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OPUNTIA



OPUNTIA is published irregularly by Dale Speirs, Box 6830, Calgary, Alberta, Canada T2P 2E7. It is available for \$3 cash for a one-time sample copy, trade for your zine, or a letter of comment. Whole-numbered issues are sercon, .1 issues are reviewzines, and .5 issues are perzines.

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EDITORIAL: Officially OPUNTIA is an irregular, thus I can never be accused of being late with an issue. In actual practice, I've been publishing monthly, but the last few issues have been off the pace. My father died suddenly on March 31, which has thrown my personal life into a turmoil since. I am only now starting to get back to normalcy.

UNEASY AIR THAT I BREATHE

1995-12-17

Although this winter has been only slightly colder than usual, precipitation is much greater, and I've been shovelling my sidewalk about every third day. The furnace has been running almost continuously. I am a cautious sort of chap, the pride of our Safety Officer at work, and not only have three smoke detectors in the house but this past summer installed a carbon monoxide detector in my bedroom. The furnace is an old iron monster, and I don't entirely trust it.

At about 01h30 this morning, I was roused from a sound sleep by the loud and insistent beeping of the CO detector. Groggy and frightened at the thought of being poisoned, I checked the test button on the device. I normally close the bedroom door, but when the device

went silent after hitting the test button, I thought that perhaps the problem was poor ventilation. I left the bedroom door open for fresh air, and went back to an uneasy sleep.

Through the day, the detector was silent, but in evening hours it went off again. This time it would not silence. If all else fails, read the instruction manual, so I did. It assured me that if it was beeping every few moments, it was probably a low battery. I took the device upstairs, left it disconnected for an hour, then tried again. This time it sounded continuously. That was enough for me. I opened the door to allow in fresh air, and dialled the non-emergency number of the Fire Department. I didn't call 9-1-1 since I didn't want a big fuss with engines roaring up to the house, lights and sirens full blast, and bringing the neighbours out.

The woman who answered the call was quick and precise. Get out of the house, and wait on the front sidewalk. I was resigned to the inevitable. I had hoped for a duty officer to show up in a small truck, wave a CO detector about, and discuss the problem in a discreet manner. But I knew what was going to happen. Standing on the sidewalk, I looked to the west, in the direction of the local firehouse a few blocks away. Sure enough, lights blazed from two big rigs, the sirens grew louder, and in a moment they were rumbling up to my house. As the firefighters dismounted, I explained the problem. "Is that a Brand X detector?", asked the captain. Indeed it was, I told him. "We've had hundreds of false alarms with them", he replied; "In fact, a lot of stores have stopped selling them". I showed him the device. He had a handheld gas detector, which he showed me was at a zero reading. In marched he and five firefighters, the latter admiring the decor. (My kitchen is lined by dozens of ribbons won at aquarium shows.) Downstairs we all marched, and crowded around the furnace humming

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away to counteract the flood of cold air coming in through the upstairs door. He checked the bedroom and then around the furnace. CO = zero. He stuck his detector into the chimney. It promptly went berserk, flashing red lights, squealing an alarm, and blinking numbers on the readout. I resigned myself to spending the night in a motel.

But no, it was not the CO readout, but rather the O₂ display. Naturally the flue gases are oxygen deficient; quite normal. The furnace was burning with a blue flame as natural gas is supposed to do. The CO was zero everywhere.

It turns out that the Brand X detector is an ultra-sensitive model that does not reset after detecting CO, but accumulates any little minor blip until reaching the detection limit.

I thanked the firefighters, and we all tramped upstairs. By now it was midnight, and I have to be up for work at 06h00. I shall no doubt be pruning trees with only one eye open by noon. But the store where I bought the detector from shall be wideawake when I get there after work with the defective detector.

PUNCH, MAY 8, 1974, PAGE 792

I bought a stack of PUNCH magazines, circa the 1970s, for a few dollars at a jumble sale. Reading through a gossip column in an issue, I came across the following quote: "... Vancouver Island, which is a particularly dreadful place just off British Columbia ... cossetted by the limp hands of what is laughingly called Canadian culture." Directly under the column is a half-page ad by Canadian Pacific Hotels, illustrating their hotels, starting off with the Empress Hotel, Victoria, Vancouver Island.

NOW WHERE DID I PUT MY NEHRU JACKET?

1996-1-12

I took in a movie tonight at a local repertoire theatre downtown. The film was "Beyond The Valley of the Dolls" from 1970, a campy parody written by Roger Ebert. Yes, that Roger Ebert. The dialogue was Sixties-speak, with people saying phrases "Like groovy, man!", wearing hair and clothing styles that have not survived the test of time. I was wincing continuously throughout the film, thinking to myself "I wasn't really like that, was I?". Unfortunately yes.

It got me thinking though, about why I have never liked cyberpunk. When we get out into space as serious colonizers, today's punk styles will be as dated as those Sixties psychedelic jackets. Yet cyberpunk was supposed to be cutting edge. Lots of drivel was written about how it was dense with brand names, things like Japanese or German megacorporations owning space colonies. It reminds me of 2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY, with its Pan-Am space shuttles. Cyberpunk will quickly be forgotten, tied too closely to the wrong decade.

