

OPUNTIA 320

Labour Day 2015

Opuntia is published by Dale Speirs, Calgary, Alberta. It is posted on www.efanzines.com and www.fanac.org. 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.

DINOSAUR PROVINCIAL PARK

photos by Dale Speirs

This summer I made the 200 km drive east from Calgary to Dinosaur Provincial Park. It is at the southern end of the Red Deer River badlands, about 120 km south of Drumheller.

The plains pricklypear cactus *Opuntia polyacantha* is abundant in the badlands. Now you know where this zine got its title.

These plants finished flowering a fortnight prior, but if you look closely you can see some fruits forming. They turn into dry papery fruits typical of ground-hugging pricklypears, not the fleshy fruits of shrubby chollas.



Looking down into Dinosaur Provincial Park from the entrance. Imagine the early explorers having to traverse this landscape without maps. The badlands are the richest source of Late Cretaceous dinosaurs in the world.



But first things first. Down on the bottomlands of the park is a campground and visitors centre. I was hungry after that long drive. The cheeseburger was big and good. The french fries were thin cut and slightly overdone.



Cretaceous Cafe Dinosaur Provincial Park UNESCO World Heritage Site	
Call Number# 58 Date: 2015-07-28, 12:56 PM	
Cheeseburger	\$7.25
NO Tomato	+\$0.00
Combo Fries	+\$3.50

