

OPUNTIA

67.5

ISSN 1183-2703

July 2009

OPUNTIA is published 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 letter of comment. Americans: please don't send cheques for small amounts to Canada as the bank fee to cash them is usually more than the amount. US\$ banknotes are acceptable in Canada at par value; what we gain on the exchange rate we lose on the higher postage rate to USA. Do not send mint USA stamps as they are not valid for postage outside USA and I don't collect them.

Whole-numbered OPUNTIA's are sercon, x.1 issues are reviewzines, x.2 issues are indexes, x.3 issues are apazines, and x.5 issues are perzines.

COWTOWN LIFE

by Dale Speirs

My perzine issues haven't been coming out that often lately, so you'll notice that some of the dates on the anecdotes in this issue are rather stale. I don't lead a very exciting life. I have written in the past about my job in the Parks Dept., the Calgary Stampede, and other matters to the point where I have run out of anything fresh to write about in that regard. I suppose this is a blessing being in a backwater instead continuously fighting through heavy rapids. No police raids, no worries about the government defaulting on tax refunds, no mass layoffs.

I could comment on life in the oil patch, but the markets have been swinging back and forth so violently that even the daily bloggers can't keep up. The stock market and commodities futures aren't just irrational, they're outright insane. Prices bear no relation to fundamentals. Americans once worried that Shrub had spent \$500 billion on his war in Iraq, but that is now petty cash compared to the \$3 trillion the U.S. Federal Reserve created out of thin air, and the \$43 trillion in toxic paper and overpriced houses that still have to be eradicated. Alberta is doing okay compared to the rest of the world; the oilsands are hurting but conventional oil can make money at \$20 a barrel. Our economy stands or dies on oil; everything else in this province is just walking-around money.

And so to the monthly meeting of the Calgary Philatelic Society. The lecture was on stamps of the French Empire. As Larry was discussing the topic, a cellphone rang. Everyone instinctively reached for their pockets or purses, except me because I always shut mine off at events such as this. The cellphone rang a second time, and there was laughter when Larry reached into his pocket and found it was his cellphone. He interrupted his lecture, and as the audience fidgeted, he pushed assorted buttons and put it back. He continued his talk, but seconds later, the cellphone rang again.

The audience muttered as he pushed some more buttons. Someone said just loud enough to be heard: "Never mind the voicemail, just shut the damn thing off." Undaunted, Larry put the cellphone away, but a few seconds later it rang again. This time he walked over to the side of the meeting room and put it away in his jacket. The muffled tones of the cellphone continued at intervals, but he didn't shut it off. When you really need one, there's never a gigawatt electromagnetic pulse generator around to burn out someone's cellphone.

I was on my way home from work. Southbound on Crowchild Trail, across the Bow River, then up the valley escarpment where

Crowchild Trail makes an S-curve up the hill.

As I came round the bend, I had to slow. Traffic had been barricaded in the two lefthand lanes and was down to one lane. The cars slowly inched along and we soon saw why. On our side, several fire trucks and an ambulance. On the opposite side of the concrete barrier in the median, a half-dozen police cruisers were blockading the northbound lanes. The constables were U-turning traffic about and sending them back to the previous interchange. I saw a battered motorcycle lying on the far boulevard and knew what was wrong. Twenty metres later, I saw the body under the traditional yellow blanket, lying on the asphalt next to the concrete median. Further on, the police were shutting down northbound Crowchild Trail and detouring traffic into the adjacent neighbourhood.

Once at home, I turned on the radio news. The dead motorcyclist had been racing two other bikers when he lost control at very high speed and slammed into the barrier. He was pronounced dead on impact. The other two bikes did not stop. Did they even see the accident? It's possible they didn't notice because the S-curve winding down the escarpment might have hid the accident behind them, and they might have thought they had outrun him. Will they come forward later? Were they friends, or strangers who happened to meet on the freeway, give each other a look, and in unspoken mutual agreement begin racing?

