

OPUNTIA

307

Cinco De Mayo 2015

Opuntia is published by Dale Speirs, Calgary, Alberta. My e-mail address is: opuntia57@hotmail.com When sending me an emailed letter of comment, please include your name and town in the message.

CALGARY UTILITY BOX ART

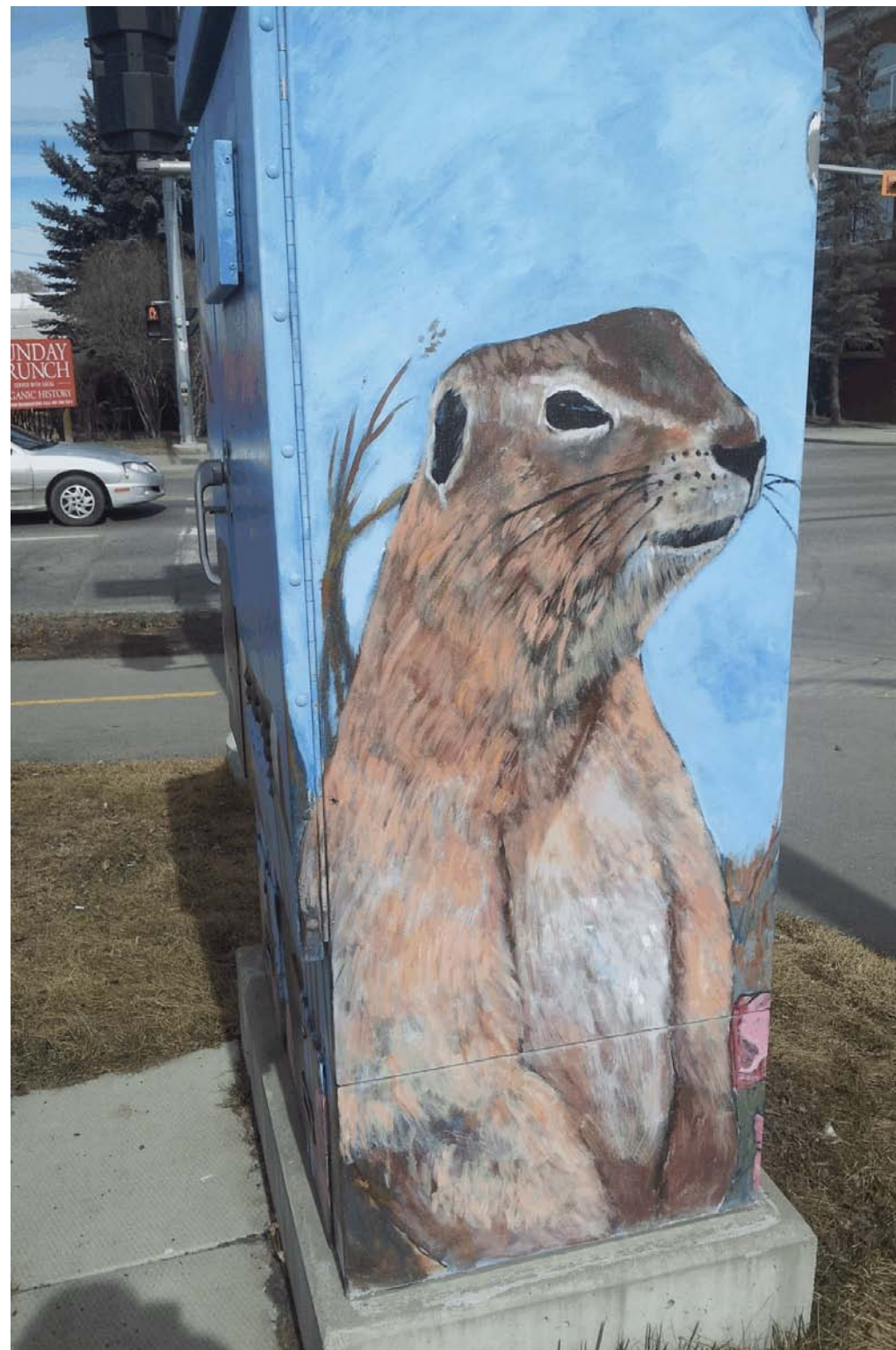
photos by Dale Speirs

I love my smartphone camera because I can snap photos while walking about the city. It's no good for extended photo sessions such as the Stampede parade or hiking in the mountains, for which I use a Nikon digital camera whose battery will last for a week. The smartphone battery runs down too fast for that, but for a few snapshots here and there it is very convenient.

Calgary utility companies began hiring artists about a decade ago to paint their boxes as a graffiti control measure. It's working quite well, the proof being a comparison with plain grey boxes covered with graffiti tags. There are thousands of utility boxes throughout the city, so a substantial number are not yet artistic.

The photo on this page and the two on the next are of a single box in the Inglewood district, just across the Elbow River from the downtown core.





Two views of a box in the Westgate district on the opposite side of the city.



THEY SHALL MOVE OUT OF THEIR HOLES LIKE WORMS OF THE EARTH: PART 1

by Dale Speirs

Terra firma was never quite so shaky during an earthquake as when a monster roars up from the depths and gobbles someone. If you can't trust the ground you walk on, what can you trust?