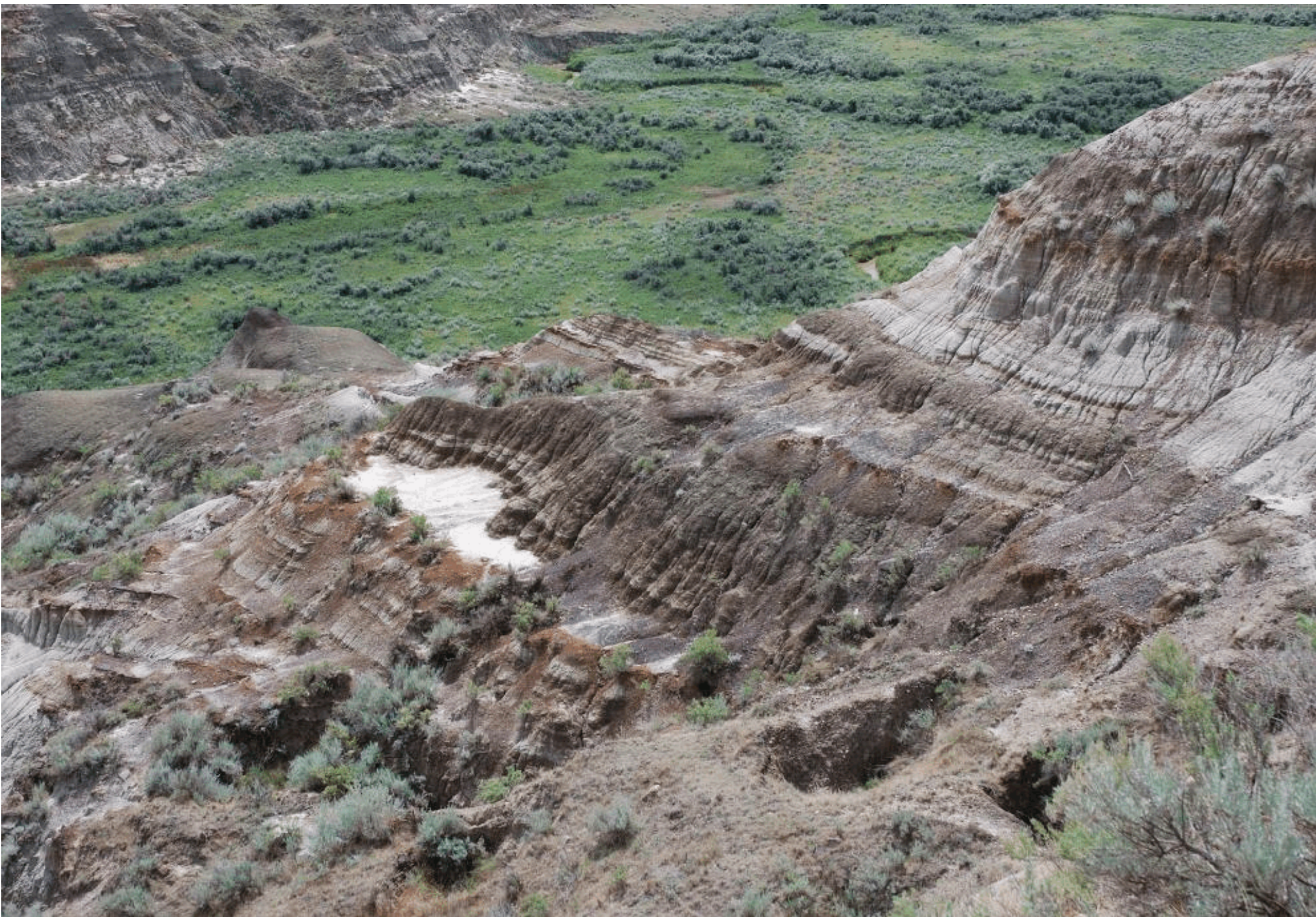
Subtotal:	\$10.75
Total Tax:	\$0.54

Total:	\$11.29
Customer Paid Cash:	\$12.00
Customer Change:	\$0.71
Thank-you!!!	



Tired from all that hiking? Set a spell and relax. Just don't look up.









Seen at the entrance to the nearby village of Patricia up on the flatlands.

Cattle may safely graze.



This is the highway leading to Dinosaur Provincial Park.

Someone in the Ministry of Transport had too much time on their hands.



On the way home, I stopped at a roadside turnout for a brief rest. This is the Trans-Canada Highway halfway back to Calgary, just east of Bassano. I got tired of waiting for a vehicle to come along to give scale to the picture, so finally went ahead and took the photo.

There's a lot of nothing on the southern prairies. The view doesn't change for hundreds of kilometres westward or 1,500 km eastward.



VANISHED WORLDS: PART 1

by Dale Speirs

Dinosaurs and lost worlds have always been popular in science fiction. In OPUNTIA #67.1B, I reviewed a number of lost-world movies based on the famous novel by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, so this column will look mainly at dinosaurs and their ilk.

Fossil Wars.

Scientists publish or perish, and sometimes the pressure results in violence. The most famous example, not fictional, is the feud between palaeontologists O.C. Marsh and Edward Cope in the late 1800s as they raced to outdo each other in western USA fossil discoveries. They did not hesitate to use sabotage, espionage, and violence to get the jump on each other.

Brett Davis wrote a couple of novels about this feud, with alien bone hunters mixed in, which I reviewed in OPUNTIA #290. Sharon Farber carried this one step further in “The Last Thunder Horse West Of The Mississippi” (1988 November, ASIMOV’S). Instead of bones, Cope and Marsh are chasing after the last known living dinosaur, found out West. The two gangs (professors can be gang leaders, too) fight to the finish, the finish that is, of the unfortunate dinosaur. The attitude is that if I can’t have it, no one can.

Before Jurassic Park.

The idea of recreating dinosaurs goes back long before those movies. “Paleontology: An Experimental Science” by Robert R. Olsen (1974 August, ANALOG) is told as a series of abstracts from scientific periodicals. Written in the dispassionate, passive-voice style that is the standard of technical periodicals everywhere, the story is funnier for all that. Scientists working on computer-assisted reconstruction of fossils get together with another group of scientists who have discovered *Tyrannosaurus* remains still with actual organic material. The plot is easy enough to predict. After the revived dinosaur escapes into the wilds, “*It was at this point that the civil authorities requested (People of California vs Smith) that the creature be put to death. Although conscious of the immense amount of data yet unacquired, the author endeavored to comply.*”

The K-Tec Event.

The mass extinction of the dinosaurs and various apparently unrelated life forms is popular with SF writers and palaeontologists alike. Modern discoveries indicate that there wasn’t a single cause for the mass extinction. Dinosaurs were already declining before any asteroid impact and some managed to survive a short time into the subsequent Palaeocene, when the Age of Mammals began. A major group of shelled marine animals were the ammonites, who suddenly dwindled away worldwide but did leave *Nautilus* as a survivor.

“Crash Site” by Peter Ambrose (1977 May, GALAXY) postulates that an alien spaceship made a bad landing on Earth at the end of the Cretaceous, 70 megayears ago. The ship released alien bacteria harmless to its inhabitants but which spread like a plague on Earth where there was no resistance, thus causing the mass extinction. The ship was buried in sediments and fossilized, until eventually found again, a la Quatermass. Only a few alien bacteria have survived, but that is enough to once again wipe out the dominant species, this time humans.

“Homecoming” by Barry B. Longyear (1979 October, ASIMOV’S) takes a different twist with the dinosaurs’ disappearance. 197 starships arrive at Earth on what humans discover are their return. They are crewed with bipedal dinosaurs who had known that asteroid was coming 73 megayears ago. Their technology was advanced enough to build suspended-animation starships traveling at relativistic speeds, enough to get them away and allow time for Earth to heal after the impact. The problem of their return is that Earth cannot have two sapient species. Just as humans fear the worst, the dinosaurs decide to leave briefly, for they have predicted that humans will destroy themselves in 120 years, at which point they can return yet again and take back their planet.



BOTANICAL FICTION: PART 3

by Dale Speirs

[Parts 1 and 2 appeared in OPUNTIA's #316 and 317.]

Murder Most Foul.

Plant materials do play a part in forensics. An example is Cheryl Rogers's story "Farewell To The Shade" (2012 February, ELLERY QUEEN'S). A murderer's alibi is broken because his car's air filter has pollen in it from the area where the murder was committed but not the place he claimed to be at when the murder was done.

This is something I am familiar with as a professional horticulturist because plants release pollen or spores at specific times of the year when they are flowering. For example, in Calgary it happens that at the time poplars are releasing seed fluff, grasses are releasing pollen. Citizens constantly asked us to cut down the trees and we had to explain that fluff doesn't cause allergies, it was the grass.

Plants can speak from beyond the grave. Michael Jacot's "Unwanted Seed" (1953, LONDON MYSTERY MAGAZINE) is about a farmer who kills his hired hand, who was having an affair with his wife. He then buries the body in the manure pile. Sometime later, police catch out the farmer when they see potato sprouts on the pile. The hired hand had taken some potatoes for his dinner and had them in his pockets at the time of death. Well, I suppose it could happen. The only question is why police would be paying any attention to a manure pile and/or potato sprouts.

Another story about plants speaking from beyond the grave is "Down The Garden Path" by F. Gwynplaine MacIntyre (2008 February, STRAND MAGAZINE). An elderly woman is planting bulbs when her ne'er-do-well nephew visits her. As they talk, she realizes that he is going to kill her then and there. She begins planting bulbs so that they will form the message "Trevor killed me" after her death. The following spring, the message is seen and understood.

"The Potted Purple Petunia" by Lee Russell (1967 July, MAN FROM U.N.C.L.E. MAGAZINE) is about common house thieves being tracked down a year after a housebreaking because they stole some purple petunia seeds

among the other loot. The police saw the plants growing the next year on the ground below the thieves' apartment. I doubt this story for three reasons. First, police don't generally investigate routine break-ins; they just have you fill in a form and tell you to talk to your insurance agent. Secondly, I doubt that any officer would be so diligent as to notice petunias a year later. And thirdly, any first-year law student could get the case thrown out because who is to say where those petunias came from?

I came across "Up To No Good" by Sue Robinson (1992, WEIRD TALES) with a plot I'm sure has been used before, even if I can't find the reference. It is about a lady who uses humans for organic fertilizer in her garden. Not an awful lot else to say about it. Somewhat on the same subject is "The Gathering" by Michael Dewey (2002, ON SPEC MAGAZINE). A woman who gardens organically by fertilizing with road kill is likewise recycled into her garden when she dies. Her nephew cultivates the garden and finds the next crop of vegetables grow human tissues and organs on the produce. Hard to believe.

The old-time radio show SUSPENSE had a 1943 episode "Uncle Henry's Rose Bush" about a young couple who visit her Uncle Henry and Aunt Julie on the farm. Henry is missing, Julie is behaving strangely, and the farm and the house are neglected, excepting that one of the rose bushes is doing very well. The couple come to the conclusion that Henry is buried under the rose, killed by his wife for insurance money. But while they are digging it up, Henry shows up and becomes very angry. There is a struggle and he is killed. Julie finally tells the truth that Henry was under her care for insanity.

I am a Nero Wolfe fan, and have reviewed books about him in previous issues of OPUNTIA (see #319 for a checklist). His hobby was growing orchids, and the rooftop of his brownstone was a greenhouse. Plants only occasionally play a part in the stories. One such novella is "Black Orchids" (1967 January, THE SAINT MAGAZINE) about a murder at a flower show. The culprit was a nurseryman who was getting back at a blackmailer who knew he had destroyed a rival tree nursery by contaminating it with yellows virus. Wolfe solves the case as we knew he would. Instead of taking his usual fee in the thousands of dollars range, he asks for three rare black orchids.

Ruth Rendell's "Weeds" (1989 March, ELLERY QUEEN'S) begins with a couple and their daughter, with friend Jeremy, walking over to a neighbour's open house. Along the way, the girl gives him a poppy for his lapel from a weed she plucked by the roadside. At the open house, the owner brags about

his gardening ability, and offers a cash reward for any weed that anyone could find on his land. Another man, who is having an affair with the owner's wife, comes to him with a poppy. The owner angrily kills him. Jeremy later realizes it was his poppy that fell out of his lapel. Some gardeners really obsess.

Talk To Me.

Back in the 1970s, professional horticulturists such as myself were plagued by a bad bestselling book which claimed plants had nervous systems that responded to humans and which could empathize with them. Amateur gardeners wanted to know if that was true, but were dissatisfied when we told them it wasn't. Such pseudoscience never really goes away, and there are still people out there who think plants are sentient. They're not, but I don't try to convince such people anymore. They want to believe. Some gardeners claimed they got better growth talking to their plants, but that was the carbon dioxide and moisture in their breath. The fad did, however, generate a flurry of SF and mystery stories using the concept.

Miriam Allen deFord was an early entrant with her story "Murder In Green" (1973 August, ELLERY QUEEN'S). A researcher is murdered at a laboratory while studying plant emotions (sic). The suspect is identified by testing plants with polygraphs and locating a philodendron that had an emotional reaction. From there, it was a matter of gathering clues. I can imagine what a defense lawyer would do with the chain of evidence in that case.

The same plot was used about the same time in Edward Rager's story "Crying Willow" (1973 September, ANALOG). The protagonist works for the League to Eliminate the Abuse of Flora (LEAF). He uses a plant polygraph to detect a pervert who is torturing a weeping willow. I would say that plants don't have rights, but as part of neighbourhood improvement schemes, some Canadian cities have by-laws prohibiting landowners from cutting down trees or butchering them. Calgary does not, although it was an occasional topic at City Hall during my career with the Parks Dept.

Another variation on this theme which showed up about the same time was using plants as patsies to commit murder. Donald Olson was an early entrant during the fad with "Green Thumbs And Trigger Fingers" (1973 August, ALFRED HITCHCOCK). Plant emotions were used to trigger a murder device. The same magazine had a story in its 1979 April issue "The Enemies Of The Prodigal" by Dennis O'Neil. Plants kill a man with a pacemaker by generating

electricity. This is not as ridiculous as it may seem. One of my specialties is cacti and other succulent plants, many of which have spines or thorns. (A spine is an evolutionarily reduced leaf, a thorn is a reduced branch.) The obvious reason is for spines and thorns is as a defense against herbivores looking to slake their thirst by eating the plant. However, a couple of decades ago it was discovered that in dry desert conditions, spines and thorns attract static electricity charges, which then cause moisture to precipitate on them in the form of nighttime dew.

David Drake used a similar plot in "The Predators" (1979 Oct-Dec, DESTINIES). A man is killed by electrocution in a private elevator. The detective determines that a potted geranium sitting next to the elevator was wired with circuitry to temporarily cause a short circuit and kill the victim. He can't prove his case but gets even when the murderer goes down the elevator and is electrocuted the same way.

We Feel For You.

Since plants don't have mouths for talking, many SF writers suppose that they may use telepathy. Dave Dryfoos had a story "Tree, Spare The Woodman" (1952 October, GALAXY) which dealt with settlers on an alien world. The trees could read minds and amplify emotions, with results you can easily guess. Evelyn E. Smith repeated this theme in "The Venus Trap" (1956 June, GALAXY), again with telepathic and sentient trees. The wife of one settler becomes jealous of her husband's relationship with a tree by their house. Platonic love, of course. A modern variation by James A. Hartley, "Please Keep Off The Grass" (2003, in the anthology LAND/SPACE) is about explorers landing on a planet where telepathic vegetation sucks them into a collective consciousness.

Robert Silverberg tried a variation with "The Nudes Of Quendar III" (1957 January, IMAGINATIVE TALES). Astronauts exploring a planet are lured to their deaths by carnivorous trees that produce images of nude women by telepathy. The trees were foiled by female astronauts. Wot, Mr. Silverberg, women never fantasize about men? The trees wouldn't use visions of 20-year-old well-hung studs with hard bodies to lure them?

A better variation is Mark Mallory's "The Good Seed" (1960 January, WORLDS OF IF), set on an alien planet. A man is stranded with a sapient plant on a rocky islet in a flooding river. Both are threatened with drowning. The

plant learns that the man has no children, whereas the plant has seeded several times and is currently doing so again. Its seed pod is hollow and large enough to float the man safely to shore, but the plant dies. The man sows the seeds on the beach in gratitude.

