, back in 1971, when I had to make a choice on what I wanted to do with myself. The Vietnam War was winding down and I was in Grad School. After a few months of that, I hadn't been 100% sure I wanted to continue as my research advisor was a somewhat taskmaster professor in an area that I had at best marginal interest. But I kept down that path mostly because the employment prospects back then were horrible for people right out of college. In the end, 2+ years of Grad School did get me a M.S. and a job offer in industry.

There was a different road not taken back at the end of 1971, though. True, the Vietnam War was winding down, but it was still a few years from being over. And the Air Force was still very actively looking for recruits. I wasn't so stupid as to not realize what military experience could do for long-term career prospects, especially as it would open doors for future U.S. Government employ. I had even gone so far as to hitchhike, in the dead of a very cold northern New York winter, to the next town over, where the recruiter was located, so I could have a sit-down with him. And I have to tell you, the enticement to enlist was there. He was really good at showing what even a short career in the Air Force would be like, and how it could help me. He told me to think about it for a day or two, and if not for the fact that I would have had to do another frigid 10-mile hitchhike back to see him again, I might well have joined up.

But the few days I waited until a bit warmer weather moved in made a difference in my outlook, and I decided to stay in Grad School – after all, I could always enlist later on if I wanted to. Anyway, I never went back and every so often I wonder what would have happened if I'd chosen that other road.

###

So what's next, now that my Walk Across America has ended? I'd originally planned to coincide the end of the walk with my retirement. But that hasn't happened yet, and most likely will not for another year-and-a-half. Or maybe even longer yet, if rumors come true on the possible location of the 2019 Ministerial Meeting of the multilateral carbon sequestration forum for which I am Secretariat.

So what I'll probably do is open Google Maps to plot an extension of the walk. It's about 475 miles from San Francisco north to Crater Lake in Oregon, and then another 430 miles on up to the Space Needle in Seattle. Both are realistically achievable if I should keep putting off retirement. And then what? Well, the Canadian border beckons, and after that...

See you in Alaska? ☀

(Excerpt from the song "El Paso" © 1959 by Marty Robbins)

Afterword:

In the end, I decided not to extend my walk. It concluded at the beginning of August, and by then there were looming deadlines at work where I couldn't spare the time to continue it. I'm resigned that it's probably going to be this way until I finally retire, whenever that may be. I think what keeps me from hanging it up is not only the work, which is interesting to say the least, but also all the friends I've made, in many countries, whom I would miss very much. Some of them are in Regina, Canada, a place I've been to only once, back in 2015. And I was surprised to find that it, along with the surrounding area, was very vertically challenged.

Cities of Steel and Irony

Prolog: Flatter than a Pancake

After four days in Regina, I'd long since come to the conclusion that there were no notable topographical features of the city. It's flat. But it wasn't until a field trip, to a power plant southeast of the city, that it became evident just how vertically challenged the region is. Southern Saskatchewan isn't just flat, it's *incredibly* flat. Describing it 'as flat as a pancake' doesn't do justice. The only things that broke the view to the horizon were the occasional stands of trees (none of which are native to the area) and, as the bus approached the North Dakota border, oil drilling rigs.

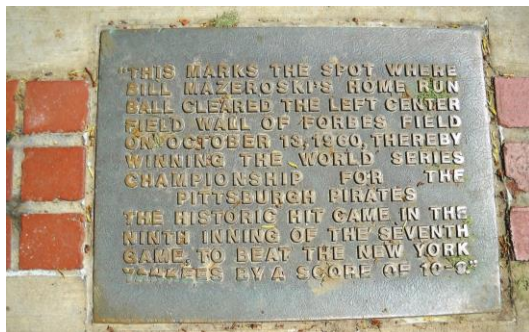


the endless plains of southern Saskatchewan

I found it rather ironic that all this flatness is right in the middle of the Mountain Time Zone.

The City of Steel

I had never been to Regina before, and it's far enough off the beaten track for me that I may never be back. The purpose of the trip was for a mid-year meeting of the multinational Carbon Sequestration Leadership Forum, for which I am the lead organizer. Just about all of my activities at work in some form or another involve carbon sequestration (a.k.a. carbon dioxide capture and geologic storage, or 'CCS'), so you'd think it would be easy for me to get permission to attend conferences and the like to keep my knowledge current. Not so. I'm actually far enough down the pecking order where it takes a combination of low travel costs and a place on the program agenda to get a trip approved. But luckily there *is* one such annual conference where I can do that. In Pittsburgh.

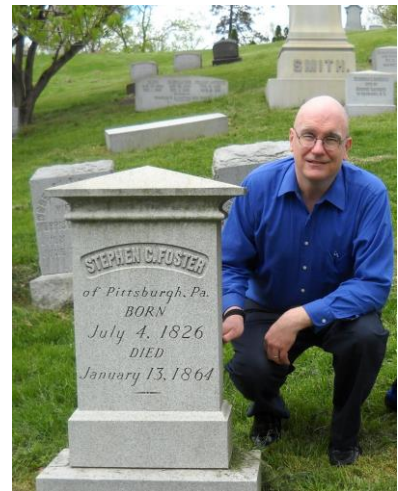


where Forbes Field once stood

The Steel City is one of my favorite places to visit, and it's only because of the ordeal of driving the Pennsylvania

Turnpike that I don't get there more often. The place is filled with history and culture, lore and legendry. The great American songwriter Stephen Foster was born and is interred there. Sports fans like myself still make pilgrimages to the place where a grand old

stadium once stood, itself a source of baseball lore and legendry. There's a thriving theatre district and even an Andy Warhol Museum.



a 2011 visit to the grave of Stephen Foster

There's a lot to do and see in Pittsburgh, even when there's not a whole lot of free time to do so. For this trip, I was limited to the downtown section of the city, but even so I found enough things of interest to more than fill the few hours I had available. One was the Fort Pitt Museum, located at the confluence of the Monongahela and Allegheny Rivers, where the Ohio River begins. The museum is in a recreated bastion of the French and Indian War-era fort that had been built by British colonists. Inside there are artifacts and recreations that show what frontier life must have been like back in the mid-18th century, as well as the role that



entrance to the Fort Pitt Museum

the fort played in the last years of colonial America and the first years of the American nation.



the place where two rivers become one

But it was the Point Park itself, where the museum is located, that was of the most interest to me. It's quite scenic there, where the two rivers become one. I walked all the way out to the point to take it all in and when I turned back toward the city I noticed an opportunity to sharpen my photography skills.