Thou Hast Sore Broken Us In The Place Of Dragons.

THE OUTER LIMITS was a television series of the early 1960s that featured a different story each week done in playhouse style. A 1964 episode "The Invisible Enemy" was based on a story of the same name by Jerry Sohl which appeared in the September 1955 issue of IMAGINATIVE TALES. In the original story, astronauts land on a far distant planet to find out why ships keep disappearing. At the climax of the story, they discover there are underground creatures that pop out of the soil and gobble up astronauts.

The television network executives moved the venue to Mars, which in 1964 was already obsolete as a place of unknown civilizations and creatures. They had the ship land on a sand-sea like the Arabian desert. A network executive insisted that the monster appear in the first ten minutes of the episode, rising out of the sand and snatching a supporting actor. This not only ruined the suspense as to why the astronauts were disappearing, but also displayed one of the world's worst sock-puppet dragons. Even for 1964 the SFX were atrocious, about what one would expect for a low-budget kiddie movie from the 1940s. Many shows can survive bad SFX but this one was killed by a bad script and teleplay.

A much better television episode was "The Devil In The Dark" (1967) from STAR TREK, considered to be one of the best episodes of the original series. It starts off as a routine monster-of-the-week show but takes a turn near the end that sets it apart.

On the mining planet Janus 6, something is killing miners and damaging machinery, so the Enterprise is called in to help. The first foreboding is the silicon nodules the miners started finding after they opened up a new level of tunnels. It was just after that when miners began dying, killed by corrosives. A rare survivor says he saw something huge and shaggy. A reactor pump is taken by the creature, indicating intelligence. It burrows through solid rock by excreting corrosives. A nitpick I noticed is that the rock, whether fragments or

dissolved, still takes up about the same volume of space, yet the tunnels are clear and dry. Where did the extra mass go?

Spock suspects a silicon life form. Eventually contact is made after the creature is wounded by a phaser gun. Spock is able to establish a mind meld with it and learns the details. The creature belongs to the Horta, who every 50,000 years die off except for one caretaker adult. They leave behind thousands of eggs, the silicon spheres the miners found. The Horta was just defending its eggs, which are about to hatch. After further conflict, the miners reach an agreement with the Horta. In exchange for leaving the hatchlings alone, the Horta will help locate metal deposits for the miners.

The story is well done and is one of the few monster shows that doesn't kill the monster just because it is a monster. There is rational behaviour on the part of the Horta, and the miners and Starfleet officers come to a peaceful understanding.

He Was Eaten Of Worms And Gave Up The Ghost.

In 1990, a monster movie TREMORS was released. The plot was cliched, but it had good production values and a sense of humour. Some of the stars in the movie were on their way up, others were on their way down, and many were bit players who hung on for the sequels.

The movie did well enough that three sequels were produced, then a single-season television series. All are available on DVD and worth viewing. The characters came and went over the series but there was a fair semblance of continuity. The SFX were well done and as a measure of how good they are, were done in bright sunlight. Too many films rely on murky darkness to cover up the defects of their SFX. Additionally, the sequels didn't just simply repeat the plot of the original, which is why so many sequels fail, but instead elaborated original story ideas.

TREMORS (1990) started off in the usual manner of monster movies, set in the isolated desert valley of Perfection, Nevada, population 14. There are frequent references in all the movies and the television series about characters making quick trips over to Bixby, so it is nearby within a day's drive.

Val and Earl are two odd-job men eking out a living in the valley when they find themselves in a situation. There are the first few deaths, then the growing

realization, then the isolation when the only road out of the valley is blocked by a rock slide and the telephone land lines go down. The valley is rimmed by mountains and has no cellphone service. No help is coming.

The monster, a gigantic worm that tracks its prey by vibrations, is soon uncovered. It travels underground just below the surface, moving as fast as humans can run on the surface, and tracking its prey by the vibrations. It has three tongues, each with a head, that grab on to the prey and pull it into the mouth. When Val and Earl are first attacked, one of the tongues is torn loose after it wraps itself around the rear axle of their pickup truck while they were making their escape. At first everyone thinks that the snakelike tongue was the actual monster. They soon learn different though. The monster is given the name “graboid” because that’s what it does; it grabs people from below and pulls them underground.

The villagers’ first thought is: “How can we make money from this?” They are briefly distracted from the danger by the idea of putting specimens on display, if only they could catch one. For a ghost town like Perfection, this seems like a good way to generate some tourist dollars, especially for Walter Chang, who operates the grocery store. In the sequels, this is an ongoing concern. Never mind losing the occasional tourist (or Chang; his niece takes over the store in a later movie); how many graboid knickknacks and comics can we sell?

But in the meantime, the villagers are driven to desperate measures as they are killed one by one by the monsters, of which there were four. The good luck is that Rhonda LeBeck, a geology graduate student, had a network of seismographs set up in the valley, which are used to track the graboids. Where they came from and why they were never seen before is the subject of speculation among the rapidly dwindling pool of survivors, but no satisfactory answer is given.

The graboids are intelligent and learn from their mistakes. The first one is dispatched by inadvertence while chasing Val and Earl, as it slams full speed into a concrete wall of an irrigation ditch. The contest begins, with graboids killing villagers while being killed in return. The supporting characters are picked off one by one, each in a way that indicates the graboids can plan tactics.

