My Back Pages 26

Rich Lynch

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articles and essays by Rich Lynch

Well, it's been a hell of a year. *Another* hell of a year, make that. This 26th installment of my personal time capsule is once again being composed in the belly of the beast, a.k.a. the fucking COVID-19 pandemic. In fact, every essay here except for one was written this year. Most of them appeared in my Southern Fandom Press Association (SFPA) publication *Variations on a Theme*, a couple are from one-off publications, and there's also one previously unpublished that I wrote specifically for this collection.

My wife Nicki and I have been pretty well beaten down by two years of this but at least there's now a glimmering of light at the end of the proverbial tunnel. Even though COVID infections are still occurring, both Nicki and I are now triply-vaxed as are an ever-increasing number of people. Social distancing as well as a mask mandate here in this part of Maryland also gave us some peace of mind throughout the past two years. But, ironically, on the one day of the year that we actually *wanted* to see plenty of masked visitors… as you'll read in the first essay, there was a disappointing turnout.

Rich Lynch
Gaithersburg, Maryland
December 2021

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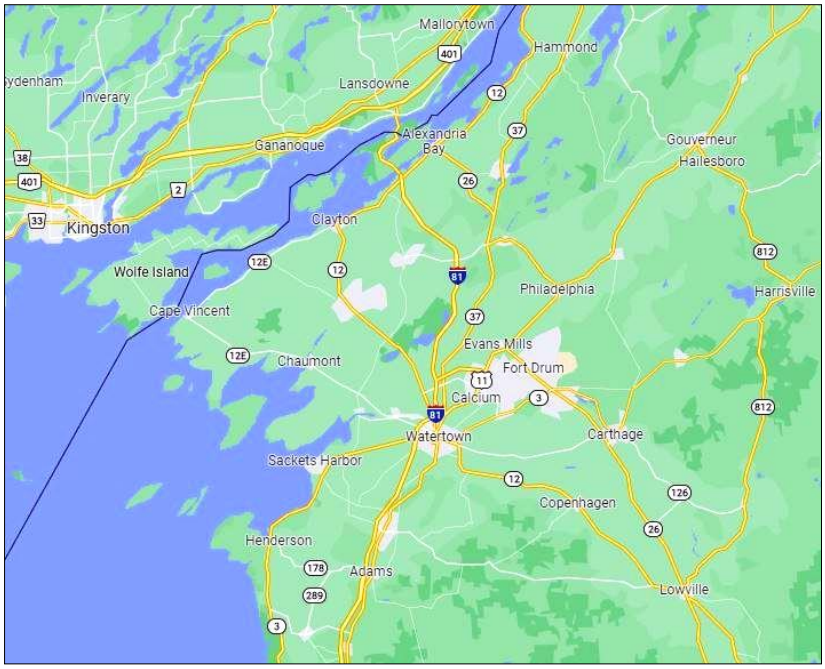
Random Thoughts on All Hallows' Eve

Well, here it is, nine o'clock on Halloween night, and there's been nary a trick-or-treater. Nicki and I came to the conclusion about an hour ago that there wasn't going to be any but we kept the front porch light on anyway, hoping we were wrong. And now we have all these delectable Hershey's Miniatures, two bags of them! Sweet temptations that we know we'll pretty quickly not be able to resist.

Hershey's Miniatures, yum!

I don't remember Hershey's Miniatures even existing more than 60 years ago, back when I was as little as some of the kids who we expected would show up at our front door this evening. I was a trick-or-treater for maybe five or six years when I was a pre-teenager. My parents' house was located at the outskirts of the village up in the North Country where we lived (Chaumont, located very near Lake Ontario in northern New York State), and it was a mini-marathon of sorts to visit as many other houses as I could in the couple of hours that I was allowed to be out and about. It was a different time back then – my mom and dad stayed home to hand out candy to other kids who came to the door while I was out roving the neighborhoods unaccompanied by any adult. Chaumont wasn't particularly hazardous to roam around in after dark and there wasn't any crime to speak of, so on Halloween night the streets were relegated to kids of all ages, dressed up in whatever costumes we could get our parents to devise. And some of them were pretty basic – I remember that more than once I donned a rugged-looking coat and hat with a Lone Ranger-type mask. I was a burglar, and gimme some candy!



Chaumont (center left on the map) and the North Country

The few hours available for trick-or-treating made it challenging to visit as many houses as possible, so there was one year that I figured out in advance what an efficient route would be, as opposed to the random meandering that usually happened. It worked out so well that I made it all the way over to the other end of the village, across the bridge spanning the river at the west end of town. But it was a trek – probably two or three miles of walking around that evening and by the time I got back home I'd decided that the additional candy that I got from it was not worth the extra effort. And it hadn't helped that there was some snow on the ground.

Halloweens in Chaumont were pretty cold, usually – that rugged-looking burglar's coat was really needed! There was one year that an early cold snap brought in several inches of lake-effect snow on the day before Halloween which made getting out and about for trick-or-treating a bit more complicated than usual. But it turned out not to be all that big a deal and I ended up with more or less the usual haul of Halloween treats. Hey, I grew up with snow, often lots of it! I thought it the most natural thing in the world to wake up on a cold December morning to discover that a foot or so of new snow was on the ground. In other years there were snowfalls as late as May. It all provided a degree of truth to the old adage that there were really only two seasons up in the North Country – Winter and July.

Chaumont was not an especially gregarious community. People had their own circles of friends and I don't ever remember a large group of any kind gathering except for school events. So Halloween nights provided me once-a-year opportunities to visit, if only for a few brief seconds, with Chaumont residents who I never saw at any other time. One of them was a little old lady who lived by herself in an ancient-looking house across-and-down the street a ways from my parents' house. She was a very kindly soul who, instead of candy or fruit, gave each Halloween visitor a shiny new penny. It belied the notion among a few of the kids in my grade school classes that she might be a witch and that her house could be haunted. I don't think anybody truly believed that, but on Halloween we all were looking for stuff to be scared of.

And now, more than six decades later, another Halloween is in the books. This was the first time ever for us that there were no trick-or-treaters. If that had happened back in the early 1960s I'm guessing my parents might have idly wondered if some supernatural being had swooped into town to abscond with all the kids. But in the here and now I'm chalking it up to both the lingering bad mojo of the pandemic and the gradual aging out of children who live in the area. Mostly the latter, I think. And there's one other thing I can mention about ghosts and the like on this All Hallow's Eve – Nicki and I are wondering if *our* house is haunted!

Every few weeks or so our doorbell will ring…and there's nobody at the door. It's not some kid playing a trick and scampering off because I can view our front walk from a window before any prankster could get away unobserved. We've kind of concluded that there's some sort of intermittent electronic signal that sets it off. But you know, we're not 100% sure of that. So if there really *is* a phantom lurking within our walls, I wish it would make an appearance.

We could really use some help eating up all those Hershey's Miniatures! ☼

Afterword:

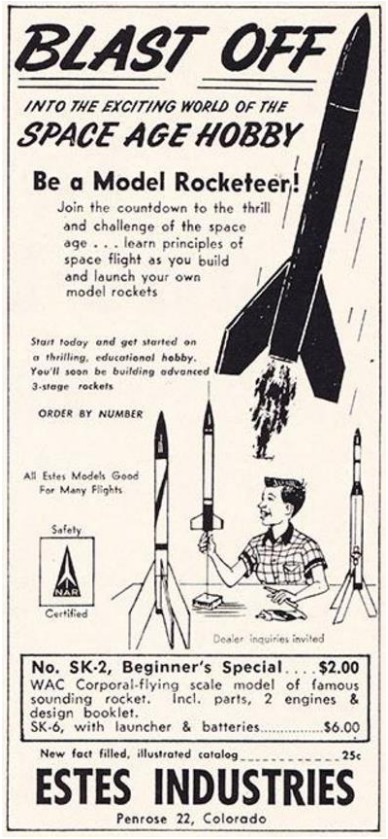
I apparently was nostalgic this past year about the decade-and-a-half that I lived in Chaumont because I wrote two other essays about my growing-up years there. One of them, as you will read next, is about a topic which has captivated me ever I was old enough to discover there was a big world out there: space flight. I was a child of the space age – I remember, vaguely, the evening news broadcast back in October 1957 which announced that the Soviet Union had launched a satellite into orbit. And I remember, in much greater detail, all the spaceflights of the first and second generation of American astronauts, from Alan Shepard in May 1961 (which my 6th grade class avidly followed via radio broadcast) all the way through the Apollo moon landings, the last of which happened when I was a graduate student.

