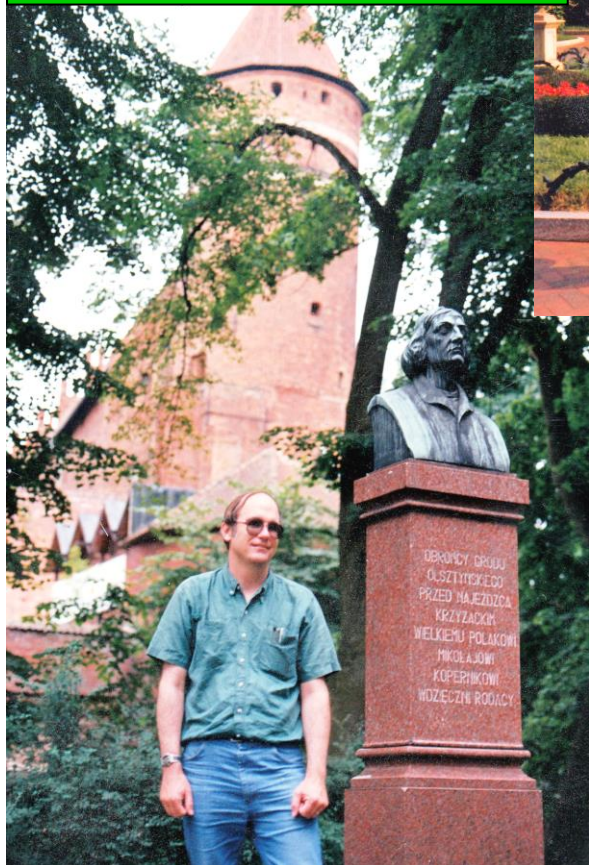




My Back Pages 22

Rich Lynch



My Back Pages 22

articles and essays by Rich Lynch

The temporal nearness of the Irish Worldcon, now only about two months in the future, brings back some memories of my one previous trip (with my wife Nicki) to the Emerald Isle. That was back in 2005, about a week before the Interaction, the 2005 Worldcon, which was staged in Glasgow, Scotland. We were in Dublin for three days, which allowed us to take in a lot of what the city had to offer – Trinity College and the Book of Kells, the National Museum with its somewhat macabre collection of mummified Bog People, the National Gallery with its fine collection of Renaissance and modern art, and paying our respects to one of Dublin's most famous citizens.

Nicki and I will be going back to Dublin in August for this year's Worldcon, so with that in mind I've given this issue of *MBP* a travel-oriented theme. Seems appropriate to start with our trip last August for Worldcon 76, which was held in San Jose, California. But, as you will read in this first essay, the convention was part of a greater adventure.

Rich Lynch

Gaithersburg, Maryland

June 2019



paying my respects to one of Dublin's most famous citizens, James Joyce

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Up the Coast

Prolog: Here is where it begins.

It really wasn't all that long ago that I was a cellular Luddite. I didn't get my first mobile phone until I was in my fifties, and even then it was one of those cheap flip phones which were good at making telephone calls but not much else. My first 'smart' phone, several years later, was an ancient Blackberry that I got as a hand-me-down. And it wasn't really all that smart – it did have a few built-in apps, but they were all either useless to me or else difficult enough to use that they might as well have been useless.

And then the world changed for me. My next phone after that was an honest-to-god iPhone and right out of the box it had what seemed to me an *amazing* amount of really useful apps and the ability to customize the device to add even more if I so desired. (Which I did.) And now, after just five years of being i-connected, I find that I've become a nomophobe. There are many apps such as my email that I use several times a day and others such as the airline and hotel apps that are really useful when I'm preparing for a road trip. But the one that I've grown to really depend on when I'm actually out on the road is the maps app, and in particular its GPS capabilities. It's found me alternate routes around detours and traffic jams and kept me from getting lost (on foot as well as behind the wheel) any number of times.

The most recent case in point happened in August, when Nicki and I were out in California for a vacation which would eventually take us to San Jose for the 76th World Science Fiction Convention. We had gotten into LAX just in time for the Friday afternoon glacially slow Los Angeles rush hour and had originally intended to take our rental car out the 101 freeway toward Ventura. But my iPhone somehow 'knew' that would have been a big mistake because of all the rush hour traffic and routed us up the incrementally faster Pacific Coast Highway instead. We soon realized that we'd never been that way before – which in itself had been a big mistake – when we came upon a marvelous ocean vista which seemed to be unending. The beaches went on and on for more than twenty miles – most of an hour at the speed we were able to maintain. And along the way there were thousands of people along those beaches taking in the late afternoon sun in various ways – cycling, walking, swimming, and surfing. *Especially* surfing. In addition to all the surfers on the water, we saw dozens of boards of various size and design atop or hanging out of vehicles of various size and design. They were everywhere.

It was twenty miles of *The Endless Summer*.

Now, I've never been on a surfboard and, indeed, have no desire to ever do so. But after vicariously experiencing the California beach life as we slowly wheeled past it, I can well understand its allure. People that I observed who were enjoying the late summer sun as the world went by all around them – they all looked like they'd found serenity. If I'd been brought up in southern California instead of the icy New York north country, I might well have been one of them.

Every so often we emerged from beach-induced sensory overload when traffic ground nearly to a halt while we slowly eased our way through busy intersections. Nicki pointed out to me the street sign for one of these: the famous Sunset Boulevard. "So here is where it begins," she said.

In more ways than one she was right.

In the Land of the Chumash

The area around what is now the city of Ventura has been inhabited for more than 10,000 years. In 1769, an expedition led by Spanish military officer Gaspar de Portolá established the first European settlement there. Prior to that it was populated by the indigenous Native American Chumash people.

There is a small but informative exhibit about the Chumash at the Museum of Ventura County, one of the places that we visited during our two days in the city. The gallery seemed mostly aimed at schoolkids with its visual depictions of the Chumash culture as well as artifacts and interactive displays, but elsewhere on the museum grounds there is a recreation of part of a Chumash village including one of their houses – it's vaguely dome-like in shape, built from tree branches and covered by bundles of reeds with a hole in the top where light could enter and smoke could escape.



inside the Chumash gallery at the Museum of Ventura County

The Chumash civilization flourished prior to its first contact with Europeans, ranging along the Pacific coast from Los Angeles all the way north to San Luis Obispo including several of the Channel Islands offshore of Santa Barbara. The Chumash culture was mainly that of a hunter-gatherer people, though they were known for shell beads which became the currency for a thriving regional trade network. But the coming of the Spanish colonists mostly meant the end for the Chumash as a nation. The indigenous population declined due to disease brought by the settlers and by displacement away from areas that had become occupied by the Spanish. Many of those who remained were converted into Christianity at the Spanish missions which were built in the late 1700s.



Mission San Buenaventura

One of those old Spanish Missions is in downtown Ventura, right across the street from the museum. It was founded in 1782, the ninth and last one established by the Franciscan friar Junípero Serra. The building that's there now is a bit younger than that, completed in 1809 to replace the original structure which had been destroyed by fire. It's very striking in its appearance, and Nicki and I found it even better on the inside. The Mission has its own museum, as you might expect, and even though it was pretty small it still contained dozens

of religious artifacts that date back to the early 19th century and fragments of items, from the original church, which had been carved and gilded by the resident Chumash people.

