

OPUNTIA 361

Winter Solstice 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.

FOUR STRONG WINDS

by Dale Speirs

Last winter was one of the warmest that Calgary has ever experienced. We did not have a single daytime high below -20°C. November 2016 was warm, with temperatures seldom below -10°C, but our luck ran out in the first two weeks of December. We had -25°C daytime highs and -30°C overnight lows.

I had to plug in my car for the first time in two years. The temperatures finally turned after a couple of weeks and rose to 0°C to -10°C, much more palatable.

Speaking of palatable, I did my grocery shopping in the cold, and came across a special on chicken noodle soup, themed with snowflake noodles and the Disney movie FROZEN. I have not seen this or any other Disney animated movie, but the label seemed like a good idea scanned for a zine cover. The soup was standard Campbell's fare, reasonable quality for the price. I just upgraded to a new smartphone, a Samsung Galaxy S7, so I decided to test the camera. It had trouble focusing on the soup because of the difference between the reflective surface of the soup and the noodles beneath, so this was the best photo I could get.



INSTRUCTIONS: Empty soup into a saucepan and slowly add one full can of water, stirring constantly. Heat, stirring often. Refrigerate unused portions promptly.

MODE D'EMPLOI: Verser la soupe dans une casserole, puis incorporer lentement une pleine boîte d'eau, en remuant constamment. Faire chauffer en remuant souvent. Réfrigérer immédiatement les portions inutilisées.

INGREDIENTS: CHICKEN BROTH (WATER, CHICKEN STOCK), PASTA (WHEAT FLOUR, EGG WHITES), CARROTS, SEASONED CHICKEN (SOY), CHICKEN FAT, SALT, FLAVOUR, POTATO STARCH, YEAST EXTRACT, BETA CAROTENE.

INGRÉDIENTS: BOUILLON DE POULET (EAU, FOND DE POULET), PÂTES (FARINE DE BLÉ, BLANCS D'ŒUF), CAROTTES, POULET ASSAISONNÉ (SOYA), GRAS DE POULET, SEL, SAVEUR, AMIDON DE POMME DE TERRE, EXTRACT DE LEVURE, BÉTA-CAROTÈNE.

Nutrition Facts	
Valeur nutritive	
Per 125 mL / par 125 mL	
250 mL prepared / 250 mL préparée	
Amount	% Daily Value
Teneur	% valeur quotidienne
Calories / Calories 60	
Fat / Lipides 1.5 g	2 %
Saturated / saturés 0.5 g	
+ Trans / trans 0 g	
Cholesterol / Cholestérol 5 mg	
Sodium / Sodium 480 mg	20 %
Carbohydrate / Glucides 9 g	3 %
Fibre / Fibres 0 g	
Sugars / Sucres 1 g	
Protein / Protéines 3 g	
Vitamin A / Vitamine A	2 %
Vitamin C / Vitamine C	0 %
Calcium / Calcium	0 %
Iron / Fer	2 %

Disney FROZEN

Campbell's
CONDENSED SOUP / SOUPE CONDENSÉE

Olaf
Elza
Anna
Snowflake
Flocon de neige

FUN SHAPES!
FORMES AMUSANTES!

No artificial colours or flavours
Aucun colorant ni saveur artificiels

284 mL Pasta with Chicken in Chicken Broth
10 oz fl Pâtes et poulet dans du bouillon de poulet

Make meal time enchanting with a bowl of Campbell's® soup featuring Olaf.
Pour des repas enchantés, servez un bol de soupe Campbell's® mettant en vedette Olaf.

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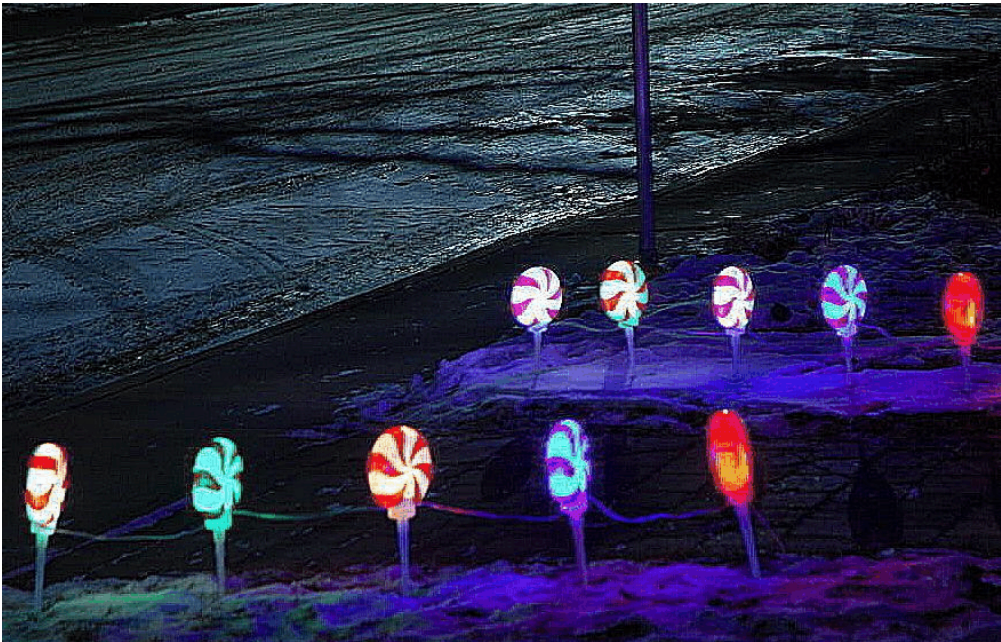
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DECK US ALL IN 2016
photos by Dale Speirs

Once the weather warmed up, I went out at night with my camera. My real camera, a Nikon SLR digital, which is far better than a smartphone for night or telephoto shots. It also has a heavy-duty battery that lasts for weeks, whereas a smartphone is lucky to make it through one day.

Even so, it is difficult to take night shots of Christmas lights. These photos were taken in the residential neighbourhood of Altadore. A Chinook was blowing, so most of my photos had blurriness in them as the trees swayed.





CRY UNCLE AND LET SLIP THE DOGS OF WAR: PART 1

by Dale Speirs

The death of Robert Vaughn at the age of 83 on Remembrance Day 2016 prompted me to start this new review series. He is best remembered for his role as the handsome and suave Napoleon Solo in the television series THE MAN FROM U.N.C.L.E.** This was a spy series set in the Cold War era but little to do with the Communist menace. THE MAN FROM U.N.C.L.E. was inspired by the tremendous success of the James Bond movies. It was one of many such imitators, but the other television series never had the mystique that TMFU had.