It was sometime in the mid-1960s that it dawned on me that I could actually launch *my own* rockets. But just like NASA's early launches, it turned out to be a learning process.

Rocket Boy

I saw on the mid-day news today that on this very evening (May 11th) there will be a rocket launch from NASA's Wallops Island Flight Facility that *could* be briefly observable from where I live. But I'm skeptical, to say the least. Wallops Island is a bit more than 100 miles southwest of here as the crow flies, so it seems doubtful that whatever there is to see will get high enough off the horizon where it will be visible at all.

The launch isn't going to be much by Cape Canaveral standards – it's only a relatively small sub-orbital 'sounding rocket' whose onboard experiment, according to NASA, will "study a very fundamental problem in space plasmas, namely, how are energy and momentum transported between different regions of space that are magnetically connected". What makes it a noteworthy news event is that as part of the experiment, the rocket will release barium vapor which will form two green-violet clouds that, again according to NASA, "may be visible for about 30 seconds". We shall see. Maybe.



If it does turn out that there's something to see this evening, it'll be the first time in 55 years that I've in-person witnessed the launch of a rocket. The previous time was in the summer of 1966, and I'd been the one doing the launching. A couple of years prior to that, I had discovered (probably from an ad in a comic book) that Estes Industries of Penrose, Colorado was selling model rocket kits and components. I remember that I'd become supercharged by that revelation, so much so that I had scoured the neighborhood for odd job opportunities that in the end provided me enough money to send in an order.

The very first rocket that I built and launched was pretty puny, even by Estes standards. It was at most 7-inches tall but nevertheless I had decided to use one of the most powerful single-use rocket engines that Estes sold. In hindsight, the results were predictable – the thing took off with a loud and impressive *whoosh*, and after that…where the heck did it go?? The engine cut off after just a few seconds but by then Sky Bird 1, as I'd named it, was moving so fast and had ascended so high that I lost sight of it. There was a small parachute that was supposed to deploy, but if it did I never noticed. The rocket was gone, probably coming down somewhere way back into the wilderness of undeveloped land behind my parents' house, and I never did find it.

Even though it hadn't exactly been an auspicious start, the thrill of witnessing that fast and impressive take-off was enough to make me want to try again. So a few weeks later, after the next package from Estes had arrived in the mail, it was time for Sky Bird 2 to make its maiden flight. I had stayed up all night building and painting it, and more had gone into it than just the materials of construction. I'd learned a lot from that unfortunate first attempt, starting with the lesson that it was probably a good idea to use a much less powerful engine until I was sure that I knew what I was doing. So I used the lowest thrust one that Estes offered, and as a result the

rocket *might* have made it up as high as a couple hundred feet in altitude. But the parachute deployed exactly as planned and Sky Bird 2 floated gently and safely down to the ground. Success!

There were other Sky Birds after that, more and more ambitiously designed in terms of size and shape, and it eventually got to the point where I stopped naming them. But time was running out. By the summer of 1966, I knew that my days as a Rocket Boy were coming to an end because my parents were selling the house and we were going to move into a rental home down by the bay for my Senior year in high school. There would no longer be an open field to do launches. It was kind of a signal that it was time to move on. For my very last launch I had built a two-stage rocket – not so impressive in size and fairly conventional in terms of its shape, but it was still something I'd never tried before. And I had an observer! My mother's oldest brother was visiting that day and, from what I saw, his enthusiasm was even greater than mine – he volunteered to be my recovery crew and even gave me a countdown for the launch.

The model took off normally and rose straight up for maybe a couple hundred feet or so before the second stage kicked in, but then there was trouble. Instead of continuing its upward flight, the thing keeled over and zoomed away horizontally, gradually approaching the ground all the while. It went directly overtop a house across the street and continued on, neatly bisecting the gap between two tall trees behind the house. And then it was gone. I remember that my uncle gave me a quizzical look and asked, "Was it supposed to do that?"

I really don't know what happened to my model rockets after we moved. They didn't come with me, so I can only surmise that some of them were donated to a church-run community yard sale. Others weren't in very good shape, so I don't doubt that they'd just been gotten rid of. After that my interest in rocketry was limited to what I saw on television, as the Space Race was capturing everyone's imagination back then. And since then I've never, ever, been in the right place at the right time to personally witness another launch.

And you know what? Doesn't look like it's going to happen tonight, either – the clouds have been moving in all afternoon and the sky is now completely overcast. But, really, that's okay. If I ever do get to see a big rocket leap into the sky, I want it to be much more up close and personal than from 100 miles away. Until then I'll be content to think back about my time, so long ago, as a Rocket Boy. They're good memories. ☼

Afterword:

It turned out that the NASA launch was scrubbed that evening because the weather was not ideal. And it was also scrubbed the evening after that, the evening after that, the evening after that, and the evening *after that* for the same reason. It was about a week before it actually did happen, but by then it had slipped below my attention and I missed it.

This ongoing personal time capsule has created plenty of opportunity for me to revisit my life as I remember it, and I'm grateful for that. No life is without angst and sorrow, and I've certainly had my share. But there have been far more good memories than bad, including one that happened at the 1992 Worldcon. It was there that I met, very briefly, one of the most storied fan personalities who has ever graced the science fiction genre – Walter A. Willis. Nicki and I were honored to have published, in our fanzine *Mimosa*, a series of remembrances by Walt that were, in effect, his own personal time capsule. And back in February, I compiled all of these articles under one cover. Here's the introduction I wrote for that collection.

I Remember Him

I remember the exact moment when I met Walter Alexander Willis. It was on September 5th, 1992 at MagiCon, the 50th World Science Fiction Convention. More precisely, it was in the aftermath of the Hugo Awards ceremony that evening where *Mimosa*, the little publication I co-edited with my wife Nicki back then, had won the 'Best Fanzine' Hugo. All the award winners had congregated, along with the convention's guests, in a backstage lounge area prior to us all departing for various parties and meet-ups that evening. And that's where I found Walt. He was Magicon's Fan Guest of Honor, and until then our convention schedules had not meshed to the point where I could have a chance to finally meet him. I recall that we sat next to each other on a couch for 10 minutes or so, though at that point I was still so stunned by winning a Hugo (and the way it happened, but let's not go into that) that I cannot remember a single thing we talked about. One of my friends took a photo of the two of us but after all these years I can no longer locate it. And maybe that's for the best – I remember that I had an open-mouth look on my face that made it seem like I was trying to cough up a hairball.

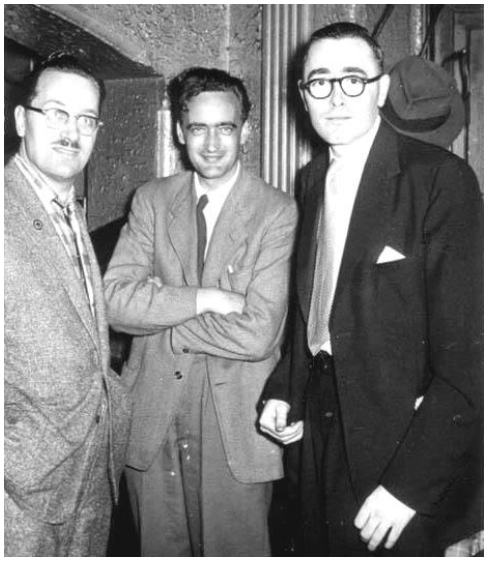
I also recall the moment (though not nearly so precisely) that I *first* met Walt Willis. It happened a bit more than five years earlier, when I found a postcard in our mailbox from him that commented on the second issue of *Mimosa*. Walt had the deserved reputation for being perhaps the best writer that science fiction fandom has ever produced (if that's the right word) but he was equally adept at providing egoboo to fledgling fan publishers (as Nicki and I were back then) in the form of perceptive and usually entertaining letters of comment on fanzines he had received in the mail. The one he sent in response to *Mimosa* 2 led off with a witty remark about a Bob Tucker article in that issue but also made grand use of what very limited space was left on the card to colorfully describe "the ultimate convention hotel" that he and his friend Chuck Harris had discovered in Greenore, on the shore of the Irish Sea:

> Set in beautiful countryside, it had a railway station and a boat dock actually in the hotel, but was completely deserted. It seemed it had been constructed towards the end of the great railway boom for a new Irish Sea crossing (Fleetwood/Greenore) which never took off, leaving a newly built hotel high and dry. Ireland is full of such ruined hopes.