I got to thinking of how the dead man's life was snuffed out in an random instant. He was on his way someplace, gave in to an impulse, and a moment later was dead. He would have felt a flash of pain before his massive injuries shut him down. He might have had time to think "Oh jeez, what have I done?" before blacking out. None of us will ever know what his last thoughts were. Death is a private matter no one can intrude into.

Later that evening, a constable would be ringing a doorbell somewhere and telling a parent or wife the news that would shatter their weekend, their week, their lives. If you want to make God laugh, tell him your plans for the future.

1 Metre From Infinity.

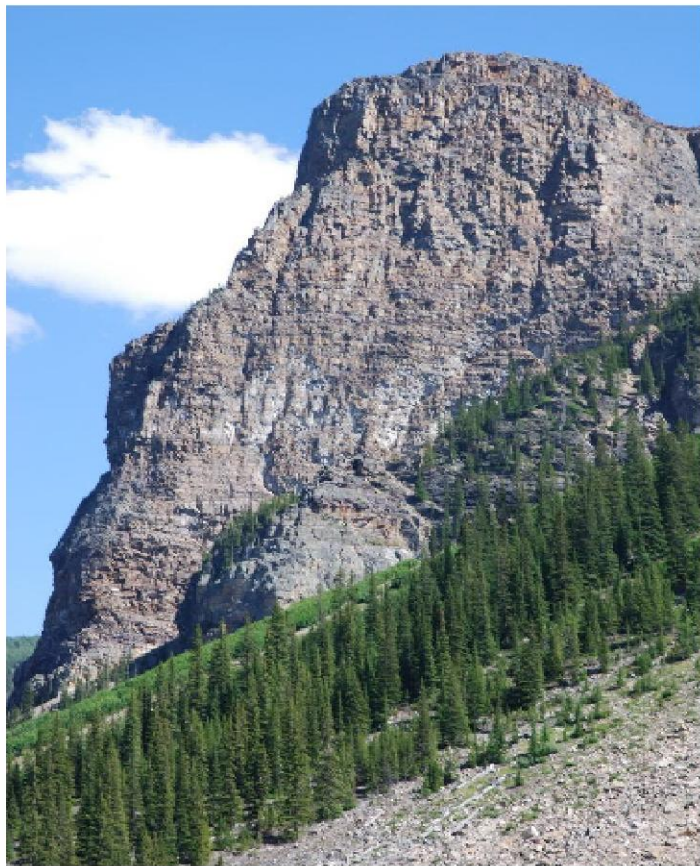
2008-08-06

A beautiful sunny day with temperatures up to 25°C, so I headed out to the mountains of Banff National Park. This time I went to Moraine Lake, in the next valley over from Lake Louise. Both lakes are opaque turquoise in colour, both are overloaded with tourists, and both are hemmed in by magnificent jagged mountain peaks crowned with glaciers. Moraine Lake is on a different road than Lake Louise, a narrow paved two-lane road carved up the side of the mountain to the hanging valley where the lake is. On one side of the road are vertical cliffs soaring up to the sky, and on the other is a vertical drop of 500 metres, with no road shoulder and no guard rail. The road is closed in winter, and I am amazed

there aren't more serious accidents in the summer. But before I can tell my story, I have to tell you this. Banff National Park is popular with professional athletes for training, especially Olympic and national teams. In winter the cross-country skiers are everywhere, and in the summer the roads are plagued by bicycle riders training for the Tour de France or Summer Olympics.

Having had my fill of the turquoise waters of Moraine Lake, I began driving back down the winding road in my trusty Honda Civic. The speed limit is 50 km/hr, and only someone with a death wish and a Ferrari would try to do 60. As I zoomed down the mountain, I approached four bicyclists, wearing team colours, and also zooming. I managed to pass them on a short straightaway but had trouble doing so because they were traveling 30 clicks as well. On the next curve I had to brake, which brought them up behind me in close order.

