

Opuntia 6.5



OPUNTIA #6.5

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OPUNTIA is published irregularly by Dale Speirs, Box 6830, Calgary, Alberta, Canada, T2P 2E7. It can be had for \$1 per copy, letter of comment, or trade for your zine. Whole-numbered issues are sercon, .5 numbered issues are perzines.

ART CREDITS: The cover depicts Joffrea speirsi, a fossil tree named after my mother Betty. The artist was Polyanna Quasthoff, who drew it for the article naming it in CANADIAN JOURNAL OF BOTANY 63:340-364 (1985). On the back cover is the wing of a fossil aquatic insect, Pseudolimnophila speirsae, from a camera lucida drawing in CANADIAN ENTOMOLOGIST 111:777-782 (1979). Page 6 has the third and most recent fossil honouring Mom, that of the fish Speirsaenigma lindoei, appearing in JOURNAL OF VERTEBRATE PALEONTOLOGY 11:442 (1991).

EDITORIAL: The El Niño ocean current has reappeared and is once again giving Alberta a warm winter. The 1980s were the warmest decade for this province since records were kept. These last few weeks in 1992 are as warm; I and my crew pruned in our shirtsleeves the last week of January. I'm on vacation for the month of February. One of the reasons that I choose this time of year is that in these El Niño times, January is usually warm, February starts warm but then gets cold, and March varies. The first week of February was warm, in fact a record high of 16°C was set one day, but the weather is now reverting back to -10°C and ice fog. The continual ice fogs are a paradise for photographers who work in B&W; trees are covered with ice crystals and the fog makes a wonderfully diffuse background for mood shots. Miserable for pruning though, as the vibration of the saw brings

down all those ice crystals onto the back of one's neck, and later in the day when the sun comes out, all that ice melts and drips down. But that's not my problem. It reminds me of when we were pruning hawthorns earlier this winter. Hawthorn fruit is easily detached by saw vibrations. Rather than have it coming down while standing underneath the tree, the accepted practice is to shake the tree before starting pruning. This results in a tremendous rain of fruit. Although it then makes the ground slippery to stand on, it is better than being constantly pelted as one saws through a branch.

My major project while on vacation will be to get all the fiddly details done on my book "History of the Calgary Philatelic Society". I wrote the book on my February 1989 vacation, serialized it over a two-year period in the club bulletin "Calgary STAMPede", and am now revising and arranging the manuscript for book form. The stamp club will publish the book later in the year as part of the 70th anniversary celebrations of the C.P.S., founded in 1922. The C.P.S. has complete archives from 1922 (I am the club archivist as well as bulletin editor), which certainly made writing the history easier. I wish Canadian SF fandom was as well preserved; Garth Spencer's histories are a vital step in that direction. I wrote the C.P.S. history because one basement sewer backup or house fire could have destroyed the Archives and lost the club its history. Now, whatever may happen to the Archives in the future will not affect the C.P.S. as severely; there will be a multitude of copies of the history floating about.

Meanwhile the Canadian constitutional debates lurch forward, with a cast of thousands debating whether or not provinces and two (soon to be three) territories can dance on the head of a pin, and if so, how many of the angels should have distinct-society status.

1892

1992

CENTENNIAL

CALGARY
PARKS & RECREATION

WHAT IS SO RARE AS A PEDESTRIAN?

1992-1-15

Yesterday it was -10°C and a wind, today it was $+10^{\circ}\text{C}$ and chinooking, and the forecast for tomorrow is -6°C and a breeze. This afternoon I was pruning in shirt-sleeves; yesterday and tomorrow in heavy parka. The ideal pruning weather is 5°C , no wind, and overcast skies. 5°C is the temperature at which the cool air exactly counterbalances body heat generated by exertion of pruning, and leaves one at a comfortable temperature. Cooler than that and one gets cold if the work pace slows. Warmer than that and one sweats. A chinook is desirable not so much for its warmth but because it brings cloudiness with it. In the winter, the sun is always low on the horizon. In mornings, it is difficult to prune facing south or east because the sun is in our eyes. Ditto for afternoons when we are facing south or west. A bright sunny day with snow on the ground is the worst of all because of the glare straight from the sun and the reflection off the snow. Overcast days with the snow gone are best, since the light is diffuse and even. Pruning while looking into the sun is troublesome since we see the branches as flat black silhouettes, with no depth perception.

Today we were pruning young trees on a road median in Douglasdale, a new suburb like any other. All day as I pruned, something felt different about this suburb, but I couldn't place what it was. Lots of houses, a fair number of cars driving by, sidewalks on every street. In the late afternoon I noticed a woman going down the sidewalk and realized what the problem was. She was the first pedestrian we had seen all day. No one walks in the new suburbs. Where could they go? The stores and services, the few of them in Douglasdale, are designed to be approached by car. A bus service runs infrequently in the suburbs, serving mainly schoolchildren and Filipino nannies. I felt as if I were in an SF movie; were us four pruners the only humans left?