The series had 105 episodes from 1964 to 1968, spun off a related series THE GIRL FROM U.N.C.L.E., a paperback series, comics, a digest fiction magazine, standalone books, a movie sequel, a movie remake, and merchandise galore. It was initially a tremendous success, although it was ignominiously canceled halfway through its fourth season. A DVD box set came out in 2008. I'm missing some books and magazine issues but am reasonably complete. I never collected the comics, toys, or other merchandise, but did buy the DVDs.

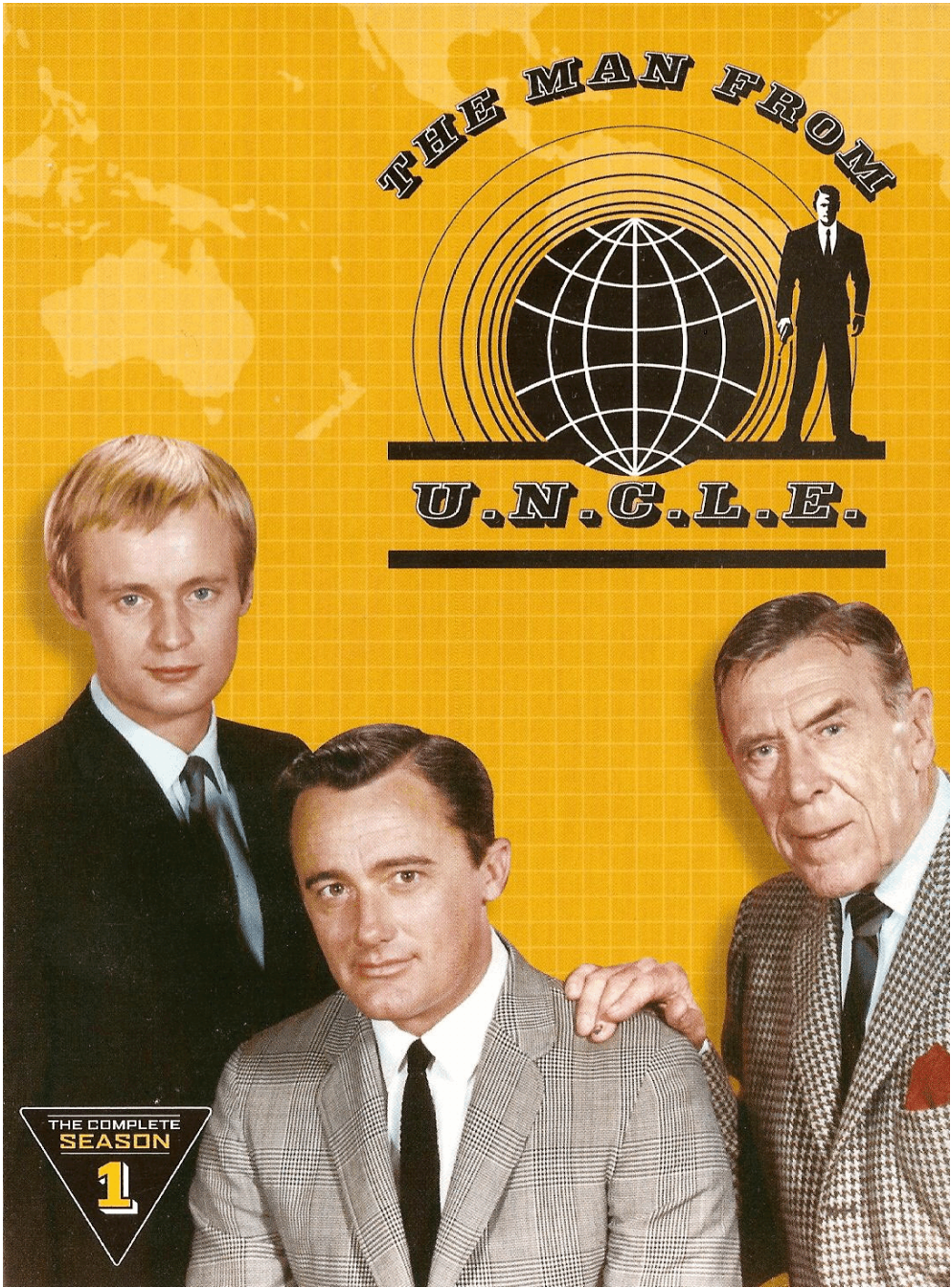
The Name Is Bond, Pardon Me, Solo, Napoleon Solo.

Jon Heitland published THE MAN FROM U.N.C.L.E. BOOK in 1987, which gives a history of the series and all its associated material. The idea for the show began with Norman Felton and Sam Rolfe, with Ian Fleming as a consultant. It was Fleming who suggested the name Napoleon Solo.

Fleming had sold his James Bond rights to Eon Productions, who were trigger-happy at anyone poaching on their territory. They sued people left, right, and centre, including Fleming himself, for any movie or television series resembling the Bond adventures. Fleming had forgotten that his Bond novel GOLDFINGER had a character named Solo, but obviously that was sorted out.

After assorted contretemps, MGM Studios changed the concept and series title enough to avoid further legal action. Thus it was that the series mutated into THE MAN FROM U.N.C.L.E., with sufficient changes to make it distinct from James Bond. U.N.C.L.E.'s main adversary was THRUSH, an organization bent on world domination, not unlike SMERSH of the Bond milieu.

** The acronym should properly have a period after each letter, viz U.N.C.L.E. For convenience in typing, I omit all those periods.



Above: Cover from the complete series DVD set.

The series skirted constantly with James Bond overlaps. In TMFU paperback #14, THE CROSS OF GOLD AFFAIR by Frederic Davies (1968), the villain is a THRUSH financial officer who is doubling down on short-selling gold mining company stocks. UNCLE deals with them, after the usual derring-do by Solo and Kuryakin, by manipulating the stock market to put THRUSH into a short squeeze and force them to cover their bets at a loss. Anyone familiar with CASINO ROYALE (the original version, not the movie travesty with David Niven as Bond), will instantly recognize the source.

(Frederic Davies was a pseudonym of Ron Ellik and Frederic Langley. Ellik died just before the book was published. They were good friends of David McDaniel, whose book THE UTOPIA AFFAIR was the next in the series. He dedicated that book to “Ron Ellik, a squirrel with a cross of gold”.)

Gestation.

Heitland’s book goes into detail about the production and casting of the series, a long and winding road that led to many changes en route to the final concept. Television shows and movies are collaborative efforts between producers, the director, actors, production crews, and, least important of all, writers. The most important people are the ones who put up the money, since without them there would not be a show. As the Scots say, whoever pays the piper gets to call the tunes. Writers are used to working alone and only dealing with one editor, which is why they commonly complain when working for studios.

TMFU premiered on 1964-09-22. The shows were an hour long, written in four acts to deal with the problem of television commercials breaking up the continuity. The series got off to a shaky start and was almost canceled before the first season ended. TMFU was saved because the release of another James Bond movie boosted the next season.

