

OPUNTIA

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Early July 2016

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.

OTAFEST 2016
photos by Dale Speirs

2016-07-02

Calgary has an annual anime convention called Otafest. It used to be up at the University of Calgary campus on the Victoria Day weekend, but they moved downtown this year to the convention centre on the Stephen Avenue pedestrian mall, where they were much more conspicuous. I don't follow anime but as I was walking down the mall the day after Canada Day, I spotted a bunch of them wandering about. They're a genuine convention, not a mob like the comic cons.

God gave us smartphone cameras to use them, so here are a few photos for posterity. They were a prelude to the biggest costume con in Canada, the Calgary Stampede rodeo.



At left on the steps of the opera house. Below are three cosplayers
lounging in Olympic Plaza, directly across the mall.



YEEHAW! AND ALL THAT OTHER STUFF


photos by Dale Speirs

[Reports on the Calgary Stampede rodeo appeared in OPUNTIA #253, 264, 265, 280, 314, and 315.]

My favourite time of year is the Calgary Stampede, the world’s largest rodeo, with 1.2 million paid admissions over ten days. The city-wide celebration begins a couple of weeks before the actual rodeo. Almost everyone dresses western and gets into the act. Even the monthly bus passes go stampeding.

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Transit



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Parade day is the Friday after Canada Day, and thereafter little real work gets done in the city.

No one in their right mind will schedule any important business meetings during Stampede, although most businesses host a round of pancake breakfasts and barbecues for their best clients.

Stampede is bigger than Christmas and New Year’s Eve combined,

has nicer weather, and you don’t have to shop for presents. About 200,000 spectators line the streets for the parade, which winds its way through the downtown core for two hours.



The free Stampede pancake breakfast is a tradition that dates back to 1922 when a chuckwagon driver parked his rig downtown, fired up the stove, and began handing out flapjacks to passersby. Today, chuckwagons are purpose-built for racing but back then they were genuine cook wagons brought in for the races by local ranchers.

There must be hundreds of breakfasts throughout the city. Every shopping plaza, church, community association, and politician puts on one. Big businesses usually have two, one for the public out front of the skyscraper, and one for favoured clients inside for schmoozing. Many Calgarians, myself included, plan their routes so they can eat breakfast free for three weeks, beginning the week before Stampede.

The standard menu is two flapjacks, two sausages, and fruit juice or coffee. If not a live band entertaining the crowd as they wait in line, then at least there is a DJ churning out country-and-western songs.

I won't illustrate all the pancake breakfasts I went to, but these photos are of the Westhills Church breakfast on July 3, four days before the rodeo. As with SF conventions, I prefer the smaller breakfasts. There are a few breakfasts at the major shopping malls that serve 20,000 people in two hours, with dozens of stoves going full blast. Like comic cons, those ones are a mob where people spend most of their time standing in line.

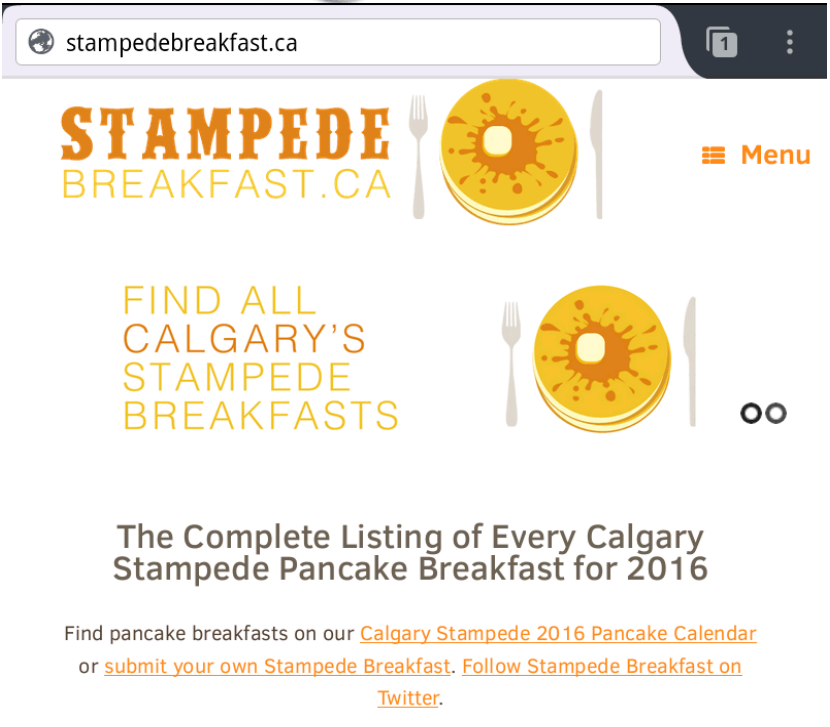
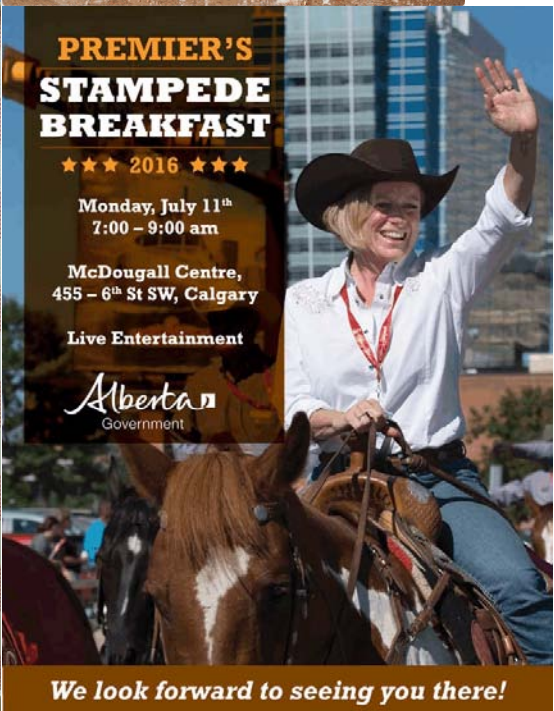
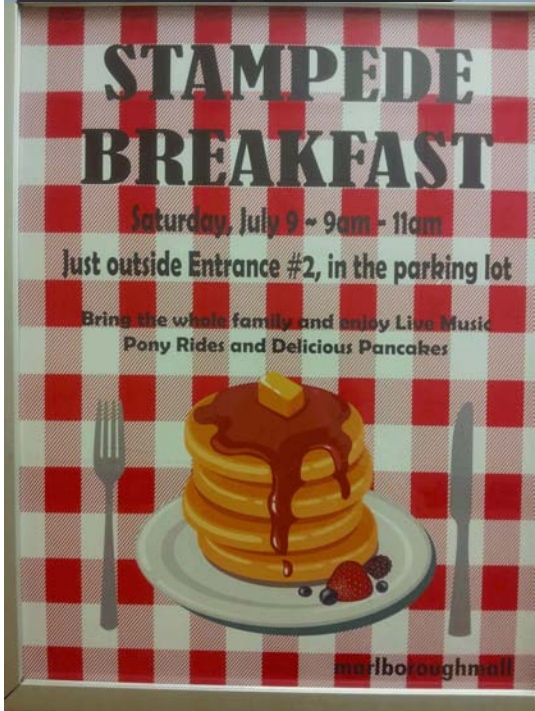
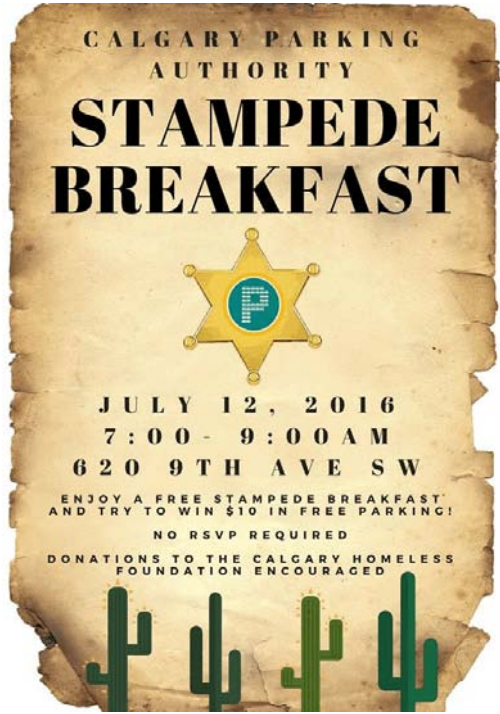
At right, an outbreak of line dancing, a common hazard when playing country music in a public place.