You won't find those words in the *Mimosa* 3 lettercol, however, because in my infinite lack of wisdom (and I hasten to add that Nicki had nothing to do with it) I had edited Walt's postcard down to only the specific comment about the Tucker article. It was obviously the wrong thing to do and I now feel horrified about it, and I can only say that my abilities as a fanzine editor did improve over the final 27 issues of the run. I am truly grateful that Walt didn't immediately give up on us after that slight.

But this fanzine is about Walt, not me. After publishing ten issues of *Mimosa*, Nicki and I finally felt confident enough to ask Walt to write us an essay, but what resulted was a lot more than that – instead of a single piece, Walt contributed a series of 12 historical articles which ran starting in the 11th and continuing through the 22nd issues. Two of them are reprints of sections of fabulous trip reports and other essays that Walt wrote during the 1950s but the rest are a different kind of trip report – an annotated guided tour through his correspondence files from that period. Those ten articles he titled "I Remember Me", and they were a continuation of a series of that same title that had been collected and published 14 years earlier in the mammoth and now legendary 28th issue of the fanzine *Warhoon*, which contains more than 600 pages of vintage

Willis writings over the decades of his involvement in science fiction fandom. *Warhoon*'s editor, Richard Bergeron, had described "I Remember Me" as "... a revelation of high fannish secrets, low fannish secrets, gossip, eavesdroppings, skeletons, skeleton keys, opened letters, and glimpses into Machiavellian machinations... " and the resumption of the series in pages of *Mimosa* was more of the same. And with that, I am happy to now collect all of Walt's *Mimosa* articles under one cover for current fans and future historians to marvel over.



Walt Willis (center) with Forrest J Ackerman (left) and James White (right) at the 1957 Worldcon

And marvel you will. There are many famous writers and personalities both within and outside the science fiction genre – Robert Bloch, Horace Gold, Harlan Ellison, Robert Conquest, John Brunner, Damon Knight, and Eric Frank Russell to name just a few – who appear in this continuation of "I Remember Me" via their letters to Walt and his return correspondence. The excerpt from the postcard I reprinted above is a representative sample of the quality of writing you will find in these articles. I had an enjoyable time bringing this collection together. I hope you'll have an enjoyable time reading it. ☼

Afterword:

I wrote an editorial epilog of sorts to close out the publication, and I think it's also worth reprinting:

> In the end, there's not much to say about Walt Willis that isn't a superlative. He was the most prominent member of fandom's most famous fan organization, the legendary Irish Fandom of the 1950s. Bob Shaw, another member of IF and also one of fandom's finest writers and humorists, once described Willis as "the best writer [he'd] ever known". But it was Harry Warner, Jr., in his book, *A Wealth of Fable*, who described Walt as the "best and most gifted fan of the 1950s, who also might qualify as the Number One Fan of any and all decades".
>
> And you know what? Harry was right.
>
> When a notable person passes on, there's usually somebody who makes what in retrospect often seems a superficial remark: "We will not see his like again." But in this case that's exactly right. We really won't. Walt was unique in fandom – an absolutely great writer, fanzine editor, correspondent, and humorist, all in one. I am very happy that I got to meet him, if only for what turned out to be a few moments. A century from now, if fandom still exists, it would be a great compliment to me for some future historian, before mentioning anything else I had done and accomplished in fandom, to write that: "I'm envious that he got to meet Walt Willis."

This past year has done a lot to reinforce a sense of mortality. Several friends from fandom have died, including three different (and unrelated) Tennessee fans all named Charlie Williams. Here's a remembrance of one of them.

Charlie

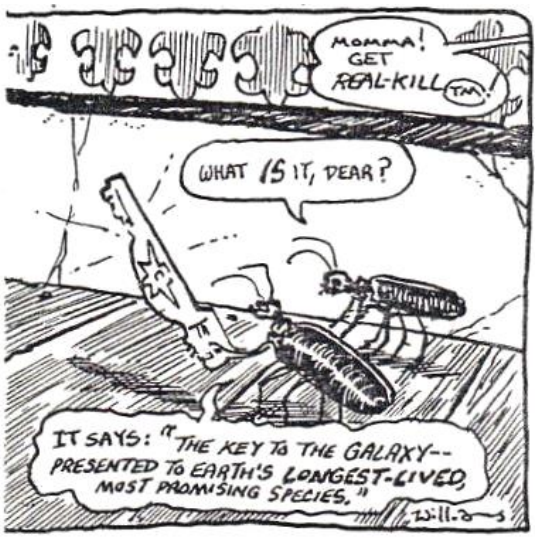
My friend Charlie Williams passed away a few days ago as I'm writing this. I'd learned, several months ago, that he'd become very ill with cancer and that his chances for survival were not good. But still…where there's life there's hope. Until there isn't.

Not long before he died, Charlie's long-time friend Rusty Burke with his wife Shelly Wischhusen visited him in hospice. He wrote that: "I was privileged to be with Charlie near the end, while Shelly and I were in Knoxville. I hope he was aware I was there, telling everyone in the room how important he was to me. He really helped set my life on the course it has taken since college days. So many memories, so many good times, such a remarkable guy."

I feel much the same way, even though I didn't meet Charlie until several years after my college days were over. I first became aware of Charlie's existence at the end of January in 1978, at the first meeting of what would be a short-lived science fiction club in Knoxville, Tennessee. Nicki and I were living in Chattanooga back then and were members of a local science fiction club there. And we were also publishing its monthly clubzine, *Chat*. We promoted the new club's meeting in our 5th issue and also made the trip up to Knoxville as a show of support. One of the things that happened there was a raffle to raise some money to help pay for the meeting room rental, and one of the items was an original piece of comic art by a local cartoonist named Charlie Williams. "Charlie Williams," I remember thinking to myself, "who the heck is he?" And then: "Damn! We need to have some of his artwork in *Chat*!"

Charlie wasn't at that meeting so the club organizer (a friend of ours) provided us his address. Nicki and I wrote him and got back what we thought was a surprisingly enthusiastic response. Plus a few cartoons, the first of which appeared in our 8th issue. I wrote a short paragraph accompanying it which introduced him to science fiction fandom:

> *"I would also like to take the opportunity to introduce readers of* Chat *to the artwork of Charlie Williams, premiering in this issue. In my opinion, Charlie is a damn fine illustrator good enough to win someday (soon!) the fan artist Hugo. Remember, you saw his work here first!"*



first cartoon illustration by Charlie for *Chat*

I can't remember for sure the first time I actually met Charlie in person but I know it was in Knoxville at his place of business, East Tennessee Comics, of which he was a co-owner. He had a small studio in the back of the Quonset hut-like structure and it was clearly obvious to me that he much preferred creating inventive illustrations than dickering over the price of some back-issue comic book with a pre-teen customer. He immediately became friends with Nicki and me, and I made it a point to stop by to see him every few weeks when my job in industry (at that time) took me to the Knoxville/Oak Ridge metro area. Every time I did I usually brought back several more illustrations (and once in a while, covers) for future issues of *Chat*.

cover by Charlie for the final issue of *Chat*

It didn't take too long for Charlie to be noticed by other fan editors and soon his illustrations began to appear in many other fanzines. After *Chat* ended its run he did the very first cover for its successor, *Mimosa*, and later in the run did two others, both wraparounds. He also illustrated many of the articles that appeared in *Mimosa* over the course of its existence and even contributed a convention report, "NorthAmericon in Words and Pictures", to the second issue. He was a welcome, constant presence in *Mimosa*, the only person besides Nicki and myself who appeared in all 30 issues.