The one that I found most interesting was a wooden bell. It's one of two that the museum has on display, dating back to the mid-1860s and originally residing up in the Mission's tower. As for why a bell should be made out of wood, there have been several theories, the most colorful being that the original bells (presumably made from metal) had been stolen earlier in the 1800s by one of the pirates who prowled around the Pacific coast back then. But the best guess, from what I've been able to research, is a much more mundane explanation – the bells were made from wood because it was much less expensive to do so. Back then, cost certainly mattered.

There was a lot to see and do in the relatively short time that Nicki and I were in Ventura. The Museum of Ventura County had several other galleries which interested us, including one titled “Black and White and Read All Over”, which was an exhibition of comic art by local artists who

“shaped the development of the American comic strip and comic book during the past century”. One of those featured was Sergio Aragones, who was a winner of the 2002 Eisner Hall of Fame Award.



George Stuart's quarter life-size figurine of Giovanni Borgia

But the gallery that really drew our attention was an assemblage of one-quarter life-size figurines, created by sculptor and historian George Stuart, which were themed around the Renaissance and Reformation eras. Stuart, who lives up in the hills overlooking Ventura, has created these figures to augment monologues he has written and performed about notable historical eras of the past 400 years. The collection that we saw on display featured really detailed recreations of many famous and infamous personalities, including the Borgias, Martin Luther, Pope Leo X, and the notorious puritan fanatic Girolamo Savonarola. And there was also a short film on how Stuart constructed these amazing recreations. When we mentioned to the museum staff how impressed we were by what we saw, they told us that it was a permanent installation but the themes were changed several times a year to feature different collections of figurines. Just another example of “what’s old is new again”.

Ventura is old, but also new again from what we could see. It had been more than a decade since our previous time there and even though the downtown looked about the same it was pretty obvious that the city was growing, especially in areas away from downtown. There were a lot of large shopping centers that looked to be only a few years old. There were also many new places to eat. And gone were citrus groves that used to back up to housing subdivisions – in their place were more subdivisions. But the opportunity to rediscover Ventura was really not what brought us there. It was friendship.



one of the wooden bells in the Mission Museum

Why we came to Ventura

It was back in 1991 that I first became acquainted with Lester and Esther Cole. I was doing some research for a new edition of Harry Warner, Jr.'s book *A Wealth of Fable*, an informal history of 1950s science fiction fandom, and had contacted them to gather additional information about the 1954 World Science Fiction Convention, which was held in San Francisco that year. (Lester had been co-chair and Esther the treasurer.) It was two years later, at the 1993 Worldcon (also in San Francisco), that Nicki and I got to meet them – they had attended to participate in several discussion panels about fandom from that fabulous decade of the 1950s. I was moderator for the panel about the '54 Worldcon and I remember that it was highly informative and also really entertaining, so much so that I am hoping that an audio recording will someday surface.



Esther and Lester Cole
at the 1954 Worldcon

Nicki and I became friends with the Coles at the 1993 Worldcon, and following the convention we persuaded them to contribute essays to our fanzine *Mimosa*. Esther's appeared in the 16th issue, in December 1994, and described the half century that she and Lester had been science fiction fans. It was titled, appropriately, "I Married a Science Fiction" and evoked a comment from another fanzine publisher that this was the kind of article he would want to build an issue around. But it was Lester's article, which appeared in the 18th issue in May 1995, which was of even greater historical interest because it provided an inside story about the time, in February 1952, when the Little Men's Science Fiction Club of Berkeley, California (of which he was President) had staked a claim for a tract of land on the moon. It resulted in mainstream news coverage around the world.



Nicki with Esther Cole at her home in Ventura

By the time we had met the Coles they had long since moved down to Ventura. Esther described it as a charming little city and a good place to live, and invited us to pay them a visit. We did that in 1996, as part of our trip to the Worldcon down in Anaheim that year, and saw them again in 2002 and 2006 when we were back in California for other Worldcons. When it came time to plan for this year's Worldcon we had many options for places to go and things to do before we ended up in San Jose. But all of them included a visit to the Coles in Ventura. They are both in their nineties now and even though neither they nor we wanted to acknowledge it, this might well be the last time we'd see them.

It turned out that Lester was not feeling well and had just returned home from a short stay in the hospital, but Esther was as buoyant as we'd

remembered her from a dozen years earlier. It was all so very pleasant to see them again. We sat around the dining room table with Esther, bringing back some of the memories from the past quarter century of our friendship and telling her about some of what was going on in current-day fandom. She talked about things that had happened and were happening in her life, including a feud with her next door neighbor that had started when she had put signs supporting left-of-center political candidates in her yard. Time passed too quickly, and then it was time to go – we took our leave just as a health care specialist was arriving for Lester. Esther accompanied us to her front gate and as it closed between us I told her gently that I wasn't sure we'd ever see them again. This could be the last time.

But she just smiled and told me, “We won't let it be.” I'm hoping she's right.

A Tale of ~~Two Cities~~ Four Wineries

By the time we ended our two day visit to Ventura we had decided that Esther was correct – it really *is* a charming place. The main street through downtown has all kinds of interesting shops and restaurants, all in close proximity to the Pacific Ocean. Nicki and I are both East Coast people and I don't see us ever moving out to California. But if we did, Ventura is the place we'd want to be.

But Paso Robles might come in a close second. That was the next stop in our journey up the California coast, and it seemed to have almost as much charm as Ventura. The city center is dominated by a large green space unimaginatively named ‘Downtown City Park’ which is home to the Paso Robles Historical Society, housed in a magnificent old building that was formerly the Carnegie Library. Nearby is a statue of the famous Polish pianist and statesman Ignacy Jan Paderewski, who settled in Paso Robles during the period between the two World Wars. In his honor Paso Robles hosts a four-day festival every November with concerts and recitals, lectures, a youth piano competition, film screenings, and wine tasting. Probably *lots* of wine tasting – just in the perimeter surrounding the park there are many storefronts which offer wine tastings. And there is no lack of wines to taste because in and around Paso Robles there are more than 200 wineries.



the old Carnegie Library and Paderewski statue in Paso Robles

And that was the reason that had brought us to Paso Robles. The previous time we had been through there, back in 2006, we had come into the city by Highway 46 from the west, which goes up and over a mountainous ridge that separates the southern end of the Salinas River Valley from the Pacific coastal plain. The two things that were memorable about that drive were the magnificent views we had of the ocean before topping the ridge and all the wineries we passed by which populate that highway on the way down into Paso Robles. Many of them had tasting rooms and we'd been sorely tempted to stop and check some of them out, but there just hadn't been time. For this trip, it was a different story.

This time we had allotted a full day in Paso Robles so that we could take a winery tour. There are several available and the one we had chosen took us out the other side of Highway 46, up into the hills to the east of the city. Besides the minibus driver, it was just us and two others, a married couple from down in Temecula who apparently do winery tours for their vacations.

The day consisted of visits to four wineries, ranging from the very small to moderately large. The first one was the smallest but it was also the most interesting. The Ranchita Canyon Winery has been in existence only since 1999 when the owners, Bill and Teresa Hinrichs, bought the land and planted the grapevines. There are only about 50 acres total, but it's enough to produce 1,000 cases annually in ten varietals plus custom blends. We didn't see grape harvesting or actual wine production – August is too early for that – but we did get a behind-the-scenes tour of the winemaking process as well as the storage area where wine is being aged in oak barrels.