For the majority of children, this is the only exposure they get to farm animals.



A selection of posters. I didn't go to all of these but just show them as samples.



And, of course, there's always an app or Website these days.

The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation hosted a breakfast on July 7. Both their television and radio networks broadcast live from the parking lot.



Mayor Naheed Nenshi poses with a couple of future voters.



There are hundreds of Stampede barbecues as well, but these are almost always private functions. The only free barbecue I've found is the University of Calgary President's Barbecue, although I've never seen her there. Probably lost in the crowd. An excellent menu: tender prime beef on a bun, fresh coleslaw, corn on the cob, and real lemonade.



The Stampede mascot, Harry the Horse, says hello.



The obligatory line dancers. I think it's a City bylaw.



The U of C gives out miniature cowbells each year at the barbecue. This time, instead of just the usual logo, the other side commemorates the fiftieth anniversary of the university, founded in 1966. (A loonie beside the bell for size comparison.)

When I left the university campus and headed downtown on the bus, I stuck the cowbell into my jacket pocket. Every so often as I shifted in my seat, the bell would tinkle, and one or two other passengers then instinctively checked their cellphones.

The “yahoo” refers to the official shout of the Calgary Stampede, used decades before the Internet company. Notwithstanding that, most Cowtowners use “yeehaw”.



CANADA IS PLAN B

by Dale Speirs

It's become hilarious to Canadians that every time some short-lived kerfluffle flares up somewhere, Google reports a sudden surge in searches for "moving to Canada". The latest ones occurred when Donald Trump was nominated as the Republican candidate for the American presidency, followed by another surge from Britain after the Brexit vote was won by the Leave faction. We saw these things before when Shrub was elected south of the border, and again after the September 11 attacks.

It always blows over. A few people might actually migrate, but most get over their panic. Samuel Johnson remarked a couple of centuries ago that it made little difference to the average person about who was in power. Still true. In our times, Brexit will have little effect in the long run once the Brits remember they used to be outside the European Union within living memory and yet had useful productive lives. Trump has insulted so many identifiable groups that few are left who will vote for him, and he will be another Ross Perot.

It is flattering that Canada seems to be everybody's contingency plan around the world. No country fears an invasion by us, and we seldom make the news in other countries.



ON THE CUTTING EDGE OF TECHNOLOGY: PART 2

by Dale Speirs

[Part 1 appeared in OPUNTIA #258.]

The idea that a device can record the voice of someone long dead is something we take for granted today, but before the late 1800s it was science fiction. It wasn't until the 1960s that portable recorded music became common. In OPUNTIA #258, I reviewed some fiction about wire and tape recorders back when they were cutting-edge technology.

Take A Message, Patsy.

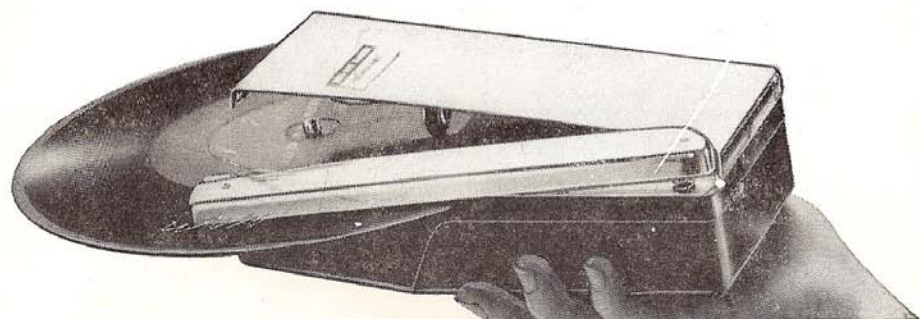
It is surprising how long some of the early forms of voice recording lasted. Wax cylinders, for example, were in widespread use on dictation machines until 1947, when they were finally supplanted by tape and wire recorders. The Dictaphone company was the major purveyor of such devices during the 1900s, so much so that their name became a synonym for dictation recording machines.