One pair of humans that do make it to the end of the movie are a survivalist couple Burt and Heather Gummer. (Burt will become the leading man in subsequent movies and the television series.) They have more firepower than

the local National Guard unit and gleefully expend it against the graboids. As they say in the army, ammunition was meant to be used.

One by one as well, each graboid is killed by a different method and because they learn, no method can be used twice. The humans use the graboids’ sensitivity to vibrations against them, by detonating homemade bombs that deafen the graboids and panic them into running away at full speed. The final graboid is disposed of this way by luring it after a running human towards a cliff, then detonating a bomb behind it so that it barrels out of the cliff face and falls to its death.

The Beast That Ascendeth Out Of The Bottomless Pit.

TREMORS 2: AFTERSHOCKS (1996) picks up a few years later. Earl is losing money on an ostrich ranch in Perfection Valley, while Val and Rhonda are gone from the series, married and living in the big city. There was some money made from the graboids, such as a pinball machine, video rights, and exclusive stories sold to PEOPLE and others of that ilk. Earl spent it all on ill-advised investments. Burt Gummer is still in the valley but Heather has gone to visit her sister and isn’t coming back. She blames Burt for not being the man he was before the fall of the Soviet Union made survivalism less urgent than it used to be.

A Mexican oil company approaches Earl to come down to their oil field, which has been shut down because of graboids. They’re willing to pay \$50,000 per dead graboid, double for a live captured one. Why the graboids are there is the same mystery as in Perfection. Along the way, Earl hires an assistant, an obnoxious fanboy named Grady Hoover. For the love interest, there is Kate White, a geologist with the oil company.

The Petromaya valley is wired with seismographs to track the graboids. Earl and Grady develop a standard method of killing graboids by using radio-controlled model cars as bait, each car with a stick of dynamite. Once swallowed, flick the detonator switch and kaboom goes your graboid. They also learn to carry umbrellas, because when the graboid is blown up, a fountain of shredded meat and organs sprays up into the air. This becomes a running joke, as they have to constantly clean entrails off the windshield.

There are humorous bits, such as coyotes howling at night and suddenly being cut off with a frightened yelp as a graboid swallows them. Another graboid, not

killed initially, swallows a boom-box radio left playing on the ground and thereafter can be tracked across the valley by the sound of a Mexican greatest-hits radio station. There seem to be an awful lot of graboids in Petromaya valley, almost too many for Earl and Grady to handle, so they call in Burt to help them out. He shows up in an army truck loaded with heavy armament, as in, the elephant gun was the smallest item.

The problem of where graboids came from is dealt with once again, but in an unsatisfactory manner. Kate is sorting through borehole samples and comes up with a graboid claw from a Precambrian deposit. Set aside the fact that petroleum is not found in Precambrian rocks and oil rigs would not be drilling through them. Kate says the graboids are therefore one of the oldest life forms on the planet if they left fossils in the Precambrian. There are Precambrian fossils but only microscopic algae. Advanced and big monsters such as graboids definitely would not occur in such rocks because multicellular life back then was no more than clumps of cells just starting to evolve organization and specialization. The big question is also left unanswered. If graboids have been on Earth for two billion years, how come they have never been noticed before and why are they now popping up in so many locations?

So far, a routine sequel. However, a new variation makes its appearance. It is discovered that graboids are only one stage in a complex life cycle. They die giving birth to an aboveground stage that looks like a berserk dodo. Named shriekers because that is what they do, they are vicious eyeless predators who only see by thermal imaging. Nasty beaks, good runners on two strong legs, and reproducing by parthenogenesis if they get enough food. The shriekers run amok, killing Mexicans left and right. (The gringos survive because they are the stars.) The shriekers destroy vehicle engines and the only radio relay transmitter, homing in on the infrared emissions from the warm engines and electronics. The graboids are confined to soft sediments in valley bottomlands, but the shriekers can easily disperse regardless of terrain. The threat is obvious.

Assorted alarums and excursions follow, resulting in the demolition, bit by bit, of just about everything at the petroleum field camp. The shriekers are intelligent. When the heros take shelter by climbing up a ladder onto the top of a storage tank, the shriekers can't climb the ladder, so they stand on each other's backs to form a pyramid and almost succeed. They are distracted into a warehouse but the heros forgot that their food was stored there, and the shriekers multiply exponentially.

Burt masses all his explosives and ammo together and touches off the pile, destroying the warehouse and leaving a giant crater rimmed with shredded shriekers. And so to the end credits. One wonders though, if the petroleum company deducted the cost of their blown-up facilities from the graboid bounties.

His Fruit Shall Be A Fiery Flying Serpent.

TREMORS 3: BACK TO PERFECTION (2001) is set eleven years after the first movie. After the initial graboids were killed off in Perfection Valley, all has been quiet. The seismograph network has been allowed to run down, so no one is aware when a new batch of graboids hatches out. A real estate developer, Melvin Plug, is trying to peddle house lots in the valley. One would think that no one would buy a lot in a valley of graboids, but since so many humans live on floodplains, hurricane coasts, and earthquake zones, it is not so unbelievable. Plug grew up in the valley and is always hustling, hoping to make a fortune somehow. He will reappear in the television series with a stronger part.