TRETIAK'S BALALAICA

1992-1-17

Ever since the 1988 Olympic Winter Games, I've been intending to visit the Museum at Canada Olympic Park, just below the ski jumps and bobsleigh runs. I've got a list of places I really should visit someday, such as Calgary Tower (I moved to Calgary in 1978 but have never been to the top of the Tower) and the Royal Tyrell Museum of Paleontology (my mother is a paleontologist and has some of her fossils on display there) in Drumheller. Today I happened to be thinking about the Olympic Museum and decided to visit it now or never.

I got in free to the Museum because I was a volunteer in 1988. It is a three-storey building, and is combined with the CODA complex, which supervises the ski hill and the leftover Games venues. The ski hill was not the one used during the Games, but is simply a public facility for revenue purposes. The bobsleigh and luge runs are used a fair bit by athletes. The small ski jumps get a bit of use for training, but the big jump is unpopular because it cannot be used in windy weather, which is 90% of the time in Calgary. The big jump has large rooms at the top which are very popular with wedding receptions, so it makes a profit, albeit not the way it was intended to. The Calgary Games made a \$50,000,000 profit, which was used as an endowment fund, the income of it paying for the cost of operating Canada Olympic Park. Without this fund, the COP would have gone bankrupt in its first year. The big ski jump was reported to have been used $1\frac{1}{2}$ times per year. This had me worried; did a skier not make it? The news media paid no attention to that part about the $\frac{1}{2}$ jump. I assume what the report meant to say was that the jump was used three times in the last two years.

The main floor of the Olympic Museum had a theatre with walls covered by the names of the 10,000 volunteers. I knew my name was there, and correctly spelled too, since a publicity poster for the Museum showed a woman stand-

ing in front of the wall and my name was clearly visible over her shoulder. The three floors of exhibits were sparsely furnished and I went through the place in less than thirty minutes. Mostly souvenirs of the Games, such as medals, torches, clothing, and posters. A few of the exhibits had no obvious connection to the Calgary Games that I could see. One of them was a balalaika autographed by Vladislav Tretiak. This is a three-stringed musical instrument that looks like a triangular banjo. Tretiak was goaltender for the Soviet hockey team from 1972 to 1984. He created a sensation when the Soviets played against Canada in the 1970s, and is still remembered and thought well of in Canada. But what Tretiak's balalaika has to do with the Olympics is beyond me.

The third floor of the Museum looks onto the ski hill, and I sat for a while and watched the skiers and snowboarders. Lots of kids on the hill today, no doubt because of the teacher's strike. The ski hill is not very big, being only the side of the Bow River valley, but since it is inside Calgary it is very convenient for the public.



Once a week I go to the University of Calgary Library to catch up on the current periodicals, mostly scientific. I was pleasantly surprised this morning to see my mother had another species named after her. The December 1991 issue of JOURNAL OF VERTEBRATE PALEONTOLOGY carried an article by Mark Wilson and Robert Williams on a new fish genus and species Speirsaenigma lindoei, first collected by my mother Betty. She lives in Red Deer, about 100 km north of Calgary, halfway to Edmonton. She collects for both the University of Alberta (Edmonton) and the Royal Tyrrell Museum of Paleontology (Drumheller). The two localities she collects at are Palaeocene deposits about 63,000,000 years old on the Red Deer River. One location is at the junction with the Blindman River; the other locality is further downstream at Joffré Bridge. She also does the occasional bit of contract work for pipeline companies; Alberta law requires that any major pipeline must have a paleontologist or archaeologist going ahead of the construction to determine if there are any valuable fossils that should be saved.

She's had two other fossils named after her. The first was an aquatic insect Pseudolimnophila speirsae, followed a few years later by the tree Joffrea speirsii. All three fossils come from the Paleocene. In Alberta during that time, the central Alberta area was lake and river country. Prior to that, the area was an inland sea during the Cretaceous, but as the Rocky Mountains rose, the sea receded back to the Gulf of Mexico. This sea stretched from the Gulf to the Arctic during the time of

the dinosaurs. Further downstream, the Red Deer River cuts through Cretaceous deposits as it passes by Drumheller and Dinosaur Provincial Park. The Drumheller Badlands are the richest source of late Cretaceous fossils in the world.

I used to do some fossicking until about ten years ago when the laws were changed to restrict fossil ownership to Her Majesty The Queen In Right Of The Province Of Alberta. My mother collects under permit of both the University of Alberta and the Royal Tyrrell, but the paperwork was too much for me. Incidentally, all government property is owned in the name of the

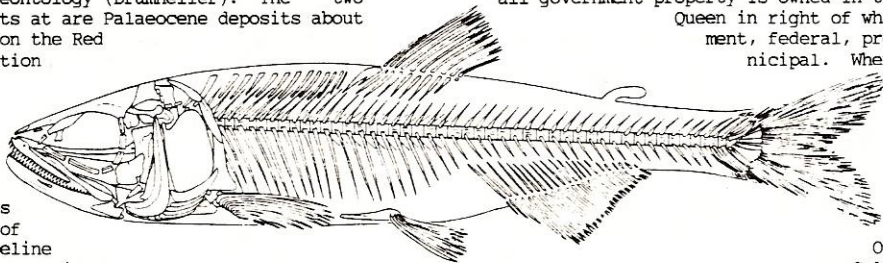
Queen in right of whatever government, federal, provincial, or municipal. When I go pruning,

my handsaw is the property of Her Majesty The Queen In Right Of The Corporation

Of The City Of Calgary. All tools

are marked by engraving, but since H.M. etc. would be a bit much to mark on a handsaw, we just put "City Parks Dept.". I'm sure the Queen would not object if she knew. I wonder how she marks her own stuff? "In Right Of Me"?