"The Case Of The Dictaphone Murder" is a 1946 episode of the old-time radio (OTR) series NICK CARTER, MASTER DETECTIVE, written by Jock MacGregor and Peggy Mayer. (This and other OTR shows are available as free mp3s from www.archive.org.) Like the Dictaphone, Nick Carter had a remarkably long life. Carter first appeared in 1886 and lasted into the 1990s in pulps, OTR, movies, and paperback novels.

The story opens with Carter receiving a visit from a manufacturer named Buckley, who wants him to investigate Roger Denham, engaged to Buckley's daughter. That investigation gets off to a flying start when, even as the two men are still discussing the case, they get news that Denham has been found murdered in a hotel room. The search of the crime scene discovers a wire in a closet leading to the room directly upstairs where a Dictaphone machine had been installed. Denham had rented the machine and both rooms. The wax cylinder was now missing, and that recording becomes the MacGuffin of the plot, since it obviously held vital information.

Clues and characters multiply as Carter barges about investigating, while the police are strangely absent. Denham turns out to have been a sharp-practice man. He was already married, for one thing. He was also involved in a bid for

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a new factory with bid-fixing and kickbacks. Fingerprints on the Dictaphone are ambiguous about who removed the wax cylinder. Carter narrows it down to the chambermaid, who does indeed have the recording, and bullies it from her. With the recording, he stages a J'accuse! meeting. The voices on the cylinder condemn the murderer.

The show moves briskly along and is a good listen. Some of the social behaviour is breathtakingly incorrect by today's standard. Carter's secretary puts up with blatant wolfish behaviour, not from him but others, that would have any woman today filing a legal complaint for sexual harassment. Carter himself commits several felony offenses while investigating the murder. He contaminates the evidence and witness testimony so thoroughly that a first-year law student could get the case thrown out of court. The police are conspicuous by their absence, and seem content to let a private detective investigate the murder.

Phonograph Blues.

Phonograph records had a good long run and still survive in specialized applications with techno DJs and fanatic music lovers who want analogue sound. The vast majority were sold as pre-recorded music, but there were many shops that had one-off recording devices whereby a customer could transcribe a message on a disk and mail it to the folks back home. Imagine hearing the sound of your son's voice from the war front, or your sister in the big city!

"Eight Records Of Death" was a 1944 episode of NICK CARTER, MASTER DETECTIVE which begins when a man calls in Carter to investigate some one-off records he found in an unclaimed package that was auctioned off by an express company. The records were transcribed by a young woman who was being held hostage by men who wanted her to sign over her inheritance. The kidnappers were careless and didn't realize the recording machine was in her room. She hid the records in a box and arranged with a servant to have the box shipped to the police department, but they refused the package. Must have been afraid of a mad bomber.

The express company couldn't return it because there was no return address, so they held it for a time and then put it in their regular unclaimed items auction. Carter and the man listen to the records in sequence as the woman tells her tale in one-minute increments. The two men eventually track down the culprits but the woman has already been murdered.

“Phonograph Murder” was a 1947 episode of BOSTON BLACKIE. He was a smart-mouthed former jewel thief who kept tangling with Inspector Faraday, a man who didn’t believe in innocent bystanders and arrested Blackie at the drop of a hat. Blackie didn’t take the Inspector seriously and delighted in tripping him up during murder investigations.

This episode begins with a man, imminently soon to be murder victim #1, receiving a one-off record via messenger. The male voice on the record tells the victim he is about to be shot, and sure enough it comes to pass. Faraday rounds up the usual suspects, including Blackie, has them speak into a recording device, and then plays the record back to see whose voice matches. Fortunately for Blackie it wasn’t his voice but unfortunately for him the voice belongs to a man who turns up dead in Blackie’s apartment a short while later.

Blackie convinces Faraday to set a trap in his apartment. Blackie tells the suspect that he had a home recording device in the apartment which the dead man had known about. The deceased had left a message explaining everything and was exiting when he was killed. The murderer didn’t know that. The trap is sprung. There are a couple twists before the ending. In the finale, Blackie receives a one-off record from his girlfriend Mary, who explains the rest of the plot and who did what to whom.