One of my former upper-level managers is a very skilled photographer and has been a positive influence on me. He has critiqued some of my photos and I've gotten lots of good advice on how to make them better. One of the areas where I think I have improved is composing my photos, and here was a chance to demonstrate it. But all I had on me was an iPhone, which increased the degree of difficulty. My Nikon DSLR makes it relatively easy to zoom in on and frame a photo. The small mobile phone screen with only electronic zoom available was anything but trivial to work with.

In the end, it took three or four tries to get the photo I wanted – a view of the iconic PPG Building with flag and tree in the foreground and gibbous moon in the background. It got me a positive comment from my mentor (after I texted it to him), and also some attention from a man with his young son who were out enjoying the day. He had me take a photo of them with his cell phone, and that one got me *two* positive comments!



an exercise in photo composition using the iPhone

The City of Clear Skies

The Pittsburgh CCS conference got me even more positive comments. I was a session chair, which put me on stage in front of about 400 people, including some of my upper-level managers. One of them paid me a nice compliment. But even beyond that my presence was noticed. I am chronically inclined to be interactive in technical meetings and seminars, and for this conference I was frequently called on during Q&As. By the end of the event, the conference Chairman was referring to me by name. In a *good* way!



on stage at the Pittsburgh CCS conference

For the Regina CSLF meeting, I had no trouble gaining notice because I was both the overall meeting organizer and the advisor to the Technical Group's chairman. Actually, I could have used a bit *less* notice because I wound up with a truckload of action items from the meeting that required several weeks to work through.

The highlight of the Regina meeting was the day of the site visit, two-plus hours by bus down to Estevan, a community of about 11,000 within walking distance of the United States border. It was a good day for a field trip, with lots of sun and clear blue skies, but I guess that was to be expected. Estevan is the city with the clearest skies year-round in the entirety of Canada.



at the Regina CSLF meeting

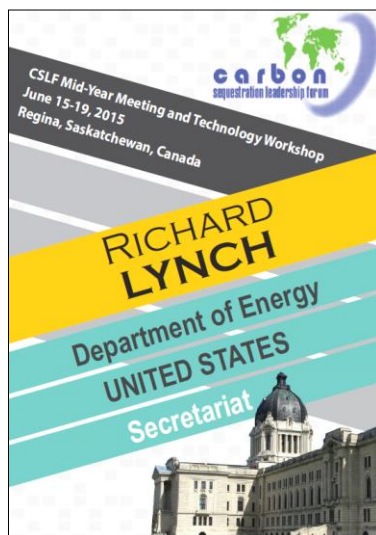


during the tour of SaskPower's large-scale CCS project

Estevan is also where SaskPower's large CCS demonstration project is located. This is a first-of-a-kind project, with full-stream carbon dioxide capture from the flue gas of a commercial coal-fueled power plant. More than a million tons per year will be removed and geologically stored or sold to nearby petroleum producers for boosting oil recovery from their wells. This is a hugely important project, and it has drawn interest and attention from many different countries. I was surprised and pleased that more people came all the way to Regina for this CSLF meeting than to the one last year in Europe, and I'm chalking up the better-than-expected turnout to the SaskPower field trip as the prime reason.

And meanwhile, outside the hotel...

I'd been afraid that there wouldn't be much to do in Regina, even supposing there was much time to do anything at all, and for most of my week there that was true. There's a big downtown shopping mall, but it was closed down by the time the daily meetings ended. The Provincial Capitol Building, which we used as a signature image for the meeting, was under construction and the dome was boxed up like a Brobdingnagian holiday present. Saying that streets rolled up at night would be an understatement. They were already half-rolled up during the daylight.



the Saskatchewan Provincial Capitol Building, real and imagined



First Nation celebrants in Victoria Park

that evening, and I heard all about it on the way to the airport the next morning. I had considered joining them, but after a long week of meetings the hotel lounge looked to be a better option. I was joined by one of the delegates from Australia and after a pizza and a few beers, all was right with the world again.

As I mentioned, I probably will not pass this way again. But memories of the things I saw and the people I met will stay with me. And now the roll-up has already started for the next CSLF meeting, a big one in Saudi Arabia near the end of

It wasn't until the Friday afternoon of the meeting that the city began to show some life. A weekend multicultural festival of some kind took over Victoria Park, across the street from the meeting hotel, and it was suddenly filled with people. The featured attraction was a pow-wow by a First Nations tribe, complete with much drumming and chanting. Near the park there were musicians set up at various locations and a couple of intersections over there was street hockey going on.

A few of the meeting attendees went to a Saskatchewan Roughriders pro football game



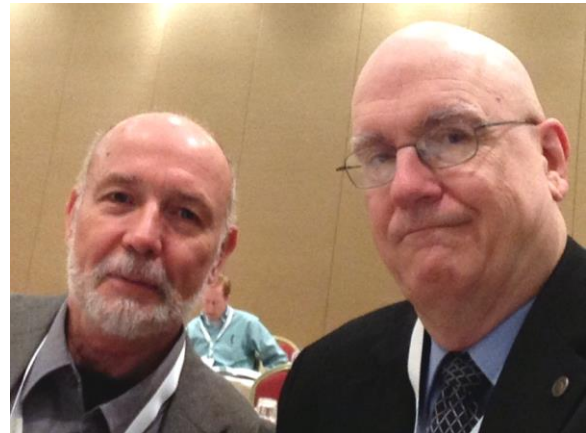
street hockey in Regina

the year. And after that, meetings in 2016 in the United Kingdom and Japan. I had originally intended to be retired by then, but all of these meetings that will need to be planned and organized are keeping me inexorably involved.

It's a conspiracy, I'm telling ya!

Epilog: Hail! and Farewell?

