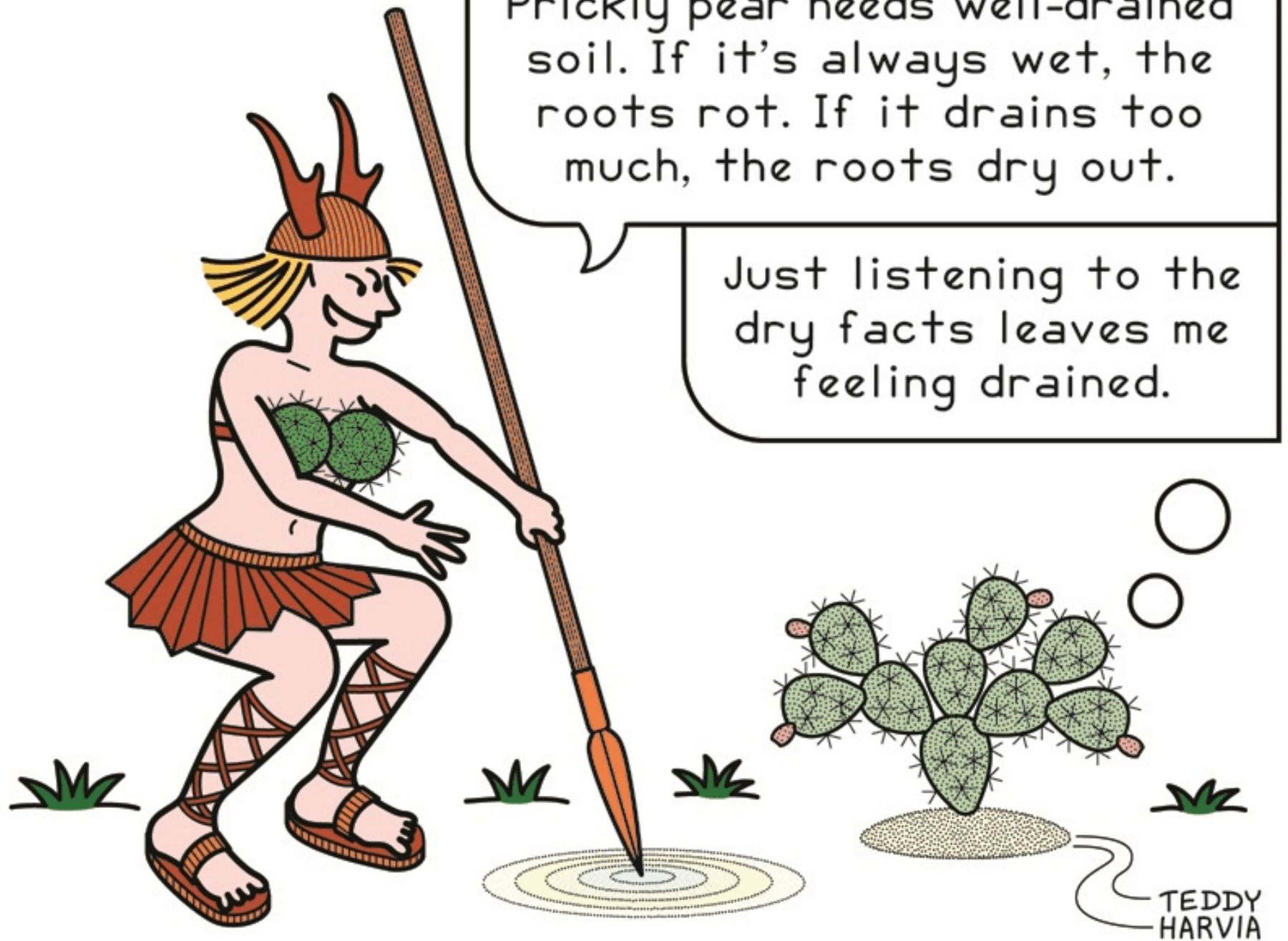


OPUNTIA 330

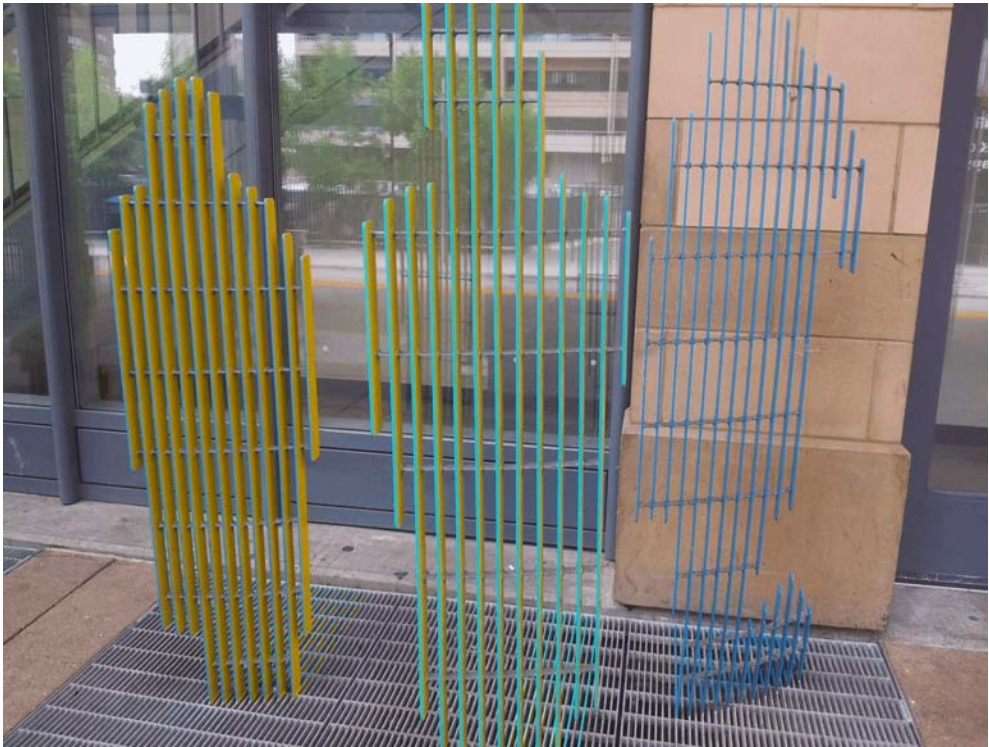


Hogmanay 2015

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.

AROUND CENTRAL COWTOWN
photos by Dale Speirs

The City of Calgary allocates substantial funds each year to public art. One that I frequently walk past is on the platform of the Centre Street LRT platform, a set of figures that change colour as one goes past them. Each side of the metal strips is painted with a different colour, as is the edge, and shadows painted on the ventilation grille the figures are welded to.



The Inglewood district is on the opposite side of the Elbow River from the downtown core. It is the oldest neighbourhood in the city, and is currently undergoing gentrification, including these recycle/garbage bins. The designs are cut out of cast iron and placed over a coloured background.



The wall below is the back alley side of a boutique at 4 Street SW and 15 Avenue in the Beltline district. I'm not a ballet fan so I don't know why the goldfish are in the scene.



Below is a barber shop wall kitty-corner from the Sunnyside LRT station.



ALBERTA AS A SETTING FOR SCIENCE FICTION
by Dale Speirs

Although I have done random-book reviews in the past, you will have noticed that recently I've been concentrating on theme reviews, which may be of more use to some future graduate student researching a topic. One theme that I hadn't expected to come across is SF set in Alberta by non-Canadian writers. More specifically, I was surprised to find two such pieces in *FANTASTIC* within a short span.

The 1970 June issue has a story by Bob Shaw titled "Communication". The plot is about a new computer system that communicates with the dead. It turns out that the spirits of those who have passed into the great beyond are tired of being asked questions about life in the next world. They want to know what life is like in our world, such as whether or not their daughter married that accountant or if Cousin Jean finally got her divorce.