We went into a downhill S-curve at 30, and as we did, the bike riders tried to pass. One came up on my left and I watched him in my outside left mirror, as he crossed the centre solid line and took up position next to my car, only a hands-breadth from the left rear fender. Their leader passed me on the right, and pulled even with the passenger door, riding on the narrow shoulder of the road with no more than 1 metre of pavement between my car and the edge of the cliff. The two tail-gunners were centimetres from the rear bumper.



Together we all whipped into the S-curve in tight formation, still doing 30 clicks and looking like the Snowbirds aerial acrobatic team. Trundling up the road in the opposite direction were three RVs. It was then that things got exciting.

Another RV turned out from a roadside viewpoint across my path. I had to brake hard but was never in any danger of hitting it. However, shouts from behind me indicated that the two rear riders had almost gone underneath the back end of my car, caught off guard by my sudden braking. Simultaneously, the left-side rider had to brake hard and cut in behind the car because one of the on-coming RVs was a bit too close to the centre line and its outside rearview mirror would have decapitated him. I instinctively swerved slightly to the right to avoid the mirror scraping my car, forgetting about the right-side biker. For a bad moment I thought he had gone over the cliff. He wasn't visible in the righthand outside mirror when I glanced at it a split-second later. I checked the inside mirror and saw all four cyclists behind me. They were trying to avoid crashing into each other as they all simultaneously attempted to occupy the same space on my rear bumper.

Mount Babel, on the southeast corner of Moraine Lake. (Photo by Dale Speirs)

As I came out of the S-curve, I looked in my rearview mirror again and saw the bicyclists fading back into the distance. They wobbled into the viewpoint and came to a stop. The last I saw of them they were slumped over their handlebars. I hoped they were contemplating their narrow escape from winning the Darwin Award. I got to thinking of how their lives might nearly have been snuffed out in an random instant. They were on their way someplace, gave in to an impulse, and a moment later nearly met death. They would have felt a flash of pain before their massive injuries shut them down, and might have had time to think "Oh jeez, what have I done?" before blacking out. Death and life are sometimes are matter of centimetres.

I continued down the road past Paradise Creek and eventually to the village of Lake Louise. I stopped off at a shopping plaza for a bite to eat. As I sat on a bench and munched my food, the bike riders rode in and parked next to me. I knew it was them because of their uniforms, but they did not recognize me. My car was at the far end of the parking lot, and they would not have seen my face back on the road. I was tempted to give them what-for but sometimes it is better to let things go.

A Slice Into Infinity.

2008-09-13

The Parks depot I work out of is shared between Parks Maintenance and a golf course. I was walking out to my truck

when the golf course foreman zipped up to me in his cart. In the back was a freshly-dead Canada goose. Mike told me that a golfer had sliced the ball into an adjacent wetland and killed it. The skull of the deceased goose was crushed in by the ball's impact, and presumably the poor goose never knew what happened. The golfer was quite upset and Mike had a job calming him down. Mike wasn't certain how the carcass should be disposed of. I deal with dead animals in parks occasionally in my capacity as Parks Trouble Calls Supervisor, so he asked me. The first thing I did was to check the goose's legs for bands, but there were none. That being the case, I advised Mark to dispose of the defunct bird in the dumpster bin. Had there been a band, the corpse would still have gone to the same fate, but the band would have been taken into the provincial Fish and Wildlife office.

I got to thinking of how the goose's life was snuffed out in an random instant. It was minding its own business, grazing on the turf beside the fairway, and a moment later was dead. It might have felt a flash of pain before its massive injuries shut it down. Fortunately at this time of year the goslings would be on their own, but I wondered what its mate would be thinking. Was it anxiously honking and searching about the golf course for its mate, never to know the why and how of its sudden disappearance?

I had intended writing about the financial panic, but events have been happening so fast that any of my remarks would quickly be out of date. The only thing falling faster than the price of oil is the stock market. There is no glut of oil; world production peaked in 2006 and even the Saudis couldn't control the price. However, demand fell faster than the supply declined. There's nothing like severe unemployment to make people conserve.