The movie begins with Burt Gummer in Argentina, where failure to act by local authorities has resulted in a graboid metamorphosing into a batch of shriekers. In addition to cleaning up the mess, Burt has a television crew following him about. His ego is about the same size as a graboid, and in between firing at shriekers, he pompously lectures the camera about his hunting techniques.

That was the overture, and the scene quickly shifts back to Perfection. There is a subtle joke in the opening pan shot of Perfection. In the first movie, a traffic sign announced its population as 14, but a quick camera pan over the sign shows the population is now 5. And we know why, don't we?

Given the length of time elapsing between the movies, it is not surprising that there are cast changes. Earl and Kate have disappeared, and Burt is now the leading man. Burt has reinforced his compound with a deep rebar concrete wall underneath it that no graboid can penetrate. There is a newcomer named Jack Sawyer who has set up a graboid tour for visitors. Jack has a doofus for an assistant, but not to worry since Doofus is eaten by a graboid in the first ten minutes, which also starts the plot rolling.

Walter Chang, the general store owner who was gobbled up by a graboid in the first movie, left his estate to his niece Jodi, who is now trying to make a go of the store as a souvenir shop. She is selling knickknacks, graboid sock puppets,

comics (“Shrieker Versus Graboid” and other great literature), a serious book by Rhonda LeBeck about the valley geology and history of graboids, and, since it is a desert, cold beer and pop at extortionate prices.

Three graboids are now being tracked on the remaining seismographs, but just as Burt and Jack move into action, the feds show up from the Bureau of Land Management. They have just declared the graboids to be an endangered species to be protected. Burt goes ballistic but Jack is a good diplomat and negotiates a deal with the BLM men. In exchange for helping them capture a live graboid, they will allow Burt to kill all the others.

A nice touch is that the BLM men are not cardboard villains or remorseless bureaucrats. They only have a minimal budget to operate with and are under pressure from their head office to get results. They were stuck with the job because they were the low men on the totem pole and would much rather be someplace else. They must do the dirty work but that doesn’t mean they like it.

A BLM scientist discovers an empty graboid egg shell, which he dates at 300 years for the shell but present-day for the organic traces left inside. The mystery of the graboid life cycle is clearing up a bit. The graboid hatches from the egg, and later produces shriekers which can disperse further overland. Graboid eggs can stay dormant for centuries or millennia.

All three of the BLM men are not long for this world. They go chasing after one of the graboids but find it just after it died and released shriekers that kill them. Meanwhile, Burt has been dealing with an albino graboid, later to be named El Blanco, and which behaves anomalously. It is mentioned that albinos are sterile mules that cannot breed (true more often than not in other species), which explains why El Blanco has not pupped out any shriekers.

While hunting for the third graboid, Burt is attacked but manages to hide inside an empty oil drum. The graboid swallows the drum and Burt. Jack decoys the graboid into chasing his truck back to Burt’s compound, where it dies on full-speed impact with the underground concrete wall. Jack chainsaws open the dead graboid and releases Burt, who would just as soon forget the entire incident.

What with all the excursions and alarums, Burt and the gang are delayed in tracking down the shriekers. When they do locate them, they discover the shriekers have molted, and are now flying beasts who use intestinal gases as rocket fuel to launch themselves. Like shriekers, they are eyeless and only use

thermal sensing to home in on prey. Burt clears up a loose thread by mentioning that all the previous shriekers dealt with in Mexico and Argentina were killed within twelve hours of birth, whereas this batch had enough time to metamorphose into flying shriekers, henceforth named ass-blasters by Jodi. The life cycle is completed when the ass-blasters lay graboid eggs, and, like shriekers, are a mobile form not restricted to unconsolidated sediments, thus allowing wide dispersal of the species. All of this goes to prove, incidently, that they could not possibly have evolved such complexity in the Precambrian.

It was bad enough hunting and being hunted by shriekers, but now the surviving Perfectionites (the last Mexican in the valley was killed off by an ass-blaster) must fight in three dimensions. What follows are various battles across the valley, and eventually everyone converges to a junkyard. Jury-rigging homemade weapons from spare parts and junk, they commence the final showdown with the ass-blasters. They win, of course. In the bargain they capture a live ass-blaster, which they sell to Sigmund and Ray**, a Las Vegas casino act, for a huge sum of money. El Blanco still roams the valley but it can be tracked with seismos, and becomes one of the tourist attractions.

In The Beginning Of The Watches.

TREMORS 4: THE LEGEND BEGINS (2004) is an origins movie that explains some of the history of the graboids. The movie opens in the year 1889 in Rejection Valley, the original name of Perfection. Hiram Gummer, great-grandfather of Burt, is a Philadelphia city-slicker who had invested in a silver mine in the valley. The Bottom Dollar Mine’s output suddenly drops to zero and Hiram comes out west from Philadelphia to see what the problem is.

What it is, he discovers, is that monsters the local residents call dirt dragons are killing off the miners, and no one wants to work there. They are what a later generation would call graboids, and were uncovered when the miners excavated a stratum with the eggs.