Like other episodes in this series, the plot rushes along from one cliffhanger to the next. I always enjoy the organist who does the scene changes and incidental music; nothing is too melodramatic for him.

PETE KELLY’S BLUES was a short-lived OTR series in 1951 starring Jack Webb, the creator of DRAGNET. He played Kelly, a 1920s jazz musician in Kansas City, who each week got tangled up in a murder. The dialogue was exactly like DRAGNET, snappy, terse, and fast-paced. The episode “Zelda” began with Kelly and his band visiting their recording studio, run by Zelda’s ex-husband Marty. She intercepts Kelly on his way in and asks him to retrieve a record master of a song he recorded. Marty won’t give it back. Zelda had ditched him for a gangster named Johnny April, who resents Kelly even talking to his wife.

The master was re-recorded over top the song with an incriminating conversation between Zelda and Marty, which is why she wants it back. She kills Marty and searches the recording studio files but can’t find it. Kelly and a friend show up, followed shortly by April. The friend reminds Kelly of Edgar

Allen Poe’s tale about the purloined letter. Marty was suspicious after the first request for the master, so he put it on a turntable in plain view but where no one would notice it. Fade out to the sound of gunshots and jazz music as Kelly once more has the blues.

Mixed Up With Murder.

THE BIG REWIND (2016) by Libby Cudmore is a murder mystery novel that begins with Jett Bennett receiving a mix cassette in the mail. The postie mis-delivered it to her instead of her downstairs neighbour, known only as KitKat.

Pause for an infodump for Millennials who don’t know what a mix cassette is. As you know, Professor, the tape cassette displaced reel-to-reel tape recorders until it in turn fell before the compact disk. It was a popular custom for people to compile their favourite songs onto a cassette and then trade with their friends. Mix cassettes often had nicely designed card inserts, with good art and typed play lists. It was a Boomer thing; ask your father. Mix cassettes were popular with disk jockeys, who didn’t have to lug vinyl, pre-recorded cassettes or CDs to a gig. They have long since been replaced by mp3s.

Jett takes the mis-sent cassette down to KitKat and finds her dead, bludgeoned to death by a blunt instrument. After the police come and go, the apartment building tenants settle back into the dull routine of life. Jett never did deliver the mix cassette. Since she doesn’t have a tape player, she doesn’t listen to it.

KitKat’s sister asks Jett to investigate the murder because the police don’t seem to be making any progress. Jett works as a temp clerk for a private detective agency, which doesn’t qualify her anymore than being a convenience store clerk, but she agrees to do the job. KitKat’s boyfriend is arrested by the police on the grounds that they can’t go wrong with the usual suspects. As Jett does her Miss Marple investigation, mix cassettes keep popping up all over the plot, with a constant recitation of play lists.

KitKat had run afoul of a jealous woman named Cassie, who resented her for taking her boyfriend. Cassie prepared a mix cassette, the one that Jett got by mistake, with a special song on it intended to strike at KitKat. She then went over to KitKat’s apartment and when the latter truthfully denied having listened to the cassette, went into a rage and killed her. Music didn’t have charms in this instance.

The story is set in 2015 when few people have cassette players anymore. There are wry references in the novel about obsolete technology such as cassettes, and how they are just so retro. The novel reads reasonably well, and I did keep turning the pages.

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THE FIRST THING WE DO
by Dale Speirs

John George Diefenbaker was Prime Minister of Canada from 1957 to 1963. He stayed on as leader of the federal Progressive Conservative party for another two years before he was finally evicted in the nastiest political convention ever held in Canada. I reviewed a book about that in OPUNTIA #14.1. He is considered to be one of Canada's greatest orators, but was run over by the Boomer generation who preferred style over substance and voted for Pierre Trudeau.

Diefenbaker was always a man of the people. Before entering politics, he was a defence barrister in his native Saskatchewan and built up a reputation as a defender of those without hope.

DIEFENBAKER FOR THE DEFENCE (1988) by Garrett Wilson and his son Kevin Wilson goes through the legal records of those early days in the first half of the 1900s.