Ranchita Canyon Winery owner Bill Hinrichs
extracts a wine sample for tasting

Ranchita Canyon is a boutique winery. They don't sell commercially, only to those who come to the place – they apparently get all the visibility they need through word-of-mouth and from various festivals and tasting events down in Paso Robles. The wines they sell are premium priced, and they apparently have found the right business plan to be sustainable. I asked Bill how he got started and he replied that the winery is his retirement project. He'd been near the end of a successful career at IBM when he and his wife had bought the place. It was a fixer-upper and they'd had to do a lot of work and invest a substantial amount of money to make the buildings that were there suitable for use. Bill said it had been worth it, and from the wines he offered for tasting I can well believe it. He presented us eight different varietals and blends to taste, plus a sample from one of the barrels to demonstrate the difference in taste for wine that was not yet fully aged.

We were there about an hour longer than had been scheduled but it was so pleasant and with such good conversation that we could easily have stayed all day had there not been three other stops in the tour. Before we reboarded the minibus I took one last look around of the hillsides covered in grapevines. There wasn't another house in sight. I commented to Bill that it must get so dark at night that millions of stars would be visible. He smiled and said, "Yes, it does." I'm envious.



the view from the tasting room at
Ranchita Canyon Winery

The other three wineries we visited were equally memorable in their own ways. Next was the Graveyard Vineyards Winery, situated adjacent to the Pleasant Valley Cemetery with a fish pond just down the hill from the tasting room and a nearby picnic area where we had lunch. It also was relatively small in terms of yearly wine production but had added a gift shop to augment its income. Among other things there were some exquisite and colorful ceramic tiles for sale, depicting ghouls and goblins in Halloween-ish graveyard scenes, which probably sell pretty well in October. After that was the Riverstar Vineyards Winery, which was owned by a woman and her daughter. And also a friendly black Labrador, who seemed happy to provide his opinion on things whenever someone petted him. And we ended the tour at the biggest place we visited – the LaVigne Winery, which had an expansive tasting room that actually seemed more of a commercial storefront. And with good reason – there was more than wine for sale there. We snacked on some excellent cheeses that were paired with the wines we tasted, and were informed that the winery makes a substantial part of its income from sales of these cheeses.



the owners of Riverstar Vineyards Winery

By the end of the day I had sampled more than thirty different wines, and I was pretty much wasted. Each tasting room has small spittoons where you can pour out from your glass any wine you don't want to consume, and that's what Nicki did. But for me...well, if somebody is going to pour a sample of fine wine into my glass, I'm going to drink it. All in all, it was a great day, really memorable and a highlight of the trip. But it's probably a good thing we didn't have a fifth winery on the tour schedule.

The Spirit of 76

I am now convinced that Paso Robles is going to be, and soon, the wine center of California, surpassing even the Napa and Sonoma areas of the state. The wines are that good. And the amount of land being used for growing grapes is enormous. For miles and miles along the 101 freeway coming into and leaving Paso Robles there was nothing but the green of grapevines to be seen. There are also wineries about a three-hour drive farther up the coast, in the San Jose area, but they were not what we went there to see. We were there for this big science fiction convention.

San Jose was previously host to a Worldcon back in 2002 and what I mostly remember about that convention was not so much the programming or the special events (which included a well-attended talk by actor Patrick Stewart), it was the chance to reconnect with friends – some of whom we'd not seen in a long time and one, as it turned out, we'd never see again. Worldcons are like that and the current one, generically-named "Worldcon 76", was typical in this regard. As the name implies, Worldcons are international events. There are people we know who live in far-flung places in the world (as well as only slightly less far-flung places across the United States and Canada), and the only times we ever see them are at Worldcons. This also is true for

some of our more elderly friends we see at Worldcons, and each time we do it's hard not to wonder if there will be a next time. But not for all of them. The oldest person at the convention was in his mid-nineties and I think he must have a hidden portrait of himself somewhere which is doing all the aging. He looked in better shape than I am.

The previous time I'd been to a Worldcon, back in 2016, my convention schedule had kept me busy – I had participated in six discussion panels, one of which I moderated. But for Worldcon 76, I wasn't on any at all. And Nicki did only slightly better, participating in one cryptography-themed panel. We took it as just another example of the relentless passage of time – fifteen years down the road from winning a sixth Hugo Award and we're now chopped liver.



Nicki (at left) in the "Contemporary Cryptography" panel

Nevertheless, there was still a lot going on that attracted my attention. Even though I wasn't a participant in any of the hundreds of panels over the five days of the convention, there were many that I attended and several that were of sufficient interest that Nicki and I made audio recordings for the fan history YouTube channel. One of these was the panel commemorating the 50th anniversary of the legendary 1968 Worldcon, which had been held over in Berkeley. The panelists were some of the attendees of that convention and described a time back when multi-day cross-country trips to get there and back in a car packed with people were no big deal. The panelists described in loving detail much of what happened at the convention – a Guest of Honor speech which seemed to go on for days, an anti-war protest going on outside the convention hotel that was dispersed by police tear gas, a convention hotel without air conditioning in the middle of a heat wave, and a demonstration by the Society for Creative Anachronism that was interrupted by a swarm of wasps. Compared to all that, Worldcon 76 was downright prosaic.

There were panels at Worldcon 76 which were so popular that the audience filled every seat, took every standing room place around the room, and even spilled out into the convention center hallway. For those you had to get there early, as I found out to my dismay a couple of times. The one that possibly had the greatest audience overflow happened on the middle day of the convention – it was a remembrance of Harlan Ellison, who had died just a few weeks earlier.

As most of us know, Ellison had a very outgoing and at times provocative personality (to say



the Harlan Ellison remembrance panel

the least!), and he often interacted with fans throughout his life partly because he was a science fiction fan before he became a professional writer. A show of hands indicated that most of the people in attendance had a personal Harlan story of some kind (Nicki and me included), but given how packed the room was and how limited the available time was (just 55 minutes were allotted) it was only the panelists who shared their memories about Ellison with the most entertaining ones, no surprise, coming from Robert Silverberg, who had been friends with him for more than 60 years.

Ellison was depicted as one of the great science fiction writers of all time, which he certainly was, and also as someone who wasn't averse to stirring up some controversy by his words and actions from time to time. Which he certainly did. The panelists appeared to me to show catharsis with all their Harlan stories, and in the end there was consensus that there was a pedestal somewhere out there that Mr. Ellison's career and reputation would reside upon. He was unique, and that was emphasized at the end of the panel by Silverberg when, after hearing the moderator say that we would not see Harlan's like again, responded: "One was enough!" It brought the house down.