The standard plot of monster movies is followed; the denial, the mystery, the realization, the battles, and the successful resolution, minus assorted extras and bit players whose main function was to be eaten by graboids.

** No connection, of course, with any Las Vegas act having a similar name. Don’t want to be sued, eh?

Hiram plays the fool but is a quick learner of western ways. He telegraphs for a gunslinger to kill the monsters. Black Hand Kelly responds, a fabulous shootist but who seldom has more than three brain cells functioning at the same time. The carnage continues, as the graboids demonstrate their cognitive abilities, never falling twice for the same trick.

Three of the heroes are trapped in a building with heavy wooden planks for a floor that a graboid can't smash through. The graboid therefore begins dragging away the planks one by one. It manages to gobble down Black Hand Kelly, which surprised me because usually the Mexican gets it. However in this movie Juan makes it all the way to the end credits.

Everyone prepares to abandon Rejection and flee from the graboids, but after a stirring speech from Hiram they decide to stand fast. Instead of chasing around after the graboids, they set up ambushes in the main street (the only street) of Rejection. That way, they are fighting on their terms, not the graboids'. Each graboid has to be dispatched in a different way because the beasts learn, but finally the job is done.

In the epilogue, all the survivors agree never to mention the graboids to anyone else because otherwise no one would work in the silver mine or settle there. This is a neat touch to explain why no one in the first movie knew about the beasts. And finally, civic pride appears and the village is renamed Perfection.

The movies are well done, leavened by humour and with a reasonable attempt at maintaining continuity. Recommended for your viewing pleasure.

[to be continued]

WHEN WORDS COLLIDE 2015

Calgary's annual readercon When Words Collide returns on the weekend of August 14 to 16, 2015, at a new and bigger location, the Delta Calgary South Hotel on Southland Drive SE, just east of Macleod Trail. This is a literary convention designed to cross genres, with author Guests of Honour from fantasy, science, fiction, mystery, romance, and young adults. More details at: www.whenwordscollide.org

THE MAN FROM MONTENEGRO: PART 8.
by Dale Speirs

[Parts 1 to 7 appeared in #252, 253, 275, 278, 279, 289, and 304 respectively.]

TROUBLE IN TRIPLICATE collects three Nero Wolfe novellas from the late 1940s. Rex Stout was best at writing novellas, although he did write novels about the fat detective.

“Before I Die” takes place in the war years when rationing was operating. Gangster Dazy Perrit approached Wolfe for help. Normally Wolfe would refuse to deal with such lowlife, but he specifies that as part of his fee Perrit must supply him with assorted black market meat cuts for the dinner table. On this basis, Perrit becomes a client.

He has a complicated problem. Years ago he had a daughter who had to be adopted out for various reasons. She is now 21 under the name Beulah Page and unaware of her father. Perrit wants her to have part of her patrimony. Unfortunately other gangsters are a threat to her, so Perrit hired a ringer from Salt Lake City named Violet Angelina Sally to pose as his daughter and live in his house. The idea is that his enemies will see that she is under his protection and leave her alone.

Sally is now blackmailing him, asking for large sums or she will reveal to others that she is not the real daughter. Unbeknownst to Perrit, Sally brought along her boyfriend Morton Schane from Utah, where both were wanted by the police for good and sufficient reason. Schane starts his own operation; he identifies the real daughter and romances her to the point that they are engaged, which doesn't make Sally happy.

Matters simplify themselves somewhat when Sally is gunned down in the street and a day later Perrit also. Wolfe's assistant Archie Goodwin was present at both killings, as a result of which people are nervous about standing next to him in a public place.

There are two good clues in the early part of the story that enable the reader to identify the killer, but Goodwin misses them both. NYPD Homicide Inspector Cramer sticks to Goodwin like glue, not because he believes he did it but because he figures that if NYPD wants to know where the next murder will take place they could do worse than follow Goodwin around.

For the traditional J'accuse! meeting in Wolfe's office, Wolfe insists on bringing in a couple of other gangsters to hear him out. After being identified as the killer, Schane pulls out his handgun and a battle erupts. The other gangsters are better shots and the matter is resolved without the State and People of Utah having to go through all the trouble of trying to extradite Schane. The gangsters aren't charged since everyone testifies that Schane fired first, which makes it justifiable homicide by reason of self-defense. The real daughter inherits Perrit's substantial estate and all ends well, except for the dead of course. And Wolfe, who never does get those promised meat cuts.

"Help Wanted, Male" begins with Ben Jensen approaching Wolfe for help after receiving a credible death threat. Wolfe declines on the ground that he does not provide bodyguard services. Goodwin recommends another company the matter temporarily ends there. Jensen is not long for this world; he and his bodyguard are gunned down in front of his apartment. The fat doorman tells police he was down in the basement stoking the water heater, it being wartime and good help hard to get, and he didn't see a thing. He had only worked there a short time and then quit, on the grounds that he didn't have to put up with such goings-on.

Wolfe gets a duplicate threatening note every bit as credible as the late Jensen's, and decides to hire a body double. The man, H.H. Hackett, looks almost exactly like Wolfe and starts work immediately. Meanwhile, Wolfe and Goodwin are convinced that the culprit is Capt. Peter Root, who was sent up the river for trying to sell military secrets. Jensen and Wolfe both had a part in putting him away. Root is still in jail, but that's not to say he couldn't have someone on the outside working for him.