What grabbed me was not the storyline, cute as it was, but the fact that it was set in Lethbridge and name-checked Calgary and Red Deer (where I grew up). Shaw is an Ulster Irishman best remembered for his slow-glass stories. He was a structural and aviation engineer in his day job, and from 1956 to 1958 lived and worked in Calgary. (Before my time; I was born in Eckville in 1955.) Wikipedia says: "*His novel VERTIGO is set in Alberta, and ORBITSVILLE's limitless grasslands may have been influenced by this period in his life.*"

For those who don't appreciate how big our province is, the map shows Britain superimposed on an outline of Alberta.

Shaw has to explain a few things his readers, of whom probably a dozen of them at the time had heard of Calgary, and none of Red Deer, 150 km north. There is a reference to the New University of Western Canada, which is not only fictitious but an impossible name combination. The funniest thing is that Red Deer is mentioned as having a population of 200,000. It happened that there was a great celebration in Red Deer in 2015, when its population finally passed 100,000. In 1970, when Shaw's story was published, Red Deer had 27,000 citizens. I was in Grade 10 that year in a Red Deer high school, and well remember it as a dull, boring city. It still is.

There is a mention of a fictitious Champlain Avenue in an equally fictitious well-to-do neighbourhood of north Red Deer. Actually, then and now it was lower-middle-class suburbia. Our farm was just north of Red Deer and in the 1980s was redeveloped into even more middle-class suburbia. The rich folk in Red Deer live on the Waskasoo Creek** escarpment east of the central part of the city, looking down in more ways than one at the commoners scrabbling for their daily bread on the valley floor. All that being said, the story was good, with an interesting twist at the end.