I met someone at the Pittsburgh CCS conference whom I had not seen in a very long time. Back in the 1980s when I lived in Chattanooga and was a Project Engineer at the Tennessee Valley Authority, my friend Rob was a mid-level manager in the same research division where I worked. He and I both left TVA in 1988, and I completely lost track of him after that. I saw his name in the list of attendees for the meeting and had the convention help desk put out a BOLO for him but it turned out that he found me first, having recognized me during my stage time as a session chair. We spent about half an hour talking about All Things TVA and what became of some of the other people we knew from back then. He's now semi-retired, as I am hoping to be one day. But not yet. Not yet. ☀

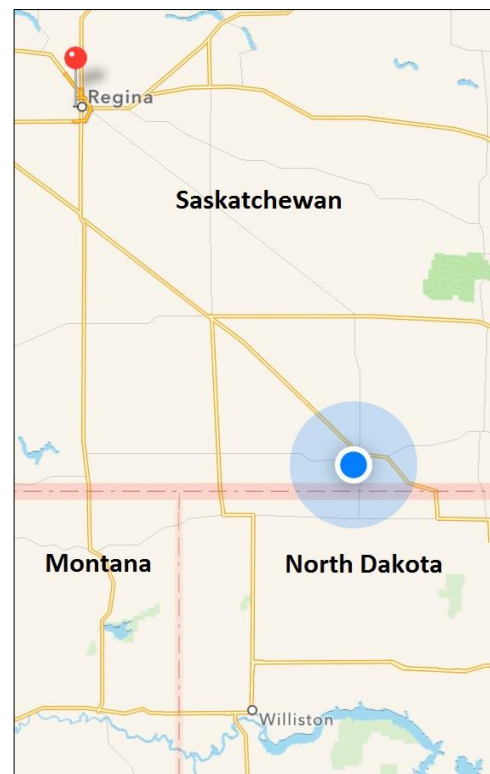


with my friend Rob at the Pittsburgh CCS conference

Afterword:

I wasn't kidding when I wrote that Estevan is within walking distance of the U.S. border. Only about five miles gets you there. My travels did not bring me quite that far south, but I can still state with certainty that there are no tall continent-spanning walls that separate the two countries. And with any luck, there won't ever be.

This seems a good way to segue into the next article, which I wrote back in the middle of the George W. Bush era during the roll-up to the 2004 Presidential election. As everyone is only too aware, we've just gone through another one of those and the eventual victor was the candidate who wants to build such walls. But there are other things the President-elect claims he wants to do, if his word is worth anything, that might be of interest to the politically progressives. Such as preventing jobs from being lost by 'off-shoring'. This was also a campaign issue (albeit a minor one) back in 2004, and seems to be a case in point that history tends to repeat itself about every 15 years. But I'm not holding my breath for any positive outcome on that. As the saying goes, the more things change, the more they stay the same.



Estevan is close to the U.S. border!

The Inevitability of Change

I was down in D.C. today for a meeting, and it so happened there was also a luncheon forum at the Heritage Foundation – the first one I’ve been able to attend in several months. This one was titled “Reforming Labor Regulations for the 21st Century.” The speaker was a Deputy Secretary at the Department of Labor (and a true-blue Republican – he’d previously been a high-ranking Senate staff-person, and before that, worked for former Vice President Dan Quayle’s infamous “Council on Competitiveness”).

The forum largely consisted of him reading a prepared speech that mostly hit out at organized labor (more specifically, how labor unions are financially managed) while also embracing change. Change, we were told, is inevitable. New technologies are already affecting how things are made and how people do their jobs. Furthermore, the right response to change will allow us as a nation to thrive, while resistance to change is, in the end, counterproductive for the good of the whole. This was pretty much red meat for most of the audience attending this conservative think tank event; new regulations concerning worker overtime have been promulgated that could affect many people and the spin (whether or not it’s actually true) was that these new regulations will, in the end, be helpful to the American workers.

The Q&A following the speech was surprisingly technical in nature; many of the questions dealt with arcane and obscure (to me, at least) features of existing laws and regulations, and most of that went pretty much over my head. I did get to ask a question, but not about that. Mine was about something he didn’t mention in his speech, but that will most likely become a key issue of the upcoming U.S. Presidential campaign. So I asked:

“The theme of your speech seems to be that change is not only inevitable, it is also usually beneficial in the long run. However, one of the newest forms of change that’s now affecting the American workforce is the off-shoring of jobs. The IT field, in particular, has been decimated by this phenomenon, with perhaps as much as 5-10% of programming, testing and help desk jobs winding up in India and other low worker wage parts of the world. Could you tell us, please, how the Bush Administration feels about this off-shoring phenomenon?”

I probably should have phrased it a bit differently, because he politely flicked the question away as if it were a piece of lint on his business suit. He responded that of course nobody liked to see people lose their jobs, but the situation had to be looked at in a broader context – job ‘in-sourcing’ also exists, where jobs have been created here in the U.S. by non-U.S. companies, and we “...should be careful that we do nothing that would affect the millions of jobs that are being created by in-sourcing.” This would seem to imply that some direct correlation exists between computer programming jobs headed for India and Toyota automobile assembly facilities in Kentucky. I sincerely doubt that, but then again, what the hell do I know?

The one statement he made that I did agree with was that: “We exist in a highly polarized and politicized environment.” For sure. In a world of inevitable change, this is the one thing that never does. ☼

Afterword:

In light of the recent election, that statement rings true more than ever. As Ben Franklin wrote, nothing is certain except death and taxes. So next is a remembrance I wrote of a friend that was recently published on the 10-year anniversary of his passing.

Remembering Ron

I remember that I read the news of his death in the November 2006 issue of the newszine *Ansible*:

*Ron Bennett (1933-2006), long-time UK fan who was the 1958 TAFF delegate and edited the classic sf newsletter **Skyrack** (1959-1971), died on 5 November soon after being diagnosed with leukemia. He was 73.*

The life and death of one of the most important and notable British science fiction fans, reduced down to just a few lines of text. That I hadn't even known he was ill made it all the more disheartening to read.

I feel very fortunate that I became friends with Ron Bennett, and regretful that it happened only in the last decade-and-a-half of his life. It started with correspondence, back in 1991, when I was editing the manuscript that became Harry Warner's fanhistory of the 1950s, *A Wealth of Fable* (SCIFI Press, 1992). Ron appears in several places in the book, and I had contacted him to clarify something that in the end turned out to be nothing more than a typographical error. But that got him on the mailing list for *Mimosa*, the fanzine that I co-edited (with my wife Nicki) that specialized in the preservation of the history of science fiction fandom, which eventually led to our first face-to-face meeting in Glasgow at 'Intersection', the 1995 Worldcon.