Robert Vaughn as Napoleon Solo, and David McCallum as Ilya Kuryakin, became international celebrities, met by mobs of adoring fans wherever they went, much like Beatlemania. Solo was intended to be the star, but Kuryakin grew on viewers and became the cute guy to adoring female fans.

Merchandising was an integral part of the show and planned into it from the start. Toys were churned out by the truck load. The most popular were variations of the handgun that Solo and Kuryakin used, known as the UNCLE Special. There were model cars, radio communicators, board games, and dolls.

**Illya and**
(David McCallum)
Napoleon
(Robert Vaughn)

LIFE SIZE
Personally Autographed
PIN-UPS

They're the newest, the wildest, the greatest ever... New super pin-ups of Illya and Solo. They're lifesize (over 2½x3½ feet). And what's more they are exclusive, no one else has them, not even the fan mags. They're THE OFFICIAL PHOTOS CHOSEN BY THE FAN CLUB. Wait till your friends walk into the room. Won't they flip! THERE IS ILLYA — THERE IS SOLO — lifesize and so real they'll think for a minute both are there.

It's real fab for your bedroom, den, or playroom. It's like nothing you've ever seen before. You'll really be the envy of the crowd. And remember they're personally autographed and they are official.

\$1
only
each





FREE

Rush your order now and receive **FREE** your official membership card in the Man from U.N.C.L.E. Fan Club.

PLUS your very own U.N.C.L.E. Agent card. So c'mon. Don't Delay.



RUSH BACK THE COUPON NOW!

MAN FROM U.N.C.L.E. FAN CLUB, DEPT. 17
P.O. Box 711, Grand Central Post Office, N.Y., N.Y. 10017

Rush me my pin-ups plus official MAN FROM U.N.C.L.E. Fan Club Membership card and U.N.C.L.E. Agent card. I must really flip or I may return everything for a full purchase price refund.

☐ I enclose \$1.00 plus 25¢ (to cover shipping charges) for Illya.

☐ Please send me Robert Vaughn also. I enclose an additional \$1.

Name.....

Address.....

City..... State..... Zip Code.....

Above: A full-page ad in the February 1967 issue of TMFU MAGAZINE.

Trading cards were popular. I had some as a boy; where oh where are they now? I suspect my mother gave them to my younger cousins when I went off to university and they would have been handled to death. Books, magazines, and comics were churned out by the score and kept many hack writers employed.

Unfortunately the studio began messing with the series. The third season was widely criticized as a distortion of the original concept because the executives decided to play TMFU as a comedy. Ratings plummeted. Worse yet, copycat series and movies were flooding the airwaves and theatres, killing the whole genre. The fourth season was canceled halfway through. The actors found out about it in the newspapers.

In the late 1960s, spy movies and television series faded away as Hollywood overdid them. It is said in the industry that every genre ends in parody, and as the spy farce GET SMART took the airways, the death of the UNCLE shows was nigh. BATMAN began as a television series, fresher and more in tune with viewers, and helped contribute to the death of TMFU.

Open Channel D.

UNCLE stood for “United Network Command for Law and Enforcement”, an international police organization. Its logo bore more than a little resemblance to the United Nations emblem, and the nomenclatural changes were just enough to avoid lawsuits. UNCLE had hidden offices around the world but Napoleon Solo and his Russian partner Ilya Kuryakin worked out of the New York branch, camouflaged by a tailor shop.

UNCLE had a variety of spy gadgets. The most famous was a fountain pen that was a miniaturized shortwave radio used for calling in to New York headquarters from just about anywhere in the world. There were no cellphone towers in those days, and one wonders how a pen-sized radio could transmit with such power. Solo and Kuryakin would begin their communications with the phrase “Open Channel D”, which implied there were operators on duty 24/7 to switch the calls around. The main problem with the pen was that using it in a public place would draw curious stares from passersby. Today if people see you talking into a pen, they assume you’re using a Bluetooth device.

UNCLE agents sometimes drove a sleek low-slung sports car with gull-wing doors. It seemed too conspicuous for use by spies who should be trying to blend

in. This problem was addressed in TMFU paperback #14, THE CROSS OF GOLD AFFAIR, while Kuryakin was driving it in a New York City slum (page 74): *“He parked the gray UNCLE sedan directly underneath the light. He always preferred to look ‘normal’ with that car. He had long ago discovered that any attempt to stay out of sight, such as parking in the dark here, brought up every curious bystander. In the glare from the only streetlight the streamlined sedan would be too obvious to be worth gawking at.”*

The car was awkward to get in and out of. It was problem enough for Vaughn and McCallum. Stefanie Powers, who used it in the spin-off series THE GIRL FROM UNCLE where she played agent April Dancer, complained about being expected to get into it while wearing a tight skirt and high heels.

The car was pictured on the back covers of the TMFU paperbacks #9 (left side in scan) and #11. The photo on #11 shows Vaughn sitting in the seat. He is visibly uncomfortable. The car looked impressive but seldom ran properly. It constantly dribbled a trail of oil behind it and stalled out from engine overheating. For all they needed it, it would have been better to drive a rental car. It was seldom used on the shows.

THE TRAIL BEGAN IN RIO DE JANEIRO....

Two beautiful girls had been killed in a mysterious car wreck near Rio, and a large number of people seemed determined to discourage any investigation of the accident. Since the girls were U. S. citizens, the FBI became interested...and they quickly alerted U.N.C.L.E.

When Napoleon Solo and Illya Kuryakin finally uncovered the secret hidden in the wilds of Brazil, it was only the beginning of their mission. For now they faced a fantastic plot that could destroy the world...and the countdown to disaster had already started!

Napoleon Solo looks over the new U.N.C.L.E. car, specially designed for battle against THRUSH.



Another exciting adventure based on the famous MGM-ARENA TV series THE MAN FROM U.N.C.L.E.

DISAPPEARANCE WITHOUT SOUND OR TRACE!

A moment before, the house had been solid, completely normal in appearance. Then, suddenly, it wasn't there. Instead, there was a huge circular pit in the ground, almost as if a bomb had destroyed everything. But there had been no explosion, no sound...nothing.

The U.N.C.L.E. agent who stumbled upon this discovery could hardly believe the evidence of his own eyes—but he knew he had to report it to Mr. Waverly. And when he did, Napoleon Solo and Illya Kuryakin were plunged into the strangest adventure of their careers, fighting a deadly THRUSH weapon they couldn't even see!



Another exciting adventure based on the famous MGM-ARENA TV series THE MAN FROM U.N.C.L.E.

The guns were particularly famous. The UNCLE Special handgun had a telescopic sight, was convertible to a rifle, had an extended magazine clip, and a silencer. Several variations of real-world pistols were used for it. Toy Specials were by far and away the bestselling merchandise. The cover of the September 1967 issue of TMFU MAGAZINE shows two variations of the gun.