Just about all of the convention's program was sited in the expansive San Jose Convention Center and even if some of the breakout rooms turned out to not be large enough, the convention's concourse was plenty big for everything it contained. That's where the dealers area and art show were located, but it also had more than enough room for all the other features that Worldcons are known for – fan tables promoting conventions and special interest groups, site selection for a future Worldcon, and a fan



one-tenth scale recreation of the San Jose Electric Light Tower

lounge where honest-to-god

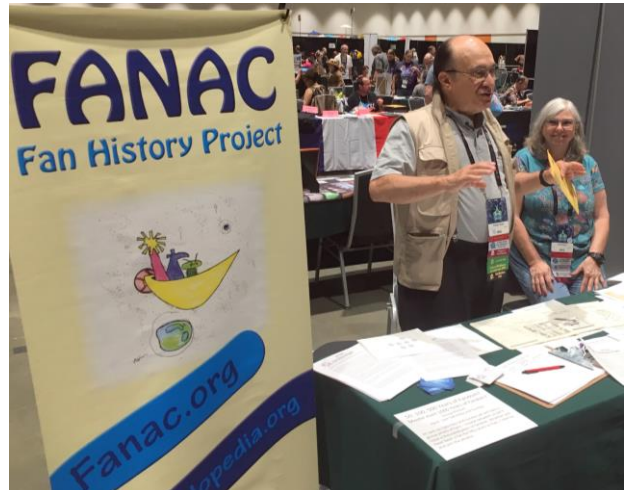
fanzines were available for reading. There was also a stage area with table seating called 'Callahan's Place' that was inspired by a fabled bar featured in stories by the convention's Guest of Honor, Spider Robinson. Throughout the convention it was used for mini-concerts and special events such as pun-off and tall tale contests.



Callahan's Place during the pun-off contest

There was a unifying symbol to all of this – a one-tenth scale retro-future recreation of old San Jose Electric Light Tower, created by the convention chairman as a homage to the original tower which had existed for only about 30 years around the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th. It had been erected over the intersection of two downtown streets, making San Jose the first electrified city west of the Rocky Mountains, and to this day it remains one of the symbols of the city. It's even been memorialized by a local brewing company with its Electric Tower IPA.

Of all the fan tables in the concourse, the one that interested me the most was hosted by the FANAC Fan History Project. Originally, FANAC was the organization which bid for and ran the 1992 Worldcon, Magicon, which was held in Orlando that year. But following the convention it has devoted its resources over the past quarter century to the preservation of information about science fiction and science fiction fandom. The **fanac.org** website and the FANAC Fan History YouTube Channel were created for this purpose and as a whole contain a large archive of fan publications, photographs, information about past conventions and fan organizations, as well as audio and video recordings of speeches, interviews, and scripted productions, many of which were taped decades ago.



Joe Siclari and Edie Stern at the FANAC Fan History Project table

Arguably the most important accomplishment to date by the organization has been the publication of a third edition of the 'Fancyclopedia' which is best described (according to the FANAC website) as a place "where you can find articles about all aspects of SF fandom: people, places, things, events, honors and awards, conventions, slogans, clubs and most of the *et ceteras* that occur to you". And, as it's been published as a Wiki, it's still a work in progress.



Brad Lyau and I account for 93 years of fandom!

The FANAC Fan History Project was represented at Worldcon 76 by three of its founders: Joe Siclari, Edie Stern, and Mark Olson. They do special activities at each Worldcon where the Fan History Project is represented, with the one for Worldcon 76 titled "1,000 Years of Fandom". This was based on an idea by Mark Olson, with the objective of documenting, through photographs, a cumulative 1,000 years of fandom by those who were attending the convention.

It was mostly a word-of-mouth undertaking, with people coming up to the FANAC table throughout the convention to have their photos taken holding cards showing their years of involvement in science fiction fandom. Mine (as well as Nicki's) was 43 years, which probably put us in the upper echelon of those who were photographed for the project. But not even close to the most – there were many fans with 50 or more years, and one person (Tony Lewis of the

NESFA club in Massachusetts) displayed a card that showed 70 years! In spite of the relative lack of publicity it took only a few hours to blow past the 1,000 year goal and by the close of the convention the total had reached an amazing 6,707 years. In the end, for many of us who had our pictures taken, we did find out what 1,000 years of fandom looks like. It looks old.

‘Being old’ could actually have been a subliminal theme of Worldcon 76. Worldcon Guests of Honor are normally selected as a career honor, which usually means they are senior citizens. That was true for three of this convention’s guests, with another two honored in absentia because they were deceased. But there was something else at Worldcon 76 which uniquely qualified as being old – it was the time capsule from Magicon.

At the closing ceremonies of the 1992 Worldcon, its chairman, Joe Siclari, had assembled a time capsule which was filled with publications, mementos, and other keepsake items from the convention. Since then the plastic box had resided in Joe’s garage. The original plan had been to open it on the 25th anniversary of its creation but that became unfeasible when site selection for the 2017 Worldcon awarded that convention to Helsinki, Finland. So instead, the big reveal happened in San Jose.

There was a lot of stuff in that plastic box! Either it was a miracle of packing or else there’s an unknown feature about time capsules which make them bigger on the inside than the outside. The first thing removed was an extra Hugo Award trophy from 1992, and boy did that bring back some memories! Nicki and I have an identical one of those which we won at Magicon for Best Fanzine. It was our first Hugo Award, and it has the additional historical significance of being the only time that a Hugo was presented in error. The Hugo Award Administrators for that convention had made a major screw-up (there’s really no other way of putting it)



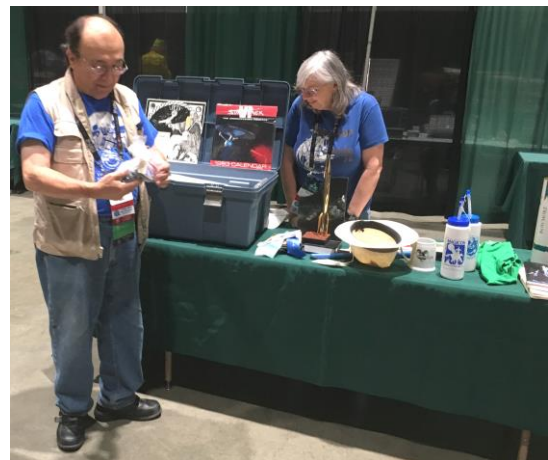
I do my Han Solo-in-carbonite imitation

and the wrong person was called onstage to accept the award. And when the mistake was finally corrected, it happened at exactly the wrong time. But that’s another story.

There was one other old thing of note at the convention, this one originating a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away. It was a Lucasfilm Ltd. movie prop from the original *Star Wars* trilogy – Han Solo encased in carbonite. It had been set up in the concourse as a magnet for photo ops, and many people were only too happy to oblige. Me included.



the opening of the Magicon Time Capsule



There was a lot of stuff in there!

The highlight of any Worldcon is the Hugo Award Ceremony which for Worldcon 76 took place on the final evening of the convention. It's interesting enough that Nicki and I wanted to see it, but not quite so much that we wanted to be in the large ballroom where the awards were being presented. Instead, we made our way over to Callahan's Place where the ceremony was being live streamed. And that was the place to be – instead of a crowded dark room where you had to speak in whispers, we were able to relax and have normal-voice conversations with friends who were seated nearby. There were even snacks for sale, and I was enjoying an ice cream sandwich when the proxy acceptor for Mike Glyer's popular fanzine-turned-newsblog *File 770* (which had just won the Best Fanzine Hugo for the eighth time) informed the audience that Mike was recusing himself and *File 770* for the rest of eternity. Mike was not there in person to tell that to the audience because of a medical emergency which landed him in the hospital for most of the convention, and that resulted in him acquiring a heart pacemaker a few days later.



the live stream of the Hugo Awards Ceremony at Callahan's Place



at the SFPA party

Nicki and I were relieved that no calamities struck any other people we knew at Worldcon 76. And that covers a lot of ground – after four decades of attending Worldcons, we knew a lot of people at the convention. A few of them are members of the Southern Fandom Press Alliance apa (as are we) and we'd all taken the opportunity earlier in the convention to have a room party for the SFPAns who were in San Jose. My friend Guy Lillian was there – he and his wife Rose had driven to San Jose all the way from Cape Canaveral, Florida. With their two Yorkies! That seemed like almost too big of an adventure to me, so I had been calling him daily to check in

on his progress during the trip. But when Nicki and I finally met up with them, he and Rosie looked no worse for wear. Me, I'd have been a blubbering mass of protoplasm I think. Kudos to them and their stamina.