Getting back to my mother's fossil localities, there are two basic types of deposits. Bonebeds are mass kills of fish and other aquatic animals. There are also thick deposits of plant fossils, mostly ferns, Metasequoia (still extant), and Joffrea. No dinosaur remains, since they died out just before the deposits were laid down. Most people who see her digging ask if she's looking for gold, I don't know why.



We had one of our crewcabs backed onto the boulevard at an angle. The back half of the truck was tight against a large poplar, so that Sam could stand on the rack and reach some branches. The front half of the truck was on the road, blocking a lane. One of us acted as a flag-person, while Sam sawed off the large branches drooping down onto the road.

One minor fringe benefit of driving a City of Calgary truck is that you can park it anywhere without fear of a parking ticket. Just the same, I had a twinge of guilt when the police car arrived.

I had my back to the road and was looking up into the tree, so I only saw the police car out of my peripheral vision. Its light bar was flashing but no siren; just the loud whooshing of a Police Special engine, the kind of engine that the factory won't sell you. I ignored the car, assuming that it was on its way to a traffic accident. A brief moment later, I heard a car door slam. Turning to look, I saw two constables coming toward us. I thought they were going to get us for illegal parking, but instead one constable asked us if we had knocked on the door of the house next to us. "Not me!", we all chorused. It seems that the alarm system in the house had gone off, and it was just coincidence that we were pruning the boulevard tree in front at the time. One constable went into the backyard, the other walked up to the front door and peered into the window.

Loud barking suddenly erupted inside the house, and the front door shook from the impact of a large black Labrador dog. The constable hastily backed away. Fortunately the door held in its hinges, otherwise all of us, police and pruners, would have been setting world records in the 100-metre sprint. You could hear the boom of Fido hitting the door all the way out in the street. The constable grinned sheepishly and said that it obviously was

not an intruder responsible for the false alarm. He went around back to see his partner. The dog had by now raced into the living room and was stationed at the picture window, barking furiously. At first I thought it was foaming at the mouth, but it was just a graying muzzle; the dog was fairly old.

Just before all this happened, a young mum had stopped on the sidewalk across the street so her children could watch us prune. The little toddlers were quite fascinated watching the branches crack and drop onto the ground as we pruned. The arrival of the police was jam for the toast; all kinds of excitement today.

The two constables came around front again, and got in their car. It wasn't a good day for them; the car wouldn't start. Up went the hood, and they began to fiddle about, all the while under the gaze of, by now, a dozen or so people. Besides pruners, mums, a batch of kids, and homeowners peeking out from behind their curtains, a backup squad car had arrived to add to the congregation.

It doesn't take much to attract a crowd.

But after a few minutes, the reluctant police car started. By now we had pruned our way further down the street. The police cars drove off, the dog gave up barking, and life returned to normal in our little slice of suburbia.

EPILOGUE

1992-1-29

While driving through a different suburb, immediately adjacent to Deer Run, I saw the two constables operating a radar trap by a school. They were doing good business; lots of people who think nothing of zooming through a school zone.

LETTERS OF COMMENT

[Editor's remarks in square brackets]

FROM: Buck Coulson
2677W-500N

1991-12-3

Hartford City, Indiana 47348

Soil conservation struck home. I've lived on farms, though not as a farmer, for the past thirty or so years, and one thing that's universal in the Midwest is that the area that's been farmed is anywhere from 6" to over a foot lower than the land that hasn't been farmed. Fencerows are higher ground than fields. Part of our present yard is land that was cornfield before we acquired it, and there is a definite slope down from the old yard and driveway to the former farmland. Even in the 1930s, the Midwest didn't have its entire topsoil blow away as parts of the plains did, but there has been a steady loss just the same.

[Calgary skies are generally clear, but when we get that brown stuff, it is dust, not smog. My coworkers and I have really noticed a change in Calgary air in the last year or so. We work at the extreme southeast corner of the city, which is slightly higher than the downtown, so from our distance the thick brown layer of dust often obscures the city core. Where does the dust come from? Some of it is due to construction of new suburbs on land that was scraped bare, and some of it is from dryland farms upwind.]

Sure tobacco is poisonous. Dad used to spray fruit trees with "Black Leaf 40", the active ingredient being nicotine sulphate. It was banned years ago as being too hazardous for use. Get a little bit on your hand and you could drop dead. Dad always wore gloves and I had to watch from a good distance away when he mixed it with the water.