By then I had learned a lot more about Ron's activities in that 1950s Golden Age. He had published two focal-point fanzines – the newszine *Skyrack* and also a more general interest fanzine, *PLOY*, which lived up to the name by beginning its run with issue #2 to make readers believe they had missed the first one (there was even a letters column with comments from a few friends in the know who heaped praise on the fictional first issue). He was also described as a key player in the unraveling of one of the greatest hoaxes ever perpetrated in science fiction fandom – the celebrated Joan W. Carr, who was ultra-active in British fandom for about four years during the mid-1950s but didn't actually exist.

Ron himself was also ultra-active in British fandom during the 1950s and into the 1960s, and his fanac diminished only after temporarily relocating to Singapore in 1967 for employment as a teacher of the children of British army personnel stationed there. By the time I finally met Ron, in the Dealers Room at Intersection, I had become familiar enough with his personal fanhistory that when we were chatting about the circumstances surrounding his move to Singapore, he was so impressed by the breadth of my knowledge that he asked me in jest if I also knew the airline and flight number he had booked!



Ron Bennett (far right) at the 1960 Eastercon in London

It was two years later that Ron started contributing what became a series of nine entertaining and illuminating articles for *Mimosa*, the first being an account of his time in Singapore and how

(in that era of the Cold War) he once had to ward off the overtures from a Russian spy. Following that, Ron wrote short, amusing, anecdotal histories of *PLOY* and *Skylark*, and also a thoughtful and warm remembrance of another of British fandom's most prominent members, Vinç Clarke. But it was Ron's article about the four Kettering Eastercons of the mid-1950s that provided more information about the "Joan Carr" hoax and in doing so contradicted the general belief that he had been the person who had outed the hoax – it was true that he had been inadvertently tipped off by another fan who was in on the ruse, but that had been the entire extent of his involvement.

Ron's last article for *Mimosa*, which appeared in the final issue of the run, described the first Worldcon that he ever attended, the fabulous 1957 Loncon. This was the first time a Worldcon had been held in Europe, and with its compact size (which allowed everybody to meet everybody else) and unprecedented international nature, arguably it was the most important science fiction convention that has ever been staged. Ron attended several other Worldcons, including the very next one in California where he was the Trans Atlantic Fan Fund delegate, but the only other time where we crossed paths at a Worldcon was in 2002 at San Jose. It was totally unexpected and happened on the very last day of the convention. He was in the States to visit his son, who was editing a Silicon Valley-based computer trade journal of some kind, and just showed up unannounced. The only reason Nicki and I found him at all was because of a chance remark I overheard from someone who'd sold him a book in the Dealers Room.



Ron Bennett and Nicki Lynch
at the 2002 Worldcon

That was the last time I ever saw him. I had thought we'd meet again at the 2005 Worldcon in Glasgow, and had even requested a program item from the convention committee where I could interview him to see what other bits of knowledge we could glean about the 1950s and 1960s. But for whatever reason, Ron didn't attend and with a travel schedule that had been "carved in stone" I really couldn't go and seek him out. But if I'd known he only had a bit more than a year left, I would have tried a lot harder.

With all of his years of fan activity and involvement in the storied events of decades past, I'd always thought that Ron Bennett would have been an ideal candidate for a Worldcon Guest of Honor. I do believe it would eventually have happened, but time ran out on him. All of what's left are the memories and recollections from people who had been fortunate enough to have known him. These have been some of mine. ☼

Afterword:

In the decade since the passing of Ron Bennett, other fan friends have also joined the ranks of the departed. One of them was someone whom I had known and admired for decades, and his tragic death from a fall from the roof of his home put me in denial for many weeks. But, as you will read, it has not dissuaded me from going up on the roof of my own home once every autumn. At least, not yet.

Up on the Roof

It was a bit more than a year ago that my friend Ned Brooks died when he fell off the roof of his home. I'm not going to write a remembrance of him because I really don't have any Ned stories to tell. But I can say that Ned was one of the most important southern U.S. science fiction fans. His activity dates back to the early 1960s and in the six decades since then he accumulated a large collection of fanzines, many of them rare and historically valuable. These were all bequeathed to the University of Georgia's library, and I was pleased to find out that the curator is someone who has also been a science fiction fan for many years.

But as I mentioned, this essay is not about Ned. It's about roofs. Or, more specifically, it's about the roof of my house here in Maryland. In the immediate aftermath of Ned's death there was much agonizing about why Ned had been up atop his roof in the first place. My friend Guy Lillian probably spoke for many people when he wrote: "*Damn it Ned. Fixing your own roof. Why didn't you hire somebody?*" But whatever he was attending to up there might well have been so minor that he was quite capable of handling by himself. Unfortunately, something terrible happened, maybe caused a moment of inattention. But there are many fatal accidents that happen down at ground level that are also caused by inattention.

Like Ned, I also go up on the roof. Every November, after the leaves are off the trees, to use an electric-powered blower to clear out the gutters. I am *very* careful – the edge of the roof, 25 feet down to the ground in a few places, gets a lot of respect from me. But here's the thing – I really *like* being up there. On a late autumn day, where the weather is still clear and calm and not all that chilly, it's a very pleasant place. And the views are splendid. The back yard of the house abuts a shallow wooded ravine which connects to nearby state parkland, and from up on the roof it's not unusual to see deer and other wildlife.



view of wooded ravine from up on the roof

My wife Nicki, who was also a friend of Ned, is not happy with me being up there. But I've been doing it every year for the past two decades, so she is resigned that it's going to continue. She knows that I am chronically inclined not to hire people to do things that I am capable of doing myself. (I think it comes with my northern Yankee upbringing.) But Nicki also knows that I'm not going to take any risks and indeed, as I pass from late middle-age into geezerhood I am putting more and more distance between me and the void every time I am up there.

I don't expect that this will continue for much longer – the body is becoming incrementally creakier with every passing year, and I have no intention of repeating Ned's misfortune. So I am treasuring the moments that I get to linger there after the leaf cleaning is done. As well as anticipating, with some trepidation, a time when it will no longer be possible. ☀

Afterword:

I will go out on what I believe is a fairly sturdy limb and predict that next year will not yet be that time. Next is an appreciation I wrote in 2004 of one of my favorite composers, someone who was inspired by his own view of woodlands for one of his famous waltzes.