The 1972 August issue of FANTASTIC has a story set in the Calgary area by James Tiptree Jr, the pseudonym of Alice Sheldon. It also has another Bob Shaw story, but that one is set in Europe. The Tiptree story is "Forever To A Hudson Bay Blanket", about a time-traveling young girl who wants to know her ancestor in the village of Bragg Creek, about a half-hour drive west of Calgary in the Rocky Mountain foothills.

I can't decide whether Sheldon ever actually visited Alberta and misremembered, or if she glanced at a book and composed the story from that. She mentions a Split Mountain, which probably was fictional, there being none by that name out here. She may have been thinking of Split Peak on Mount Assiniboine, on the other side of the border in British Columbia, nowhere near Calgary. Bragg Creek is still a village even though so near to Calgary, mainly because most of it is either bottomless muskeg, near-vertical slopes, or on a floodplain regularly inundated by the Elbow River.

Tiptree/Sheldon mentions Alberta Hydroelectric. The idea that Alberta has hydro companies is a common failing of both Americans and eastern Canadians.

**Waskasoo is the Cree word for elk. Early pioneers mistranslated it as "red deer". There are two species of deer in Alberta, mule and whitetail, but not the red deer of Europe.

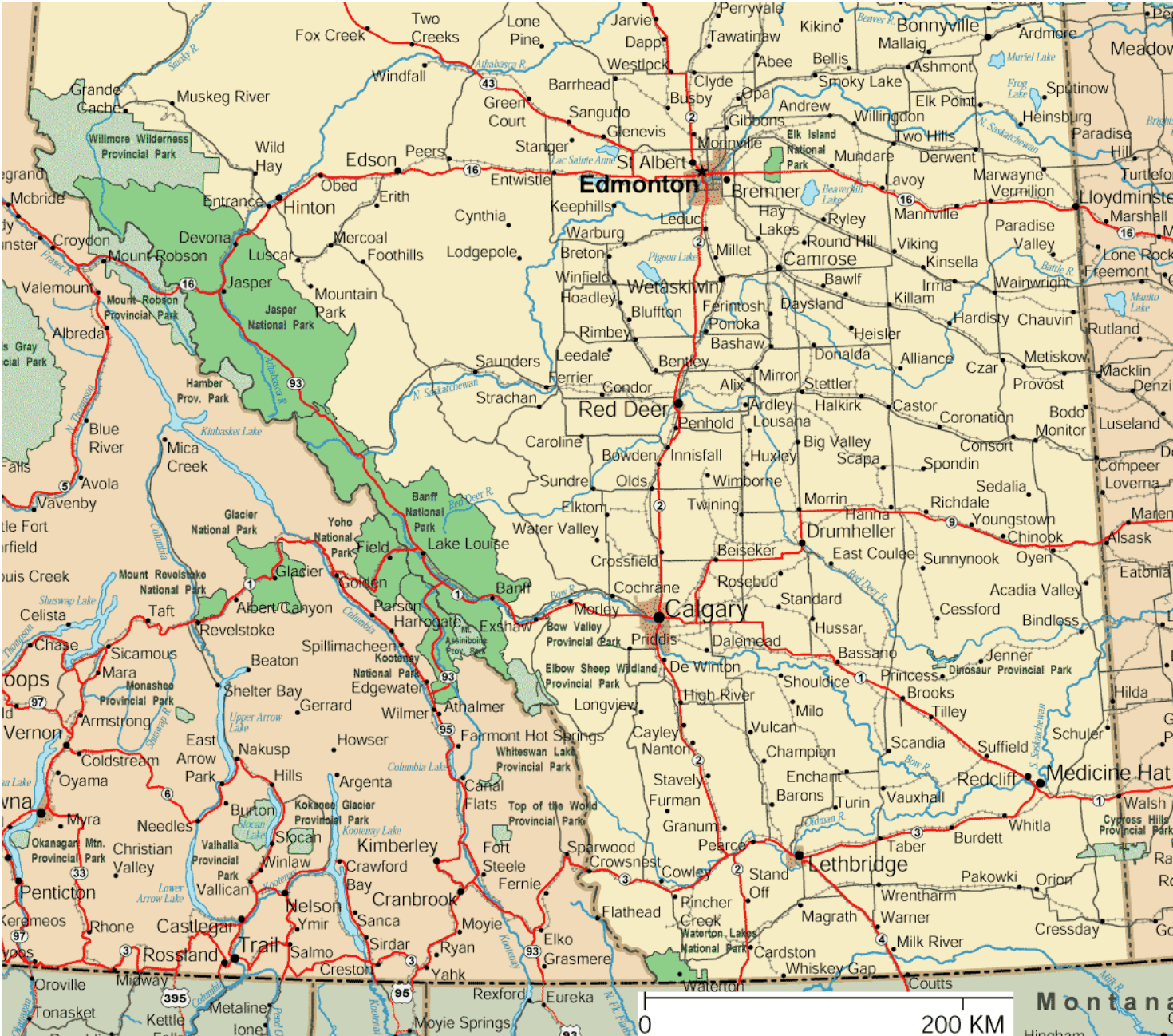
Alberta gets very little electricity from hydro projects because most of the mountain valleys are in national or provincial parks. No Albertan born and raised would ever refer to a power company as Hydro. There has never been a single electricity provider in Alberta. Back in Sheldon's day, Calgary was supplied by Trans-Alta (still in business) and the City of Calgary Electric System (today called Enmax).



Tiptree writes: *"Calgary has the tallest water-tower on the continent, you know, and all that tetra-wheat and snow sports money."* Our water supply comes from the Bow and Elbow Rivers and is stored only in underground reservoirs. I assume the water tower remark was her being sarcastic about the Calgary Tower, completed in 1968 and the tallest thing in western Canada at the time. Today it is dwarfed by all the petroleum skyscrapers surrounding it.

I have no idea what tetra-wheat is supposed to be. Agriculture, while important in Alberta, is not centred in Calgary despite its nickname of Cowtown (which dates back to pioneer days when ranching was the only industry in Alberta). Maybe she was thinking of that Star Trek episode where the tribbles ate all the quadrottricale. Nobody makes money from snow sports, which is why all the ski slopes in the adjacent Rockies change hands every few years as a fresh crop of foreign suckers, pardon me, investors, think they will be the ones who finally turn a profit from the resorts.

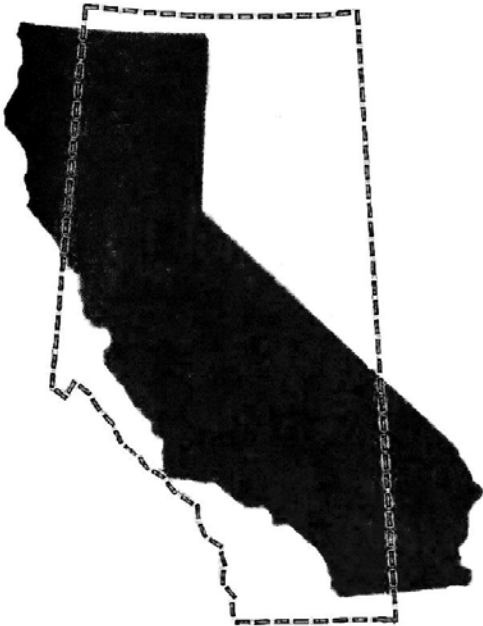
The bottom half of the province, where 95% of Albertans live, is shown below. For my American readers, I throw in a comparison of California to Alberta. Alberta's population is about 3.5 million. Calgary and Edmonton each have about 1.2 million people, and the rest are mostly across the southern half of the province.



Red Deer is halfway between Calgary and Edmonton on Highway 2. Lethbridge is about two-thirds of the way to the Montana border, southeast from Calgary.

My birthplace of Eckville, which unaccountably both Shaw and Sheldon failed to name-check, is about 50 km west of Red Deer but doesn't show up on the map. It hasn't changed since I was born there in 1955.

This is a peculiar map. It doesn't show Eckville but does mark out Ferrier, which is a railroad siding. At a 45° angle northwest from Calgary, it shows Water Valley, a hamlet, while ignoring the nearby village of Cremona, much larger. Straight down from Calgary is the place name Furman, which isn't even a settlement but a cattle ranch in the Porcupine Hills.



HOGMANAY
by Dale Speirs

My father’s family came from Scotland to Rice Lake, Upper Canada (today Ontario) in the early 1830s. The Speirs’s were lowland Scots; no illiterate oatmeal savages in our family. After two centuries in Canada, my paternal ancestry is Canadian, not Scottish. The ancestral village is Houston, just west of Paisley. I was delighted to discover on Google Maps that there is a Speirs Road in the village. I sent off for the Houston postmark.



Hogmanay is the Scottish New Year’s Eve celebration, a far bigger holiday there than here. Auld Lang Syne and all that.



<<<< Speirs Road



Ain’t Google wonderful?

RADIO FICTION: PART 5

by Dale Speirs

[Parts 1 to 4 appeared in OPUNTIA #301, 302, 310, and 319 respectively.]

Stay Tuned For Murder.

“The Record Collector” is a 1948 episode of BOSTON BLACKIE, an old-time radio (OTR) show meant to be serious but which is instead hilarious listening. I especially enjoy its berserk organ player who does the scene-change music. (This and other OTR shows mentioned further on are available as free mp3s from www.archive.org.) There are two antagonists on the show. Police Inspector Faraday, who always chooses a suspect first, usually Blackie, and then collects the evidence to fit him. The other is Boston Blackie, who barges into the middle of the police investigations in order to one-up Faraday, and keeps up a steady stream of insults at him.

The shows are briskly paced. I find there is added fun in counting how many felonies Blackie commits while investigating a case, such as break-and-enter to find clues, or withholding evidence from police. Faraday violates accepted police procedure many times, such as failing to frisk an arrested man for weapons (which allows the criminal to pull a handgun), or contaminating evidence before the lab boys can view the scene.

The episode at hand is about a criminal kingpin who likes to phone in song requests to a local disk jockey, and also keeps asking him about rare records he wants for his collection. The song title and the time it is requested to be played corresponds to a job pulled off by the kingpin’s gang. It doesn’t take long for the disk jockey, Inspector Faraday, and Blackie to notice the correlation.

Since we hear the conversations the kingpin has with his gang about when and where to pull off the jobs, it doesn’t seem to make sense he would tip off others. It turns out he wants to retire to and enjoy his record collection without the gang coming back to haunt him. They are picked off by the police in gun battles, and because the gang members weren’t aware of what the kingpin was doing (they were doing the job, not listening to the radio), he gets away scot-free.

The Shadow was a multimedia character with his own magazine, movies, and OTR show that gave birth to him. “The Man Who Collected The Shadow” by Bill Pronzini (1971 June, MAGAZINE OF FANTASY AND SF) is about a

collector who finally obtains the last few items he needs for his Shadow collection. He now has every magazine, story collection, and radio tape related to the Shadow. On finishing the collection, he finds himself becoming the actual Shadow when he accidentally stumbles into an ongoing murder. The gunman can’t see him because his mind has been clouded by the collector, who then begins to actually live the life of The Shadow. A handwaving fantasy.

“To Dance By The Light Of The Moon” by Stephen Gallagher (1986 January, MAGAZINE OF FANTASY AND SF) is a horror story about a newsreader working New Year’s Eve. She gets a strange phone call tipping her off about a murder and decides to play Miss Marple in between her hourly news reports. She attracts the attention of a demon possessing the murderer, a radio station employee, who then comes after her. The hunt goes through the station, killing several others on and off the air. The possessed man is stopped dead, not just figuratively, but the demon is still out there.

Non-Standard Radios.

“Two-Way Communication” by Christopher Anvil (1966 May, ANALOG) is about the Cartwright Corporation, which inadvertently invents an all-bands radio receiver that can transmit to any radio station it is tuned to but cannot transmit on its own. The radio device allows the listener to talk back to the show in progress on a radio network, and interrupt the announcer, performer, or commercial message. It doesn’t take long for users to take advantage of this. Advertisers touting detergents or cars are shouted down for the annoying commercials, news readers can’t finish their stories without listeners saying it isn’t so, and poor singers are booed off the stage. Radio networks are forced to develop back-talk filters in the same way that Websites have to moderate comments. In a way, this story is prescient about the World Wide Web.

“The Killing Of Mother Corn” by Dennis O’Neil (1975 February, MAGAZINE OF FANTASY AND SF) is about the day that broadcast radio came to the backwoods village of Feely, Missouri, in 1929. By that time, the big cities and their dwellers were used to radio, but there were many places in North America that had yet to get electricity, nevermind being able to listen to radio. (My mother grew up in a house that didn’t get electricity until the 1940s.)

A shopkeeper announces he is buying a deluxe radio that will be installed in his store for customers to listen to free of charge. An expense for him, of course, but one he expects to recoup from additional sales, just as fast-food outlets

today offer free Wifi. A Pawnee tribesman warns him not to do it, for the tribal god Mother Corn cannot stand it, but he is laughed off as one of those superstitious natives. On the fateful day, the radio arrives, is connected to the battery and turned on, and emits a loud female scream heard through the county, before beginning to broadcast the regular radio shows. The corn crop dies, the Pawnee vanishes, and the villagers never forget the sound of that dying scream.

“The Cliffhanger Sound” by Paul Dellinger (1980 January, FANTASTIC) is about a man who returns after a long absence to the village where he was born and raised. The local inhabitants are under the thrall of the radio station owner, who hypnotizes them via the airwaves, using OTR shows. This evil must, of course, be stopped but it takes a fair amount of trouble to reach the radio station and destroy it. Who knows what evil lurks in the hearts of men. An average story but I liked the twist where the hero tries to become one of those superheros from an OTR show and strike back at the villain. It doesn’t work, but a more mundane method does.

“Turning Off” by Larry Tritten (1986 June, MAGAZINE OF FANTASY AND SF) is a cliched plot. A man finds a cheap radio in a pawn shop which turns out to monitor conversations related to future news reports. Not very practical but the man clings to it despite attempts by the pawnbroker to retrieve it. So the pawnbroker ensures that the man will be in the next broadcast. A variation on the old plot about a mysterious hole-in-the-wall shop that sells something the buyer can’t handle.

“The Big Chill” by Cynthia Ward (1994 May/June, GALAXY) is about a San Francisco disk jockey at a classic rock station KMRK. He is visited by the ghost of Elvis Presley (the young one, not the middle-aged slob) who complains that radio stations are holding back new forms of music. Presley wants more new forms of music such as rap to be played, but the DJ, who calls himself Renegade and tries to pretend he is “with it”, argues against trash such as that. Presley points out that when he was starting out, rock music was called trash. After the ghost of Presley disappears, Renegade gets an idea. He not only goes on the talk show circuit telling people about Presley’s visitation, he makes up other visits by dead rock stars.

Fun With Radios.

OUR MISS BROOKS was a long-running OTR sitcom that eventually made the transition to television in the 1950s. Constance Brooks was a schoolteacher at

Madison High School, Osgood Conklin was the tyrannical principal, and there were several other regulars, such as student Walter Denton. “Radio Bombay” is a 1950 episode that starts off with Denton experimenting with a new shortwave radio. He picks up a weather warning that a hurricane is on the way and rushes out of the room to tell others. The warning continues on in Denton’s absence, telling the audience that Denton had unknowingly tuned in to a Bombay, India, radio station. Denton successfully spreads alarm and panic about Madison, and the characters prepare for the storm, unaware of the true location of the hurricane. Conklin breaks up some new furniture he had just bought in order to build shutters for his house windows. Finally the true source of the warning is discovered, with repercussions all around for Denton et al.

DUFFY’S TAVERN was an OTR comedy in the golden years of radio. Patrick Duffy was never heard; the principal character was Archie the manager, a Brooklyn bum in charge of the hole-in-the-wall tavern on Third Avenue in Manhattan. Customers only drank there because they couldn’t afford or were banned from better places. Regular characters on the show were the owner’s ugly daughter Miss Duffy, the waiter Eddie Green (his real name; he was a jazz musician who played piano on the show), the Mad Russian (the only sane person in the series), and the village idiot Clifton Finnegan.

“Archie Buys A Radio Transmitter” was a 1950 episode that begins with him buying an elaborate box said to be a radio transmitter. The seller was Slippery McGuire, a recurring character who showed up every so often to dupe Archie. The guest on this episode was Barry Nelson, a handsome leading man who is forgotten today except as the answer to a trivia question. (“Who was the first man to play James Bond on camera?”)**

Archie blithely sets up an elaborate schedule for his first radio broadcast, roping in Nelson as a convenient celebrity to attract listeners. All the characters take their turns in between the numerous commercials. (“*Feeling tired and run down? Visit Cavendish the undertaker.*”) Miss Duffy sings, or screeches rather. Eddie, with a southern drawl, is the announcer. Nelson keeps trying to plug his latest movie but every time he begins, he is quickly interrupted by another commercial. Eventually the episode runs down when Archie finds out that the transmitter is just a box with lots of knobs and the programme wasn’t being broadcast. The humour of this episode lies mostly within the weird and wonderful radio commercials, not too far removed from reality.

** In a television playhouse series performance of CASINO ROYALE.

“KASH And The Lemurs” by Ralph Spencer (1954 September, BEYOND FANTASY FICTION) begins with snow in Los Angeles. Radio announcer and writer George Rogers is trying to spin this because his station KASH is owned by the local real estate agents association, who naturally don’t want any bad news that might discourage outlanders from moving to southern California and buying houses.

As the story progresses, we learn that the bizarre weather afflicting California is being caused by the astral projections of Lemurians, they of the supposed continent that sank without a trace, leaving only ghosts. What bothers the Lemurians is the up-and-coming sound of rock-and-roll, just being born about then. They prefer Bach and quieter music. The electromagnetic emissions of radio stations is bothering them, so they begin a campaign of throwing bad weather until all the stations are only broadcasting classical music. Eventually though, they tire of all the work necessary to create bad weather and slink away defeated, allowing radio stations to return to their noisy and sinful ways.

full-page ad from GALAXY, 1956 November

BROADCAST BAND - ALL TRANSISTOR WRIST RADIO



New!

THE BROADCAST BAND WRIST RADIO was developed by a research organization having wide experience in the design and manufacture of electronic equipment for guided missile use. These techniques have been applied to the development of a miniature radio receiver. A special (patent pending) regenerative RF reflex circuit is incorporated in the wrist radio which allows for good selectivity and maximum sensitivity. In moderate signal strength areas, no antenna is required. The high sensitivity of the receiver permits its use with no external antenna at distances up to twenty-five miles for a broadcast station of average power, facilitating its use as a true wrist radio. Good reception is possible at greater distances by the use of a short length of wire from six inches to three feet depending on the distance from the broadcast station. Consistent reception has been obtained over thirty-five miles from the transmitter site.

The small size makes it the ideal radio. It can be worn on the wrist where it will fit comfortably under the sleeve of a jacket or worn in a shirt pocket.

The use of transistors makes it a rugged device not subjected to tube breakage. Special ruggedized high-quality components are used throughout. Normally the transistor will not have to be replaced for the life of the instrument. Extreme economy of operation is obtained through the use of special circuitry requiring very low current, thus prolonging the life of the mercury cells. Battery life is approximately one hundred hours and battery cost of operation is less than two cents per hour.

Listen to:

- Ball games
- Election Notices
- Sport Programs
- Music
- Favorite Programs

Use on:

- Vacations
- Traveling

In:

- Home
- Office
- While Walking
- Keep in Touch with Conelrad

Complete with battery Ready to Use

\$29.95

OLIVER GARFIELD CO., Dept. G-108
126 Lexington Ave., New York 16, N. Y.

Please send me _____ Wrist Radios at \$29.95 each, postpaid.

NAME _____

ADDRESS _____

CITY _____ STATE _____

NOT RADIO FICTION
photo by Dale Speirs

One of the bus routes I frequently take goes past a building in the Beltline district called “Radio Block”, on the west side of the 1200 block of 1 Street SW. I always assumed the name was a hangover from it being a former radio station, but when I researched it (<http://2.beltline.ca/community/heritage/radio-block>), I discovered that it has never housed a broadcaster. It was built in 1922, when mass-market radio broadcasting was just being born. Calgary had two newborn radio stations, CFCN and CFAC.

Radio was trendy then for business names, the way modern companies are iWhatever or eGadget. Businesses included the Radio Meat Market, Radio Grocery, and Radio Shoemaker. In the last couple of decades it has been home to a succession of restaurants and pubs, none of which use “radio” in their name, or “i-“ and “e-“ for that matter.



THIS JUST IN

Calgary’s annual readercon When Words Collide (www.whenwordscollide.org) has just released its first progress report for the 2016 event next August 12 to 14. See OPUNTIA #318 for the report on the 2015 event, which will give you an idea of what to expect. The membership cap is 650, and last year sold out two months before the convention. There are no at-the-door memberships. It will once again be held at the Delta Hotel on Southland Drive SE and Bonaventure Drive, a three-dimensional pretzel that goes overtop Bonaventure Drive. Scheduled events include a steampunk banquet on the Saturday evening. The 2016 Aurora Awards will be hosted at WWC.

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: Lloyd Penney
Etobicoke, Ontario

2015-12-16

OPUNTIA #326: Remembrance Day was a busy day for many. I really would have liked to have been in Ottawa for ceremonies. There was supposed to be a ceremony at the Etobicoke Civic Centre, but I never found it.

[There are dozens if not a hundred ceremonies across Calgary on the day. They are very well attended in modern times. As Canada takes casualties in Afghanistan, the younger generation no longer views it as an old men’s parade.]

OPUNTIA #327: Great to see Teddy Harvia on the front cover again. It’s been years.

With all the discussion of telephones and their history, we use as our regular telephone a Crosley reproduction of a black candlestick phone. We’ve had a couple of Bell technicians in here to check connections and the server we have, and the befuddled looks we get when they ask to use the phone has been entertaining.

OPUNTIA #328: In my travels in British Columbia, I sometimes had to deal with small ferries going maybe a few hundred feet to get from one small island to another. Just slight differences in the road trip. BC is also where I saw three-lane highways for the first time.

The mention of Martian fiction reminds me not of Andy Weir’s novel, but the fact that Kim Stanley Robinson’s Mars Trilogy has been optioned for production as a mini-series. A lot of this seems to be happening, and after seeing CHILDHOOD’S END the other night, I have some level of confidence in the Mars books being treated right. We will have to see.

OPUNTIA #329: Our own Christmas Eve tradition is to go out and see some of the light displays in our area of Etobicoke, and sometimes in Mississauga. Nathan Philips Square downtown always has a great display, this year augmented with the big TORONTO shining brightly beside the ice rink. Given that Hanukkah, the Festival of Lights, has come and passed, the lights are more appreciated, and having lived in Brampton, Hindu and Sikh families always enjoyed the lights, and always added to them. They may not be generic, but so many enjoy the bright colours this time of year.

Last night was the final evening of Showcase Canada’s viewing of CHILDHOOD’S END. It’s been so long since I’ve read Clarke’s novel, and that novel was Yvonne’s introduction to SF itself. After the finale was the preview showing of the first episode of THE MAGICIANS, based on Lev Grossman’s Magicians trilogy, which we have also read. The full series of Magicians episodes will be shown on Showcase Canada in January.

All done for the moment, but given the time of year, Yvonne and I wish you a great Christmas and a Happy New Year, and see you again in 2016. Given the events of 2015, I hope that 2016 will be relatively quiet, normal and stress-free. I can always make a wish, anyway. See you then.

FROM: Charles Rector
Woodstock, Illinois

2015-12-17

OPUNTIA #319: An unusually strong, not to mention long photographic display. It’s also something that you could not do if you lived here in Woodstock, instead of Calgary. People here just do not seem to have that kind of Christmas spirit.

SF writers keep on writing old-time Venus stories in what seems to be denial of the scientific reality of that planet. Why don't they just make up planets around other stars instead of using Venus?

Interesting that one of those stories turned out to be a plagiarism of a story that appeared in that same magazine. Just goes to show just how unfamiliar editors are of the past of their own genre, let alone their own magazine. I remember reading about a similar scandal involving a creative writing professor in Alabama who recycled stories and got them published in the same literary journal half a century later.

[Who could remember all those stories?]

SEEN IN THE LITERATURE

Robertson, C., et al (2015) **Winters too warm? Citizen-science reported variability in availability of outdoor skating in Canada.** CANADIAN GEOGRAPHER 59:383-390

Authors’ abstract: *“Recent studies forecast declining availability of outdoor ice-skating as a result of warming temperatures. Using data on outdoor rinks collected from a citizen science project called RinkWatch, we compared skating conditions to temperature data for ten cities across Canada, over two winter seasons. We find there is observable variance in the temperature-skating relationship regionally, and from one year to the next. By combining this data with daily temperature simulations based on the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change A2 emissions scenario, we projected the number of skating days by the year 2090 to decline on average by 34 percent in Toronto and Montreal, and 19 percent in Calgary. The results suggest that impacts of a warming climate on future outdoor skating opportunities will exhibit regional variability. Our report further highlights that below-freezing average temperatures do not necessarily provide outdoor ice suitable for skating.”*

Speirs: This paper caught my eye because I retired in 2010 after 31 years with the City of Calgary Parks Dept., which has authority in the city over outdoor rinks. In the winter, supervision of outdoor rinks was part of my responsibilities. Because Calgary has regular chinooks, it has always been difficult to maintain outdoor rinks. Chinooks are warm winter winds that

frequently come out of the Rockies adjacent to the city, and commonly raise temperatures from -20°C to +10°C in a couple of hours. As a result, the Parks Dept. only maintains three outdoor rinks in the entire city (pop. 1.2 million). One is the Olympic Plaza wading pool, which has a refrigeration system built underneath it to turn it into a rink in winter. Another is Bowness Park, an island in the Bow River, whose long and winding channel separating it from the mainland is at the bottom of a deep bank and shaded by heavy spruce trees, which trap cold air and prevent chinooks from reaching down into the channel. The third one is a community rink out on the flatlands of east Calgary which only operates in cold weather because it turns into a large pond when chinooks come through.

There are dozens of volunteer-run outdoor rinks in small parks throughout the city. Parks Dept. teaches the citizens how to use winter hydrants (special hydrants inside a galvanized culvert; if they freeze up, pack them full of straw and coal, set fire to it, and let it smoulder overnight). We also taught them how to make a good rink. The worst thing to do is flood the rink, because the water doesn't freeze evenly; it bubbles and cracks. The best method is to gently spray water back and forth over the field, so that the millimetre-size droplets freeze instantly and a nice pebbly finish is built up. I used to supervise the volunteers and few of them returned after more than a couple of years because chinooks kept evaporating the rinks completely away every few weeks.

One reason why Canada is so strong in hockey is because any homeowner or farmer can create a backyard rink for the kids. In Florida or California, any kid who wants to play hockey (or speed-skate, etcetera) has to join a league and get Mom or Dad to drive him to the arena for practice. In Canada, go down the back alleys of any suburb, and every block will have one or two backyard rinks. I grew up in the Eckville-Red Deer area of west-central Alberta, outside the chinook zone, and where winters were more uniform. When my brother and I came home from school, like so many other Canadian kids, we would go out the back door and play one-on-one hockey until Mom called us in for supper. Kids in the neighbourhood would get together for the backyard world championship finals, played every night, with teams whose players sometimes changed sides if the score got too lopsided. The backyard rinks were usually too small for figure skating or speed skating, so the girls would go over to a neighbourhood outdoor rink. There was always a neighbour farm with a nice shallow pond where no one worried about falling in. That is why winter sports developed so strongly in Canada, not just because of the cold but because everyone could create their own opportunities at little or no cost.