As I described earlier, I'd always thought that Charlie would win a Fan Artist Hugo. Even though, to my disappointment, that never happened, Charlie did receive well-deserved recognition by being Fan Guest of Honor at three Southern Fandom conventions during the early 1980s and receiving the Southpaw Award for Best Humorist at the 1984 DeepSouthCon. He was hyperactive in fandom during that time and it was not unusual to cross paths with him at some of the mid-South conventions Nicki and I attended.

In the early autumn of 1988, Nicki and I moved from Tennessee to Maryland and we only rarely saw Charlie after that. We still kept in touch, though, and he always answered the call whenever we needed illustrations for *Mimosa*. And he did the same for at least one other fan publisher – after *Mimosa* ended its run he became one of Guy Lillian's "go to" illustrators for his fanzine *Challenger*.

I have lots of regrets that, during all these years I've lived in Maryland, Nicki and I didn't make more of an effort go down to Tennessee to pay him visits. I've looked, and I don't even have a photograph of the two of us together – astonishing to me, since there were so many opportunities. Instead, my memories of him will have to be enough. And you know what? He's still alive in there. Always will be. ☼

Afterword:

Back in the early 1990s, Nicki and I were passing through Knoxville on the way to a convention and stopped by Charlie's home to pick up a couple of illustrations that later on appeared in an issue of *Mimosa*. As far as I remember it was the last time I saw him in person, though there's no way I could have known that when I was there. That was by no means a unique experience – there are many friends and acquaintances who I will never see again, without me knowing it at the time, on what turned out to be the final times we crossed paths.

This kind of thing also has relevance to events as well as people, and I'm old enough now that I treasure my time at conventions and similar gatherings. But there still have been some professional meetings I've attended where I had no idea at the time that I wouldn't be attending another one. The most recent instance happened back in November 2019, at a multilateral carbon sequestration meeting in France. As you'll read next, I fully expected that there would be two more of them for me before I retired. And then the pandemic happened.

In the Land of the Impressionists

I've been to Paris enough times where I think I know my way around the city reasonably well. But even so, the city is big enough, with so many places of interest, that any trip there can, well, leave an 'impression' on you.

the Maison Fournaise restaurant

An example of this are the Parisian suburbs of Chatou and Rueil-Malmaison. They're just a short train ride from Paris's financial district, and the difference is enormous. Instead of tall buildings and concrete-paved plazas there are lush riverside parks.

a reproduction of Renoir's *Luncheon of the Boating Party*

And there is a restaurant, the Maison Fournaise, on an island in the middle of the Seine where the famous impressionist painter Pierre-Auguste Renoir once hung out. The interior is depicted in Renoir's painting *Luncheon of the Boating Party*. Which happens to reside in The Phillips Collection museum in Washington, D.C., about 20 miles from where I live in Maryland. My life is *filled* with synchronicity.

* * *

Paris's La Défense business and financial district, where I stayed during my early November business trip, may be without much in the way of green spaces but it's definitely not without things of interest, many of them more than a bit whimsical. For example, what's probably the world's largest thumb is there. It's one of the public art sculptures which populate a spacious esplanade that's dominated by one of the more iconic buildings in the city – the Grande Arche, a hollowed-out cube 360 feet on a side which was the end-result of a design competition back in the early 1980s. Its purpose is prosaic – it houses Government offices for the most part – but the view from the

the Grande Arche building

giant thumb sculpture in the La Défense esplanade

the view from atop the Grande Arche, with the Arc de Triomphe at left and Eiffel Tower at right

roof is truly spectacular. From way up there I could easily see all the way over to the Arc de Triomphe in one direction and the Eiffel Tower in another.

But that was as close as I got to either of those iconic structures. My meeting was in Chatou, not Paris, and what free time I had was mostly spent out in the `burbs.

* * *

This was the 32nd in a long and continuing series of multilateral meetings on the topic of carbon capture and storage that I've had a hand in planning and organizing. My duties, as the Secretariat, are largely administrative, which means that during the roll-ups to meetings I handle everything from developing the schedule and agendas to managing the logistics (including the website) to acting as liaison to each meeting's host organization. But during a meeting I have other responsibilities, including assisting the Chair as her right-hand man (though I prefer to sit on her left). And I also do a brief organizational status report presentation. But for *this* conference, there was one other thing I was called on to do – make an additional presentation at one of the workshops.

as 'left-hand man' during the main meeting

Not that I had wanted to. No, not at all. I'd found out a week or so before the meeting that I'd have to fill in for one of the U.S. delegates who'd be at another meeting in a different part of Europe. It was a program review, of sorts, on a topic that I had (in my opinion) insufficient knowledge – carbon capture, utilization and storage opportunities from so-called 'blue hydrogen' production (i.e., hydrogen produced from steam reforming of natural gas, which also generates substantial amounts of carbon dioxide). I had been provided the PowerPoint presentation with no additional notes to go by, so I reverted to a time-tested tactic – just wing it and hope for the best. And so I started by saying:

"Mark A******** had been originally scheduled to give this presentation but as you can see, I am not him. Mark is a lot younger than I am. I have a lot less hair than he does.

"I had an enjoyable dinner last evening with Dr. P** S******* of Equinor. As part of a broad discussion on many different topics, we tried to guess on how near, or more accurately, how far away the fabled 'Hydrogen Economy' actually is. But for me, at least, I think the term 'Hydrogen Economy' is an oversimplification. What we're really talking about is a 'Hydrogen and CO_2 Economy'. It seems likely that

my presentation at the workshop

'blue hydrogen' is going to be the primary source of hydrogen for the foreseeable future. And you can't have 'blue hydrogen' without 'blue CO_2'.

"So this presentation, and I'll go through the slides quickly, is about how the U.S. Department of Energy has fashioned a program to bring down the cost of capturing and storing CO_2. And, as you will see, there are some definite synergies with industrial-scale hydrogen production processes."

The presentation was pretty straightforward, as it turned out, with slides that were mostly self-explanatory. But I will admit that sometimes I know just enough to be dangerous, and I didn't want to find out if this was one of those occasions. The audience had been very interactive for other presentations, so there was no way was I going to risk stepping in it by inadvertently giving out misinformation. So not only did I not take any questions at the end of the presentation, I thought it might be wise if I just made myself scarce for the rest of the afternoon. And with that, I decided to pay a visit to the Château de Malmaison.

* * *

the Château de Malmaison

It was back in 1799 that Joséphine de Beauharnaise, at the request of her husband, General Napoléon Bonaparte, purchased a decrepit estate, a few miles west of Paris, which was much in need of renovation. It encompassed a large expanse of woods and meadows, and no small expense later it had been transformed into what Joséphine considered "the most beautiful and curious garden in Europe, a model of good cultivation". Napoléon and Joséphine lived at the estate for about ten years, after which there was a divorce and Joséphine became sole resident until her death in 1814. After that it became the residence or summer home of several notables, including a Queen Consort from Spain and an American philanthropist. Today it's a national museum, of sorts, with rooms in the château restored to what they were like at the beginning of the 19th century.

the Gilded Room

Early November is not a good time to visit the gardens which surround the Château de Malmaison. There were still some flower blossoms and plenty of foliage, but it must pale in comparison to what's there in the middle of summer. But I'd come there mostly to see the building. The interior of the château is utterly filled with opulence, and I had the good fortune of latching on to the end of an English-speaking tour which provided me some context to all that splendor. I don't think I can decide on which room I thought the most opulent, but the Gilded Room probably comes closest. Exquisite period furniture is complemented by mahogany-paneled walls, a

fireplace mantle with decorative inlays, and gilt-framed panels where works by the prominent French painters François Gérard and Anne-Louis Girodet are on display. Truly sublime.