A couple of TMFU paperbacks mention the use of Gyrojet handguns. The Gyrojet actually existed and fired rocket-propelled bullets. It was a miserable failure because of picky little details such as poor aiming, range problems, and poor target penetration. In the novels it only received brief mentions, and deservedly so.

Birdwatching The Hard Way.

The Communists were brought in as adversaries from time to time, and a number of freelance criminal masterminds appeared occasionally. The main enemy of UNCLE was THRUSH, a global criminal organization whose branch offices were called satrapys. The acronym stood for “Technological Hierarchy for the Removal of Undesirables and the Subjugation of Humanity”. It had nifty gadgets as well, such as night vision rifles, which were unusual at the time in armed forces.. Most of their devices were room-sized destroy-the-world machines, not particularly suited to the toy market.

THRUSH was run on the lines of a multinational, with satrapy managers who sometimes were hampered by budget cuts. In TMFU paperback #12, THE MIND-TWISTERS AFFAIR by Thomas Stratton (page 126), a satrapy manager bitterly complains to Solo (who had been taken prisoner):

“Whenever THRUSH Central finds itself with material it doesn’t know what to do with, we get it. Just because this is largely a rural satrapy, they think they can get away with anything. We were getting nothing but Volkswagens until I put my foot down. ... I know the official position is that THRUSH is a free-wheeling organization, throwing millions around in a quest for world domination, but you’d never know it by working in the Central Indiana Satrapy. I’ve sent THRUSH Central four requisitions for cyanide in the past month, and do you think I’ve seen any of it? Not a gram!”

(Stratton was a pseudonym for Gene DeWeese and Buck Coulson. Both were Indiana men, hence the in-joke about a THRUSH satrapy in rural Indiana.)

[to be continued]

FAR SPEAKING STORIES: PART 4

by Dale Speirs

[Parts 1 to 3 appeared in OPUNTIA's #313, 327, and 337.]

Wrong Numbers.

THE MYSTERIOUS TRAVELER was an old-time radio (OTR) show whose narrator rode on a train and talked to the listeners as if they were fellow passengers hearing an interesting story from a stranger. (This and other OTR shows are available as free mp3s from www.archive.org.) A 1946 episode titled “No One On The Line”, written by Robert A. Arthur and David Kogan, begins and ends with telephone calls. Harvey Benson, a successful businessman, gets telephone calls at home where no one speaks but just hangs up as soon as he answers. It doesn't take him long to suspect that this is a case of “if a man answers, hang up”. His wife Linda seems to get an inordinate number of wrong number calls whenever she answers the telephone with him nearby.

Harvey hires a private detective to follow her. Suspicion settles on Donald Arkwright, an old high school flame of Linda's who is now an architect. Harvey is a man of quick decisions. He invites Arkwright to go with him to view a remote site where a construction contract is to be let. His first attempt to kill Arkwright fails but he succeeds the second time by faking a car accident. The police accept the story and he returns home to Linda.

Harvey has it out with her and she demands a divorce. He tells her he just killed her boyfriend, without mentioning the name, and she storms out of their apartment to tell the police. She doesn't have far to go because the police were arriving just as she left. They were already on the way over because it turns out that remote site wasn't remote enough. A group of birdwatchers saw the whole incident through binoculars. They signed affidavits that they saw the murder and the staging of the fake accident to cover it up.

In the final confrontation at the apartment with Linda and the police, Harvey learns that he killed the wrong man. She had a different boyfriend, and Arkwright was nothing more than a casual acquaintance. As the shouting dies down, the telephone rings. Harvey answers, but there is no one on the line.

A good episode, with crisp narration and acting. The plot moves along at a steady pace, and the sound quality of the mp3 is excellent.

“Who's Calling?” by Robert Turner (1956 November, MANHUNT MAGAZINE) uses the telephone for psychological warfare. Jay and Beth Breen in Florida begin receiving phone calls for James Binford. That happens to be Jay's real name, before he embezzled \$90,000 from a New York City bank, killed the auditor about to expose him, and then ran for Florida to start a new life under an alias.

The calls keep coming, and eventually drive Jay to drink. He kills himself in a single-vehicle accident while driving impaired. That suits Beth fine, who had set up the telephone calls with the help of her boyfriend. They celebrate, but their elation is short-lived. A new series of calls begins, with someone asking for Mrs. Binford.

Right Number.

“Bells” is a 1961 episode from the OTR series SUSPENSE, written by Jack Bundy. It is about a young couple, the Fieldings, who rent a country home. The story is slow to begin, and Act 1 is taken up entirely with the tedious details of their house-hunting and how they finally got the rental. Act 2 throws in all the ominous forebodings. The moving men tell the Fieldings that the place has a high turnover of tenants, who generally leave in a panic. The house and acreage are renting well below market value despite the pristine condition. And it is a dark and stormy night.

The telephone calls begin while the Fieldings are still unpacking. Screams on the phone and a voice chanting “Get out!”. The operator says no calls came through and they must be imagining them. The husband yanks the telephone cord out of the wall, but it still keeps ringing. The Fieldings work themselves into a state of hysteria and finally flee to a hotel. Listening to a news broadcast on the radio in their room, they hear the newsreader reporting that lightning completely destroyed the house earlier that evening. The Fieldings might have been in it and killed, had they stayed.

The conclusion doesn't make sense. If previous tenants fled the house because they were also getting the strange phone calls, then why did nothing further happen? And what about the landlord, who kept trying to rent the place? The emoting in this episode is over the top, but the plot runs into a brick wall.

“A Man Called” by George Burke (1962, MANHUNT) is about a lonely woman who begins receiving obscene phone calls, and likes it. She begins playing

psychological games with the caller. He doesn't realize he is being led on, until one night when she goes too far and scares him away permanently, much to her remorse. An interesting twist.

DYING TO CALL YOU (2004) by Elaine Viets is about Helen Hawthorne, part of a series of cozy mysteries where she works a different dead-end job in each book. This installment is about her time as a telemarketer for Tank Titan Septic System Cleaner. Not much fun for those doing the calls, working long hours, and taking abuse for minimum wage and a \$10 commission on a \$200 sale. Hawthorne does jobs like these because she is on the run from the law and an ex-husband. She needs jobs that pay cash and whose bosses don't ask questions.

The plot gets going when she calls one prospective customer, a rich man named Henry Asporth. He asks her to wait a moment, then puts the phone on the table. She hears a woman arguing with Asporth, then a scream, then silence before someone hangs up the phone.

Hawthorne calls the police, who attend the scene but find nothing. Asporth claims it was just a movie on his television set that she heard. He's rich and white, so the police aren't going to check beyond a cursory look around the house.

Hawthorne uses the telemarketing computer to research Asporth, and finds a rich lode of data. It isn't difficult, since private industry has more data on citizens than the government does. She begins a Miss Marple adventure, phoning people connected to Asporth by association on the database. The search takes up most of the book, and along the way another corpse is added to the total.