Nicki and I cross paths with Guy and Rosie about once a year on the average, but there were others at the SFPA party we hardly ever get to see. Sheila Strickland, for example. She lives near Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and this was one of the few Worldcons she's been to. She *does* go to DeepSouthCons, as do we, but lately we've been out of synch with Sheila on which ones we've attended and which ones we haven't. So I really enjoyed talking to her outside the pages of SFPA – she had been part of a choir trip to New York City earlier in the year, an excellent

excursion just in itself, but had also found the time to visit a few of the places that Nicki and I have been to in our annual January mini-vacations in The Big Apple. There's some synchronicity there somewhere.

David Schlosser was also at the SFPA party. It was a much shorter trip for him, as he resides up in the wilderness of way northern California. He was central to the big accomplishment of the party – we *de facto* elected him to be the next SFPA official editor. That brought a sigh of relief from me, as I'd been afraid that a united front would form and look in *my* direction. Ruth Judkowitz and Kyla – just Kyla – were there too, and it had been years and years since the last time I'd seen them. But they looked just the same as before, as far as I could tell – maybe they also have pictures hidden in attics which are doing all the aging. And we were also happy to see Jeff and Liz Copeland, who had made their way down to San Jose from their home in the Seattle `burbs. Worldcons are really the only times we get to cross paths with them, previous times being in 2016 (for both), in 2015 (for Liz only), and in 2008 (again when they'd both been able to attend). The SFPA party was the only time we saw them, though. Jeff told me that he and Liz had to leave San Jose on Sunday to fly down to San Diego for a wedding. That meant he missed seeing the Hugo Awards Ceremony. Unless, of course, he surreptitiously live streamed it during one of the wedding events. I guess I'll have to wait for his next SFPazine to find out.

Epilog: What we did (and didn't) get to do in San Jose

A couple weeks before our trip I discovered that I had messed up our airline reservations such that we had to return home from San Jose a day later than we'd originally planned. In the end that worked out okay, as it gave us the opportunity on that extra day to see the Computer History Museum. It's been in existence since 1996 and in its current location since 2002, but as it's more than 10 miles from downtown San Jose it wasn't one of the places we visited during the previous San Jose Worldcon.



the docent describes ENIAC

There was a lot to see and we had a really informative tour, led by a docent who had

attended Worldcon 76. The museum has the largest collection of computers and computing accessories in the world, dating all the way back to the very first general purpose programmable electronic computer, ENIAC, which was used starting in the mid-1940s to help design the hydrogen bomb and after than on less destructive projects. And there was also a Cray-1, dating back to 1975 and at that time the world's fastest computer in terms of operating speed. But that was then. I found it ironic that my iPhone, which I used for photographs during the tour, is a thousand times faster.



during the docent tour of the
Computer History Museum

There were also museums we visited in San Jose prior to the convention which were only a short walk from our hotel. One of them was the San Jose Museum of Art, which had on display exhibitions as varied as “Rise Up! Social Justice in Art” to “Crossroads: American Scene Prints from Thomas Hart Benton to Grant Wood” to “The House Imaginary”, the latter a selection of sculptures, paintings, films, photographs, and drawings of dwellings by various artists which were intended to “explore memory, identity and belonging in an increasing itinerant world”. We found it thought-provoking and definitely worth the visit, though it didn’t take a great amount of time to see it all.

And then there was the San Jose Museum of Quilts and Textiles, housed in a building so small that it didn’t have any of its permanent collection on display. Nor any quilts, either, to Nicki’s disappointment, except for a few in the gift shop. But what they did have was interesting. The best exhibit had nothing to do with either quilts or textiles – it was all about paper cutting, a homage to an art form which dates back to the 4th century.

As for what we didn’t do, probably the most obvious was a visit to the Winchester Mystery House, a large mansion that was once the residence of the widow of firearms magnate William Winchester. It’s filled with architectural quirks and has been claimed to be haunted by the ghosts of those killed by Winchester rifles. Next time for that. The one place I *really* wish I could have visited was actually visible from the convention hotel – Lick Observatory, located atop a mountain ridge to the east of San Jose. It dates back to the 1880s and is the site of one of the world’s largest refracting telescopes. An amateur astronomer friend of mine who was at the convention did make the trip and the photos he sent me afterwards made me wish that I had planned differently.

But, you know, you can’t do everything. What we did do in our time in California was certainly memorable – it turned out to be one of our best vacation trips. And yet, when it was over, we were happy to be home again. That’s our best destination ever. ☀



Nicki contemplates the ornate paper cutting
“Morning Warm Ups (optic games)”
at the Museum of Quilts and Textiles



my long-lens photo from the convention hotel of Lick Observatory



140 Worldcon 76 badge ribbons!
Bruce Pelz would have been in awe!

Afterword:

There were some other noteworthy things that happened along the way that I maybe should have included in this essay. And probably would have, if I were doing a complete re-write. But I'd really rather not do that so instead I'll mention a couple of them here. One was the kid with all the badge ribbons. These have become a ubiquitous part of Worldcons (and other conventions too, for that matter) and are produced by science fiction clubs, convention sponsors, and various other special interest groups for informational or identification purposes (e.g., "Program Participant"), as part of a promotion of some kind ("*Avengers: Infinity War* Support Group"), as in-jokes ("Still Mowing Peggy Rae's Lawn"), or for totally obscure reasons ("Just Sayin'"). My late friend Bruce Pelz used to collect as many of them as he could at Worldcons he attended, and there were several conventions when the ribbons attached to his name badge extended all the way down to the floor. But *this* kid...

Nicki and I happened across him on the last day of the convention, after the Closing Ceremonies had concluded, and were amazed by the number of ribbons he had managed to find – 140 of them! They extended about 15-20 feet in length and from what we observed he was as much of a photo op as the Han Solo-in-carbonite slab. I'm sure that even Bruce would have been in awe of this lad!

There was also another youngster who impressed us, and this was on the very last evening of the trip. Nicki and I had an Indian meal at a restaurant in a strip mall near our hotel, and we were waited on by a schoolkid who probably wasn't yet a teenager. His family owned the place but it was *he* who was the expert on the menu and on what dishes I might like. And if that wasn't entertaining enough, the television on the wall near where we were sitting was playing clips of Bollywood song and dance sequences from various Indian movies. We thought it a great way to end the trip.

The topic of music segues me into the next essay, from back in 2005. Back then, before Wikipedia had become the go-to source for almost everything, I had written a series of short appreciations of classical music composers on their birthdays. Here's one of them.