The son of Jensen and Jane Geer, a woman associated with Root, show up at the brownstone for a meeting, unaware that they will be introduced to Hackett, not the real Wolfe. Goodwin will ride herd and report to Wolfe later. He steps out of the office for a moment, and while doing so, a gunshot is heard. A bullet just missed Hackett, and needless to say Jensen Jr and Geer are the suspects. Evidence such as the gun and some other items are found planted in the adjacent room, a little too convenient for Wolfe.

Some more checking is done, revealing that Hackett and the fat doorman at Jensen's apartment are one and the same, and further is Thomas Root, father of Peter. He was seeking his chance to kill Wolfe and staged a charade to make himself look good before killing Wolfe in a day or two and then disappearing.

The story seems to sputter a bit. Although the loose threads are all neatly tied up and everything has a logical explanation, the plot seems contrived by just a smidgen.

"Instead Of Evidence" begins much the same as the previous story. Eugene and Martha Poor show up at Wolfe's office. Eugene is convinced his business partner Con Blaney is going to murder him, and he wants to pay Wolfe a \$5,000 retainer to investigate if he dies by foul play. Eugene is so nervous he has trouble lighting his cigar and keeps coughing over the smoke. Wolfe accepts the deal and sure enough Eugene suddenly departs this vale of tears later that evening at home when he lights up an exploding cigar that blows his face off.

The business of Blaney and Poor is a novelty gag factory, the kind that makes joke items such as squirting flowers and pencils that spray perfume. Suspicion is thrown around like salt on an ice-covered road because there were a number of romantic affairs being conducted in the factory. Martha was a labourer there until she managed to marry one of the bosses.

In an apparently unrelated matter, out in the countryside near Blaney's estate, a man's body is found, his face crushed beyond recognition. It only occupied a few paragraphs in the newspaper, but Wolfe latches on to it. The body is eventually identified as Arthur Howell, who worked at a munitions plant and supplied the murderer with explosive capsules that would fit inside a cigar. Goodwin and the factory foreman do another search of Blaney's office and discover several more capsules. They turn over some of the to police as a good citizen should but keep a couple for Wolfe's purposes.

Further sleuthing reveals that while the deceased husband really was Eugene, the man Martha had brought along to Wolfe's office was Howell, posing as her husband. With both men out of the way, there is no evidence to convict her. Wolfe attaches an explosive capsule to a photograph of Howell and has Goodwin deliver it to Martha and try to bluff her that she will be convicted. He refuses to leave the apartment or let Martha use the telephone.

After wandering about the apartment for some time, Martha takes the photo and capsule into the bathroom. Goodwin waits for the inevitable bang, and then telephones Inspector Cramer to wrap up the case. Justice does not necessarily have to be done in the courts.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

[Editor’s remarks in square brackets. Please include your name and town when sending a comment. Email to opuntia57@hotmail.com]

FROM: Joseph Nicholas
London, England

2015-04-29

I was interested to read your review of Jim Baen's DESTINIES and its later iterations in OPUNTIA #306, in part because I hadn't realised that its publishing history was so long. I bought the first few issues when they appeared, in 1978-1979, but didn't continue because they didn't interest me that much. The fiction was formulaically Campbellian, and the (supposedly) factual articles struck me as very naive, certainly by comparison with what was being reported in NEW SCIENTIST (which I'd been reading every week since 1973, and am still reading every week).

The default assumption by many of the writers, with their let's-colonize-space-now mentality, seemed to me to be that if it was technically and technologically possible for something to be done then it would be. Issues of cost and whether there was the political will to meet that cost could be disregarded. Indeed, the writers mostly failed to recognise that such questions needed to be asked, whereas it was fairly clear, from reading between the lines of NEW SCIENTIST's news reports, that crewed spaceflight was coming to be recognised as an expensive diversion with few tangible returns.

As Stephen Baxter subsequently put it in the afterword to TITAN, his alternate history of the space programme which posited a crewed trip to Mars in the decade after the Apollo lunar landings, had crewed spaceflight been continued at the same level it would likely have sucked up all the money that subsequently went into uncrewed exploration. The result would be that we'd know just as much about the different planets of the solar system as we did then: i.e., next to nothing.

[The sad part is that the current space programme expenditures, including shuttle flights, is about two week’s worth of the military budget. The U.S. Dept. of Defense budget for 2015 is about \$600 billion, while NASA’s is \$18 billion. It’s not a matter of “either or”. NASA could do both out of the Pentagon’s petty cash account but the political will isn’t there.]

You comment on one of the articles in those early volumes of DESTINIES that the writer is ignoring basic economics. As it turns out, so have all those who in the decades since have been arguing that the private sector can get us into space more cheaply than governments. It has become ever clearer that overcoming the Earth's gravity well has a very large financial penalty, almost logarithmic in its scale. As the individual payload increases in mass or volume, so the quantity of fuel required to lift it into orbit goes up in leaps and bounds. The consequence is that corporations have not been able to substitute for governments.