[When I studied horticulture in the early 1970s at the

University of Alberta, one of my professors gave a brief talk on obsolete pesticides. "Black Leaf 40" is not missed by him; he remembered the dangers of the stuff. Somewhere I recall a professor who had to put up with anti-nuke demonstrators claiming that plutonium is the deadliest substance on Earth. He told them that he would swallow a gram of pure plutonium if they would swallow a gram of pure nicotine.]

There is a convention which counts backward, Millennicon in Dayton, Ohio. 1991 was Millennicon -10. Presumably they'll go to positive numbers after 2001.

1992-1-12

Someone years ago showed the fallacy of truckers pointing the way to good meals; they're more apt to point the way to attractive waitresses. Out here though, there aren't any government vehicles to use as pointers. Juanita and I usually stop at fast-food places when we're on the road. The food may not be the best but it's always edible. Usually Wendy's for lunch, because they don't have seeds on their buns. I'm not sure why nearly all fast-food places use seeded buns; the seeds add a trifle to the expense and nothing to the taste.

[You know, I've always wondered about that myself. The seeds are a nuisance to me because they get stuck in my teeth. It's a mystery, I guess, like people who put ketchup on their eggs.]

One hopes the 1990s depression isn't as bad as the 1930s, since it took WW2 to bring an end to the Great Depression. In the USA, there were almost as many people out of work in 1938 as there were in 1933, although there were fewer starving because government relief and work programs were operating. Then nations began tooling up for war and the unemployed disappeared. Keeping up with the ~~Jones~~ USSR was enough to pow-

[continued next page]

er the USA economy since WW2, but now we're in for a bad time. It's one argument in favour of space development; putting government money into space is an alternative to putting it into unemployment benefits. Or WW3.

[Trouble is, because of the arms race, there is no government money, just government debt.]

No sparrows inside our bumpers that I know of, but once when we were taking our dog to be boarded (in Marion, 15 miles away), we were waiting to be taken care of when Juanita noticed one of our barn cats wandering around outside. It had ridden over with us under the car somewhere, or possibly on the front bumper; it hadn't been on the back, roof, or inside. I was all for leaving it there, but Juanita insisted we bring it back. Some of them get on our roof, and occasionally in summer sit in the dormer windows of the upstairs bedroom and demand to be brought inside (they don't succeed). I feel responsible enough to feed them and they have the water in the dog's pan. After that they're on their own. Presumably when our two housecats die, we'll select replacements from the barn pack; until then they stay outside. As for rescuing them from high places, I go by the dictum of the man who asked why there are no cat skeletons in trees if they have to have help getting down.

California may start losing people in the next decade; the water is running out. Most of the water in southern California comes from the Colorado River in Arizona, and other states and Mexico are complaining more and more loudly about California grabbing it. The Colorado used to flow to the Gulf but these days it runs dry just south of the Mexican border. Northern Alberta seems to have plenty of water, but I've read that the land is too poor and the weather too cold for much farming. How are the minerals? True wealth may be the people, but the people have to have something to do.

[In university, I took a course on the Peace River dis-

trict of northwest Alberta. There, and in other northern Canadian lands, the problem is not technical. A large part of Canada can be farmed regardless of the climate or soil. The problem is marketing the crops. There are not enough consumers in the north to support the farmers, and it is too expensive to ship any crops south to where the population is. Yukon and Northwest Territories have some farming operations, but there is no way of making it pay on a large scale even without the unfair subsidies of the European Community destroying world markets for crops.]

FROM: Chester Cuthbert
1104 Mulvey Avenue
Winnipeg, Manitoba, R3M 1J5

1992-1-16

Your collecting of material differs from mine. You seem to have no interest in the profit-making potential of collecting, or you would not have so openly divulged the information about the Co-op Book Exchange. If this is known to Calgary dealers, most generally-collected items likely are taken by them.

[The Co-op Book Exchange is not, I suspect, used by Calgary dealers unless they specialize in romances or last year's Reader's Digests. I regularly inspect a few Exchanges since there are four Co-op stores within ten minutes drive, but good deals are rare. For a commercial dealer, it wouldn't repay the fuel and the time lost in driving around.]

FROM: Harry Warner Jr.
423 Summit Avenue
Hagerstown, Maryland 21740

1992-1-23

OPUNTIA #5.5 is splendidly packed with comment hooks. I would advise shovelling your sidewalk faithfully or having it done for you if you have any potential heart or back problems. It's a nuisance but not as much a headache as a lawsuit inspired by a hotshot attorney on behalf of someone who falls on an icy sidewalk and suffers a slight abrasion on the little finger of the left hand. Hagerstown has a municipal law requiring sidewalks to be shovelled clear four hours after the snow stops falling, or four hours after daylight in the case of a snowstorm that ceases and desists during the night. This regulation is mostly ignored, and in fact there are some service stations, restaurants, and other small businesses with parking space in front of their establishments that shovel the parking spaces clear and deposit the resulting snow on the sidewalk. But I'm still shovelling faithfully, although so far this season there hasn't been enough snow to shovel, a phenomenon which may end over the coming weekend when some snow is predicted.