* * *

The final workshop of the meeting was only a half-day event, so that left time for one more walkabout in the Land of the Impressionists. Or in this case a 'rideabout', at least in part, as what I wanted to see was in the next town over. Saint-Germain-en-Laye is the home of another château, not quite as famous as Malmaison but still most definitely worth seeing. And it took quite an effort to get to it. Back in the 1990s, at a large convention in San Antonio, I had been 'appointed' by some of my friends as leader of a dinner expedition to a well-regarded Italian restaurant. It was less than a mile walk, but the heat of the day was a bit oppressive and by the time we arrived I had gotten several snarky comments that I was leading a death march. I can say, without qualification, that if any of those friends had been with me in Saint-Germain they would have had justifiable cause to complain of a death march. It was only a bit more than a mile, but my iPhone's GPS did not show how hilly the terrain was. By the time I finally arrived I was pretty much worn down. And then there was an added nasty surprise: the château was closed that day. It was a place that I'd really wanted to see – the Château de Monte-Cristo, home of the famous French writer Alexandre Dumas.

an obstructed view of the Château de Monte-Cristo

The best I could do was take a few photos from the street. I had hoped there might be a great view of the château through the front gate. And there would have been, if not for a large tree that blocked much of the sightline. Very disappointing.

But I didn't come up entirely empty during my time in Saint-Germain. An intimidatingly large castle which houses the National Archeological Museum is located practically next door to the train station. Inside there were all sorts of relics, some of them dating back to the time of prehistoric cave paintings. My favorite was the large Roman-era tile floor, depicting the four seasons in finely-crafted mosaic. It was worth the trip to Saint-Germain just to see that.


Roman-era mosaic tile floor at the Archeological Museum

* * *

If I could only have a single image to remember this trip, I think it would be the photo I took in the Parc des Impressionnistes, across the Seine from the meeting venue. This small urban green space has been in existence since 1996, and I've read that it's intended to pay tribute to all the impressionist painters of the 19th century by "offering visitors floral compositions that read like paintings" as if one were in the midst of Claude Monet's garden. At least in the warmer months of the year. But in early November all I found were the last roses of summer.

the last roses of summer, in the Parc des Impressionnistes

As I mentioned, this was the 32nd carbon sequestration meeting that I've had a hand in planning and organizing. There will be only two more for me. I'd decided a few months ago that I am going to retire from U.S. Government employ at the end of 2020, and I made no secret of that to other meeting attendees. So I'm going to treat these final two meetings like those last roses of summer that I happened across in the Parc des Impressionnistes – the end of what's been a flourishing and creative part of my life. It seems an apt analogy. ☼

Afterword:

Well, the pandemic ended up altering my retirement plans. It caused a changeover to work-from-home which is still in effect and also cancellation of all international travel. Which is still in effect. I decided it was in my financial best interests to continue working through 2021, but that meeting in France did turn out to be the final in-person one for me – it metaphorically really *was* the last rose of summer.

at The Phillips Collection with Renoir's *Luncheon of the Boating Party*

As for the Renoir painting, it was about a month-and-a-half after the meeting that I got to see it at The Phillips Collection, a very fine modern art museum that occupies a three-story Georgian Revival town home near Dupont Circle in D.C. It's got a terrific collection of art ranging from Grandma Moses to Picasso, but the interior of the building and especially its wonderful oak-paneled Music Room is as much a splendor to behold as the art itself. The Renoir painting seems to be the star attraction, and on the day Nicki and I visited there was a large docent tour which was admiring the work. I guess it made an 'impression' on them too.

It turned out to be more than a year-and-three-quarters after that before Nicki and I next saw the inside of a D.C. museum. By then we both had been multiply-vaxed and were starting to feel a bit better about being out in public. As you'll read next, the place we chose to break the intellectual drought was our favorite of the entire Smithsonian.

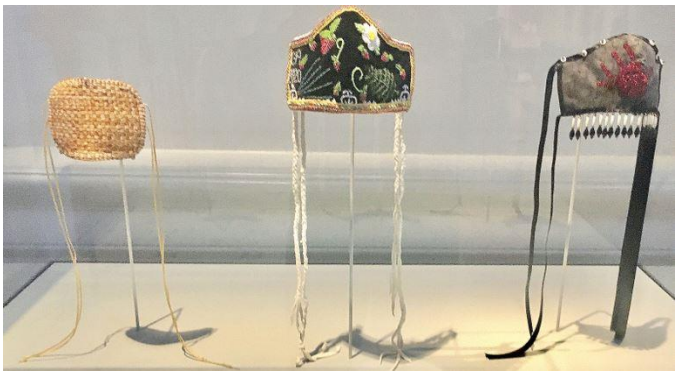
The Museum of Soldiers and Artisans

Well, it's not over, but Nicki and I decided in the middle of October that our Moderna double-vax was sufficient protection against the slowly ebbing COVID-19 pandemic to where we could finally take a trip farther away from home than nearby grocery stores and doctors' offices. So we decided to travel down to D.C. to visit our favorite Smithsonian museum.

outside the Renwick on October 14

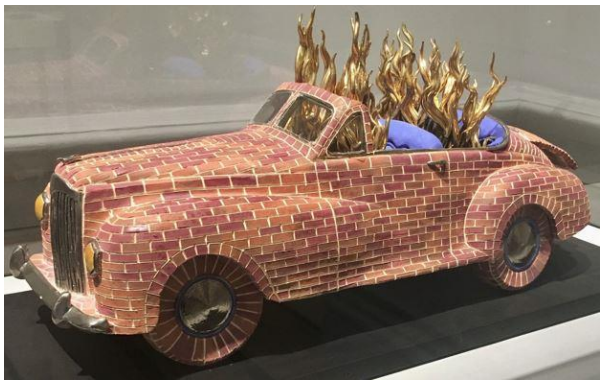
And that would be the Renwick Gallery. It's actually a branch of the Smithsonian American Art Museum, its building dating back to the Civil War with first use as the headquarters office for General Montgomery Meigs. It's a gorgeous building that owes its design to the now-destroyed Tuileries Palace in Paris. The Renwick has been part of the Smithsonian since 1965 and ever since then has been host to the Museum's decorative arts and crafts collection.

Things are starting to head back toward normalcy for the Smithsonian but they aren't there yet. So only the upper floor of the Renwick was open for viewing and there mostly were items from the permanent collection that were on display. But that what we did see were truly sublime and it started with something, in these pandemic times, we could absolutely connect with.

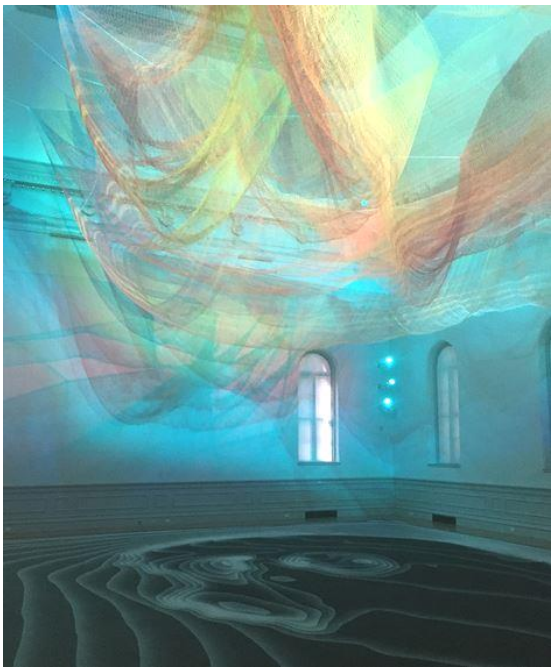

woven face masks by First Nations artisans

Face masks.

There were three of them, made by expert artisan weavers from Native American tribes in Washington State, Oklahoma, and Ontario, incorporating wood strips, grasses of various kinds, bone, shell, and other materials that have been used by First Nations people throughout their histories. Obviously not meant to be worn, but still a statement of sorts that there is room for beauty in times of cold truth.