Asporth is caught out and arrested by the police, but not for the original murder. The epilogue takes care of that though. For good measure, the telemarketing company is shut down by the feds for money laundering by the bosses. Hawthorne lands on her feet and gets a new job selling bridal dresses, where she will no doubt cross paths with another murderer in the next book.

Death By Remote Control.

The telephone is an obvious method of killing by remote control, once the mechanics of the thing are figured out. It thus has been used for many stories about killers who do the job from a phone booth.

“Dial A Deadly Number” is a 1965 episode of the British television series THE AVENGERS (not to be confused with the American superheroes), written by Roger Marshall. John Steed and Emma Peel are two posh undercover agents working for some Ministry or other. Mrs Peel uses martial arts combat (and tight black leather costumes). The story begins with a techie gone wrong taking out corporate bigwigs with booby-trapped pagers, and yes, they had them back then. The shirt-pocket pagers were designed to kill when the techie dialed the victim's number, triggering a spike filled with poison to snap out into the victim's chest.

Steed and Peel investigate. The victims were all in apparent good health, deemed essential to their corporations, and their deaths caused share prices in the company to fall. Peel examines the deceased mens' personal effects and finds they all had pagers from the same supplier. From there, she locates the answering service, who turn out to be part of a gang.

Steed, meanwhile, follows the money, and discovers that another part of the gang were bankers and brokers. They bought “put options” on the companies of the deceased a week or so before the death, before the share prices collapsed. Put options are a bet that rely on the share price falling. (The opposite bet is a call option.) The put option holder buys the shares at the lower price and then re-sells them at the higher option price to whomever issued the put options. The difference is the profit, less the premium paid for the options. Of course, if the stock price went higher before the option expired, the holder loses what he paid for the option and the option seller makes the profit on the premium. In this case, the gang were not leaving matters to chance, and made certain they would win their bets.

The trails get hotter as Steed and Peel go along, with various assassination attempts against them, additional bodies done in by pagers, and suspicion scattered about like road salt. Booby-trapped pagers are everywhere, but in the end Steed and Peel prevail. God saves the Queen.

“Death Took The Call” by Michael Croft (1976 June, MYSTERY MONTHLY) is about a private investigator hired to look into a fatal arson. The suspect was in Las Vegas when the fire happened, so he must have hired an arsonist. The detective puts an illegal wiretap on the suspect's telephone lines but comes up empty. Only after seeing the partially melted remains of one of the telephones from the room where the fire started, does he realize that it was rigged with a small detonator to ignite a container of gasoline under the desk. Not believable

that the Arson Squad would have missed that. This story would be better as a police procedural, especially since the detective brings them in anyway.

“Two Small Vials” by Elsin Ann Graffam (1977 August, ALFRED HITCHCOCK’S MYSTERY MAGAZINE) is about the manager of an explosives factory who decides to dispose of his wife so that he can be free to play the field. He rigs their telephone with liquid explosive so that when he calls her from a payphone, the ringing will detonate it from the vibrations of the bell. It would not only kill her but destroy the room.

He doesn’t seem to have thought it though (or, more correctly, the author and the editor). He would be the obvious suspect to the police, blatantly so. It is a moot point, however, since just as he finishes rigging the telephone, his mistress calls him.

Even Switchboard Operators Get The Blues.

OUR MISS BROOKS was an OTR show that later made the transition to television. It was a sitcom about Constance Brooks, always getting into trouble inadvertently at the high school where she taught English. The show was basically a clone of I LOVE LUCY, the only real difference being that she wasn’t married. The school was run by pompous principal Osgood Conklin, always ready to explode at the drop of a typewriter on his foot (which Miss Brooks once did). The love interest was Philip Boynton, biology teacher.

“Switchboard Operator” was a 1954 episode that even then was drifting into obsolescence. The school had a new switchboard installed, but from the way it was operated, it appeared the telephone system was circa the 1910s. No direct dialing, and all calls, internal or outside line, had to go through an operator. Miss Brooks was dragooned into operating it temporarily during her free periods when not teaching English. One doubts that even then the teacher unions would have allowed that. The fact that she had no idea how to operate the switchboard made no difference.

Naturally she gets the calls mixed up, connecting people to the wrong numbers. In a couple of cases, she doesn’t want to connect the callers with their numbers, so she fakes voices and carries on conversations with them. By the end of the episode, she has all the callers tied up on a single line, leading to a mass of cross-talk and confusion.

“Extension 201” (1979 Winter, FANTASY TALES) by Cyril Simsa alternates between the tale of a 1911 scientific expedition in the Amazon and a modern-day receptionist named Kate Morrow, who works at the Museum of Nature. Morrow is new on the job and is puzzled when she notices that the internal telephone directory of the museum skips from extension #200 to #202 for no apparent reason.

Her curiosity prompts a search of the museum’s labyrinth of storage rooms and corridors. She finds an old ledger that does list #201, it being for Dr Rudolf Baehr, “poste restante, The Amazon Expedition”. That expedition supposedly failed due to the presence of ultra-giant 3-eyed anaconda snakes.

Morrow conceives the idea of telephoning extension 201 to see if anyone answers. No one does, but she gets the help of a museum caretaker, who calls that number repeatedly while she wanders up and down abandoned corridors trying to hear the telephone ringing. She succeeds in finding Baehr’s old office.

The story continues to alternate with the Amazon expedition, its capture of a 3-eyed anaconda, and that specimen ending up forgotten in a museum storage area. The two plots converge when Morrow finds out that the anaconda isn’t yet fully dead, just hibernating.

Defunct Technology.

Pay phones aren’t entirely extinct but are certainly scarce nowadays. THE LIFE OF RILEY was an OTR show about a Brooklynite who moved to California to work in a war plant. Chester Riley was a schnook with a wife and two kids, a born loser who often compounded his troubles because he refused to admit he was wrong or because he had an over-active conscience, sometimes both.

The 1945 episode “Riley Takes Phone Booth Nickels”, by Alan Lipscomb and Reuben Ship, begins with him stopping to make a quick call. When he hangs up, a flood of nickels is released from the coin box, 85 cents worth in all. That was back when 85 cents was worth more money. Riley initially scoops up the coins with glee, but later his conscience begins to bother him.

He decides to return the coins to the booth by feeding them into the phone without lifting the handset, then walk away. A police officer spots him and is suspicious, misunderstanding what Riley is up to. Riley is forced to call a random number to allay suspicions and gets into a weird conversation with a

dippy woman about her cats. When he hangs up, he gets another flood of nickels, this time double the amount.

The police officer arrests him for fraud but takes him to the telephone company headquarters instead of the police station. That was in the days of telephone monopolies, when they were bigger and more powerful than the law. It turned out that the branch manager was an old friend of Riley's, and had him released.

The story is definitely a period piece. I don't know about other cities, but in Calgary the remaining pay phones are very scarce. There are still those of us old enough to remember when they were ubiquitous and cost 25 cents for a local call, payable in coins. You tell that to kids these days and they don't believe you. I found this one in an obscure corner of the University of Calgary Library.



“Anniversary Present” by Theodore R. Cogswell (1959 December, THE SAINT MYSTERY MAGAZINE) involves another piece of obsolete technology, the party line. Several subscribers shared a common party line, each of whom had a certain number of rings to indicate for whom the call was intended. It was a universal joke that the neighbours would listen in on other calls, and no one was indignant about it because they did the same.

Where I grew up in rural west-central Alberta, party lines were extinct by the 1960s, but they hung on in a few places elsewhere. Two of my uncles had a dairy farm in what is now northwest Calgary, and strangely, still had a party line.

I remember from when we visited them, if the telephone rang, one of my aunts would wait for the rings to stop, then lift the phone, cover the mouthpiece, and listen in. She was a good Christian woman but that didn't stop her from collecting gossip, just as she knew her neighbours listened to her calls.

Getting back to the story at hand, it is about an electrical engineer who wants to get rid of his wife. He decides to murder her on their wedding anniversary when he is staying in town and she is at their country house. The rural place has a party line and he knows the two old biddies who share it always listen in. He sets up a tape recorder on his townhouse telephone with pre-recorded dialogue in his voice.

He then goes out to the country and kills his wife. Using a disguised voice, he then calls his own number and stages a fake conversation with himself, relying on his neighbours to tell police that someone had phoned him in town at the time his wife was murdered. What he doesn't know is that his wife had the line changed to a private line for a surprise anniversary present. No one heard the call and he has no alibi.

“The Night Caller” by Carl Henry Rathjen (1975 August, EXECUTIONER MYSTERY MAGAZINE) is about police trying to track down a man making obscene phone calls to single women. An officer stopped to check a suspicious man in a phone booth and was killed by the suspect, identity unknown. The victims of the caller say he had a peculiar singsong voice.

The police trace the calls but find a man who stutters badly, which stymies them because they can't prove he faking it. The case breaks open when they discover a treatment for stuttering is to sing the words instead of speaking them. The

culprit had left some answering machine messages at a warehouse he did business with, identifying himself by name in the singsong voice. His victims identify the voice and the case is closed.

This is an interesting example of a story written as leading-edge technology (as answering machines and call tracing were in those days) now made obsolete after street corner telephone booths and answering machines passed into history.

“Receiver” by Michael Arnzen (1990 February, DETECTIVE STORY MAGAZINE) appeared in an obscure small-press quarterly with all the production values of a fanzine. The story is a series of answering machine messages from Jack to Julie (who never picks up the telephone), and later from Bob. It is the eternal triangle, as Jack finds out that Julie was having an affair with Bob. He kills Bob, or thinks he does, then flees the country. Julie repents, goes to Jack, and begins leaving her own messages. An obsolete story. Kids these days don’t break up by voicemail, they text.



At the University of Calgary. Once upon a time there was a row of payphones on this wall. If you look closely, you can see the holes in the wood paneling where the telephones hung.

COWTOWN MYSTERIES
by Dale Speirs

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THE KALEVALA AFFAIR (2016) by G.W. Renshaw is a fantasy detective novel I bought at the dealer bourse at When Words Collide 2016. The book caught my eye because of the title, a reference to Finland. My mother, although Canadian-born, was a pure-blood ethnic Finn (no Swedes or Russians in the mix), which makes me half Finnish. Both sides of her family came from Finland in the early 1900s and homesteaded in west-central Alberta.

I was born in the village of Eckville only a few kilometres from their farms. My mother spoke Suomalais to her elders but never taught it to us kids, on the grounds that it wasn’t a particularly useful language in Alberta. By the time we were old enough to be interested, the original Finnish immigrants were gone to the graveyards, so there wasn’t much point in learning Suomalais.

I told you all that because the KALEVALA is Finland’s national epic, what the ILLIAD is to Greece or BEOWULF is to Anglo-Saxon England. A central feature of KALEVALA is a device called Sampo. The epic is vague as to just exactly what Sampo is, other than it had a lid and was indestructible. It might have been a treasure chest or a cornucopia, possibly a short pillar. Its magical power was that it could grind out unlimited quantities of salt, flour, or money (in those days, silver).

It was lost to the Finns by one of those annoying mishaps that mythology is subject to. Supposedly it was thrown into the sea by a bishop who thought it demonic, but then dredged up by a fisherman, reclaimed by a traveling monk, and finally vanished into history.

Getting back to the book, it is the third volume in a series about a Calgary private investigator named Veronica Chandler. The fantasy part of it is that she has problems with demons, not the psychological kind but the actual just-visiting-from-Hell type.

They’re not all evil, and one or two are helpful to her in solving cases. In this particular volume, the demons only appear briefly at the beginning and the end. I haven’t read the first two volumes but each is independent of the other.

The novel begins with Chandler in a running-gun (and arrows) battle with unknown snipers across the Banff Trail neighbourhood along Crowchild Trail NW (all freeways in Calgary named Trail were originally cattle drive trails).

The course of the battle is laid out in great detail, from one street to another, with descriptions of sound barriers, LRT stations, and whatever else fits in. I spent 31 years with the Calgary Parks Dept., and during my career quite often worked out of a maintenance depot in that neighbourhood, so I can vouch for Renshaw’s accuracy in describing it.

What will be especially funny to Cowtowners, and which will be missed by outlanders, is his mention of Capitol Hill Crescent, famous to Cowtowners for being a long straight road despite its name. Nowadays it runs north-south inside Crowchild Trail from 24 Avenue NW to 16 Avenue NW. The latter is the Trans-Canada Highway inside Calgary city limits, which runs east-west.

When the Crescent was first built, it really was a crescent, curving away from Crowchild Trail to run parallel alongside 16 Avenue. In later years, when the avenue became the Trans-Canada Highway, eight lanes wide, it swallowed up that portion of the crescent, converting what was left into a straight-line road.

Having established all that at great length, the novel then departs Calgary and never returns. Chandler is hired by mysterious men to find the Sampo. One would think it impossible, but she does find some sources.

The rest of the book is an epic journey, first to England, then Finland, Poland, Slovakia, and Austria. She is aided by a partner with connections to a spy agency. Along the way they are shot at by unknown snipers, and tangle with a truckload of Finnish terrorists. (Look up “Karelia” on Google if you really want to know.)

When Chandler finds the Sampo, it turns out to be a mysterious piece of technology indeed. She discovers that its three settings for silver, salt, and flour are test settings, and it can be adjusted to produce anything else.