Even though such as Elon Musk's Space-X is now ferrying stuff to the ISS on behalf of the US government, it is being paid by the US government to do so, which amounts to a simple transfer of funds from the one to the other. There is no net saving at any point. And as for the proposals by outfits such as Mars One to send people on a one-way journey to the planet for a few billions of crowdsourced dollars, they are beyond ridiculous.

[To me, Mars One is like the L-5 Society or the Artemis Project, always making impressive plans but never any real results. Those people yomping around the Arctic pretending to be Marsnauts have given the Inuit much amusement.]

FROM: Lloyd Penney
Etobicoke, Ontario

2015-05-01

OPUNTIA #303: Great walkway along the river. Hard to believe that the Bow River rose that high in the flooding. The inscriptions in stencil are wonderful to see. It’s a shame that wars are fought now, not for honour, but for financial gain by a country or even a corporation. John McCrae’s verses restore some sober second thought to the idea of war; they must revisited regularly.

OPUNTIA #304: [Re: Bow River signs] Never expect mercy from a river, or Nature in general. Best to prepare for the worst, and hope that the worst never exceeds your best efforts. Instructive? Certainly was.

[That was why the great flood of 2013 shocked Calgary so much. If it was just the usual places on the floodplains that went under water, it would have been a local news item and quickly forgotten. But when the levees were overtopped, the river spread out for kilometres in the valley, and people who thought they were nowhere near any danger suddenly lost their homes in one day.]

My previous letter about my time as a DXer, for shortwave and for AM and FM bands was a great time, but dealing with the club, I belonged to, the Ontario DX Association, was a great preparation for fandom. They looked down their noses at me, criticized me for being new, or not having as many QSL cards or letters as they did, or not having as good a shortwave radio as they did.

[Comparative hobbyology, I call it. I was active in the aquarium hobby during the 1980s and 1990s, and still am in philately, so it is interesting to see the differences and similarities. Bad behaviour has unfortunately ruined many clubs in many hobbies.]

OPUNTIA #305: I have no interest in paying \$\$\$ to get into a pro-run convention either, but I do appreciate the costuming. Making an exact reproduction of a costume is quite a skill. I recognize some of the costumes, and I have no doubt I know some of the Calgary steampunks.

[In future issues I hope to have reports on the Calgary Flames hockey fans and the Stampede rodeo considered as costume cons.]

OPUNTIA #306: Toronto's winter was quite cold, and I am glad it's done. Our spring has been late, but only on this very weekend will the temperatures be warm, and the skies sunny.

[A warm and early spring here in Calgary after the mild winter, and I was outside in shirt sleeves in March, which is very unusual. However, no one in Calgary will relax until after the rainy season is over at the end of June, having learned our lesson in 2013.]

I have some of the FAR FRONTIERS/NEW DESTINIES books from Jim Baen, but didn't enjoy them. If I recall, I always found them far too warlike in their fiction. Still, the action took place in far galaxies or on strange worlds. I'm getting nostalgic just thinking about it.

I used to say that I knew where every used book store was in Toronto. I can still say that, but there's only a handful left, and none of them are taking books in trade. For many, books have become a nuisance item.

[If it wasn't for the Little Free Libraries, I would have nowhere to dispose of my books except the blue bin.]

FROM: Jason Hozinguy
Brooklyn, New York

2015-04-23

I have an unusual question for you. Were you alive and living in Calgary in the 1960s? I ask because in the miniseries "Death Comes To Town" by the comedy team Kids In The Hall, a cat asks Death "*What's Heaven like?*" and he responds "*Like Calgary in the '60s*". The joke, I guess, is it's like a dull place in an interesting time.

[I moved to Calgary in 1978 after graduating from university in Edmonton. I grew up in the Eckville-Red Deer district of rural west-central Alberta. However, two of my father's brothers had a dairy farm where now are the suburbs of Arbour Lake and Royal Oak of northwest Calgary. We visited them several times a year in the 1960s but the farm was then well out of the city, so I have little memory of Calgary in those days. I don't doubt that it was a dull place to the younger generation, although not as dull as small-town Red Deer, nevermind the village of Eckville. Some of the Kids In The Hall were from Calgary, so they knew what they were talking about.]

I recently found out that The Original Caste of "One Tin Soldier" fame was from Calgary in the 1960s. The American version of that song was done by Coven [for the Billy Jack movie].

[I know the group and the hit song but never knew they were from Calgary. According to Wikipedia, they formed in 1966 in Cowtown. Lead vocalist Dixie Lee Stone was a secretary at Pacific Petroleum, and the other band members worked at various jobs around the city. Up until now, I thought the only internationally famous singer Calgary had was Joni Mitchell.]

I Also Heard From: Jason Burnett

CINCO DE MAYO, ALBERTA STYLE
by Dale Speirs

When Premier Jim Prentice called an election for May 5, it looked as if the Progressive Conservative party would be returned for another term. But after 44 years of the Tories in office, the electorate were mad as hell and weren't going to take it anymore. Instead of Wildrose, an alternative small-c conservative party, they gave the New Democratic Party (labour-socialist) a majority government. As my father would have said, it was a real barn burner.