Happy Birthday, in three-quarter time, to a famous Viennese composer

It seems very appropriate that the melody of the song “Happy Birthday to You” is in three-quarter waltz tempo, because today, October 25th, is the 179th birthday of the famous “Waltz King” composer, Johann Strauss, Jr. (1825-1899). Like so many other composers, he had the great fortune to be born unto a family of musicians. In this case, however, the father was a famous orchestra leader and composer who works had already begun the evolution of the waltz and polka musical forms from traditional dances into the music of ballroom extravaganzas. Strangely enough, the elder Strauss at first strongly discouraged Johann Jr. from taking up music, instead pointing him toward a career in banking. It was only after the Johann Jr. demonstrated he was much better at working with a violin than with numbers did his father relent, and as it turned out, for good reason – at his first public concert performance, Johann Jr. played so brilliantly that he was called back for 19 encores, the final one being one of his father’s waltzes.



Johann Strauss the younger, in his salad days

Unlike most other composers of his era, Johann Strauss, Jr. had no formal music education. He apparently learned violin in secret from his father, most likely (and ironically) from the concert master of Johann Sr.’s orchestra. Johann Jr. was obviously influenced by his father’s musical genius as a composer and by the time he was nineteen he had not only started to compose his own waltzes, he had also formed a small orchestra of his own.

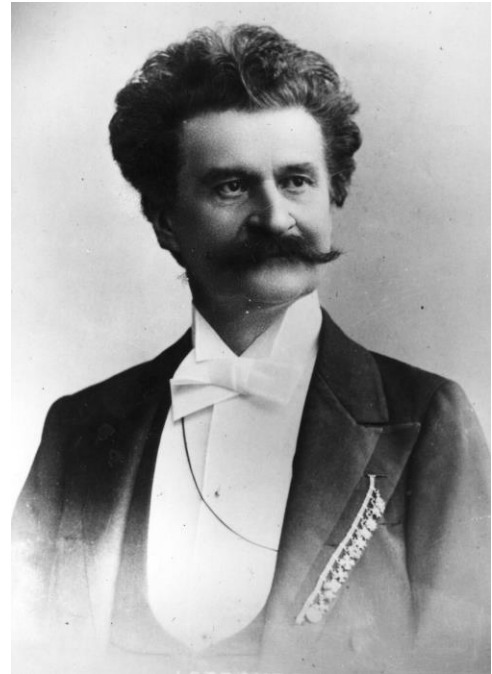


Johann Strauss the elder
(lithograph by Josef Knehuber)

Vienna of the late 1840s was a turbulent place, with the Hungarian revolution of 1848 causing the ascension of Franz Joseph to the throne of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Johann Jr. and Sr. supported opposing sides, and this very much contributed to a rift between the father and son which began when Johann Sr. left his family in 1842 for another woman and remained until the father’s death from scarlet fever in 1849. By then, Johann Jr. was well on the way to becoming as famous in Vienna as his father; after Johann Sr.’s death, the orchestras were merged and soon after that set off on an extended tour that brought world fame. The popularity of the Strauss orchestra eventually became so great, in fact, that during

the height of the reign of Franz Joseph, in the 1860s and 1870s, Johann Jr. became the Royal Director for Court Balls in the Emperor's court. At the peak of Strauss's popularity, there were actually several Strauss orchestras in Vienna, often performing at the same time in different locations in the city; Strauss would hurry from one to another throughout the evening, making appearances as a conductor to the delight of the concertgoers.

Johann Strauss, Jr.'s most famous works all date from about a two decade period that began in Vienna's golden age of the late 1860s. The first of these, "On the Beautiful Blue Danube" waltz, was composed in 1867 and others soon followed: "Artist's Life" waltz (1867), "Tales from the Vienna Woods" waltz (1868), "Wine, Women and Song" waltz (1869), "Vienna Blood" waltz (1873), the operetta *Die Fledermaus* (1874), "Roses from the South" waltz (1880), "Voices of Spring" waltz (1883), the operetta *The Gypsy Baron* (1885), and "Emperor Waltz" (1888). He was reportedly a prolific and compulsive worker, always jotting down bits of music that he would later develop on whatever was handy – napkins, tablecloths, and even his shirt cuff. And he remained that way until his death in the late spring of 1899, from a respiratory illness.



Johann Strauss, Jr.
at the peak of his popularity



The legacy of Johann Strauss, Jr., to the musical world is of course enormous with his timeless, elegant melodies, but in the end, it could be argued that the success of Strauss was very much a consequence of his surroundings – it is fortunate he resided in the glitz and glitter of 19th century Vienna. Strauss himself recognized this and late in his career he paid homage to his city when he stated that he owed much to "...my beloved city Vienna, in whose soil is rooted my whole strength, in whose air floated the melodies my heart drank in and my hand wrote down." His gift was a gift to us all. In 1896, one of Strauss's contemporaries said of him: "If we could estimate the amount of happiness and enjoyment contributed to the world by his creations, Johann Strauss would be regarded as one of the greatest benefactors of the century." More than a century later, this is still true. ☀

Afterword:

Two more essays before I end this collection. It's coming up to the end of the year and with it the snow season. Here in Maryland we do not get the mammoth storms you read about that lambaste places like Buffalo and Boston, but usually about once a year there is a big enough one that the meteorologists go and check their record books. Such is what happened back in January with a storm so nasty that it earned a fearsome name.

Snowzilla!

Nicki and I survived a 36-hour long beast of a storm in late January that the weather people in the Washington area were referring to as “Snowzilla”. And it really *was* a monster. It started as a big Pacific Coast storm, spawned by this year’s abnormally ferocious El Niño climate pattern. When it reached the East Coast, an arctic low pressure zone which had brought frigid temperatures to the Mid-Atlantic caused all that moisture to turn to snow. Lots and lots of snow.

About a week before the storm got here the meteorologists were ambivalent about how bad it would be. Three days out they had decided the Washington, D.C. region would probably get between 20 and 30 inches of snow, with the northwest Maryland suburbs, where we live, near the top end of the range.

Their estimates turned out to be low.