One doesn’t have to have a Phd in economics to realize the threat it represents, or for that matter, an atombiochemwarfare specialist with the military. Do you really want a machine that can churn out unlimited supplies of gold or the nastier isotopes of uranium? Renshaw does a good job of providing scientific rationalizations for the mythology.

Throwing the Sampo back into the ocean didn’t work the first time, so Chandler hits on the idea of tossing it into a lava lake. There being only about five of them on this planet, this means more traveling, this time the long way around to Hawaii. The Sampo is successfully destroyed, and the Finns can sleep easier, if only they knew. The book peters to an end with a couple of chapters tying up loose ends and explaining various points. All told, a good read.

COZY MYSTERIES

by Dale Speirs

I don’t read cozy mysteries as a class per se, but in the search for my themed reviews I do check through them for relevant stories. Cozy mysteries are one of the largest subgenres in the mystery field, rivaling police procedurals, spies, noir, or private detectives. They are the Miss Marple style of amateur detectives, living in villages with murder rates that would shock a Manhattan police officer. The protagonists are women, usually single or divorced. That is the gender of the majority of readers of this type of fiction, who look for wish fulfillment as much as a whodunit story.

The heroine runs some sort of small shop whose economics are questionable in the villages of these stories. There are series about rural women making a living from rubber stamps, tattooing, dog walking, typewriter repairing (in the 2000s, not the 1960s), bookstores, and other businesses that do best in big cities. A few have more plausible occupations that could exist in rural areas, such as blueberry farming or a café owner.

Very often the women have strange first names, either masculine, an adjective or object, or what would normally be a surname. The heroine is either the main suspect or the next potential victim in each novel. She will, of course, butt into police investigations. She often commits felony or obstruction offenses while doing her own amateur sleuthing, to say nothing of contaminating evidence enough to get the case thrown out of court.

One marker of cozy mysteries is the punning title. I suspect that some of these books were written to a suggested title, not the other way around. Just to take one example, consider these titles by Hannah Reed (copyright notice on title

page says Deb Baker) for her Queen Bee Mystery series. This is about a female beekeeper named Story Fischer (what did I tell you about first names?) who lives near the village of Moraine, Wisconsin. She and her hives get into no end of trouble in the following novels: BUZZ OFF, MIND YOUR OWN BEESWAX, PLAN BEE, BEELINE TO TROUBLE, and BEEWITCHED.

Out of curiosity, I browsed the mystery shelves of the Central branch of the Calgary Public Library, and came up with the following, by no means a complete list. It was easy enough to recognize cozy mysteries from a distance. They are all paperback originals, uniform design, with pastel, sky blue, or dandelion yellow covers. They come in sets of about a half dozen or so.

Cats: A dozen series at least, a sub-subgenre if you will. An example is Laurie Cass's Bookmobile Cat mysteries, set in the lake town of Chilson, Michigan. Librarian Minnie Hamilton and her cat make the rounds of the countryside in a bookmobile. She seems to check out as many corpses as she does books. Cats as P.I.s are a popular motif, since they are smarter than dogs or many humans.

Florists or garden centres: Again, numerous series, an example at random being Kate Collins's Flower Shop mysteries. Set in the town of New Chapel, Indiana, shopkeeper Abby Knight isn't the only one pushing daisies. So do a remarkable number of her neighbours, friends, and passersby, except they push up daisies from six feet under.

Scrapbooking: Several series, including Mollie Cox Bryan's Cumberland Creek mysteries, set in a small Virginia town. Annie is a freelance reporter who files more murder stories with the wire services than any dozen Chicago journalists. The town has a scrapbook club who seem like a bunch to avoid, given how often one of their kind is suspected of murder. You'd be safer joining a biker gang.

Contracting: Okay, this occupation can make money even in the village of Lighthouse Cove, California, where author Kate Carlisle has set her Fixer-Upper Mystery series. The heroine is Shannon Hammer, a carpenter whose name should have been edited to something less cutesy. Bodies appear in her renovation jobs regularly, such that one wonders why anyone would ask her for a price quote.

Fashion shops: Always popular as a theme, whether clothing shops or fashion designers. A random example is the Consignment Shop Mystery series by Duffy Brown. It is set in Savannah, Georgia, admittedly a city of 140,000 and

not a village. As with many protagonists, Reagan Summerside is a divorcee (weird first names again; her parents were obviously Republicans). She has only the house and a large collection of designer dresses left over from happier days when she had a rich husband. She opens a consignment shop on the main floor of the house to help her get by. It doesn't take long for the first body to appear, that of her ex-husband's trophy wife, and from there it's a steady supply of corpses to the morgue.

Specialty shops: No village is too small to have at least one cozy business that shouldn't be. The Cycle Path (notice the pun?) series by Duffy Brown has its heroine Evie working in a bicycle store in the village of Mackinac Island, Lake Huron. She gave up the good life in Los Angeles and decided to seek new pastures back east. Little did the inhabitants know what was going to be inflicted upon them after she arrived.

Food: I don't read these much, because I then get so hungry that I go out and ruin my diet. These books often include recipes for the dishes mentioned, along with a publisher's disclaimer on the title page that we're not responsible if you get food poisoning.

While some series are about restaurant or hotel cooks, there are a surprising number about food critics on rural newspapers or competitors at local food festivals. Newspapers everywhere are being killed off by the Internet but it's amazing how many small-town newspapers keep a food columnist on staff. The Haley Powell Food and Cocktail Mystery series by Lee Hollis has one such person on staff at the ISLAND TIMES of Bar Harbor, Maine. Powell has a knack for stumbling over bodies, not just figuratively.

Food contests can drive emotions high. Kylie Logan has a specialty series called the Chili Cook-Off Mysteries. It isn't just the food that gets people hot. Maxie Pierce and her half-sister Sylvia run chili cook-offs across America, leaving a trail of bodies behind them.

For really, really specialized businesses that one wonders how they could survive in villages, there is the Soup Lover's Mystery series by Connie Archer. The proprietor operates the By The Spoonful shop in Snowflake, Vermont. Could it really support people? It's not like soup is a breakfast menu item, or working men fill themselves up for the day at lunch. Nor could the business sustain itself with Internet orders. In a city, it might survive. I grew up in villages, so I have my doubts.

SEEN IN THE LITERATURE

Mangold, N., et al (2016) **Mars: a small terrestrial planet.** ASTRONOMY AND ASTROPHYSICS REVIEW 24(15):1-107

Authors’ abstract: “Mars is one of the inner planets, belonging to the family of terrestrial, rock-dominated planets. By being smaller and farther away from the sun, Mars is characterized by a cold, tenuous atmosphere that evolved differently from that of Earth and Venus. Our knowledge of the geological evolution of Mars has strongly improved thanks to the NASA Mars Program and the ESA Mars Express mission in the last two decades. All together, five orbiter missions, four rovers, and one lander have acquired a tremendous amount of data of various types (visible and infrared imagery, altimetry, radar, chemistry, etc.). ... Multiple pieces of geological evidence indicate that its ancient climate was different than its present one with liquid water flowing at the surface, at least episodically. The surface composition and physical properties (mineralogy, chemistry, thermal inertia, and density) have been mapped in great detail by remote-sensing instruments that reveal a diversity of processes close to that observed on Earth.”