[Calgary bylaws require sidewalks to be cleared of snow no later than 24 hours after snowfall stops. The Bylaw Special Constables seldom enforce this, and only on complaint; they have an eight-month backlog of all bylaw complaints at any given moment. Most people, myself included, will shovel heavy snowfalls, but if it is fairly light and a chinook is predicted, we wait. Lawsuits are not as common because barristers (there are no attorneys in Canada) are not allowed to work on contingency here; anyone suing has to put up money at front, which reduces the frivolous cases quite dramatically.]

I can remember from my long-ago youth a local situation something like Calgary's aborted skyscraper. Early in this century, an area in Hagerstown's north end was the most posh residential neighbourhood, and the richest men

in town vied to see who could build the largest and most baroque residences. This wasn't all done for show, however. Wealthy families tended to have lots of children, usually had some superannuated members of the family's older generation living with them and at least two or three live-servants, so they needed big houses. I can remember my father showing me during a walk through that neighbourhood the partially-constructed house whose owner had lost everything in the Depression and couldn't have the building finished. Late in the 1930s, this man became prosperous again, had the house finished, and moved in about ten years behind schedule.

It hadn't occurred to me until I read this issue, but goalie on a hockey team may be just about the only opportunity to have a female participate at the big league level in any popular team sport. A female goalie in the NHL would be somewhat more feasible since the recent revision of rules that prevents most of the collisions with goalies in the crease. The only other possibility I can think of is a designated hitter in the American League. A woman with an exceptional batting eye might work in that role on a team that had enough power at other positions to dispense with a homerun-hitting d.h.. She wouldn't have a man's speed on the bases, but some d.h.s aren't exactly speed merchants right now.

[Actually I would think that women could play any position on a pro baseball team since it is not a contact sport. Speed? Well, Manon Rheame was chosen for goalie because she had the fastest reflexes of any goalie. Collisions in the crease? She has spent her time in male leagues and demonstrated she can tolerate the collisions. How about women as runners in baseball? I'll bet that Olympic-class sprinters could do very well base-stealing.]

FROM: Lloyd Penney
412 - 4 Lisa Street
Brampton, Ontario, L6T 4B6

1991-11-28

1992-1-18

Just received OPUNTIA #4.5 ... The cover is interesting; shades of Fantasia! If Mickey Mouse was the assistant to the wizard running the parks department, I'm sure this is how he would have tried to clean up all the leaves.

Most Canadian cities are discovering now that with the way parks are kept, the warming trends in cities, and the way people enjoy feeding them, Canada geese, for the most part, no longer migrate south, but are content to hang around for the winter. They have nearly become herd animals, content to roam the myriad parks of Toronto, snap at passersby, and foul the grass with well-camouflaged droppings. Flocks of several hundred line the lakeshore parks all year now.

[Bowness Park lagoon is a skating rink in winter, so the ducks and geese move downstream the Bow River to where the open water is. Although they eat reasonably well as a result of everybody feeding them, there are massive bird kills each winter due to avian cholera. This disease spreads rapidly because the birds are concentrated together into dense flocks. Ecology in action.]

APAPLEXY, the general apa in Ottawa, started at issue #100, and has worked its way down to about issue #45 or so. I asked what would happen if they went beyond 100 issues, and was told that they would simply go to negative numbers. I never saw any fractional issues of CAREFULLY SEDATED, but the crazies in Victoria used to send me bunches of paper miscellanea called RASPBERRY DRINKZINE.

[I don't have a copy but I've seen another zine's review of CAREFULLY SEDATED #4.5, which came out in 1986.]

Congrats on being in charge of a new district. Is this a promotion or lateral move? Or is this a move you didn't want? Happy birthday by the way; I don't think you've revealed your age in the past. Few of your readers know that you're 54.

[It was a lateral move against my wishes. 54? Good heavens, no! I turned 36 last November. I went back and reread what I wrote to find out why you thought I was 54. I see a sentence was ambiguous; I'd written that the next birthday I'll celebrate will be my 55th, when I retire. That could be misinterpreted to read that my next birthday is my 55th, but what I meant was that I presently don't make a big celebration of birthdays but will on November 3, 2010.]

The recessions have spread like a rash, and appear like hives, in one place, and then another. Our family moved from north of Toronto in 1977 to Victoria to escape poor economic conditions and get ourselves restarted. About four years after that came an economic downturn, and about one-third of all the stores in downtown Victoria closed. I'd already gone back east to school, but the hard recession caused my parents to come back as well, to come back to where the money was. Now it's downturn time here too, and my father is looking at New Brunswick as a place to retire. The latest catchphrase is 'double-dip recession', as if it were an ice-cream cone. Some are saying we're coming out of the second dip. I can only hope so; if I can get one of those jobs, I'll be out of my own dip of recession.