Peak Oil still stands as it did. New projects such as Tupi, located offshore Brazil, and the Alberta oilsands will not add oil to the existing reserves. Rather, they will make up for depleted fields, in a Red Queen's Race. New oilsands projects being postponed will take five years to re-start, meaning a greater reliance on Arabian oil by the USA.

Calgary is so far unaffected because there are so many projects in progress, whether skyscrapers or oilsands upgraders. New projects are being postponed though, officially because of high costs. 7-Eleven is still advertising for staff at \$11 per hour. When they suddenly withdraw their signs, Calgary's labour supply will finally be adequate. I use 7-Eleven as the true economic indicator of prosperity. If I see people lining up for jobs at convenience stores, then I'll know that hard times are here.

Christmas cheer seems rather short in most of North America as the commodities and stock markets race each other to the bottom. Oil closed below \$40 today and the stock market is now half what it was at its peak.

Meanwhile, Environment Canada has announced that this will be the first winter since 1971 that Canada has had a white Christmas across the entire country. Even Vancouver has snow. Their idea of a hard winter is frost three nights in a row. Calgary has been getting a blizzard a week and the auto body shops are booked up well into January. Many SUV drivers are starting to realize that 4WD does not make them invincible on ice. When I back my car out of the driveway I have to be going at full speed, otherwise the car high-centres on the snowdrifts along the sidewalk. The good news is that Albertans don't have to worry about earthquakes, hurricanes, or brush fires.

The Snows Of The Ides Of March

2009-03-29

March is the snowiest month for Alberta. During the main part of winter, the polar highs hold back other systems, but as they weaken in the spring and retreat, the moist maritime low pressure systems finally can make their way up from the Pacific Northwest and dump snow on us. That is relative though, as in Calgary a

30-cm snowfall is considered devastating, laughable to easterners who regularly get 100-cm snowfalls in the Great Lakes area. Calgary council likes to brag about how low our property taxes are, one reason being that the snow ploughing is confined to major roads, and residential streets are left to the coming of the next chinook.

I work out of the Parks Dept. depot at 16A Street NW, located at the end of a cul-de-sac at the bottom of a hill with a north-facing slope (so the sun doesn't melt the snow). The depot gate is at right angles to the cul-de-sac, which means that anyone exiting has to make a right-angle turn, then immediately go up the hill. Not a problem in the summer, but I learned a long time ago that with any kind of snow it is better for me to park my car at the top of the hill and walk a block. The street is in a residential neighbourhood of rental duplexes (who else would live next to a City depot?). All day long, a whizzing sound can be heard as residents try to get up the hill in rustbucket hatchbacks with bald tires or pickup trucks with no weight in the back. By the end of the day when I come off work, it doesn't matter how good the tires are on my car, they don't work on polished ice.

Today was the second Sunday in a row that we had a 15-cm snowfall, and the second Sunday that I had to park a block away. Besides doing trouble calls, this time of year usually just trees run over by SUVs, I also supervise the weekend rink staffs. We have

outdoor skating rinks at the Olympic Plaza downtown and several parks throughout the city. Parks Dept. also has its own garbage trucks which run every day of the year since citizens don't stop using the parks just because it isn't a regular business day. On snow days, the crews do snow removal.

I drive a 1-ton crewcab, which can get up the hill on snow days with only a modicum of whizzing tires. And so to a tree call in a far-flung suburb, not a run-over but a spruce overgrown onto the sidewalk. I shaved it back; no further action required by Parks.

From there, down the Crowchild Trail freeway, level but slippery just the same. I crept along at 40 klicks. A 20-something man yakking on a cellphone zoomed by me in a rice-burner (expensive customized Japanese hatchbacks) well over the speed limit. About 100 metres ahead of me his car wobbled, and I took my foot off the gas in anticipation of what would come next. I was not disappointed. The car looped-the-loop across three lanes of traffic and smacked hard into the concrete barrier in the median. I pattered past it without stopping. The broken fibreglass of the back end of the car was still tinkling along the road as I went by. No action required by Parks.