The book begins in 1919 when Diefenbaker was assigned his first case as a rookie barrister. He defended a homesteader who had accidentally wounded his neighbour's son with a shotgun. It was dusk in a wooded area and the accused thought there was a wolf on the prowl.

The case should never have been brought, and it was Diefenbaker's first victory. The victim changed his testimony between the examination for discovery and the trial, trying to put his neighbour in jail, but that backfired. Diefenbaker got some help from the judge, who told him privately not to exaggerate the darkness of the dusk so much but to concentrate on the victim's lies.

At left: from FANTASTIC UNIVERSE, 1959 September

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Diefenbaker initially practiced law in the Wakaw district of central Saskatchewan, where the primary languages were Ukrainian, Polish, and German, not English. Diefenbaker was Canadian-born but prejudice against people with German names was so great during World War One that he had to carry his birth certificate with him at all times to prove he wasn't an immigrant. Diefenbaker was a small-town lawyer struggling to succeed. He obviously eventually did.

It was this experience that made him sympathetic in later years to underdogs. Some of his early cases involved the language wars, such as French-only schools (he defended them). The majority of cases Diefenbaker argued in the 1920s used interpreters for the various Slavic languages. The judge, court clerk, and barristers were often the only anglophones.

In 1924, Diefenbaker moved his practice to the city of Prince Albert. At that time, Saskatchewan was the fiefdom of the Liberal party, both the federal and provincial wings. They could have taught a few things to Chicago or Louisiana politicians. Diefenbaker once commented that in those days the only protection the Conservatives had were the fish-and-game laws.

Prince Albert was the site of both a federal and a provincial penitentiary, so there was steady work for defence barristers and Crown prosecutors alike. Diefenbaker had political ambitions but as a junior man who stirred up trouble with his cases, he had no place in the Liberals. He joined the Conservative party, and lost election after election, federal, provincial, and municipal, for two decades. It contributed to his feelings as an outsider and underdog. It didn't help that in elections he had to mention repeatedly that he was Canadian-born because the Liberals spread rumours that he was an infiltrator from Germany.

In between election campaigns, Diefenbaker continued as a defender in court, winning most of his cases but frequently only on appeal. Police work was sloppy in those days, long before forensic science made its way to the frontier, and Saskatchewan was still a frontier society in many respects.

The court system was even sloppier. Often the best that Diefenbaker could do was to get an execution commuted to life in prison, with hope for parole after a couple of decades, or reduce the charge to a lesser offence. Defendants with Slavic or German names had a strike against them before they even stepped up to the plate.

Conflicts of interest among judges and police were frequent and blatant. Judges had no hesitation in carrying a brief for the prosecution and made remarks to juries that today would get them suspended by the Canadian Judicial Council.

One Saskatchewan judge named Taylor was so bad that juries would often bring in an opposite verdict to spite him because they didn't like the way he lectured them and told them what to do. A famous story of the Saskatchewan bar is a barrister (not Diefenbaker) telling the Court of Appeals: *"My Lords, this is an appeal from a judgement of Mr. Justice Taylor. But there are other grounds."*

Taylor was a hanging judge and always gave Diefenbaker a hard time. Invariably Diefenbaker had to appeal his cases to the next court. He never forgot the names of such judges and when he became Prime Minister, he made certain they were not promoted to higher courts as they would have been by normal practice.

In the federal election of 1940, Diefenbaker finally won an election and was elected as the M.P. for Lake Centre, the Prince Albert riding. From there is another story, but before he could take his seat in the House of Commons, he had one last murder case to defend. He won an acquittal, and on that high note ended his legal career.

Fifteen years later, Diefenbaker was Opposition Leader, then Prime Minister, then back to Opposition Leader, and hence to a backbencher after being deposed as the Tory leader. He was still in office when he died in 1979 at his desk on Parliament Hill.

WHEN WORDS COLLIDE 2016

Calgary's annual readercon will be held this year on the weekend of August 12 to 14, returning to the Delta Hotel at Southland Drive SE and Bonaventure Drive. Details from: www.whenwordscollide.org The Aurora Awards will follow after the banquet.

When Words Collide covers many genres of literature such as science fiction, fantasy, mystery, romance, westerns, and historical fiction. You can read my account of the 2015 event in OPUNTIA #318 to get an idea of the events.