Patti Warashina's "Convertible Car Kiln"

The craft works on display got a lot larger from there. And also much more disparate. Only slightly larger than the face masks was the "Convertible Car Kiln" by Patti Warashina that was constructed a half century ago from earthenware, Plexiglas, and gold & silver glaze. And at the other end of the scale, in both size and timeline, was Janet Echelman's "1.8 Renwick" which took over the entirety of the



a small part of Janet Echelman's "1.8 Renwick"

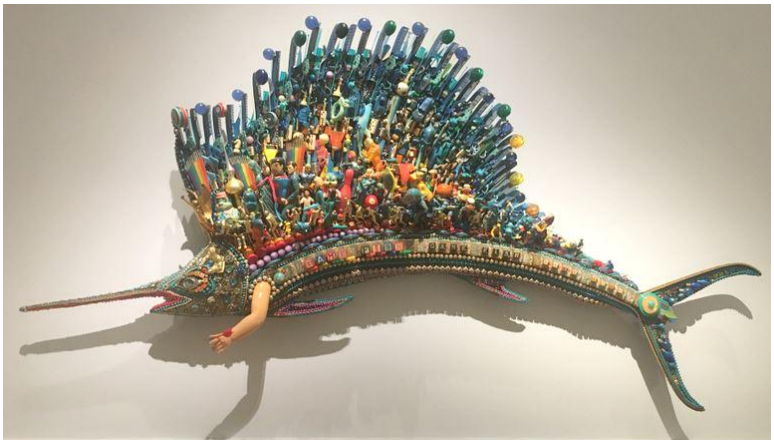
large Grand Salon room. It was constructed *in situ* using fiber and colored light, and was inspired by data collected from the 9.1 magnitude earthquake and resulting tsunami which devastated parts of Japan back in March 2011. The name of the piece comes from the 1.8 microsecond reduction of the Earth's rotation period as a result of the quake, with three-dimensional wave forms near the ceiling of the room depicted as two-dimensional topographical patterns on the floor. It's a very dynamic piece of art, as it gradually changes in both physical appearance and hue. Viewers were invited to lie down on the floor and contemplate the work, as the description of the installation stated that "the color permutations take as long to unfold as it takes to watch a sunset". Its intent seems to be to impress on us how small and insignificant we all are on the geologic scale, and it certainly did that for me.

My two favorite pieces in the exhibition were things I'd seen on many previous visits to the Renwick. One of them is of such transcendental craftsmanship that you can get up to within practically a nose-length from it and still not comprehend what it really is and how it was made. It's the "Ghost Clock".

At first glance, from practically any distance away, it would be easy to dismiss this as just a grandfather clock cloaked in a white sheet – something totally appropriate for the upcoming All Hallow's Eve, actually – and be done with it. It's only when you get within about an arm's length that you can see that something is not quite right about the sheet – it looks very stiff as if it's been heavily starched. It's not until you read the description of the piece that realization sets in – the 'sheet' is actually made of wood. And then be dumb-struck by the further realization that the entire sculpture was carved from *a single block* of laminated mahogany, with the 'clock' stained brown and the 'sheet' bleached white. This is one of a series of 13 clock carvings that the artisan, the late Wendell Castle, finished back in the 1980s, all of them unique and delightfully strange. And also, except for this one, functional timepieces. I hope that it will be possible someday for all of them to be collected in a group exhibit so that we can be further in awe of the talent of this expert woodworker.

Wendell Castle's exquisite "Ghost Clock"

My favorite piece of all has been on prominent display in the Renwick for so long that it's now become, in effect, an iconic image of the museum – "Game Fish" by artist/craftsman Larry Fuente. It's one of the better examples of how to create a work of art from 'found' objects – in this case beads, buttons, poker chips, rhinestones, coins, dice, combs, a plastic doll, and ping pong balls There's even a badminton birdie in there as well as some pieces from a miniature pinball game. All of them mostly related to different types of games and covering a fiberglass substrate formed into the shape of a marlin.

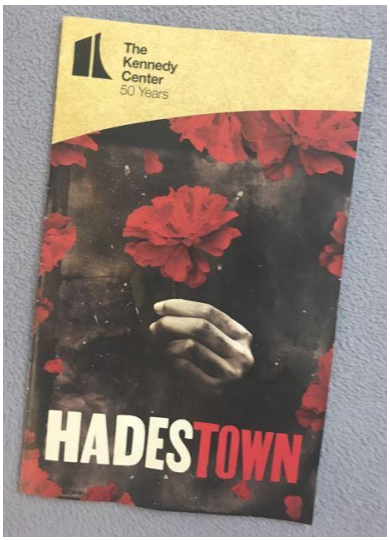


Larry Fuente's strange but wonderful "Game Fish"

I'm not sure I could tell you why it's my favorite piece in the museum. It probably has a lot to do with its delightful strangeness. But "Game Fish" is also a favorite of the Renwick itself, which describes the work as one of its "most beloved treasures". As for me, I consider the Renwick itself as one of Washington's most beloved treasures. It was exactly the right place for Nicki and me to reacquaint ourselves with D.C. after a year-and-a-half of hunkering down against the pandemic. It certainly won't be another year-and-a-half before our next visit there. ☼

Afterword:

After having gone the better part of two years of not traveling down to Washington, it only took two weeks until our next time there. Strict protocols have been put into place for theatre shows in most parts of the country and that made us comfortable enough where we wanted to take in another performance (this time at The Kennedy Center) of what has quickly become one of our favorite musicals – *Hadestown*. I've already written about the musical, as it was one of the six shows we saw back in January 2020, the most recent time we've been to New York City. So I'll only say that the national tour version, the one that came to D.C., is really good. But the one on Broadway – the staging and the actors – is even better.



Our next trip down to Washington will happen not long after this issue is going to be published, and we'll be there to attend a convention – the 2021 World Science Fiction Convention, Discon III. But only for one day. We're both sufficiently pissed off at the convention committee for a couple of reasons such that one day's attendance seems sufficient (mostly so we can vote in site selection for the 2023 Worldcon and connect up with out-of-town friends who will be there). But because of my strong and continuing interest in the history of Worldcons, I couldn't turn down a request to write a short article for the convention's Souvenir Book about the very first Discon, which took place way back in 1963. As you will read next, that was an epic event!

The First Discon

It is my belief (and to a certain degree, my experience) that Worldcons, like many large events, are labors of love in the minds of their organizing committees. So much so that it often takes significant chunks of the lifetimes of those very dedicated people to make one happen. For instance, this gathering, the third World Science Fiction Convention ever to be held within the borders of the District of Columbia, has been in various planning stages – from original inception to final preparation – for probably the better part of a decade. But, in a much broader sense, the seeds of its creation date back a lot further than that.

Fully three-quarters of a century, in fact. It was back in 1946 that a D.C. science fiction enthusiast, Charles "Chick" Derry, began contacting fans he knew in the immediate metro area with the idea of forming a fan club. Derry eventually met another active Washington fan, Bob Pavlat, at the 1947 Worldcon in Philadelphia and together they were able to generate enough enthusiasm from five other D.C. fans to form what turned out to be a lasting organization. The result was the Washington Science Fiction Society, which changed its name a few months later to the Washington Science-Fiction Association, or WSFA.

By 1950, WSFA had grown enough that more activities were possible than just twice-a-month meetings. It held its first convention that year, a one-day event that drew about 75 fans and was successful enough that it was repeated the next year under the name of 'Disclave'. By the early 1960s, Disclaves had become multi-day events and were starting to become multi-interest, so WSFA decided to try something *really* interesting: sponsor a World Science Fiction Convention. Its only other serious bid to host a Worldcon (for 1950) had garnered barely enough votes to finish third of the four bids considered by the business meeting of the 1949 Worldcon, but by 1962 things were different. The club had the wherewithal and active membership base to support a bid, and also an influential fan (George Scithers) to act as Chair. The bid won broad support at the Chicon III business meeting and as a result, the city of Washington was host to its first Worldcon, the 'Discon', over Labor Day weekend in 1963.

Will F. Jenkins (right) at the first Discon

That first Discon was notable for many reasons, not all of which involved science fiction. Just three days prior, an event staged nearby had helped to shape the world of the 1960s – the "I Have a Dream" speech of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. at the Lincoln Memorial, only about a mile from the Statler-Hilton Hotel where the convention was held. Discon's Guest of Honor was someone who was as respected within the science fiction genre as Dr. King was in the world at large – Will F. Jenkins, who wrote under the pen name of Murray Leinster. He was a great choice for GoH, not only for having won a Hugo Award seven years earlier for his novelette "Exploration Team", but for all the groundbreaking concepts he had originated and incorporated into his fiction: The first Alternate History story ("Sidewise in Time", published in 1934). The first story that foresaw a future with extensively interlinked small computers ("A Logic Named Joe", published in 1946). The first story to include a 'universal translator' device ("First Contact", published in

1945). And the first story to actually *introduce* the phrase 'first contact' ("Proxima Centauri", published in 1935). At the time of Discon, Murray Leinster was also one of the oldest living science fiction writers, his first story "The Runaway Skyscraper" having been published way back in 1919. He had been rightfully described by *Time* magazine (in 1949) as "the dean of writers in the [science fiction] field".

Leinster's Guest of Honor speech, at the convention's banquet luncheon, was an unscripted anecdotal remembrance of people, places, and events over the span of his long writing career. But also forward-looking: During his remarks he stated that, "I do have one hope I can talk about. It has long been my belief that science fiction is the hope of the nation." Leinster spoke for about 45 minutes in all, and after that it was time for the Hugo Awards presentation. Discon's Toastmaster, Isaac Asimov, had charge of the event (as he had been for several previous Worldcons) and he was humorously entertaining with many witticisms and even some back-and-forth banter with other writers who were there. At that point in his writing career, Asimov had not yet been voted a Hugo and so he used his annual Worldcon Toastmaster speaking time to make his introductory comments into an amusing faux-lament: "I have edited an anthology called *The Hugo Winners* [in which] I have bared my heart. I wrote about all the rascals who get Hugos and how they never give it to the one man, who above all others, deserves numerous Hugos – ME!"

But this time it was different. The very last award presented, one that had been kept secret by the convention committee, was a Special Award – to him! It was inscribed "For Adding Science to Science Fiction. Isaac Asimov" in honor for all of the science popularizing essays and articles he had written over the years. It only took a few seconds for Asimov to realize that his annual schtick at the Hugo Awards ceremony was finished. He turned to Scithers and exclaimed, "You killed the whole bit!"

It didn't quite overshadow all the Hugos that had been given out prior to that, and there had been some very worthy winners. Philip K. Dick won what would be his only Hugo Award for his novel *The Man in the High Castle*. Jack Vance won in the Short Fiction category for "The Dragon Masters". Roy Krenkel won in the Best Professional Artist category, *Fantasy & Science Fiction* won for Best Professional Magazine, and *Xero* for Best Amateur Magazine. There was also another special committee award, to P. Schuyler Miller in recognition of his many thoughtful and informative book reviews. And in a separate ceremony later that day, the venerable E.E. "Doc" Smith was honored with the inaugural First Fandom Hall of Fame Award.

Doc Smith with his First Fandom Hall of Fame Award

There were a lot more memorable moments at that first Discon than just the awards ceremonies, of course. One of them happened right after the gavel fell at the Opening Ceremonies, when Fritz Leiber and L. Sprague de Camp yelled mock insults at each other in Old English and Persian that soon escalated into a clanging sword duel, each of them brandishing an old Argentine Navy cutlass. Which was followed by a robed wizard reading an incantation from a book of spells. Once the theatrics had concluded, Scithers introduced James Blish who gave an incisive speech about literary criticism as it pertains to science fiction and how British reviewers

seemed to be much better at it. After that there were panels and lectures on topics as diverse as fiction writing, comic book art, and the mysteries of astronomy. There was also a costume ball and even a poetry slam. And that was just the first day.

There were two more days of Discon and each had a similarly eclectic mix of panels and speeches. In addition to the awards ceremonies and banquet, Day 2 was partially given over to special interest group meetings: the Burroughs Bibliophiles, the Fantasy Amateur Press Association, and the Hyborian Legion. And the third day featured an editors' panel, moderated by Fred Pohl, which had as its panelists several of the most prominent and respected science fiction editors of that time: Donald A. Wollheim, Cele Goldsmith, A.J. Budrys, and John W. Campbell, Jr. In all, the Discon program had something for everybody, all packed into one single, content-rich track of programming. Most of it was recorded on audio, and the result was a Proceedings that was put into print by Advent Publishers.

The 1963 Discon had an attendance of about 600 fans and professionals, very small by today's standards. But that provided it a degree of intimacy in terms of creating opportunities for meeting people, and those present were happy to partake. One of them was Mike Resnick who, with his wife Carol, were attending their first Worldcon. It was all gosh-wow to him, which caused him to be noticed by a much more seasoned Worldcon attendee. As Resnick later described it:

> *"There was a sweet old guy in a white suit who saw that we were new to all this, and moseyed over and spent half an hour with us, making us feel at home and telling us about how we were all one big family and inviting us to come to all the parties at night. Then he wandered off to accept the first-ever Hall of Fame Award from First Fandom. When they asked if he was working on anything at present, he replied that he had just delivered the manuscript to* Skylark DuQuesne*, and only then did we realize that he was the fabled E.E. 'Doc' Smith."*

It's now been nearly 60 years since that first Discon. There probably aren't very many people left who were there, but a few of them may be attending this third edition of the convention and it wouldn't at all be surprising if there is a programming panel featuring some of those fans. Worldcons are timebinding events, where old memories become new again. That's almost certainly going to be true concerning the first Discon and it's now up to you, Discon III members, to create the memories which will begin this process all over again. Those of us attending Discon IV, whenever it is, will be looking forward to timebind with you. ☼

Afterword:

That last sentence is more of a rhetorical device than an expectation for me. Worldcons in Washington, D.C. occur so infrequently that I'm pretty doubtful that there will be another one in my lifetime. Or, for that matter, in the lifetimes of many if not most of the other Discon III attendees. And before I abandon the topic of Discon III, I saw from the full list of program items on their schedule that there will *not* be a fan history program item on the first Discon. Or any other fan history program items, for that matter. Yet another reason to be pissed off at the concom.

At any rate, next up is a milestone of sorts – the 200th essay that I've collected in this ongoing personal time capsule. It once again takes me back the small village of Chaumont and tells about what was an epic place for both entertainment and exploration.

The Quarry

It's the middle of March as I'm writing this and a few days ago the nightly news broadcast shared the results of a recent meme-like audience participation activity related to the ongoing world health crisis. The one-year anniversary of the COVID-19 pandemic is this very week, so NBC News had asked its viewers to check their mobile phone photos and send them the very last one they took prior to the plague's official onset. What came back were more than 900 images, a microcosm of a life we've all been missing as you can tell from descriptions of some of them: "The last hug with a grandparent. The last track meet before school went remote and athletics got shut down. The last church choir practice, the last meal with colleagues, the last concert." Before it all changed.

The World Health Organization had declared the coronavirus a pandemic on March 11th, but for me that didn't really become evident until a week later – by then it had become obvious that the COVID-19 was going to be bad. Very bad. The Governor of Maryland, Larry Hogan, waited until March 30th to issue a state-wide closure order but the work-from-home Agency-wide email appeared in my inbox on March 18th.

So my final pre-pandemic iPhone snap was a photo of Nicki in our kitchen on March 17th, wearing a green sweater with a shamrock pin in observance of St. Patrick's Day. It's nothing special, but she does have this wonderful, serene look on her face that hasn't appeared very often since then. Months upon months of the ongoing plague and a final chaotic year of the autocratic, corrupt Trump regime will do that to you.

Nicki on March 17, 2020

I could write more about what I was doing in March a year ago but I'd rather describe what happened on a cold March afternoon a much longer time back. It was 55 years ago, in the late winter of 1966, that I took what was most likely my very last sled ride. Back then, at that time of year in the small town where I lived way up near the Canadian border, there weren't very many interesting things to do, either after school or on weekends. But it was far enough north that there was still a decent amount of snow on the ground that late into the year. And there was also a small abandoned limestone quarry not very far behind my parents' house which had a pretty good sliding hill.