Thence to Prince's Island, a downtown park in the Bow River, which forms the north boundary of the downtown core.

I talked to the crew there, who will be going over

to Olympic Plaza to help out with snow removal. The Plaza is Calgary's central meeting place, where tens of thousands of Cowtowners pack themselves in for major events such as New Year's Eve, the Second Coming, or, even less likely, the Flames hockey team winning the Stanley Cup. The Calgary Stampeders football team won the 2008 Grey Cup, so that was some solace. The Plaza is terraced, the better to give crowds a view of the stage, but this means that all the sidewalks have to be shoveled by hand because machines can't climb the terraces.

Alberta's unemployment rate has risen to 5.4% as the postponements of oilsands projects begin to take their toll. Oil is staying steady in the \$50 range, so conventional oil still pays for junior petes that didn't go into debt. 7-Eleven still advertises for workers but now at \$9.50 an hour and no retention bonus. My investments in Canadian bonds and private-equity oil companies are doing well, but the payroll mutual fund I have is down 30% because of the stock market. Having survived the disastrous decade of the 1980s, I learned one valuable lesson: stay out of debt. I have none now (the house was paid off in 1997) but I know too many people who, during the boom, felt they deserved those two weeks in Mexico every winter, the large-screen TV, the latest Apple laptop, and the leased BMW. Now they have trouble sleeping at night. I pay cash, my RRSP and TFSP are maxed out, and I have the satisfaction of telling people "I told you so." I lose more friends that way, though.

Meanwhile, back at the crewcab, a trouble call for a tree run over in the deep south of the city. This was an elm innocently minding its own business on a park boulevard when it was run over by an SUV. I don't know what it is about tow truck drivers, but they always leave the front bumpers behind at tree calls like this. I cut up the tree and loaded the branches onto my truck, tossed in the bumper, and made a note on my clipboard to tell the Urban Forestry people they had another replant. No further action required.

Coming back into the central part of the city, I took Macleod Trail, the main drag. I drove past a rice-burner wrapped around a streetlight. No driver in sight. He'll be lucky to get a tow truck in anything under five hours on a day like today.

From there to Bowness Park in the northwest, where I had to set up a booking at pavilion #1. Bookings are very few in winter, mostly skating parties at the lagoon (the park is an island in the Bow River), but we get a few in late March or April. These bookings are either by immigrant groups who have not yet understood Alberta's climate, or insanely optimistic people who think that because the cherry trees are blooming in Tennessee that it is also spring up here. I turned on the power and lights for the pavilion, put out firewood, and posted the Reserved signs. No one around or likely to come, but since they paid for the service they get it, weather notwithstanding.

Site #1 is at the end of a cul-de-sac in the park. As I backed the truck up to turn around and leave, the tires spun out and the truck was stuck. After rocking the transmission back and forth for several minutes, it became obvious I would have to shovel my way out. The park is flat, but since I had to turn the front wheels while backing, this created enough drag to pile up the snow on the tires. The truck had a full kit of tools, so out with the shovel and on with excavating two bare paths for the wheels to travel in. Fortunately the park roads are paved, so once I dug down 15 cm to the asphalt there was a good surface. Back into the truck, and after much roaring of the engine and whizzing of the tires I got it turned around and moving out of the park.

URANIUM CITY, SASKATCHEWAN

1954-11-10

Note the date on this heading; more in a moment. My uncle Norman Maki, my mother's older brother, died in Calgary in August 2007 at the age of 78 years. He hadn't been well in his last few months of life, and went into a nursing home before his death. He never had children, so my brother Neil and I looked after him, and later became his co-executors. We cleaned out his apartment and all the family memorabilia wound up in boxes in my basement. I've been going through his photo albums, and came across some of a plane crash that Norman survived in 1954. almost exactly one year before I was born.



Norman Maki in 1954, at Uranium City, Saskatchewan

Norman and my mother were both born in the now-vanished village of Hespero, Alberta, of which nothing remains today except a grass airstrip for a flying club.

The family soon moved to nearby Eckville, where Neil and I were to be born. After graduating high school, Norman joined the Imperial Bank of Canada as a teller in 1948 and spent the next 42 years with the bank, nowadays known as the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce. The CIBC posted him all over western Canada, first in various towns in northern Alberta and northern Saskatchewan during the 1950s uranium boom, then for a decade in Winnipeg, and finally back to Calgary for his final years. He rose through the ranks to head the Loans Dept., and was the very epitome of a conservative banker. He would have been completely disgusted by the Panic of 2008 and what the Wall Street bankers did to the world's economy. (My father, a Social Creditor who died in 1996, would have laughed himself helpless at what happened. It would have confirmed what he always felt about fiat money and fractional-reserve banking.)

In 1954, Norman was stationed in Uranium City, Saskatchewan. He worked partly in the retail branch there, but was also responsible for flying the payrolls out to the uranium mines. In those days, a pay packet was exactly that, a packet with one's pay inside as cash. Cheques and automatic deposits were useless out there on the bedrock of the Precambrian Shield. Norman flew bags of cash to the mines, where a card table would be set up in a secured room. He and the mine paymaster would go through the lists, fill and label each packet, and personally hand them to each miner. Before the miner stepped away from the table, he opened

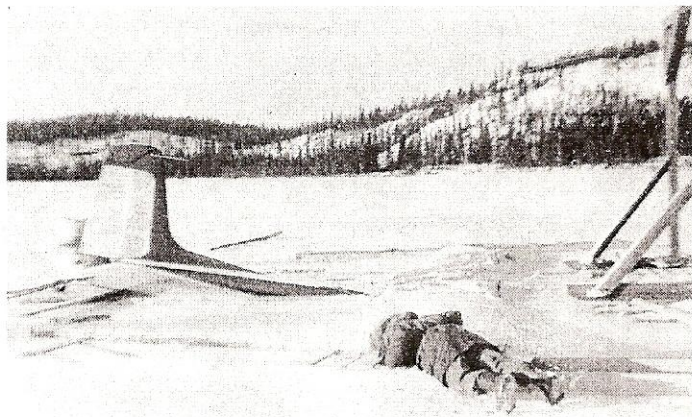
the packet and verified the cash. The local general store and the tavern both stayed open late that night, as miners settled their obligations at the one place, and drank the rest of their packet at the other.

On November 10, 1954, three men climbed into a bush plane at Martin Lake, bound for the Gunnar mine with the payroll. Don Mackay was the pilot, Norman sat in the co-pilot seat, and another bank employee was wedged into the back with more cash than was healthy to carry down a dark alley.



Norman's plane a few days before the crash.

The plane started up, taxied to the ice runway, and then turned into the wind. Mackay turned the plane a bit too sharply, and one side lifted off the ground, tilting the plane and putting all the weight on one ski. The ice didn't hold, and the plane dropped down. Everyone was calm, and scrambled to get out before the overhead wings sank down to the level of the ice and blocked their exit. Norman was wearing a heavy sheepskin coat that doubled his weight when it got wet, but he managed to pull himself out onto firmer ice.



The partially-sunken plane; the temperature was about -40.

Norman and the other bank clerk lived above the bank branch. The three men adjourned there, changed into dry clothes, and spent the rest of the day drinking whiskey to sooth their nerves. A few seconds the wrong way, and Norman would have been an uncle I would never have known but from old family photos. The rest of Norman's life was much quieter, and he was happy to have it that way.

The next day, the men went back to the plane. Norman had to dive into the water to retrieve the payroll. The photo he later took of the submerged plane was wryly labeled "The Day I Joined The Polar Bear Club". He and the other clerk then returned to the bank. They spent the remainder of the day ironing all the dollar bills to dry them out. Unfortunately some bags of loose change were unaccounted for, and to this day there are thousands of nickels scattered along the bottom of Martin Lake. Mackay, as the pilot ultimately responsible, called in assistance to build a wooden frame on the ice (seen at the right of the photo) with which to winch up the nose of the plane. He is seen stretched out on the ice, fishing to get a rope around one side of the plane.

So I guess me getting my truck stuck in Bowness Park was small potatoes.

The unemployment rate in Calgary is now up to 6.6%, and the City planning department has laid off staff for lack of work, although the rest of us City workers are okay because our budgets are not affected. California or Michigan we're not. Still lots of construction, but it is all skyscrapers and LRT lines started before the panic. 7-Eleven no longer advertises for help; they get enough walk-ins looking for work. House prices have leveled off in the \$380,000 median; they were dropping steadily but then oil came back up to the \$60 range.

We'll get our hair mussed, but it won't be the catastrophe that southern Ontario is facing as their auto plants shut down. They now have 9.4% unemployment. As always, the majority of unemployed have few useful technical skills or experience. Oilsands engineers who were laid off soon get work on the conventional oil side, which is still doing okay for companies that didn't get silly with borrowing. And also as always, the people who suffer most in a recession are the ones who have debt.

The loonie is now considered a petro-currency, and it fluctuates with the price of oil. Gold prices have been steady at about C\$1,100 per ounce. Every time the US\$ price goes up for gold and oil, so does the loonie against the American dollar, so the gold price to Canucks stays level. People are rushing to gold and silver

as a safe haven. A teller told me that every bank in the city has a waiting list for safe-deposit boxes. The mass media babble about green shoots but that is just wishful thinking. There is a steady and silent flow of currency in North America being converted to precious metals by average citizens. Business may be fundamentally sound but bullion is even sounder. If you can't afford gold, then at least buy some silver.

Alberta's spring weather has been unusually dry in the east country, and many ranches out there have hayfields only ankle-high with grass. The Great Depression was compounded for western Canada because a drought hit us at the same time, and it appears that we might repeat both scenarios.

Transit Fanning.

2009-06-15

I have to commute to work by car, there being no bus service anywhere near my depot. On my days off, if I am doing business downtown or at the university library, I take the bus, as parking in those two areas is impossible. Calgary has the highest parking fees in Canada according to a recent poll. As a low-priority project, I've started photographing LRT stations and bus types in Calgary. The city will be starting on a new leg of the LRT to serve the west end of the city, and continues to extend the other legs of the line. The newest station to come on stream is the Crowfoot station at the end of the northwest leg.



Crowfoot station is in the median of the Crowchild Trail freeway. The similarity in names is coincidental but unrelated. Each LRT station has a different design, and this one is a glass curtain wall much like any other modern design in the world. My grandparents' homestead was a kilometre to the right of the photo, but the farm was long since converted to suburbs.

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900	0
800	45
700	30
600	15
500	0



2009 June 9

Subject to conditions on back

RIDER'S REMINDER

**CROWFOOT
STATION OPENING**

Monday June 15

New routes and
schedules available.

www.calgarytransit.com for more info

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

-14-

[Editor's remarks in square brackets.]

FROM: Lloyd Penney

2008-09-13

1706 - 24 Eva Road

Etobicoke, Ontario M9C 2B2

I keep hearing criticism of the Tar Sands, about how inefficient and polluting it is. That somehow translates in the American media that Canadian oil sands, and indeed any foreign oil, are evil.

[The Tar Sands operators are cleaning up their act, and the tailings ponds will be gone in a few years. It takes 2 barrels of oil to produce 10 barrels of syncrude, but the technology is constantly improving. By comparison, corn-based ethanol needs 8 barrels of oil to produce 10 barrels of ethanol.]

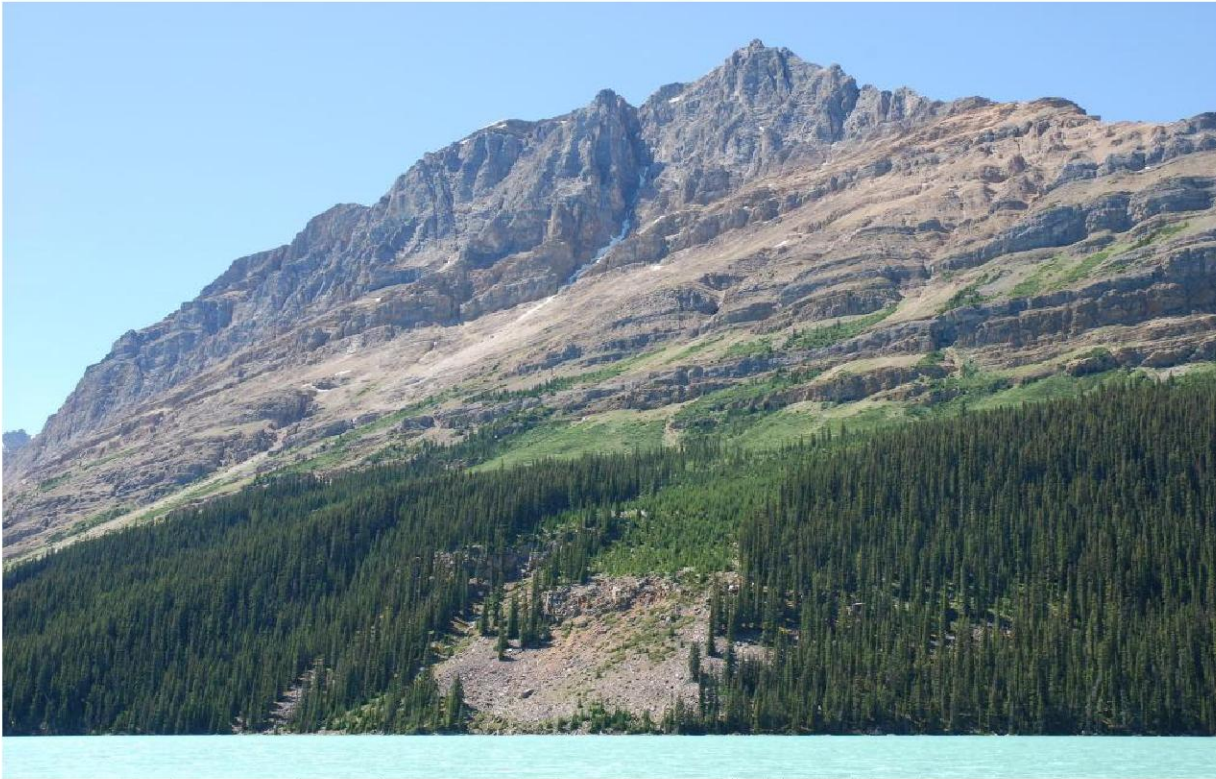
No one likes to pay the prices we pay for gasoline, and while we pay a lot, it's not the most, and perhaps we should be thankful for that. We just have to be more careful about how we use our fuel. Yvonne decided to leave the car at home, and now we both use transit passes. We figure we are saving more than \$1,000 a year.

I Also Heard From: John Hertz, Phlox Icona, Henry Welch, Ned Brooks, Franz Zrilich

ROCKY MOUNTAIN VIEWS

photos by Dale Speirs

More photos from my hiking trips. This is Caldron Peak in Banff National Park. Since the mountain is sedimentary, not volcanic, the name always struck me as rather strange.





The Vermilion Lakes as seen from Mount Stoney Squaw. The Banff townsite is just outside the photo to the left. Sulphur Mountain is behind the lakes, and just a little bit of the Bow River can be seen across the centre of the photo.

The lakes are gradually filling in and a century from now will be nothing more than bogs.