From the first snowflakes on Friday afternoon to when the skies finally started to clear late Saturday night, about 36 inches of snow came down in these parts. And it was more than just snow. The low pressure zone had created enough wind that there were blizzard conditions for a while on Saturday – we had to contend with a winter Nor’easter.



at the height of the storm

This is not the first time that a snowstorm of this magnitude has charged through here. Back in February 2010 there was a series of big bad snowstorms collectively known as “Snowmageddon” that as a whole deposited even more snow than the Snowzilla. But this storm was worse than any of the individual 2010 ones. It didn’t set a record, but it did make the top three of all time in terms of snowfall for the Washington metro region.



the little machine that could

Subjectively though, it wasn’t *nearly* as bad as the 2010 Snowmageddon, and not just because the overall amount of snow was somewhat less. For one thing, the power stayed on this time. Back in 2010 there was an outage at the height of the biggest storm that lasted about a day, and I remember that it was discouraging to see the snow get deeper and deeper as the house got colder and colder. And the power staying on was crucial, because this time around we had some help in getting most of the snow cleared away – an electric-powered snow blower.

Nicki had insisted that I get one after the 2010 storms, but it sat unused for nearly two years after that – there wasn’t enough snow in those two winters where we needed it. And when I first used it, a couple of years ago, I immediately found out that it had its limitations. It couldn’t handle densely packed

snow, and it was overwhelmed when it was up against snow deeper than about 8 inches. And it also had a propensity for not wanting to start. The instructions were to pull up on the dead man switch's handle and then push the red start button on the control box. But when I did that... nothing.

It was infuriating. And there was no recourse. I couldn't take it back or get the manufacturer to fix the problem because, after two years, the warranty had expired. After about the tenth try to start the machine, I became angry and frustrated enough that I gave the control box a **thwack** with the flat of my hand.

The snow blower started right up.

Ever since then it's been the little machine that could. It's reliable and easy to use (as long as I keep giving it that starting **thwack**), and it makes a much quicker job of clearing away several inches of snow than doing it the old fashioned way, with snow shovels. Except for where the front of the driveway meets the street.

Those of you who have lived where there is snow in the winter know that street plows are the homeowner's bane. You may *think* that you've finished clearing the snow from your driveway, but you're wrong. A street plow then comes past and deposits a foot or more of dense, heavily compacted snow into an impassible barrier that an underpowered snow blower like mine has no possibility of removing. So you spend a tiring 45 minutes or more with the snow shovel instead.



after the driveway was cleared of snow

This happened many times during the Snowzilla, so often that it became a Sisyphean task. It was about as much work to shovel these snow dikes away as clearing off the entirety of the rest of the driveway, and the more often it happened the more pissed off I became.

Come Sunday afternoon I finally decided that enough was enough, and when I saw the plow approaching I just stood there defiantly at the front of the driveway, leaning on my snow shovel in a stare-down with the plow's driver. In retrospect it was not one of my smarter moves, playing chicken with a snow plow, but hey, it worked! The driver slowly steered around me and the dense snow that would have clogged the driveway was instead strewn harmlessly across the middle of the street. Victory at last!

To celebrate, I came indoors to enjoy a cup of hot chocolate. All the hard work was finally done and the driveway was usable again! But then Nicki heard a rumbling sound out toward the street and when she checked...

Sure enough, the street plow had paid a final visit to the neighborhood, giving us all one last going away present. Until the *next* big snowstorm, anyway. ☀

Afterword:

Nicki and I rarely travel between late January and the first of March because we don't want to be away from home in the middle of snow season. But early January is fair game, and every year we take a short winter vacation to New York City. It's a place we never get tired of visiting.

Of Music, Mosaics and Minimalism

Prolog: Hooray for El Niño?

It was a January late afternoon, the first day of our annual mid-winter New York City vacation, and Times Square was bustling with activity. For a change!

Even way back in November it had been obvious that this winter was going to be far different than the previous two. The past two Januaries when Nicki and I had come to New York, bitterly cold Polar Vortex weather patterns had made Times Square almost uninhabitable. This year was a lot different. It was warm enough where even the Naked Cowboy was out and about.



the Naked Cowboy of Times Square

All this unseasonably good weather might have been due to that El Niño climate pattern we've been hearing about in the news. Or maybe it was just good karma. But whatever the cause, it was pleasant that we needed to dress only minimally warm.

Another Op'nin', Another Show

It didn't take a whole lot of good karma for this year's holiday season to be a pleasant one. Nicki and I are big fans of Broadway-style musicals and there were two good ones put on by regional theatres that we very much enjoyed. The Shakespeare Theatre Company down in Washington has begun to include musicals as part of its yearly schedule. Back in March they had a really nice production of *Man of La Mancha*, and for this year's holiday season they did *Kiss Me Kate*. The Shakespeare is a high-end regional theatre (it received a Tony Award back in 2012), and as such its production values match those of Broadway shows up in New York. *Kiss Me Kate* was very rich and lush in its staging, featuring several entertaining dance sequences and all that wonderful Cole Porter music, starting right off with one of the great songs of musical theatre, "Another Op'nin', Another Show". And there was even some synchronicity – *Kiss Me Kate* is a comic play-within-a-play, about what happened during the out-of-town tryout of a new Broadway musical version of William Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*. And when I looked at what the shows were for the remainder of the season at the STC, *The Taming of the Shrew* was one of them.



the backstage "Too Damn Hot" dance sequence from *Kiss Me Kate*

But even better, in my opinion, was the end-of-the-year musical staged by an even more local regional theatre company over in Olney, Maryland. It's located out at the edge of the Washington metro area, about halfway between Washington and Baltimore, but it's been doing Actors' Equity-level productions since 1938. And there is no lack of big-name movie and theatre stars who have, over the decades, appeared in Olney Theatre Centre shows, including Helen Hayes, Tallulah Bankhead, Burl Ives, John Carradine, Carol Channing, Roy Scheider, Olivia de Havilland, and Ian McKellen.

The OTC stages a classic musical every holiday season and this year it was a really good one: *Guys and Dolls*. It's a comedy, set in New York City, which was based on stories by Damon Runyon and was notable in that it was one of the very first musicals where the songs were integrated into the story line. And there are some really great ones: "Fugue for Tinhorns", "A Bushel and a Peck", "Luck Be a Lady", and "Sit Down, You're



stage for OTC's production of *Guys and Dolls*

Rockin' the Boat". There were no big-name actors in the cast, but the overall high quality of the production once again demonstrated that you don't need a recognizable name to have a good show. The OTC is chronically cash-strapped, and it uses its resources in other ways to good effect. I particularly liked the set design with its depiction of the New York skyline. Simply gorgeous and it made me look forward to seeing it again, this time in person.