The Composer Who Was a Friend to Bugs Bunny and Donald Duck

Today is the 186th birthday of composer Franz von Suppé (1819-1895), who may be the most famous composer born in what is now the country of Croatia. As with many famous classical music composers, Suppé showed musical ability in his early youth. And as with some famous composers, he was drawn into music as a career in spite of his parents' wishes – his father, a civil servant, had wanted young Franz to study law instead.

But in 1835, Suppé's father died so he and his mother packed up and moved to what was then the musical capital of the world, Vienna, where he studied musical composition under two very competent mentors, Ignaz von Seyfried and Simon Sechter. From this he was able to obtain an appointment as assistant Kappellmeister at Vienna's Josefstadt Theater, where he found success of sorts composing incidental music for various productions. He was successful enough that he eventually became head Kappellmeister at one of Vienna's most famous musical venues, the Theater an der Wien, where he gained acclaim as a composer of operettas. He was reportedly working a new operetta at the time of his death, at age 76 of natural causes.



Franz von Suppé

Today, Franz von Suppé might have been remembered as what he was then, a somewhat obscure but gifted composer of the mid-19th century. But in the 1940s, talented crews of animators from the Warner Brothers and Disney studios selected the overtures from two of Suppé's operettas, *The Poet and the Peasant* and *The Light Cavalry*, for inclusion in various Warner and Disney cartoons. This has resulted in the music, if not the composer, becoming world famous in popular culture – the melodies are now so familiar that almost everyone would recognize them. And this, perhaps, is Franz von Suppé's legacy: according to one biographer, Suppé was “arguably the most versatile and technically accomplished of all operetta composers”, while according to another, “melodic invention, colorful orchestration and irrepressible energy and charm have assured Suppé's overtures an occasional appearance in concert programs, even if sadly, his other works have lapsed into obscurity”.

In retrospect, it seems strange that a quirk of fate was necessary to provide Suppé's works their immortality. On the other hand, would that we should all enjoy such a destiny. ☀

Afterword:

Franz von Suppé was born in the scenic city of Split, a place on my travel bucket list that I have not yet had the occasion to visit. But just 150 miles to the northwest is an even more picturesque place – the historic city of Venice, whose founding dates all the way back to the Roman Empire. It, also, had been a place I had always wanted to experience. And last year, for a carbon sequestration conference (as you will read next), I finally got that opportunity.

There Are No Vespas in Venice, and Other Revelations

The City of Marco Polo

A visit to Venice should be on everybody's bucket list. I mean, really! The place is not only visually spectacular with palaces, basilicas, and marble buildings galore, it's filled to the brim with history dating all the way back to the 5th Century. In its storied past the city of Venice has been an independent republic and a maritime superpower during the Middle Ages, the staging area for the Crusades, and a center of art and culture during the Renaissance. And it was also the home of the famous 13th century world traveler Marco Polo.



the home of Marco Polo

His home still exists. It's located more or less in the center of the city, adjacent to one of the scores of canals that carve the city into a myriad of islets. But it's not easy to find, and for that matter neither is anything else in Venice. Even with the help of GPS, the first time I tried to navigate my way on foot across the city...I got lost.

In the Labyrinth

It's really easy to get lost in Venice, especially if it's your first time there and your hotel is over on the west side where the buses from the airport come in. I arrived in the city about mid-day on a Friday in mid-April and had a late afternoon meeting with the events coordinator of the hotel which was the host venue for the big multinational meeting that I'd been working on since the beginning of the year. My phone's GPS showed what looked to be an easy 40 minute walk to the city center's waterfront. But it took me the better part of two hours to get there.

Part of the problem was what I mentioned in this essay's opening paragraph – Venice is a visually spectacular city, and practically every plaza I happened by along the way had something of interest to stop and admire for a little while. And then wonder which way to go next. There is no street grid in Venice. The place is a labyrinth.



something to admire on a walk across Venice

Not only is there no street grid, except for that one area where buses come in there are also no streets. None at all. So no cars, no trams, no bicycles. And also no Vespas – that, at least, was a welcome discovery. On visits to other parts of Italy I’ve lost count of the number of times I’ve nearly been sideswiped by those scourges of the road. Venice is the only pedestrian-only city I’ve ever been to. And, for someone whose salad days were decades ago, this is a city that’s really hard on the legs. It’s because of all the bridges.

At the Rialto

A walk through Venice takes you across lots of footbridges. Almost any direction you go will pretty quickly bring you to one of the many canals which crisscross the city. Most of these are only a few yards wide, but all of them are in use for water traffic – there are a *lot* of boats in Venice – and so footbridges to get across them are all arched to allow boat passage.

I’ve read that there are more than 400 footbridges in Venice. Most are pretty short and a few even dead end at doorways into buildings. But all of them require you to climb up one set of steps and down another. On my walk across Venice I did that fourteen different times, and by the time I finally got to the waterfront I had observed that there were very few people who looked out of shape. If you live or work in Venice, physical fitness comes with the territory.

There are many possible ways to get across Venice, but most of them take you past the most iconic image of the city – the Rialto. It spans the Grand Canal and dates back to 1591, making it both the oldest and largest bridge in the city. When you walk across the bridge, there’s also the opportunity to do some shopping – there are two rows of shops which sell jewelry and other upscale items. But the more scenic way to pass by the structure is underneath it.

It wasn’t until I had completed my walk to the waterfront that I realized that there was a water bus (‘vaporetto’) station located close to my hotel. And so, on my lone free day of the trip, the first thing I did was cruise the Grand Canal on one of those vaporettos. It was certainly worth doing, if nothing else to give me a better understanding of the city and its layout. And there was a lot to see. The canal is lined with buildings – museums, churches, and palaces – all of which would be architectural superstars in almost any other city. And there were also the gondolas.



typical Venice footbridge



the Rialto Bridge across Venice’s Grand Canal

It took me maybe all of five minutes into my first walk across Venice to see a gondola. They're bigger than I had expected – they look about 30 feet long and about four feet wide, plenty of room for several people to sit. I've read that they're expensive, costing about \$40,000 each, and that to become a professional *gondolieri* requires hundreds of hours of training and apprenticeship, as well as knowledge of foreign languages and local history. And also a good sense of balance – I don't think that I could stand on that little platform at the end of the gondola for very long without falling in.



gondolas on the Grand Canal

I was tempted to make a gondola ride a part of my free time in Venice, but I could never get up enough interest from other meeting attendees to do it – it's really something best enjoyed in small groups. And not only that, some of the gondolas I saw looked only marginally stable – unless the water is as flat as a pancake they seem to be prone to a lot of rocking and rolling. Not the greatest thing for steady videos...or stomachs!

What to do on a Saturday in Venice

It turned out that my friend Åse, who was also the Chair of the meeting, arrived in Venice only a few hours after I did, so we made plans to meet up on Saturday morning to explore some of what Venice had to offer. She and I decided to find each other at St. Mark's Square, and I was able to get there before the place became crammed with tourists. But the place is so huge that it's not a trivial task to locate someone there, especially when you're way down on one end and she's somewhere up at the other. So I decided to go old school. I took a deep breath, cupped my hands around my mouth and yelled as loud as I could....



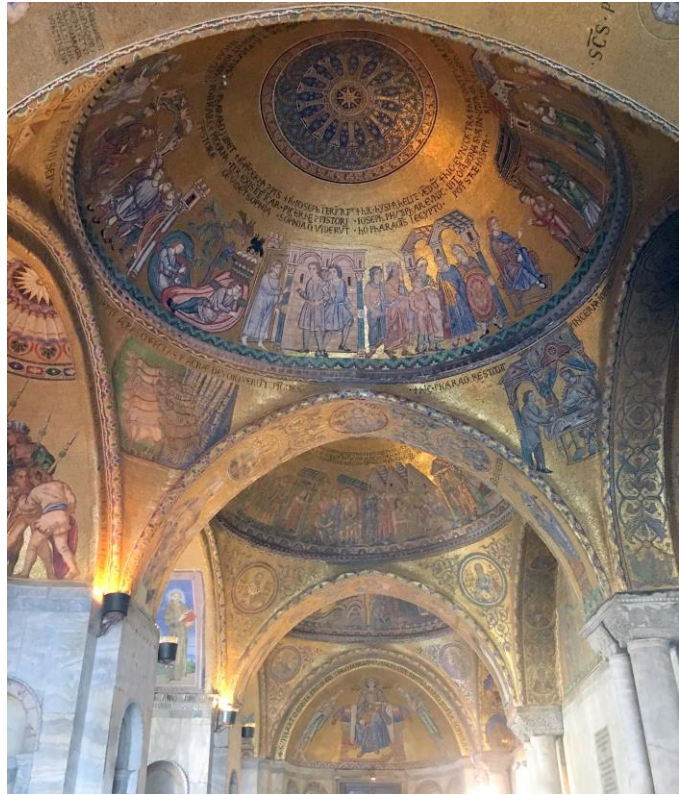
a small part of St. Mark's Square, looking toward the Basilica

“MAAARRRRRRR-CO!!!”

A few seconds later, from what sounded a long way off, came a response: “Polo!” I couldn't tell if it was from her, but she evidently heard my voice as I could see her waving. Hey, some things are easier to do *without* GPS!

Since we were right there, St. Mark's seemed the obvious place to start. The Basilica which dominates the square dates back to 11th century and features some dazzling Byzantine architecture. The inside is equally opulent, with its domes and columns covered by mosaics, mostly made from gold glass, which illustrate various stories and themes from the Bible.

I had been hoping to take some photos of these amazing constructs, but photography was not allowed and those who did so anyway were given a lecture by stern-looking individuals who were on the lookout for rule-breakers. I was ultimately able to use my cell phone's camera inside the Basilica but not within the main section of the cathedral. It turned out that the exit passageway on the way to the gift shop was also covered with some rather remarkable mosaics, and these were a lot closer to the floor than the ones on the Basilica's main domes. Unfortunately, there was also another hall monitor there, but when I *pleaded* with him for permission he just smiled and gave a backhand wave of his hand at me to go ahead. I guess you just have to ask the right person. Contritely.



mosaics inside St. Mark's Basilica



18th century glassworks at the Murano Museum of Glass

We had decided that we didn't want to cram the day so full of activities that we wouldn't have time to enjoy them, and this caused some angst as we eliminated options. Venice has several world-class art museums but in the end we decided to see a different kind of museum. One of the things Venice has been known for in its long history is glassmaking. In particular, the nearby islands of Murano, a *frazione* or administrative area of the city, has been famous for its Venetian glass for more than 700 years.

One of the vaporetto got us there and the first thing we noticed was that Murano is a lot more laid back than Venice. Nobody seemed in a hurry and there appeared as much interest in kicking back to enjoy a scoop of gelato as there was in sightseeing. The Murano Museum of Glass, located in what once was the town hall, has a collection including glass artifacts which date all the way back to the 5th century, as well as a historical sampling of locally-made glass which shows off the skill of Venetian artisans over the past 500 years. Many of the pieces were quite ornate in both design and color, but the



18th century “Italian Garden” centerpiece at the Murano Museum of Glass

one that really caught my attention was a centerpiece dating back to the 18th century which was made up of individual glass pieces that formed a miniature Italian garden, complete with arches, fountains, and flowerpots.

The museum is on the small side as museums go, and it didn’t take all that long to see everything. And then it was back to Venice. If we had

it to do over again, we probably would have wanted to see some actual glassmaking, as there is a small factory on Murano. But we didn’t know where it was, and it eventually came down to not wanting to miss catching the vaporetto. I later found out that the factory was located close by the only other vaporetto stop at Murano. I suppose we should have been a bit more curious when we observed that a small lighthouse nearby the vaporetto pier had a lot more tourists than anyone might expect. Now I know they weren’t there just for that.

The Island of Lost Souls

The Venetian archipelago is comprised of far more islands than those which make up the touristy part of the city. One of them is San Servolo, located about a mile or so southeast of the city. It’s currently the home of Venice International University, but for



the view from the pier at San Servolo Island

more than a quarter of a millennium starting in the early 1700s it was an insane asylum. In that period more than 200,000 patients were committed to the San Servolo asylum, and most of them never re-entered society. There’s now a museum on the island which has images of many of the patients as well as objects such as religious texts that they owned. And for the non-squeamish, there is also a small collection of skulls and preserved brains from some of those who died on the island. Or at least, that’s what I’ve read. I was on the island for parts of three days, but I was never tempted to visit it. I was there at San Servolo for another reason entirely – the multinational meeting on carbon sequestration – but I’ve been told more than once that I had to be a little crazy to be the organizer of these meetings for as long as I have. I guess the site for the meeting might be considered as proof.

This was a shorter duration meeting than usual, as it involved only the Technical Group part of the multilateral forum. There was also no technology workshop or site visit this time, either, so what usually is a five day meeting took only two days. But they were busy – the Technical Group’s meeting on the second day had 27 items on the agenda, 20 of which were



one of the presentations at the Technical Group’s meeting



the project’s award

presentations. For one of them, the scheduled speaker cancelled out the day before the meeting, which presented a problem as it was an update about an important Norwegian project that was getting an award from the forum for its successful conclusion. One of the Norwegian delegates, Lars, had toted the award to the meeting all the way from Oslo (we never were able to find any place in Venice where we could get it made), and he clearly was hoping to have seen the last of it. I suggested in jest that we auction the thing off and use the money for a bar crawl, but the fact of the matter was that it would have been cheaper to throw the thing into one of the canals and get it remade in Oslo than to pay shipping costs back to Norway. So, in the end, Lars reluctantly conceded that he’d find some room in his luggage and bring it once more to Oslo, where it would finally be given over to the project’s coordinator. I hope she appreciates the back story as much as the hardware.

Airplane Stories

There were hotel rooms available on San Servolo, but almost nobody wanted to stay there once it became known they were essentially upscale college dormitory accommodations. Instead, following the day’s meeting many of us convened back in Venice at one of the many watering holes for food and drink. But not necessarily in that order. And it was after several beers, on one of these stopovers, that we started comparing unforgettable airline flights.

I had started by mentioning the time, back in 2008, where my flight into Dulles airport had to do a go-around because of an airplane which had not cleared the main runway fast enough. It turned out to be no big deal, but I still remember the great sense of unease I felt as I saw trees that looked not all that far away rush past the airplane window before the big jet was able to regain altitude. Simon, one of the attendees from Canada, easily topped that – he told us of a winter flight from Newfoundland that took off in a blizzard and was not able to return to the airport when an electrical short of some kind started to fill the plane’s cabin with smoke. The pilot had to drop down to less than 10,000 feet so that he could flush out the smoke with outside

air, and everybody was ready to kiss the tarmac by the time the plane finally touched down at the airport where it was diverted.

After that the stories got stranger. One of the United States delegates, Mark, described a flight where an old lady somehow set her hair on fire. The flight attendants got it extinguished fairly quickly, but by then the pilot had called in a possible smoke emergency and as the plane landed Mark could see firefighting equipment lined up on the taxiway adjacent to the runway. The story that would have taken the prize, had there been one, was from another United States delegate, Sallie, who was seated next to an old guy on a long flight. Several hours after takeoff she leaned toward him to say something to him...only to discover that he was dead!

After listening to all that, I had a developing sense of dread about the next day's long journey back home – my experience on trips like this has been that misadventures are attracted to me like a magnet – but it ended up being uneventful. Or maybe not – the view of the Alps about a half hour after takeoff was certainly pretty memorable. It's just one of the many pleasant memories I have of my first trip to Venice. ☀



the view from the airplane window

Afterword:

It was back in 2007, after Nicki and I had spent four glorious days in Florence, I had decided that was the best place in Italy and possibly even the world. But now, after my short business trip to the Jewel of the Adriatic, I'm no longer so sure. All I know is that I intend to return (with Nicki) to Venice when there's not some big meeting going on that hijacks most of my available time.

Readers of my essays have probably long since figured out that Europe is my favorite non-North America destination. Most anyplace in Europe, actually. My first trip there (with Nicki) was in 1990 for a Worldcon in the Netherlands. Since then there has only been one year that I've not been back, and many years when I've had more than one visit. In all, I've been to 22 European countries including two which no longer exist. I've now been to Italy four times, with hopes of many more before my travel days are over, but the two that I've visited the most are Poland and Slovakia – more than a dozen times each. And there are also several which I've been to only a single time. One of those is Ireland, where Nicki and I spent three sun-less days back in 2005 (and where we'll make a return visit in just two months). And another is Estonia where, back in 1999 as you will read next, I had one of the more surreal experiences of my life.



view down the Grand Canal from the Rialto Bridge

Estonia 1999

It was 20 years ago this month that I had one of the most extraordinary misadventures of my life. For two days, in Estonia, I became a national television and radio personality. Sort of.

Back then I was on a month-long business trip to five Eastern European countries. It was all about trying to find help for some of the industries in those countries which were operating their own small power plants. These provided both electricity and process heat (usually high-pressure steam) for on-site use, and they were small enough in capacity they were below the threshold of interest for the large multinational companies who were back then sniffing around for project development opportunities. What made these small power plants targets of interest for me was that even though they were inefficient and in some cases totally obsolete, they couldn't just be shut down. A company can buy electricity from a power grid, but there are no extended grids for process heat – an industry which needs process steam has to generate it on-site.

So I was doing a 'bottom up' activity – actually going out and looking for these small power opportunities, and then promoting them to smaller project developers who didn't have the resources to find them on their own. This was very much a rogue operation – I hadn't wanted any upper management oversight at the U.S. Government Agency where I worked so I kept its visibility to a minimum. And that included stretching my travel resources – I stayed in so many low-end hotels that I was able to be out on the road for a month for what normally would be about two weeks of travel money.

It was my longest business trip ever, starting in Bulgaria and then progressing northward – to Slovakia, Poland, and Lithuania. By the time I made it to Estonia, it was the final week of the trip and I was pretty much worn down. But I still had to be on my 'A' Game because in Estonia awaited the best opportunity of the trip. I'd learned about it several weeks earlier when I was contacted, out of the blue, by an American ex-pat who was working as the International Liaison and Communications Director for a medium-sized district heating power plant in the northeastern part of the country. The power plant was using obsolete technology and desperately needed an upgrade, and I had come up with an appropriate solution for the fuel they were using (oil shale, which is plentiful in Estonia). It only remained to pay a short unobtrusive visit to the company, take stock of the situation, and gather some technical information that I could show to project developers back in the States. But my ex-pat host, as it turned out, had other ideas.

The first indication it was not going to be an ordinary day was when I had been informed by my host, the previous evening, that my visit to the power plant was going to be a media event. Apparently, the presence of a U.S. Government energy expert was well out of the ordinary, especially in that part of the country. And the company which owned the power plant was trying to position itself as a major player for electricity production in Estonia. So when I arrived there, the radio and television people were already set up for a press conference. It began with one of the upper managers announcing that the company intended to replace the existing power plant with a new and modern facility, which would bring lots of economic benefits to the region. And then I was introduced. I read a short press statement I'd prepared in support of their plan and how international collaboration could help. I had expected to sit back after that and watch the rest of the event – but it turned out that **I** was the rest of the event! The media people threw about half an hour's worth of questions at me, with cameras rolling, then we reconvened for a

photo-op at the top of one of the company's ash mountains where decades of detritus had been deposited from combustion of the oil shale.

The trip to the top of the ash heap was actually pretty exciting, going up some steep, rough inclines that looked to be impassable without a four wheel drive vehicle. Even though the view from up there was superb (you could see all the way to the Gulf of Finland), it was so desolate, so totally grey and lifeless, that when I stepped out of the car I was tempted to call out, "That's one small step for a man, one giant leap for mankind!" (Probably a good thing I didn't, though. You never know about a video editor's sense of humor.) All this was condensed down into a one minute news story that was telecast on Estonia's national news that evening. I can say that I sounded coherent on TV, though I didn't think so when they were taping.



atop the desolate ash mountain

But it turned out that my 'media news darling' time in Estonia wasn't yet over. The next day there were two interviews with newspaper reporters, one at the beginning of the day in Kohtla-Järve (where the power plant was located), and one later on in the country capital, Tallinn, where I had a wrap-up meeting with the Estonian Energy Ministry. I also found out that a sound clip from my interview at the power plant had been played on Estonian national radio several times that day, in the hourly news updates. And after that, my 15 minutes of media fame in Estonia were finally over. Literally so, as that's probably what all the television and radio coverage of my visit added up to. To this day it still seems a bit unreal that what I was doing could generate that kind of media interest. But on the other hand, it might have been just a slow news day or two. And that's what I'm gonna go with.

Before I end this essay I should mention that there did happen to be some down time during my five-day stay in Estonia. My in-country host had arranged for us to attend a cultural event – Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, performed by a local theatrical group, with the stage located inside the ruins of a medieval castle. It was pretty spectacular, with some scenes taking place on the stone stairway leading up to the inner ramparts of the castle. Occasionally, actors delivered their lines from up there, five meters above our heads. But unfortunately, I didn't understand a word of it as it was all in Estonian.



the 'wish pile' at Lahemaa National Park

One other thing we did was visit Lahemaa National Park, a large conservation area along the Gulf of Finland. There were houses with thatched roofs, a huge wooden swing that's better than any amusement park ride, and a pyramid of stones that's a 'wish pile' – you tossed a stone onto the pile while making a wish, and it would come true if your stone landed near the top of the pile. Mine did, and my wish was that I would return to Estonia. And

even though two decades down the road it hasn't happened yet, I am still very much wishing to go back there again. ☀