Historically Alberta has had one-party rule for decades at a time. The province was carved out of the Northwest Territories in 1905, at the same time as Saskatchewan. The federal government of the day was Liberal and installed their own people in the first provincial government, who managed to get re-elected until they fell from power in 1921 due to a sex scandal involving the Premier. They have never formed a government since, starting Alberta's tradition of consigning failed parties to the dustbin of history.

The United Farmers of Alberta then ruled for more than a decade until Social Credit obliterated them in 1935. The Socreds held power continuously until 1971, when the Progressive Conservative party came in. When Prentice called the election this year, the Tories had 62 seats.

From May 5, the NDP have a strong majority of 54 seats. The Wildrose Party will form the Official Opposition with 21 seats, and the Tories are now the third party with 10 seats. The Liberals and the Alberta Party each elected one member. The Alberta Party candidate in my riding was the successful one; I voted for Wildrose myself as being the best replacement for the Tories.

I doubt the NDP victory was because Albertans went left, but rather because they wanted a change and a purge. The Tories and Wildrose split the right-wing vote, with 24% and 28% respectively, allowing the NDP to sneak in with 41% of the vote. The voter turnout was 57.01% of those eligible to vote.

The NDP leader is Rachel Notley, whose father Grant led the party during its long years in the wilderness until he died in a plane crash in 1984. She only took over as party leader in 2014, although she sat in the legislature previously as a backbencher. On election night, Prentice accepted responsibility for the debacle and resigned as party leader. He also resigned his seat, which means that his riding will have to have a by-election in the near future. The NDP will

have to step carefully with the petroleum industry, which is the major source of tax revenue for the provincial government.

Calgary had other things on its mind though. May 5 was also Game 3 of Round 2 of the Stanley Cup. The Flames lost the first two games against Anaheim but on election night managed to pull off an overtime victory.

The traditional celebration of Flames victories is on 17 Avenue South in the Beltline district, where sports bars and restaurants cluster. That area is known as the Red Mile and runs from the Stampede rodeo grounds (where the Saddledome hockey arena is) to 8 Street SW. It wasn't very crowded on May 5 though, as rain moved in just as the game ended, so street celebrations were muted. It didn't help that it was also a work day the next day.



Earlier in the day as I was walking to my polling station, I saw this house with a Flames flag from 2004, the last time they made the Stanley Cup playoffs. OPUNTIA #288 shows a previous photo of this house, when it had a Batman flag in honour of Halloween.



The sign below was brought out from storage by the City of Calgary and placed on City Hall Plaza. It was made in 1989 to hold the Stanley Cup, the last time the Flames won it.



All the buses flashed this message.



The shopping malls get into the act as well. Below is TD Square downtown.



Bankers Hall atrium.



The Palace Theatre on the 8 Avenue SW pedestrian mall was Calgary's first grand theatre. It is now a listed building.

It became a multiplex movie theatre before its final incarnation as a sports bar and high-class restaurant.



ZINE LISTINGS

[I only list zines I receive from the Papernet. If the zine is posted on www.efanzines.com or www.fanac.org, then I don't mention it since you can read them directly.]

[The Usual means \$5 cash (\$6 overseas) or trade for your zine. Americans: please don't send cheques for small amounts to Canada or overseas (the bank fee to cash them is usually more than the amount) or mint USA stamps (which are not valid for postage outside USA). US\$ banknotes are still acceptable around the world.]

THE FOSSIL #363 (US\$10 per year from The Fossils Inc, c/o Tom Parson, 157 South Logan Street, Denver, Colorado 80209) Dedicated to the history of zinedom. This issue summarizes the fate of zine collections donated to various universities and libraries. While some collections do not last, many are actively being worked on. One important duty for anyone donating boxfuls of zines is that you must sort out the zines first by logical order, preferably zine title or editor. Don't just dump everything into a box and expect the library to sort it. They don't have staff or funds to do it.

WORLD WIDE PARTY ON JUNE 21

Founded by Benoit Girard (Quebec) and Franz Miklis (Austria) in 1994, the World Wide Party is held on June 21 every year. 2015 will be the 21nd year of the WWP.

At 21h00 local time on June 21, everyone is invited to raise a glass and toast fellow members of the Papernet around the world. It is important to have it exactly at 21h00 your time. The idea is to get a wave of fellowship circling the planet. Rescheduling it to a club meeting or more convenient time negates the idea of a wave of celebration by SF fans and zinesters circling the globe. At 21h00, face to the east and salute those who have already celebrated. Then face north, then south, and toast those in your time zone who are celebrating as you do. Finally, face west and raise a glass to those who will celebrate WWP in the next hour.

Raise a glass, publish a one-shot, have a party, or do a mail art project for the WWP. Let me know how you celebrated the day.

IS IT BLASPHEMY OR JUST PLAIN ELDRITCH?

by Dale Speirs



Calgary has several specialty candy stores. About half their stock is novelty items such as above, and the other half are regular candies from Europe that are not carried by Calgary supermarkets. I like Rowntree's Jelly Tots, for example, which are not carried elsewhere.

The above illustrated item was in the novelty section. The mints were not real mints, just sugar pills with a mild mint flavour. I don't know if these would be considered blasphemous, as I'm sure Jesus could take a joke.



For Lovecraft fans, these were on the shelf next to the above mints. Same manufacturer and type of sugar pills. Nothing squamous about them.