Keith Laumer’s “The Piecemakers” (1970 May/June, *WORLDS OF IF*) postulates a planet covered by a single sentient plant. The plant is lonely and won’t let visitors off its world because it wants someone to communicate with. A variation is Joseph Green’s “The Crier Of Crystal” (1971 October, *ANALOG*) where instead of telepathy a different method of communication is used. On an alien planet with silicon-based life, there are plants which use silver threads as microphones to communicate.

Imitation Is The Sincerest Form Of Flattery.

Mimicry seems to be a favoured story idea in botanical SF. Murray Leinster tried it out in “If You Was A Moklin” (1951 September, *GALAXY*). On a planet of motile trees, they are able to produce desired characteristics in the next generation. After explorers arrive, the trees begin to evolve perfect human imitations. Algis Budrys followed a short while later with a story “Protective Mimicry” (1953 February, *GALAXY*). It is about a tree on Deneb XI which duplicates all kinds of objects as a form of protective mimicry.

Fritz Leiber used a variation in “Dr. Adam’s Garden Of Evil” (1963 February, *FANTASTIC*). A millionaire (back when a million was worth something) has a secret garden in which he grows plants with blossoms that mimic people from whom he took hair samples and planted with the mimic seeds. One of his victims had him hypnotized and used implanted suggestions to control him in the garden. He is turned into one of the mimic plants and then has bees set upon him for pollination.

K.D. Wentworth considered plant mimicry as pets in his story “The Ronnie” (1991 August, *ALFRED HITCHCOCK’S*). Sentient mobile plants are bred dwarf-size with human-like faces. They are kept as short-lived pets. I’m not sure I’d want one around the house, but on the other hand there are some people who keep monkeys as pets.

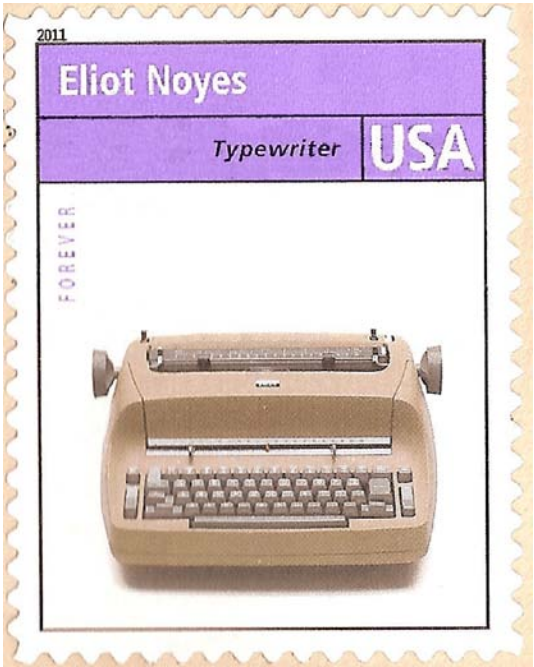
CUYLER W. (NED) BROOKS (1938-2015)

I was shocked to learn of Ned Brooks’ sudden and unexpected death on August 31, when he fell off the roof of his house while doing some repairs. He lived in Lilburn, Georgia.

Ned and I never met in person but we corresponded over many years and traded zines. *OPUNTIA* began in 1991, and Ned’s first letter of comment appeared in issue #3 and many times thereafter. He was active in amateur press associations (apas) and we crossed paths there as well.

One of Ned’s zines was *IT GOES ON THE SHELF*, a review of obscure and oddball books. It had an influence on me because I also ignore current bestsellers and concentrate on older or obscure material. My reviews were never as eclectic as Ned’s. He had a knack for finding books from a century ago on bizarre fads and fancies, or strange novels that made weird fiction seem mundane by comparison.

Ned also collected typewriters, and since *OPUNTIA* was a typewritten zine until 1998 December, this gave us something in common when writing each other. I never collected typewriters, however, since they take up way too much space.



I did keep an eye out for old articles about them and even did a one-shot zine called *T H R I L L I N G TYPEWRITER TALES* in 2005, full of short stories about typing (and yes, they exist). The typewriter stories were reprinted in *OPUNTIA* #287 for a wider audience. When going through old magazines or newspapers while doing unrelated research, I always kept an eye out for old typewriter advertisements and sent copies to him.