That quarry wasn't especially dangerous. Heck, I didn't think it was dangerous at all and apparently neither did my parents as I was never forbidden to go back there. I and the rest of my family lived in that house for about a dozen years; I pretty much grew up with the quarry as a primary play area. When I was little it was a fabulous place for Cowboys-and-Indians, and when I entered my adolescence I discovered there were some aspects about the place that were worth further investigation. One of them was the 'rockholes'.

I don't know what their scientific description is, but that's what I and the neighbor's kids called them. They were remnants of the Glacial period which had covered that part of upper New York State with mountains of ice thousands of years ago, and when it all had receded there

were places with flat limestone outcroppings which had deep crevasses. It was possible to climb down into them, so of course we did. You could get maybe as much as 10-15 feet down in some of them before they narrowed too much to descend any farther. There was one place where two rockholes were linked by a natural tunnel, and finding that was a true joy of discovery. But as for how deep these holes went, we never tried to find that out. All we knew was that water runoff from snow and rain went into them and they never, ever filled up. Where all that water ended up was a mystery that we never solved.

Another mystery about the quarry was why it had been dug out in the first place and, for that matter, why it had been abandoned. Back then there wasn't any lore or history about the place (none that I ever discovered, anyway) and there were many times that we had speculated wildly about its existence. I remember that our most colorful theory was that the quarry had once been a graveyard of dinosaurs and that it had been excavated to uncover their fossilized bones. Never mind that there was absolutely no evidence for this whatsoever; at that point in our young lives we were letting our imaginations run amok.

Google Maps view of the quarry, 55 years later

As I mentioned, the quarry had a pretty good sliding hill (which was actually its back wall), and once winter rolled around and the hill got covered in snow it was the best place in the neighborhood to go sledding. There was an elevation change of only about 15 feet from the brow of the hill to the bottom where there was an extended flat run-out, and though it wasn't a sheer drop-off, it was still pretty steep. And, for the daredevil in us, about two-thirds of the way down the hill there was a flat limestone outcropping, maybe four feet wide, that extended out from the hill by about three feet. Pilot your sled off that thing and there was some modern-day X-Games-style Big Air to be had. Truly intimidating to an eight-year-old. It took me a few years to eventually work up the courage to try it and I remember that the first time I did it was terrifying. But also super-duper exciting and I didn't waste any time getting back to the top of the hill to do it again.

When I was a Junior in high school my parents had decided that they wanted to sell the house and move someplace where there was less likelihood of being snowed in during winter. Which meant that my sledding days on that hill were coming to an end, and I knew it. By then any

users of the hill had mostly transitioned over to an even more exciting downhill conveyance, the saucer sled. It was faster by a lot and didn't need as much snow as a conventional 'flexible flyer' sled did. It was on a Saturday afternoon in mid-March, when it was becoming obvious that the snow cover wouldn't last much longer, that I and a next-door neighbor friend set out to construct the ultimate saucer sled run. The land behind the hill, even though it was not steep, still had enough added elevation to it where we could make an ersatz bobsled-like course, complete with a couple of banked turns, that led inexorably to that steep drop. We were surprised how easy it was to create and somewhat chagrined that we had never thought of doing it until just then. We were each able to get in a run before it got dark, and oh yeah, it had been totally worth the effort – it was the best sled ride I'd ever taken.

a 1960s saucer sled

And also the last. I woke the next morning to find that the Spring thaw had finally arrived – warmer temperatures and an overnight rain had made the course completely unusable. I've never been on a sled of any kind since then. My parents ended up selling the house that summer and we moved to a rental down by the bay for my Senior year – plenty of good fishing there, but no sledding hills anywhere nearby. After we moved, I never went back to the quarry. It still exists, according to Google maps – it now looks to be more than a bit overgrown by trees and other stuff that wasn't there back in 1966, and with high magnification I can even see the limestone outcroppings where the rockholes are.

Nowadays there's another pretty good sliding hill not far from where Nicki and I live here in Maryland – it's at the boundary of a middle school's large athletic field and whenever it snows there's no lack of kids (and their parents) who want to get in some sledding. And every time I see that going on, my mind takes me back to 1966 and that one epic saucer sled ride. Who knew you could have so much fun in an abandoned quarry? ☼

Afterword:

It helps to have Mr. Google as a friend. Turns out that there were other quarries in or near Chaumont besides the one nearest where I lived and stone blocks from all of them were used to build homes and other structures in the county and elsewhere in New York State. The quarry near where I lived, from what I've been able to discover online, saw first use at some point in the second half of the 1800s, though I wasn't able to find out when it was abandoned. As for the rockholes, it also helps to have a geologist as a friend and he pointed me to a 1979 technical paper on the carbonate rock of the region around Chaumont that seemed to indicate the holes penetrated the entire thickness of the limestone (estimated at 30-60 feet thick) and after that any drainage water would eventually end up in an aquifer. I'm glad I didn't know that in the 1960s – childhood and adolescent musings were so much more fun back then about what could really be down there.

There's room for one more essay and it takes us back to adulthood. Back in 2014 an extraordinary and very entertaining short movie was made on the topic of one of science fiction's most common tropes. And as you'll read, *maybe just maybe* it was actually fact-based!

It's About Time

It was back in 2014 that a student filmmaker at Stephen F. Austin State University, Ricky Kennedy, created an extraordinary short movie titled *The History of Time Travel*. Exploration of "what ifs" is central to good storytelling in the science fiction genre and this little production is one of the better examples of how to do it the right way.

Back in 1939, at the urging of fellow scientists, preeminent physicists Albert Einstein and Leo Szilard sent a letter to the President of the United States, Franklin D. Roosevelt, warning that Nazi Germany could be planning to develop an atomic bomb. This, as we know, led to the super-secret Manhattan Project which beat the Nazis to it. But what if there had also been a *second* letter from Einstein and Szilard to Roosevelt that warned of the Nazis' interest in time travel? And what if that resulted in a *second* super-secret Government activity, the Indiana Project, which eventually resulted in the creation of a working time machine during the post-WWII Cold War era?

IMDB describes *The History of Time Travel* as: "A fictional documentary about the creation of the world's first time machine, the men who created it, and the unintended ramifications it has on world events." And there are no lack of those. What if, instead of turning the completed device over to the U.S. military, the scientist inventor instead used it to go back in time to save a family member from a deadly disease? What if the Soviets took notice and stole the machine and its plans for their own uses? What if persistent meddling in the time stream ended up drastically changing historical events? And what if it was *continuing to happen* as the documentary was being filmed?

This is a pretty slick production, especially considering it was made with what must have been a microscopic budget relative to Hollywood norms. It was structured as a series of short straight-up interview snippets – the Astrophysicist, the Philosopher, the SciFi Writer, the retired Army General, the Time Historian, the family friend – which tell the story in what starts in a straightforward manner. But then, stuff starts to happen. Little stuff at first – a coffee cup is a different color, a globe in the background shows a different hemisphere. And then, not-so-little stuff – a change in an object on one of the interviewee's desk indicates that the entire history of the world since WWII has been tossed into the blender. This includes the personal history of the inventor and his family, which becomes wildly recursive until it reaches what seemed to me an inevitable conclusion.

All this is succinctly and ironically summed up in what one of the interviewees states near the end of the film: *"We experience time as we perceive it, but if time could be altered and* **was** *being altered would we perceive that? Would we even notice?"*

It's the 'noticing' of all those subtle and not-so-subtle alterations to the timeline that, in part, makes this such an interesting production. When I watched it at the 2015 Orlando Worldcon, I found it so entertaining that it was a pleasant surprise when I discovered it had finally made its way to Orinoco Prime. And I hear it's also going to be part of a film festival down in Douglas Commonwealth next year if the COVID-16 pandemic is finally over by then. Rumor is that President Harris is even going to see it. You should too! ☼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