HOW TO BREAK A \$2 BILL IN CANADA

1996-3-15

I got my first doubloon in change today, and like all Canadians, immediately dropped it hard on the counter to see if it would break. Our \$2 banknote has been replaced by a \$2 coin, called the doubloon by extension from our \$1 coin, the loonie. The doubloon has a gold coloured centre and a wide rim of nickel. Despite the best efforts of the Royal Canadian Mint in Winnipeg the earliest coins had some defective ones which broke into the two pieces when dropped on a hard surface. A new national pasttime was born, and Canadians everywhere started testing doubloons to see if they would break. Doesn't seem to be a major problem anymore, and lights were burning late into the night at the RCM as their

engineers doublechecked (pardon the pun) the minting process. The gold centre of the doubloon has the Queen's portrait on one side and depicts a polar bear on the other. The nickel rim has the wording, and the rim has an unusual pattern of alternating smooth and ridged patches. The coin is quite distinct from the loonie or the quarter; none of the three coins could possibly be confused with each other. The RCM studied the ill-fated Susan B. Anthony \$1 coin that failed in the USA, and both the loonie and doubloon circulate without trouble.

The loonie was originally to have depicted voyageurs in a canoe, the traditional design of specimen dollars sold to numismatists. The dies were manufactured in Ottawa and sent to Winnipeg via private courier, the post office not being trusted. Canada Post had a good laugh when the dies were stolen in transit. The dies had been labelled "Numismatic goods" and the thief got a surprise when he found dies instead of coins. A new set of dies had to be done up, and the central image on the \$1 coin became a loon bird paddling on the water, leading to the nickname of 'loonie' for the coin.

The doubloon centre piece, with the Queen on one side and the polar bear on the opposite, has given rise to a bad joke about the Queen having a bear behind.

MY NAME IS DALE AND I'M A BOOKAHOLIC ...

... and I'd like to apologize to anyone I've wronged. (Insert rest of 12-step programme here.) When I bought my house 15 years ago, I wondered how I would fill the empty space. With bookshelves, as it turned out. Two spare bedrooms became library rooms, with rows of bookshelves filling the centre, and floor-to-ceiling shelves around the walls. My only consideration in buying books was the purchase price. As the two rooms filled up, I racked more bookshelves around the living room walls. Lots of space. As those shelves filled, the

library expanded into the kitchen. My house was built in the 1950s when a woman's place was in the kitchen, hence endless vistas of cabinetry. I only needed one cabinet for the cutlery and food, so the rest were occupied by books. Always good for a laugh occasionally, such as the time a friend wanted a drink of water. I was busy in the living room with something, so I told her the glasses were in the upper cabinet. She opened the first one but found only a run of THE COLOPHON, a hardcover magazine of the Depression era. The next cabinet held numismatic references. Undeterred she worked her way down the length of the kitchen, getting a good idea of my collecting interests before finally being able to quench her thirst.

When the kitchen could hold no more books unless I emptied the refrigerator, I began double-shelving books. The less frequently used books were set behind the popular ones.

About a year ago I hit bottom. There was simply no more room. I initiated a policy that everytime I bought a new book, an old one would have to go (given to the Co-op Book Exchange). This was not too hard to implement at first. Did I really need BORON CHEMISTRY or THE BEST MYSTERIES STORIES OF 1976? Actually, no. But as I get within range of paying off my mortgage, I realized that when the time came that I could afford a computer, I'd have no place to set it. Each year the Calgary Philharmonic Orchestra holds a fundraiser called the Benny the Bookworm sale. I've bought lots of stuff there; now was the time to do a bit of forward planning and donate some of my books. 'some' turned out to be 29 boxes. At first it was difficult to let go. Getting rid of a book is like killing; the first victim is a difficult task, then it gets easier, and soon you are spraying bullets about with abandon. My 30-year run of BLACKWOOD'S MAGAZINE, bought at an estate sale, unleashed the flood. SKY AND TELESCOPE is a wonderful magazine but out went 20 years. Books, books, and more books, and the depressing part is that I still have the same number of shelves, only now

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with one row of books on each shelf. But I'll no longer leave some empty space on each shelf for future acquisitions. There will be no spare space; any incomer will have to eject an existing book. I've sold some of the commoner aquarium books at the local club auction, and may do likewise with my philatelic library, but the good stuff will be kept as an old-age pension. Internet will not destroy books as collectibles. As I clear out books, I also find an invisible weight lifting slightly from my shoulders. Sometimes books can be too much of a mental burden, notwithstanding the years of pleasure in reading.

THERE'S NO BUSINESS LIKE SNOW BUSINESS

As we approach the end of April, winter continues to annoy us. Snowfalls are not particularly heavy, never more than 15 cm, but the chinook winds were silent. I wouldn't mind if it snowed heavily all at once, but we have snow at regular intervals, forcing continuous removal operations. The City Streets Dept. budget went out the window in January, and suddenly aldermen had to quit bragging about the budget surplus overall. A light snowfall of 15 cm costs just as much to plow as a heavy snowfall, and the pattern of snow every third or so day means the plows run continuously in a Red Queen's Race. So much for global warming.

POSTAGE POLITICS

There was a big fuss in early 1995 when the American president Bill Clinton ordered the USPS to change the design of a postage stamp from a photo of an atomic mushroom cloud to a blander "The war is over!" stamp. Charges were made that somebody sold out to the Japs and that political correctness was ruining philately.

In the autumn of 1995, Canada Post issued a set honouring Canadian superhero comics. These stamps depicted the characters Superman, Johnny Canuck, Nelvana, Captain Canuck, and Fleur de Lys. Strangely enough, the only regular postmark seen was one honouring Superman. Where were the postmarks for the others? The answer was recently published in an issue of CANADIAN PHILATELIST. It seems that after the stamps were issued, someone thought they might be construed as propaganda in the Québec referendum. The stamps couldn't be recalled without public outcry, but who notices postmarks except a few stamp collectors? The cancellers were reprogrammed and only the Superman postmark allowed.