“While the early Mars conditions were clearly different from the present, as deduced from various observations (aqueous mineralogy and fluvial landforms, D/H ratio, and Ar isotopes), the exact conditions under which liquid water was stable at the surface are still controversial. Was water liquid seasonally, or episodically over short periods geologically speaking? Only detailed investigations in situ as performed by rovers can help to further decipher the paleoclimate of the first billion years recorded in the ancient sediments. The precise timing and causes for the climatic transition are not well-established, but there is a general consensus that the loss of the magnetic field has strongly influenced surface conditions.”

Four papers published in the 2016-12-01 issue of NATURE discussed the remarkable feature on Pluto called Sputnik Planitia, a 4-km deep basin filled with nitrogen ice overlaying a liquid ocean. I cite a couple of them here.

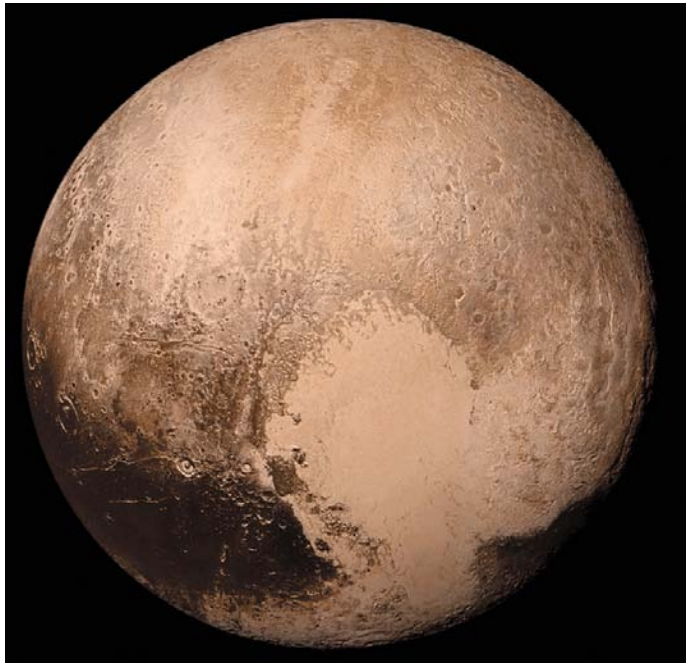
Barr, A.C. (2016) **Pluto's telltale heart.** NATURE 540:42-43

Extracts from paper: “Pluto is one of the dwarf planets in the Kuiper belt, a family of objects beyond the orbit of Neptune that are about half the size of

Earth’s Moon, and is composed of solid water ice and rock. On Pluto, an outer shell of water ice behaves like bedrock; the ice is shaped into mountains, fractures and faults by internal tectonic forces, and forms impact craters when objects strike the dwarf planet.”

“The left half of the heart-shaped region on Pluto is informally known as Sputnik Planitia and is unlike any other geological feature in the Solar System. It consists of a depression in Pluto’s water-ice shell that is filled with the same ices that comprise the dwarf planet’s atmosphere. This deposit of atmospheric ices is about 4 kilometres thick, which is similar to the average depth of Earth’s oceans. Its surface is smooth and only 10 million years old.”

“Pluto is not perfectly spherical; the gravity of its moon, Charon, causes Pluto to be egg-shaped. Therefore, in the minimum-energy configuration of the Pluto-Charon system, the long axes of Pluto and Charon are aligned. Charon always orbits above the same spot on Pluto, as though the two bodies were joined by a rigid stick. However, when frost accumulated in Sputnik Planitia, the system was no longer in a minimum-energy configuration. Pluto rolled over, and its ice shell was fractured by the resulting tension and compression forces, creating canyons and mountains. The line that now joins Pluto and Charon pierces the centre of Sputnik Planitia, a configuration that is favoured only if Sputnik Planitia represents a region of excess mass, despite the fact that it is a depression.”



Sputnik Planitia is the circular icefield in the lower centre of this NASA photo.

Hamilton, D.P., et al (2016) **The rapid formation of Sputnik Planitia early in Pluto’s history.** NATURE 540:97-99

Authors’ abstract: *“Here we report modelling that shows that ice quickly accumulates on Pluto near latitudes of 30 degrees north and south, even in the absence of a basin, because, averaged over its orbital period, those are Pluto’s coldest regions. Within a million years of Charon’s formation, ice deposits on Pluto concentrate into a single cap centred near a latitude of 30 degrees, owing to the runaway albedo effect. This accumulation of ice causes a positive gravity signature that locks, as Pluto’s rotation slows, to a longitude directly opposite Charon. Once locked, Charon raises a permanent tidal bulge on Pluto, which greatly enhances the gravity signature of the ice cap.”*

“Meanwhile, the weight of the ice in Sputnik Planitia causes the crust under it to slump, creating its own basin (as has happened on Earth in Greenland). Even if the feature is now a modest negative gravity anomaly, it remains locked in place because of the permanent tidal bulge raised by Charon. Any movement of the feature away from 30 degrees latitude is countered by the preferential recondensation of ices near the coldest extremities of the cap. Therefore, our modelling suggests that Sputnik Planitia formed shortly after Charon did and has been stable, albeit gradually losing volume, over the age of the Solar System.”

Miller, L.M., and A. Kleidon (2016) **Wind speed reductions by large-scale wind turbine deployments lower turbine efficiencies and set low generation limits.** PROCEEDINGS OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES USA 113:13570-13575

Authors’ abstract: *“Understanding the limits of electricity generation from winds is a requirement for planning a renewable energy future. A difficulty in estimating such limits is that wind turbines remove kinetic energy from the atmosphere, so that many turbines should reduce wind speeds, ultimately setting a limit to how much kinetic energy can be taken out of the atmosphere. We show that this slowdown effect can be accounted for by detailed climate model simulations and a relatively simple method that does not directly simulate atmospheric dynamics. This slowdown effect is critical to consider, as it makes each turbine less productive and shows that few land areas can yield more than 1.0 Watts per square metre of electricity at large scales.”*

Speirs: Environmentalists consider wind energy to be clean and green, but I've often wondered about that. Southwestern Alberta is one of the windiest places on Earth. As a consequence, it has attracted massive wind turbine farms. In driving around the area, I find it difficult to enjoy the natural beauty of the mountains and foothills without a line of turbines intruding into the picture. Below is a photo I took in 2013 near Pincher Creek in southwestern Alberta.