Every year I'm responsible for distributing flyers for Ad Astra around Toronto's bookstores, and every time I do this I find that at least two or three independent book stores or book exchanges have closed.

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Many people have dropped reading, and have reverted to movies and Nintendo cartridges. The cost of a movie has become comparable to the cost of a paperback, and when it comes to time, people will choose the movie over the book; the story is told faster in the movie. As the independent stores fold, they are replaced by chain stores which for the most part are distant, ignorant of what they sell, and downright unfriendly. I have tried to deal with chain store management when it comes to putting our information in stores. The last time I had the displeasure of talking to an executive, he told me he wanted \$2 per store per flyer if we wanted to place them there. He was unimpressed when I told him we were a non-profit corporation and hung up on me. That's why I support the independent bookseller; they know their customers and care about them, much as Bob Baxter did in Calgary.

[I think, though, that some indie bookstores bring their problems on themselves. They never rotate stock on the shelves, so customers quit coming because there is nothing new. Or worse yet, they carry exactly the same stock as the chain stores. Many love their favourite books and authors, and assume that everyone else must be the same, so they bring in 300 titles on macramé and New Age. Baxter's advertising slogan for his store was "If you can find a duplicate on the shelf, it's yours.".]

I grew up in Orillia, about 125 km north of Toronto, the home of Stephen Leacock and Gordon Lightfoot. I remember the neighbours coming home from berry picking, and showing us kids a baby squirrel they'd found, having fallen out of its nest. They cared for it until it could fend for itself, then released it. It quickly learned to find its own food and to run away from dogs, but it stayed quite tame and set up a nest in the maple tree by our front window. We named it Chucky, and would stand outside in the summer to let Chucky run across our shoulders. We'd hold a saltine in one hand, place the other one on Chucky's tree, and he'd run down the tree, down

one arm, across the shoulders, down the other arm, and sit in our hand while he munched on the saltine.

FROM: Harry Andruschak
Box 5309

1992-1-13

Torrance, California 90510-5309

Received OPUNTIA #5.5 a few days ago, but this is the first free time I have had to catch up on mail. Scottish Dance classes resumed Friday, and so now I am back to Monday and Friday evenings at dance classes, which does take up time. But it is fun as well as being good exercise. By the way, remember how I wondered how fans would react to my sporran, which was of muskrat fur? Whenever I have been wearing the kilt, the general reaction from fans and non-fans has not been disapproving. Rather, the usual reaction is to say it is cute, and some have teased "Will it bite me?". My usual reply is "Only if you have Campbell blood in you". I suppose most people understand authentic fur sporrans with the animal head as the flap are a traditional part of Highland Attire.

FROM: George "Lan" Laskowski
55 Valley Way

1992-1-22

Bloomfield Hills, Michigan 48304

The image presented by a riderless mower being chased by people is a humorous one. I would think that a huge sign saying it is robot-controlled would have helped. If such things as robot mowers and workers are going to come to pass, they have to start somewhere, and have people get used to seeing them. Pity that there was not the cost justification to actually buy one. You might have gotten people coming in just to watch the machines work.

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[Had the mowbots been accepted, plans were to make up a suitable sign.]

The idea of the "Tomb of the Unknown Developer" I think is new, though it should have been thought of a long time ago. There are lots of these empty buildings standing around in many cities across the States, and the world, I would presume. In the Detroit area where I live, new buildings keep going up all the time, and it becomes a struggle to fill them. St. Paul, Minnesota, has some large skyscrapers standing empty. East London, England, particularly along the Thames, has lots of empty apartment houses. Yes, the recession/depression has hit everywhere. In spite of the complaints about my teaching position, I am going to hold on to what I've got; even math teachers are finding it tough getting new positions elsewhere!

You have both black and gray squirrels living together? In spite of the human attempt to effect desegregation, I have found that other parts of the animal kingdom fight to keep colours of the same species segregated (consider black and red ants), including squirrels. Maybe the squirrels of Calgary are more enlightened.

[Squirrels were introduced into Calgary in 1929 by the Zoo. Black and grays are two different colour morphs of the same species, like humans with brunette, blond, or red hair. Black is recessive in squirrels, gray is dominant in the chromosomes. The squirrels brought into Calgary were blacks, but the gray colour is gradually swamping out black. A female squirrel can have both in her litters, depending on the parents' DNA.]

FROM: Robert Sabella
2 Natalie Drive
Budd Lake, New Jersey 07828

1992-1-18

Re: Your comments on the forthcoming depression, whether in the 1990s or 2020s. With the economic turmoil taking place in the former communist bloc countries, it seems unlikely we will get through unscathed. But such an economic stumble might actually be a mixed blessing. For all the short-term hardship it would cause, it might serve as a brake on western civilization's current disastrous course, where self-interest is destroying the social contract and ecological concerns are for the most part ignored.