Johnny Canuck and Captain Canuck are obviously federalists, so they had to go. Nelvana is very loosely based on an Inuit myth, and as the separatists do not get on with the aboriginals she had to go. Fleur de Lys hardly needs explaining, perhaps not because she might upset the Québec separatists but might cause a Reform Party member to ask why her postmark was not also in English.

Superman was originally Canadian, but he is so obviously American that his postmark could be safely used.

The separatists lost the vote, but fortunately they blamed the defeat on ethnics and people with money, so the stamps were forgotten in the hue and cry.

DEATH

A message on my answering machine. My mother's quavery voice asking me to phone her immediately. I had a good idea what it might be, but the news was still a shock. My father was dead of a sudden heart attack on the evening of March 31st. He was walking out to his car and fell dead into the snow. Just like that.

Dad had a bit of heart trouble over the past few years but it never seemed serious. He was 68, seemed likely to get in at least ten more years, and was vigorous to the end. Semi-retired as a veterinarian, down to ten head of cattle and two horses on the farm, selling off his real-estate investments gradually, and long since out of politics, he was now only working 40 hours a week instead of the 80 he had been putting in since graduation from veterinary school.

When my grandparents died, I was sad but not grief-stricken; they were either in their 80s or hadn't been well lately. We all lose our parents sooner or later, but it seems something far away until it happens. But life carries on; the funeral must be arranged, the will probated, the estate settled. Dad's livestock had to be fed. A thousand little details intruded into our sorrow, with no willingness to wait at least until after the funeral.

I've thought about doing a memorial issue of OPUNTIA in Dad's honour, but decided not to. Rather, I will carry on as I have in past perzine issues, telling small anecdotes about life with my father, instead of a single issue to be read and forgotten. Elsewhere in this issue is a bit about my birthplace which I had written about a year ago, and which mentions Dad.

My parents live in Red Deer, about 100 km north of Calgary, a 1½ hour drive. I stayed with Mom for the first two weeks after Dad died. The Red Deer house is where I grew to a teenager and from whence I went off to university. It is thus the locale which I most strongly associate with Dad. At times, his ghost was almost tangible. I kept looking to the back door or the staircase, seeing him coming around the corner and

greeting me with a cheerful comment. Back in Calgary, the ghost faded, but reappeared each time I returned to Red Deer. I can see the reason why; I bought my house as an adult, and Dad only visited it a few times, so I have no associations of him with my house. (We always had family gatherings in Red Deer or, if in Calgary, at my brother's house where the grandchildren were.)

Life goes on.

HARDWARE DISEASE

1996-4-2

Cleaning out Dad's papers and accumulated debris of his life, I came across some cow magnets, which brought back fond memories of playing with them as a boy. These are extremely powerful magnets about the length and diameter of a pinky finger; one needs a bit of strength to separate them. The magnets are used to treat hardware disease in livestock. If an animal has somehow ingested a nail or scrap of metal, it is forced a cow magnet. As the magnet travels through the digestive system, it picks up the metal object and aligns it parallel to the magnet (and digestive system) for easier passage, finally going out the back end of the cow. I don't think Dad drove a car that didn't have at least one pair of magnets in the glove compartment or poking out from under the seat. If I was riding out with him on a farm call, quite often a magnet would provide a bit of fun on the trip.

I also found some of his surgical instruments, most of no use to me. I did keep one pair of suturing scissors. I don't know the exact name for these; they curve at the tips perpendicular to the handles. Not that I intend to do any surgery, but the next time a cassette gets stuck in my car tapedeck, I'll be able to extract much easier than with a needlenose pliers.

EARLY DAYS IN ECKVILLE

I was born in the village of Eckville, Alberta, even today a small settlement whose major industries are farming, oil-well servicing, and (I am serious) the Old Age Pension. At a not-unreasonable guess, I would say that one-third to one-half the villagers are widows and retired farmers.

Eckville was founded in 1903 by an Irishman who had arrived the year before, name of Arthur E.T. Eckford. He donated land for a post office and store. At about this time, my great-grandparents arrived from Finland and settled near the original townsite. The place was first called Eckford but the man himself changed the name to Eckville. In 1912 the railroad bypassed the townsite, so the hamlet was moved to the railroad. My great-grandparents suddenly were living farther away. The old townsite is now a wheatfield, with no trace of what once was. For a while the new townsite was known variously as New Eckville, South Eckville, or Kootuk, but the name was eventually re-established as Eckville and has been since. A highway built in the 1950s bypassed Eckville, but this time the village was too established to move again. With the death of passenger trains and its distance from the main highway Eckville settled into a slumber from which I doubt it will ever awaken. It is in central Alberta about halfway twixt Red Deer (where I spent my later childhood) and Rocky Mountain House. There are no tourist attractions near Eckville, farmers tend to shop in Red Deer (a short distance to the east, about 50 km), and oil-well servicing is not that labour intensive. The youth of the village have no choice but to move to the big cities, unless they expect to inherit a farm or a small store from their parents.

My father, from a south Saskatchewan dairy farm, was the first veterinarian in the west of Alberta. His practice covered a radius of 50 km from Eckville, and

when we moved to Red Deer he still covered the Eckville area. (On country roads of the Canadian prairies, 50 km can be travelled in about 20 or 30 minutes.) My mother was descended from the Finnish great-grandparents. She was the schoolmarm, and met Dad at a picnic.