It's a *Muuuuu*-sical!

There were more musicals to see a few weeks later in New York City. Five of them, in fact – one each on our four evenings in the city plus a matinee. It worked out so well that it's created a new paradigm for us in planning for future New York mid-winter vacations.

Nicki thought the best of them was the very first one we saw – *Something Rotten!*, which *did* have some big-name actors in its cast: Brian d'Arcy James and Christian Borle, both of whom were in the TV show *Smash*. There was certainly a lot to like about it. The storyline follows two brothers in their attempt to become a bigger success in theatrical world of 1590s England than that rock god, William Shakespeare. In the process, they consult a soothsayer who tells them that the next big thing will be a play where "...an actor is saying his lines, and out of nowhere he just starts singing!" Or in other words, it's "...a *muuuuu*-sical!" Which led into the big song and dance number of the show, filled with tap dance and



outside the St. James Theatre
on January 5th

clever ‘meta’ references to many other current and past Broadway musicals. It was a true show-stopper, so good that I rank it among the all-time best of Broadway.

And yet, that wasn’t my favorite show of the five we saw. I liked *A Gentleman’s Guide to Love and Murder* even better. We had been trying to see that show for the past two times we’d come to New York, but good lower-level seats had just not been available. As Nicki says, we don’t come to New York to sit in the mezzanine.

This year was different. *Gentleman’s Guide* was into the final two weeks of its long Broadway run (it’s going on a national tour soon) so after more than two years at the Walter Kerr Theatre, good seats weren’t so hard to come by anymore. That and our choice to make this the matinee show got us seats about tenth row center.

It was worth the wait. The show was hilarious in a macabre way – it’s the story about a working-class young man in early 20th century England who discovers that he is a member of the rich aristocratic D’Ysquith family. In fact, he would be heir to the family fortune – if it were not for eight others who were ahead of him in the line of succession. And so he takes steps, in a Machiavellian fashion, to reduce the number of heirs apparent, along the way acquiring not one but two love interests and the dilemma of keeping them from finding out about each other.

There were a lot of good songs, and even a tap dance number (which I would not have expected for an early 1900s period piece comedy), but they were not really equal to the ones in *Something Rotten!*. What made this my favorite show of the five was the acting, and especially the comedic timing by the actors. In particular, Jefferson Mays, who played all eight of the doomed D’Ysquith heirs, was so good that he stole every scene he was in. I read on one of the Broadway websites that in the duration of the show’s run he had been killed off more than 6,000 times. All of them comedic.

The King of Minimalism

Nicki and I did a lot more than just attend Broadway shows while we were in New York. We always make a point to visit an art museum on these mini-vacations, and this year was no different. We had only a single day available for that, so we had to decide: do we revisit a museum, or go to one we’d never been to? In the end, we opted to do both. At the same time.

The Whitney Museum of American Art used to be located on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, not far from the Metropolitan Museum of Art along the so-called ‘Museum Mile’ stretch of 5th Avenue. We visited it back in 2014, lured there by the special exhibition of a cinema-in-the-round panorama movie of lower Manhattan that compressed a full day into 30 minutes, all from birds-eye vantage point of about 16 stories above Union Square. This past



outside the Walter Kerr Theatre
on January 6th

May the Museum moved down to its brand new and much larger building in the Meatpacking District. That part of the city borders the Hudson River at the point where the rectangular street grid ends as Manhattan starts to narrow in width. The new museum is located close enough to the river where there are some nice vistas of the shoreline, all the way down to the Statue of Liberty way off in the distance.



the view from 5th floor of the Whitney Museum
(Statue of Liberty visible across river just to the right of the window beam)

There was lots to see at the Whitney. The permanent collection contains works by some notable American artists, including



the docent tour of the Frank Stella exhibition

Thomas Hart Benton, Edward Hopper, Robert Indiana, Jasper Johns, Andrew Wyeth, Alexander Calder, and Georgia O'Keeffe. There was also a special exhibition of paintings by Archibald Motley, an African-American artist whose works from the 1920s and 1930s got him the reputation as America's Jazz Age Modernist. But the exhibition that we had come to the Whitney to see was of a much more famous American painter, the great Frank Stella. He is perhaps the best known of the so-called 'minimalist' artists, a movement that began in the 1960s and often featured simple geometric forms.

This was the largest-ever gathering of Stella's work, including more than 100 of his paintings, sculpture, and drawings. There was also an informative docent tour which did a good job of walking us through his career. The signature work, used to advertise the exhibition, was a 1967 painting titled "Harran II", named after an ancient city in Asia Minor. For this he made use of modern polymer paints. Earlier works had been done in ordinary hardware store paint, a side benefit of his day job back then as a house painter. From humble beginnings sprang greatness. Would that we all have such success.



Nicki with Frank Stella's "Harran II" painting

The People's Square

Broadway is the most famous street in New York, but it's also a bad actor (no pun intended). It cuts diagonally through Manhattan's rectangular street grid, creating traffic problems along the way. Where Broadway crosses one of Manhattan's north-south numbered avenues, it creates a small square. The intersection of Broadway and 7th Avenue, for instance, is Times Square while the intersection of Broadway and 5th Avenue is Herald Square. And a bit farther south than that, at the intersection of Broadway and 4th Avenue, is Union Square.

Times Square is the one with the most people, but if I had to designate a "People's Square", it would be Union Square. Where Times Square is one vast electronic kaleidoscope of businesses and the entertainment industry, Union Square is mostly surrounded by a quiet residential area with



the statue in Union Square of
General George Washington

some shops and a few restaurants. There's an outdoor market there, street chess, and even a small dog park. It's the place where the first Labor Day parade was held, back in 1882, and 119 years later it became the central place where people gathered to mourn and honor the victims of the September 11th terrorist attacks. The south end of the square is dominated by a large bronze equestrian statue of George Washington, depicting the November day back in 1783 when General Washington led his Continental Army back into the city, reclaiming it from British occupation after the end of the Revolutionary War.

And as for living near there, it certainly would be a possibility for us, after retirement, if only it were affordable. My guess is that probably it is not, alas...but there's always the Powerball lottery drawing!



the outdoor market at Union Square

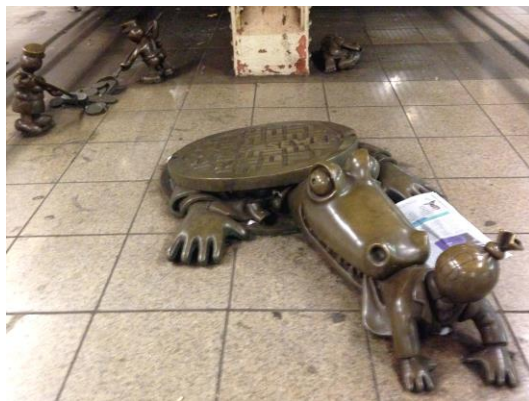
Nicki
and I spent



Nicki in the Lion Brand yarn shop

Epilog: We're not running out of things to do

The other three Broadway shows we saw were all very nice productions: *Fiddler on the Roof* (which featured one of our favorite Broadway actors, Danny Burstein), *An American in Paris* (which was almost as much a ballet as a musical), and *Finding Neverland* (which we had wanted to see because Matthew Morrison of the TV show *Glee* was headlining the cast).



bronze sculptures at the 14th Street subway station

And we saw other kinds of art besides all the impressive paintings by Frank Stella at the Whitney.

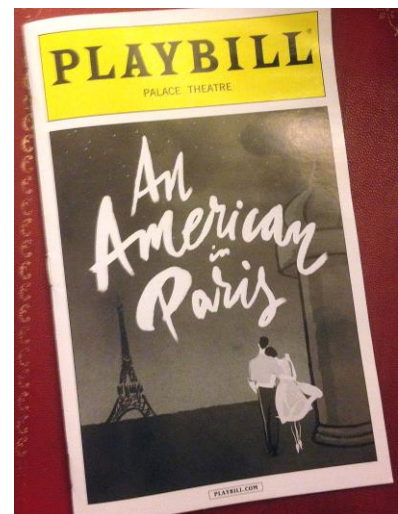
Some were in the subway system. The "Arts for Transit" program has transformed many New York subway stations into art showcases, featuring wall mosaics and sculptures commissioned from dozens of different artists. In the Union Square station at 14th Street there are anthropomorphic alligators that emerge from the sewers to attack tiny cartoon-like sanitation workers. On the way back to

our hotel in Times Square we made a special stop at the 23rd Street station so that we could check out all the mosaic hats. Turns out they are recreations, of a sort, of actual hats worn by famous people who frequented New York's Flatiron District.

As for what we didn't get to do...well, the Statue of Liberty is still number one on the list and I have no doubt that we'll get there at some point. We got a glimpse of it, way off in the distance, when we were at the Whitney; I'm expecting that our next view of Lady Liberty will be from a lot closer. And then there's the Brooklyn Bridge. I've always wanted to walk across it, but the outdoor temperatures would have to be even warmer than we experienced this year for us to want to try that.

But even if we get another Polar Vortex next year we'll not run out of things to do. As Nicki says, the weather is always pretty good inside museums and galleries, and there are still a lot of them left to discover and visit. It would probably take a winning lottery ticket for us to be able to relocate to New York, but until it happens we're going to continue greeting each new year with a trip to the Big Apple during its low season. And that doesn't even require any luck at all, just the ability to withstand some cold weather.

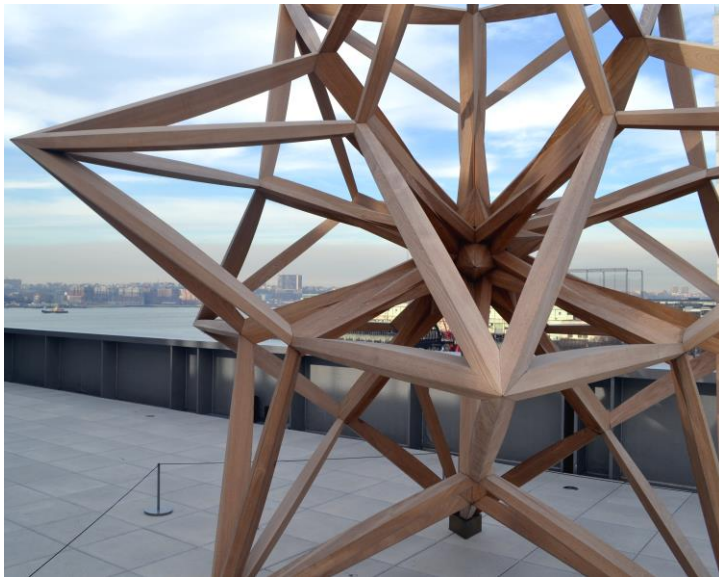
We'll dress warm! ☀



wearing one of the mosaic hats in the 23rd Street station



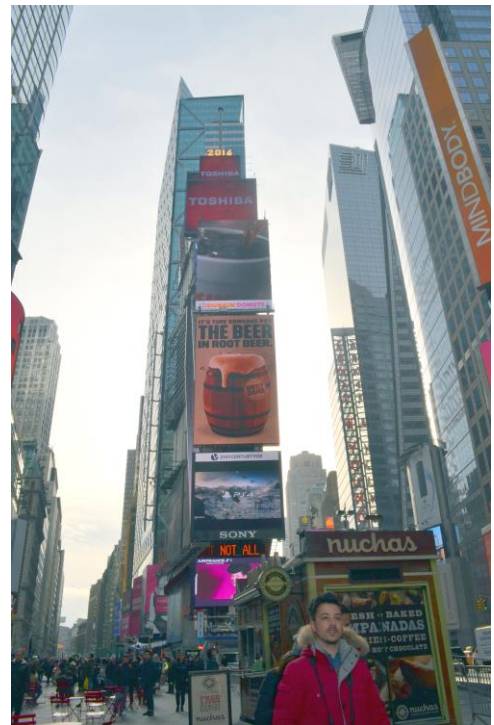
at the Frank Stella exhibition in the Whitney



Frank Stella's "Wooden Star" sculpture at the Whitney



Frank Stella's "Black Star" sculpture at the Whitney



the steel canyons of Times Square



mosaic hats of Billie Burke and Flo Ziegfeld



outside the Lunt-Fontanne Theatre