Re: Canada's population woes. While population growth might be necessary for economic growth, there is a lot to be said for stability. The United States is still the beacon for many of the world's underprivileged people, and it is questionable how much longer we will be able to handle such uncontrolled growth. Already much of Canada's natural wealth, specifically its forests, are being systematically destroyed in the name of progress. More people could only aggravate that problem, turning your country into even more of a reflection of the United States. God forbid!

[Forests do grow back. The problem with population as I see it is not that there are too many people in North America, but rather they are concentrated in the wrong places. Instead of a few giant metropolitan areas, they should be dispersed into smaller cities. In this day of advanced communications and transportation there is no need for manufacturers to concentrate in Toronto, New York City, or L.A.. At the same time that big cities are out of control, we have small towns in rural areas dying on the vine. It makes more sense to move people to where the water is instead of spending billions moving water to the desert.]

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At first thought, bloc voting seems highly unethical and should be combatted at all costs. But when considered further, how bad is it really? Is it any worse than hundreds of Hugo voters selecting the Best Novel winner based on their fondness of the authors on the ballot? Is LOCUS given a Semi-Professional Hugo each year because of its quality (which is considerable, in my opinion) or because it is the only semi-pro magazine that most of the readers were familiar with? Your comments about political parties were certainly true too.

FROM: Mark Manning 1991-12-6
1709 South Holgate
Seattle, Washington 98144

Your name, yes, your very name as I type it now, reminds me of something I read this afternoon. It was in, being part of Karelian ancestry, you should appreciate this, Frans Emil Sillanpää's novel PEOPLE IN THE SUMMER NIGHT (You see, these days I'm reading as many Scandinavian novels and poetry collections as I can find, either in translation, as in this case, or in Swedish, Norwegian, or Danish, which I can generally figure out.) Anyway, in one passage, Sillanpää has a country doctor say, "Lehtimäki here will wait and tell Syrjämäki -- what with all these different Mäkis and Laaksonens it's a real case of hills and dales, isn't it?"

[For those not familiar with Finland, Karelia is the area the Russians grabbed away in WW2 during the Winter War. The Finns are neither Scandinavians or Slavic, but have served as the Poland of Arctic Europe; someone was always invading, either Russia or Sweden. Finns and Estonians are basically the same people, but are not related to other European ethnic groups. 'mäki' means hill, and is a common rootword for many Finnish surnames. In fact, my mother was a Mackie. Her brother spelled it as Maki, and their grandfather was a Humalamaki, the name

meaning 'the hill where beer hops are grown'. Uncle Norman, however, likes to tell people it means 'the hill where all the drunks live'. Lehtimäki refers to a leafy hill, presumably one covered with trees, and Syrjämäki is a remote, out-of-the-way hill. The name Laaksonen refers to valleys or dales. My name however, is Scottish, from my father's family who emigrated from Scotland in the 1800s to Canada. The full name, Dale Colin Speirs, means 'the watchman's son who lives in the valley of the victorious people' a mouthful that is not particularly appropriate, as I am the veterinarian's son who lives on a plateau of a group of people who haven't been to war in decades. A note: Speirs, with an 'ei', is pronounced 'spires'.]

I told your Canadian-content lightbulb jokes to a Canadian-married-to-a-Seattlite. He like them all except for the one about NDPers. "The NDP isn't red!", he blustered, whereupon he correctly guessed which province you're from.

You mention tongue-in-cheek to Ned Brooks that you expect someday to see a Material Safety Data Sheet (MSDS) for water. At Boeing, where I work, we have to put labels on all containers of any chemicals, including water. There is an official label for water bottles that actually states water's flash point (states that it has none, if memory serves).

FROM: Brian Earl Brown 1991-12-5
11675 Beaconsfield
Detroit, Michigan 48224

You mention Lysol-drinking alkie; are we talking about the same product? The Lysol I'm familiar with carries the prominent warning "Harmful If Swallowed", and no indication of how much alcohol it might possess. I've heard of alkie drinking vanilla extract,

Scope, and cough syrup, but Lysol ...?

[Lysol contains about 40% ethanol. Trouble is, it also contains chemicals that not only destroy bacteria, but destroy human internal tissues. A transient who drinks Lysol does so only because he has been banned from liquor stores, and is in the final stages of alcoholism before death.]

The sewage plant where I work uses a debit card system in the cafeteria and had to change cards because someone had figured out how to counterfeit the cards. This baffled me because I didn't think it could be done except with expensive equipment. Now you tell me it's done with a bit of cassette tape!

[For those wanting to try it at home, I hasten to point out that this is For Informational Purposes Only.]

Speaking of mowing freeways, Detroit's freeways were built in trenches. Now preventing erosion has become a major concern. To my eye, the major cause of soil erosion is the destruction of sod by the wheels of the low-slung, wide-tracked mowers trying to climb up the grade. At a guess, the best way to prevent erosion is to stop mowing the slopes.