The eastern boundary of Eckville is the Medicine River. Dad's clinic was on the banks of the river, and our house adjacent. A tiny pasture separated the two, in which a Shetland pony named Sugar lived. The house was actually the second one we lived in, and was formerly the site of a feed mill and seed cleaning plant. It burned down in 1957 and Dad purchased the land. The feed mill had been built on a thick concrete pad which had to be dynamited in order to build the new house. Between the fire and the blasting, the villagers had lots to amuse them in this pre-television era. The slabs of rubble were pushed into the backyard on the bank of the Medicine River. One of my childhood memories is of my brother and I playing on the slabs and fishing off them. Like other Alberta rivers, the Medicine River was shallow. (When I went to the Winnipeg WorldCon in 1994, I was astonished to see cabin cruisers and paddlewheelers on their rivers. It had never occurred to me that a prairie river could be deep enough to support more than a canoe or rowboat.) There were large boulders across the river which served as stepping stones to get out to the middle. They did not go all the way across, so you had to get your shins wet if you wanted to reach the other side. The Medicine River got its name after an aboriginal medicine man was killed in the river during an ancient battle. It should not be confused with the city of Medicine Hat, in south-eastern Alberta on an entirely different river, where an entirely different medicine man lost his hat during yet another battle. Medicine was different in those days.

A few blocks from the clinic, to the centre of Eckville, was my maternal grandmother's house. By her first marriage she had my mother and a son, my Uncle Norman. My grandfather died suddenly at age 33, and years later,

Gramma Emma remarried to a returned WW2 veteran. She had two more children by him, the last of which was born only two years before I was, so I have an uncle my age. Her house was three doors down from the core of Eckville, where the two main streets crossed. A few years ago they installed Eckville's first traffic light at that intersection, but it didn't work out so it was removed. In the 1940s the wooden sidewalks were torn up to be replaced by concrete sidewalks. Uncle Norman remembers he and Mom and all the other village children scrambling behind the construction workers to pick up all the loose coins that had fallen underneath the wooden slats over the decades; it was quite a windfall for the kids.

Three doors down from Gramma Emma's house, on the corner of the intersection, was what was then the Imperial Bank of Canada. It was later merged with another bank to become the present-day Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce. After school-leaving, Uncle Norman took up a clerkship in this bank, and over the next 42 years worked his way up the ladder. He was soon transferred to Uranium City, Saskatchewan, in the far north. On one occasion up there, he was carrying the payroll for the uranium mines when the plane ferrying him crashed into an ice-covered lake. He had to dive for the money and successfully recovered it. From there the bank sent him to Winnipeg for a couple of decades.

Since he was at such a great distance, we didn't see him that often. He came back to Eckville on vacations driving his Bentley car, which he named 'The Flying Finn'. It might seem unusual for a bank clerk to be driving a Bentley but in those days, just after the war, European cars were dirt-cheap. Dad originally drove Mercedes-Benz sedans, but diesel stations were hard to find in rural areas back then, so he switched over to Volkswagen Beetles in the 1960s. Uncle Norman drove the Bentley for many years and never roused any suspicions of the bank examiners. It did have a problem with inadequate heating of the passenger compart-

ment, not being made for prairie winters.

Mom would visit Gramma Emma once a week, and when school let out I would go over there instead of straight home. I have a persistent memory of not liking Emma's cooking, but always put it down to just being a finicky eater. But Uncle Norman mentioned recently that Emma didn't like cooking, so perhaps there is something to it. Emma enjoyed carpentry, and was forever re-doing the house. The staircase to the upper floor led an ambulatory life; I knew it as coming down into the kitchen, but when Norman and Mom were kids it was on the other side of the house and came down into the living room. By the time I was of sufficient age to know who Emma was, she had settled down into an elderly lady, and her house had fixed into its final form.

My mother was born in Hespero, a long-vanished hamlet south of Eckville a few kilometres. Her father Neil was a blacksmith; Emma was a domestic. Neil was suddenly stricken with an infection and died a day later. A decade further on and he would have survived with a single dose of antibiotic, but that was science fiction then. Mom has no memory of him (she was two) and Norman can barely remember him. I was born in 1955 not long after polio vaccines arrived and my parents never had to worry about that disease. For all that we fuss and complain over the troubles of our modern times, we still live better than before.

My brother Neil, named after his grandfather, and I often rode out with Dad when he made farm calls. We knew the Eckville countryside quite well. There were a variety of critters around the clinic and house. For a while we had a pair of St. Bernard dogs that adopted Neil and I as pups (we were only a few years old at the time) and guarded us so well that adults couldn't come near. I can recall helping Dad plant a row of spruce seedlings along the front of the house, and still thrill to drive by now and see the towering giants they have become.

Eckville was incorporated in 1921 after two decades of growth from a place name to a hamlet. The 1996 council of the village staged a 75th anniversary fête on Canada Day weekend, which I resolved to attend. Before leaving Calgary, I had first to wait around Saturday morning for the delivery of a new fridge, the old one beyond economical repair when it went kaput a week ago. The fridge was delivered and plugged in by 11h00, and I was on the road by noon.

Heading north on Highway 2, a boring four-lane divided highway I have been on thousands of times, I stopped at a roadside restaurant across from the Bowden oil refinery. The waitress reminded me of Sarah, formerly Duchess of York, and still Fergie. I kept that to myself though, as I didn't want her thinking I was using a pick-up line on her. Imagine Sarah in western denim skirt and cowboy boots, with an Ontario accent, and you have the picture of her.

I bypassed Red Deer and turned off toward Eckville on the new Highway 11, what used to be the Burnt Lake Trail. The old Highway 11, which our farm fronts on, is now Highway 11A. The new highway cuts through glacial hill country, with lush green fields in the hollows and poplar bluffs on the hills. I've been in Calgary so long I'd forgotten what the central Alberta countryside looked like. Calgary is green for a brief period from middle May to late July, and tan or brown for the rest of the year. Highway 11 was rebuilt to bypass the resort town of Sylvan Lake, which Highway 11A goes through. Zipping along, I saw the remnants of Burnt Lake (now only wet pasture after drainage canals put in) and cattle grazing everywhere. One hollow had a herd of bison contentedly basking in the sun.

Arriving in Eckville, I parked in front of my stepgrandfather's house. I recognized my mother's car in front of mine (she having driven in from Red Deer) and Uncle Norman's car behind (he having come down a few days previous from Calgary). There were two tractors parked behind Norman's car, but don't ask me whose they were. In Eckville, it is not uncommon for farmers to live in the village and commute to their nearby fields.

Grandfather said I had just missed Mom, who had gone off to the fairgrounds for the 75th anniversary celebrations ten minutes before I arrived. I walked downtown (a half block), across the downtown core (1 block), and out to the suburbs (1 block) where the fairgrounds are. After registering as a visitor (events were mostly free), I walked around the fairgrounds and located Mom easily. We walked about and looked at the exhibits and historical displays. One hazard of walking with Mom was that she was constantly meeting up with old friends from her childhood there. I would naturally be introduced as "my oldest son", to which the invariable response was "Why, I haven't seen you since you were this high!" [hand held at knee level]. Later I went off on my own around the fairgrounds. Since Dad knew every farmer in the Eckville area, I was forever being held up by people who would glance at my name tag and ask "Are you Cec's boy?". Mom and I also saw Jim Keegstra, the infamous Holocaust denier. She told me this was my chance to go over to shake his hand; I replied I would only have to wash my hands after. Keegstra is from nearby Benalto, but when he was in the news for teaching hatred against Jews, the media always identified him as "former Eckville mayor". This made it sound as if he had been elected on the Holocaust denial platform, but in fact no one knew about him at the time, and he was defeated in the next election.

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The local newspaper ECKVILLE EXAMINER published a special edition for the anniversary, which was a local history. Mom and I were stunned to discover Dad listed as a Parent-Teachers Association member on the library committee. Neither of us knew he was on the PTA much less the library committee. Although Dad took several newspapers, he seldom looked at a non-veterinary book. Perhaps he was chosen for the prestige a doctoral name has. Eventually we ran out of exhibits to look at. Mom went back to the house, while I went to a roast-beef barbeque at the fairgrounds. The place mats had an engraving and history of the Eckville CNR train station, since torn down. I carefully saved two of the placemats, only to discover later that Aunt Darlene was on the committee that produced them and had hundreds to give away. Stopping back at my car to drop off my stuff, I kept walking after, it being some time since I had visited Eckville.

Lots of buildings change use in Eckville since it is cheaper to renovate or move the building around than to build fresh, which is why there are several vacant lots in the heart of the downtown. The hospital where I was born is now an outpatient facility. The Rebecca and Oddfellows Hall is now a house, but in a neat turn of symmetry, a house across the street is now the Town Hall. My father's clinic on the bank of the Medicine River has become a house. The only buildings that are deliberately demolished are those owned by large corporations which happen to have a branch office in Eckville. Houses move around like transplanted flowers.

A nice tradition in Eckville is that of homeowners painting fire hydrants in front of their houses. Most designs are faces, some have abstract designs, and not a few have butterflies.

The elementary school I first attended was built in 1961 on the outskirts of the village, surrounded on

three sides by wheatfields. Today it is surrounded on two sides by wheatfields, a farm implement dealer having bought on the east side.

This walk looped me back to the fairgrounds, and so to the arena for the Opening Ceremonies. In the lobby was a small "No Smoking" sign. Next to it was a sign with foot-high letters "NO SUNFLOWER SEEDS IN THE BUILDING". Spits, as salted sunflower seeds are known, are one of the greatest curses of the fast food industry. I got a good seat in the nosebleed section of the arena (fifth row up) and staked out a territory for my folks. A long wait but no matter; people watching was fun. The Asst. Administrator of the village was scurrying to and fro as final preparations were completed for the ceremony. She was in pioneer dress and sunbonnet, the effect of which was somewhat spoiled by the packet radio and cellphone she was carrying. I saw Mom and Aunt Darlene come in, but despite standing up and frantically semaphoreing with my arms, they did not see me until they were directly in front of me. But we all got settled in, and in due time (that is, a half hour late) the ceremonies began. There was a procession of dignitaries to the stage, with the inevitable piper leading the way, followed by a Mountie in dress scarlet. The next three people were elderly and required assistance with their walkers. This forced the piper into a very slow march, more of a lament than a rousing bagpipe march. There were the usual speeches and the presence of the son of Eckville's founder. Bad poetry was intermixed with worse singing. The local minister wasn't bad, and the talent contest winner at least had the excuse of being a promising young singer, but the village councillor who sang "Oh Canada" with a voice that wobbled when it wasn't off-key made one regret that hanging was done away with. The reason for all the geriatrics became evident in the presentations part of the programme. Gifts were presented to the oldest citizen (100 years), longest marriage (66 years), and the longest resident (83 years).

After the ceremony there was a cake-cutting, with a cake 1 m by 2 m to feed the multitude. And so back to Red Deer overnight to stay with Mom. This time I used the old highway through Sylvan Lake, forgetting what the traffic is like in a resort town on a Canada Day weekend.

THE SECOND DAY

1996-6-30

My brother Neil and his family arrived this morning in Red Deer. We reassembled as a convoy and headed back to Eckville, stopping along the way on Highway 11 to photograph the bison and show them to Neil's kids. The main activity of the day was a long wait to get on the free horse-drawn wagon tours of Eckville, which ran every half hour. It was a strange thrill and sense of pride to see Dad's clinic and both our houses pointed out as historical sites. The tour guide grew up on the original site of Eckville. The Main Street is now a farm driveway, but her parents still kept the original land survey of two streets and a dozen lots. Since Old Eckville is now a wheatfield, the property tax on the lots is about \$1.75 per lot. I won't bore you about the tour sites except to mention the shop where Wally Pukk the shoemaker once lived. His distinction was that he had a wooden leg.

After eats and ice cream, we went to the end of Main Street for a monument unveiling and time capsule installation. Registered visitors to the 75th celebration signed a guest book, which was included in the time capsule, to be opened in 2046. There was another procession with the same piper, but fortunately everyone in the procession was under their own steam. The number of Mounties in dress scarlet had doubled, an extra constable having been scrounged up from Sylvan Lake. Fireworks, speeches, the capsule lowered, and we mumbled the words to "Auld Lang Syne". It was announced that 1800 guests had registered, which about

tripled Eckville's population for the weekend. I went over after the ceremony to shake hands with the local M.P. Bob Mills, who had been my high-school biology teacher.

Back to Grandfather's house to wait until the evening fireworks. At 21h00, the curfew siren sounded to chase the village children back to their homes. Since Mom and I were going directly back to Red Deer after the fireworks, we drove over to the site and waited for dusk at 23h00. We sat in my car while waiting rather than face the mosquitoes. A group of teenagers happened to gather in front of my car. As the crowd walked past to see the fireworks, one man, obviously a schoolteacher, stopped to talk to the teenagers. "Have you got your lines memorized?", he asked them. "You know, Ooooh ... Aaah!".

Quite a crowd walked past, and Mom and I soon noticed that most were carrying the same kind of one-piece white plastic lawn chair. We started counting and it got to be funny. The Eckville Co-op must have had a sale on the chairs. I got to thinking about this later, as during my walkabout through Eckville I had noticed that not a few houses had vinyl siding on their roofs instead of asphalt shingles or cedar shakes. In a small village with only one of each type of store, everyone ends up buying the same merchandise. I gather someone also had a sale on sky-blue exterior paint, judging by the almost universal colour scheme.

The fireworks included a new type I've not experienced before. I'll call them 'screamers' for want of a better word; they sounded like Stuka dive bombers on the way up and the exploded fragments like a Star Trek spaceship going into warp drive.

Going home, we had the light of a blue moon. A blue moon occurs about once every 2.7 years when there are two full moons in one calendar month.

The entire family stayed overnight at Mom's house in Red Deer. I was awoken by the thunder of the grandchildren. Whoever coined the phrase "the pitter-patter of little feet" obviously never had children. I left back to Calgary at noon, and as it was a sunny day and I had lots of time, I thought to take the old Highway 2, now Highway 2A. Somewhere along its first portion it disappeared, the Dept. of Highways having negligently moved it someplace else but forgetting to put in signage. I didn't notice it at first but when I realized I was going due west instead of due south I knew I was off-course. I kept going anyway, not having been out this way since my father took me with him on farm calls. Before I found the next road due south, and then back east to find the rest of Highway 2A, I had made a 100-km loop through the farmland. But no matter ... what's an extra hour on the scenic route?

NOSTALGIA AIN'T WHAT IT USED TO BE

Although I was happy to visit Eckville for a weekend, I wouldn't want to live there as a working adult. The job opportunities are limited, government services are minimal, and recreation consists mainly of hockey and curling. Some people make villages seem utopia, but for a teenager it can be boring. The major activity of Eckville teenagers is driving up and down Main Street and burning rubber off their wheels. When I was eight, our family moved to the Red Deer area because my parents wanted us to have better opportunities of a small city as a teenager. A village is not so bad for young children who can make their own play but teenagers expect more. When I retire in 2010, Calgary will have about a million people; if I think it unliveable then, I may consider moving to a small city or possibly a village, not necessarily Eckville.

Calgary's annual convention, this year hosting the national convention as well, began today. For me it was mostly rush, rush, rush. Off work at 16h45, then a race across town during the height of rush hour to get to the bank before it closed to sign my mortgage renewal paper. Then a quick trip downtown to pick up my mail from the post office, only to discover that the Streets Division had chosen the height of traffic to repave 9th Avenue SE and reduce it to two lanes. The tailback went 2 km out past the downtown core. After finally making it to the post office, insult was added to injury when I found I had no mail in my box number today. And so to home for a quick change and freshen-up, then across town again to the Coast Plaza Hotel for the convention.

As I came in the doors, I almost immediately met up with Robert Runté. The good professor and I had a brief chat in the 30 seconds it took me to walk over to register. I went through Registration in about 3 minutes, one minute of which was putting out fanzines on the freebie table. Checking my watch, I saw time to get to the Opening Ceremonies. A 5 minute wait there, then the ceremonies were over in 3 minutes (I timed it). The Guests of Honour were introduced and we were out. Another 30 second conversation, this time with Karl Johanson of UNDER THE OZONE HOLE fame, then a few minutes in the consuite to leave some more freebie fanzines.

Finally, some time to take in a panel, this one on dinosaur intelligence. On the panel were Dr. Phil Currie of the Royal Tyrrell Museum of Palaeontology and Robert Sawyer, Nebula winner and dino-novel writer. The panel had already started when I arrived, and Sawyer and Currie were agreeing that speculating about intelligent dinosaurs in the absence of human evolution was great fun, since there were no facts to get in the way. (This is what annoys people about science; the facts keep ruining beautiful theories.)

As with convention hotels everywhere, Con-Version is sharing its space with a Christian group (Lutheran Women's Missionary League) and a Saturday wedding party. As with most Calgary hotels, Japanese tourists are stopping overnight en route to Banff. Con-Version in the last few years has developed into a writers' workshop. Lots of panels on how-to for wannabe pro writers, and even the dealer bourse was noticeable for books. There were three tracks of programming, which I think more reasonable than the multitude of tracks some SF cons have, which usually results in the panel outnumbering the audience due to fragmentation.

SATURDAY

The art show was of high technical proficiency overall but the subject matter remained clichéd. Dragons, wizards, Star Trek, Star Wars, and furies. Nothing really stood out for me this year except a painting by Stephanie Ann Johanson. It was an amusing parody of the countless touristy posters of Lake Louise (Banff National Park) but with closer inspection one sees a pleisosaur neck pogoing through the glacial waters.

I took in two panels that are annuals at this con. One was the latest images from the Hubble Space Telescope, presented by Alan Dyer. This satellite is turning up some billion-dollar photos of weird and wonderful deep space stuff.

The other panel was "Writing at the Improv", hosted as always by the Imaginative Fiction Writers Association. This is improvisational writing by a panel of IFWA members. The audience suggests words, and the panel have one minute to write a sentence using that word. They then read out loud the sentences, and the audience votes for their favourite. In this way a story is built up. This year's story is as follows. Words from

the audience are underlined. ('harlequin' was modified by the successful improv writer into the name 'Harley Quinn')

"I dunno, there's something about a taco-shaped alien that's hard to take seriously", Dr. Morak said. "Mighty good eating though", said his lithe but voluptuous assistant Cherriel, "but they always give me gas". A maroon Porsche careened outside the window, a crazed taco at the wheel. "Oh my god, it's Harley Quinn!" Cherriel exclaimed as she recognized what was, in more ways than one, fast food. "Didn't he have a lobotomy last week?", Cherriel squealed. "Didn't take", said Morak, "He's as saucy as ever". Smashing into the wall like an explosive salad, bits of Quinn splattered against the building. "I told that idiot he should have used a Mac in his autodrive", moaned Morak, "but he had to use an IBM with moabites". Homeless people converged on the free street salad like a swarm of locusts. Just as a relatively affluent individual in the mob raised his spoon, the bits of Quinn began to quiver, then to move towards each other. "I've heard of this", said Morak. "It's the taco rite of passage from larvae to adult stage, though, as you know Cherriel, they are called Higgledy Piggledy then". "The city can't cope with one of those!", shrieked Cherriel. "Higgledy Piggledies are the breeding phase. We'll have little fajitas all over the place!". Morak yelped as the oversexed tacos began to come together, then to move towards Morak and Cherriel with a distinctly unpleasant expression. It could have been a leer. Aliens normally attack the female of the species, but perhaps these were bisexual. Or maybe not. Cherriel screamed as the Mexican food moved in tequilla ... or worse.

Great fun here. I recommend improv writing to concons looking for programming ideas. Calgary taverns use a variant of this idea called trashsport poetry.

SUNDAY

1996-7-21

My first panel of the day was "The Image of Palaeontologists". Phil Currie had a slide show covering the colourful lot of palaeontologists who have inspired SF characters. He mentioned the famous feud between Cope and Marsh during the 1800s. Scientific rivalries in SF are often based on this feud between two independently wealthy palaeontologists who sabotaged each other's fossil collecting in the race for glory. The photos of their field collectors looked much like the ones you see of Wild West outlaw gangs. In our modern era, the movie JURASSIC PARK based a character on John Horner and Robert Bakker, both of whom have been in the public eye since the idea of hot-blooded dinosaurs reached the news media. Another panelist, Anthony Switkin, mentioned that the Professor Challenger stories of Doyle are based on real-life palaeontologists.

GUEST OF HONOUR SPEECHES

Mel Gilden was a capable Toastmaster, with lots of funny stories. He mentioned he liked to go to SF cons because it was nice not to be the strangest person in the room for a change.

GoH C.J. Cherryh's speech was a serious talk on book distribution by publishers. She remarked "Publishers have mistaken data for information". Computer numbers rule in bookstores more than ever, thus too much dependence on established authors and a reluctance to push new authors until they prove themselves, a chicken and egg situation. Once an author topples off the bestseller list, bookstores order fewer copies each time, and publishers spend less on publicity for that author, setting off a vicious circle. Web sites enable authors to bypass the publisher/bookstore PR system and communicate directly with fans. Cherryh

mentioned her Web page has been up since March 1996, enabling her to find out from fans where her books are poorly distributed and thus prod the publisher into doing something.

After the speeches there was a White Hat Ceremony, which many organizations do in Calgary, not just SFers. The Guests of Honour were assembled before the audience, a white cowboy hat presented to them (Calgary's symbol) as a token of appreciation, and made to swear an oath to spread western hospitality everywhere.

Cliff Samuels was presented with the first Life Membership in the Con-Version Society for past service to it and other SF cons in Alberta. He got a standing ovation.

The Convention AGM is always good for a feud or two. I went along with the idea of sitting and listening, only to end up as Secretary of the AGM, taking the minutes because I was the only one with both pen and paper. For 1997, Convention will be held in Toronto, the Primedia group winning the bid. There was discussion about eligibility criteria for the Aurora Awards. Unfortunately, we ran out of time to discuss a note by Linda Ross-Mansfield proposing that the Auroras be reduced in number due to their increasing expense, which is starting to put them out of reach of the small literary cons that might otherwise host them. My belief is that Auroras should become a purely literary award by ditching fandom categories for Organizational and for Other, leaving the fanzine and pro awards.

Con-Version produced a book of short stories, being the winning entries from the short story contest and selling for \$1.95. Also produced was an unofficial newsletter SEMPERVIVUM. I can supply sets of four daily issues for free provided you write me and ask; I'll include them when I mail you your next OPUNTIA.

Well yes, they handed out the hardware. These awards, by the way, are one of the nicest and most original designs around. They are shiny sheet metal in a wavy pattern simulating the ribbony shape of an aurora borealis. The front view shows a maple leaf hole cut in the metal. Looking down from the top, the metal forms the letters 'SF'.

After the acceptance speech of the first winner, the Master of Ceremonies asked as politely as he could for accepters to keep under thirty seconds. This led to cries of "Keep it under thirty seconds!" every time a subsequent accepter left the audience to the stage. As generally done, the awards were announced in both languages, but I wish they'd let the Québécois announce the francophone versions all the time, instead of making the audience suffer through the French of some of the anglophone presenters.

PRIX AURORA

Meilleur livre en français: LES VOYAGEURS MALGRE EUX
Elisabeth Vonarburg
Meilleure nouvelle en français: EQUINOXE
Yves Meynard
Meilleur ouvrage en français (Autre): SOLARIS
Joel Champetier
Accomplissement fanique (Organisation): Jean-Louis
Trudel

AURORA AWARDS

Best Long Form in English: THE TERMINAL EXPERIMENT
Robert Sawyer
Best Short Form in English: THE PERSEIDS
Robert Charles Wilson
Best Other Work in English: REBOOT
BLT Productions

Fan Achievement (Other): Larry Stewart

Fanzine: UNDER THE OZONE HOLE

Karl Johanson and John Willcox Herbert

Artistic Achievement/Accomplissement artistique:

Jean-Pierre Nortand

NEXT YEAR IN JERUSALEM!

Well not quite, but the 1997 Con-Version will be at the Carriage House Inn, from July 18 to 20. This is one of the early sites of Con-Version. Sort of musical hotels. The heading for this paragraph comes from the fact that it is the only kosher hotel in Calgary and probably has the best food of any hotel in the city.

Connie Willis and Kim Stanley Robinson are the announced GoHs for 1997.

HAIL AND HEARTY

1996-7-24

California gets earthquakes, Florida suffers hurricanes, Winnipeg floods out, Kansas is blown apart by tornadoes, and Calgary ... well, we get hailstorms.

Last week a vicious storm crossed the city, dumping 1 m of marble-sized hailstones on the suburb of Douglasdale. My house was on the edge of that storm and got only a brief downpour. Douglasdale being one of the communities in my Parks Maintenance District, I went on patrol the next day to check for damage. As I sped down Deerfoot Trail, I noticed white patches in the ditches but thought they were washouts exposing clay subsoil. Slowing down to turn into Douglasdale, the white came into scale; it was knee-high drifts of hailstones, and this after melting overnight. But the damage was not serious. A bit of minor flooding here and there. Douglasdale is still under construction. The trees are young saplings which

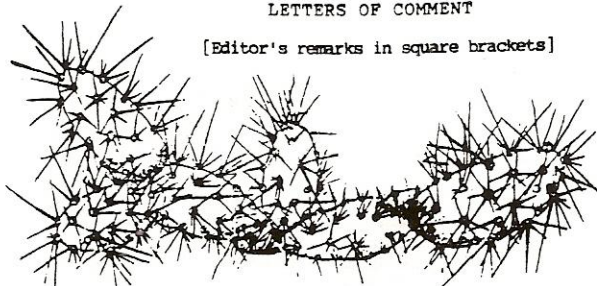
resist hail better because they don't have heavy horizontal branches to break. The houses all have cedar shake roofs, more resistant than asphalt shingles.

Today though, another storm, this time hitting western Calgary. Signal Ridge, a foothill of the Rockies, had hail deep enough to bury cars. This time my district had serious damage not from hail (which didn't make it that far east) but from flooding. Almost every freeway had at least one flooded section, and drivers therefore drove up onto the medians and boulevards to get by the water. The wet turf was plowed up as if done by a farmer. We shall have to reloom and reseed kilometres of turf.

On Bow Bottom Trail, both sides are bounded by high berms to screen adjacent houses from the freeway. In the storm, drivers went up on top of the berms, driving along them to safety. But the berm tops are just the width of a car, barely. A few drivers spun out and slid down the side into the water, or, worse yet, down the opposite side into the utility rights-of-way which are soggy at the best of times, not to mention the peak of a downpour. Looking at the long and jagged ruts in the turf where the cars slid into the morass, and the plowed ground where the tow truck finally got them out, I felt sorry for the poor sods in the cars (pun intended).

The biggest topic of discussion amongst Calgarians is what the storms will do to insurance rates. The first is estimated at \$30 million damage, the second at \$40 million and rising. Such storms are hitting Calgary in greater numbers each July, not so much because the frequency is increasing, but because the city is becoming a larger target. Ten years ago Douglasdale was range-land, and that storm would have soaked in harmlessly without notice. Five years ago Signal Ridge was only a bald foothill; now it is carpeted with houses.

[Editor's remarks in square brackets]



FROM: Ian Gunn
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1996-7-2

Worldwide Party report: Down here, of course, it's the winter solstice, and only a dozen or so chilly souls were huddled in the Melbourne SF Club. After I explained the concept to the non-fanzine reading ones, it was accepted with amusement and bemusement. The MSFC meets in a rented church hall, so alcohol isn't allowed. There was, however, a rush to the coffee stall just prior to 9 p.m.. When the time rolled round and the kettle still hadn't boiled, we did the fannish opposite of a minute's silence; we let forth a ragged cheer as our part of world fandom. Happy days, fans!

I ALSO HEARD FROM: Henry Welch, Buck Coulson, Carolyn Substitute, Teddy Harvia, Susan Zuege, John Thiel, Robert Sabella, Harry Andruschak, Chester Cuthbert, Scott Patri, Joseph Major