[Calgary Parks now mows freeway boulevards once a year, excepting medians and traffic triangles which are still done regularly. This is due to budget cuts rather than fear of erosion. We started this new regime last year; lots of citizen complaints, followed by acceptance of the fact that if they want them mowed then taxes go up. Since most freeway mowing is done by contractors, there is no argument about overpaid City workers. Soil erosion is not a problem in Calgary because of the dry climate, only in bare fields or scraped development land where the wind can do its work.]

Programming VCRs and telephones is made difficult because

se while the equipment has small but powerful computer chips, the manufacturers have tried to avoid the cost of installing an interactive keyboard to make the programming easier. Instead, they expect people to make complex program choices by pressing a succession of two or three buttons. Remembering all the choice combinations is more than most people can easily handle. If they had a screen that displayed a menu of choices, people could program their VCRs or telephones a whole lot easier.

[The City of Calgary has its own fuel depots, which are easy to use because the computer that controls the pumps has a menu-type screen. Even the most illiterate truck driver can tap the screen and get fuel needed. The Bowness Park telephones stymied two university graduates; the phones have three levels of programming, plus each phone must be programmed separately.]

FROM: Paula Johanson
Box 7 Site 1 RR 1
Legal, Alberta, T0G 1L0

1991-11-26

Your news in OPUNTIA 4.5 is not good. A bland fate. And losing the wonderful park you've described ... no continuity in planning either. Perhaps there's space/files/a hidden notebook where Park workers can keep a continuity record for successors, not just "the pipe on the left flows into the building" but "the campanulas self-seed and propagate -- leave 'em and they'll spread all through the meadow".

[We do leave records behind, but the problem is that it is impossible to remember everything that should be written down and, conversely, arriving in a new district means huge masses of information to be processed. It generally takes two years to become est-

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ablished in a new district. The matter is made worse because some foremen do not keep proper records, as happened with my new district.]

Re: bland suburban parks where you will work. Can you hold kite days or sidewalk chalking "Graffiti Without Guilt" days in these dull parks? How about nature talks with the naturalist bringing in samples if few plants grow there? Maybe a Tai Chi club will work out there or you can flood the basketball court in winter for a rink. Can herb gardens be put in? Herbs from seeds are cheap. Rose beds need a little tending but are heavenly. What does Calgary do about allotment gardens in or near parks or are they separate? Can figures be cut into the freeway berms like the Celtic Horse on a chalk hillside in England? What about bird-feeding platforms? Can flowers be seeded/planted which attract birds and butterflies? Do parent groups or daycares use the tot lots? Can they help you with special programs? Will an artist paint a mural on a blank wall at the park? What plans are made concerning trees? Is your co-worker's variegated poplar being propagated and distributed, or is that likely?

[Most of the activities you suggest are the responsibility of the Recreation side of the Dept., and are nothing to do with Parks Maintenance. In any event, activities do not make it any more interesting to maintain a soccer field nor would I bother getting out of my truck just to stroll down a windblown community association leasehold. Walking through a quarter-section of flat level fields hardly compares with wandering along the banks of Bowness Park lagoon. City Council cut \$200,000 out of our budget this year; it's too soon to tell but it looks as if flowers, fertilizing, and tree planting will take the brunt of cutbacks. Ice rinks are looked after by Adopt-A-Park volunteers or community associations, nothing to do with Maintenance (rinks go on grass, by the way; ice would destroy the basketball courts). I haven't heard lately from John about the variegated poplars, but in any event it would take a number of years to propagate.]

For developers, the naming of places consists of removing the most identifiable trait of an area and then giving it a temporary illusionary name with no grounding in reality. This name will quickly be abandoned by the inhabitants in favour of whatever label the transit company puts on the first bus to the tepid, colourless neighbourhood. Do I sound cynical about suburbs? Damn straight. I grew up in one, much nicer than any place I've seen in Edmonton or Calgary. Yet even there, whole streets were inhabited by people who seemed to believe that the only colour for a house was white or brown. East Indians moving in caused consternation only because sometimes they painted their houses other colours like orange or robin's-egg blue.

[I first started with Parks Dept. as a weed inspector and occasionally had to deal with an irate homeowner complaining about a neighbour who planted a boulevard to potatoes. There is no law against this as long as the potato patch is kept clean and weed-free, but some suburbanites go into orbit over anyone who dares to be different.]

Did I write you about the dowser I saw witching pipes at UVic?

[I've tried it myself with some bent coathangers but was never able to get it to work. I wish I could because the newer irrigation lines and sprinklers are all plastic. We can use metal detectors on the older parks because the lines are galvanized pipe and brass sprinkler fittings, but they obviously don't work on plastic.]

I ALSO HEARD FROM: Henry Welch

FROM: Dale Speirs
Box 6830
Calgary, Alberta
CANADA, T2P 2E7

WHY YOU GOT THIS ZINE

- ___ Noblesse oblige.
- ___ You contributed (this ish).
- ___ You contributed (next ish).
- ___ We trade.
- ___ We should trade. Interested?
- ___ You sent money. Thanks.
- ___ How about a letter of comment?
- ___ This is the last issue you'll
receive unless you Do Something.

TO:

