

OPUNTIA 377



Victoria Day 2017

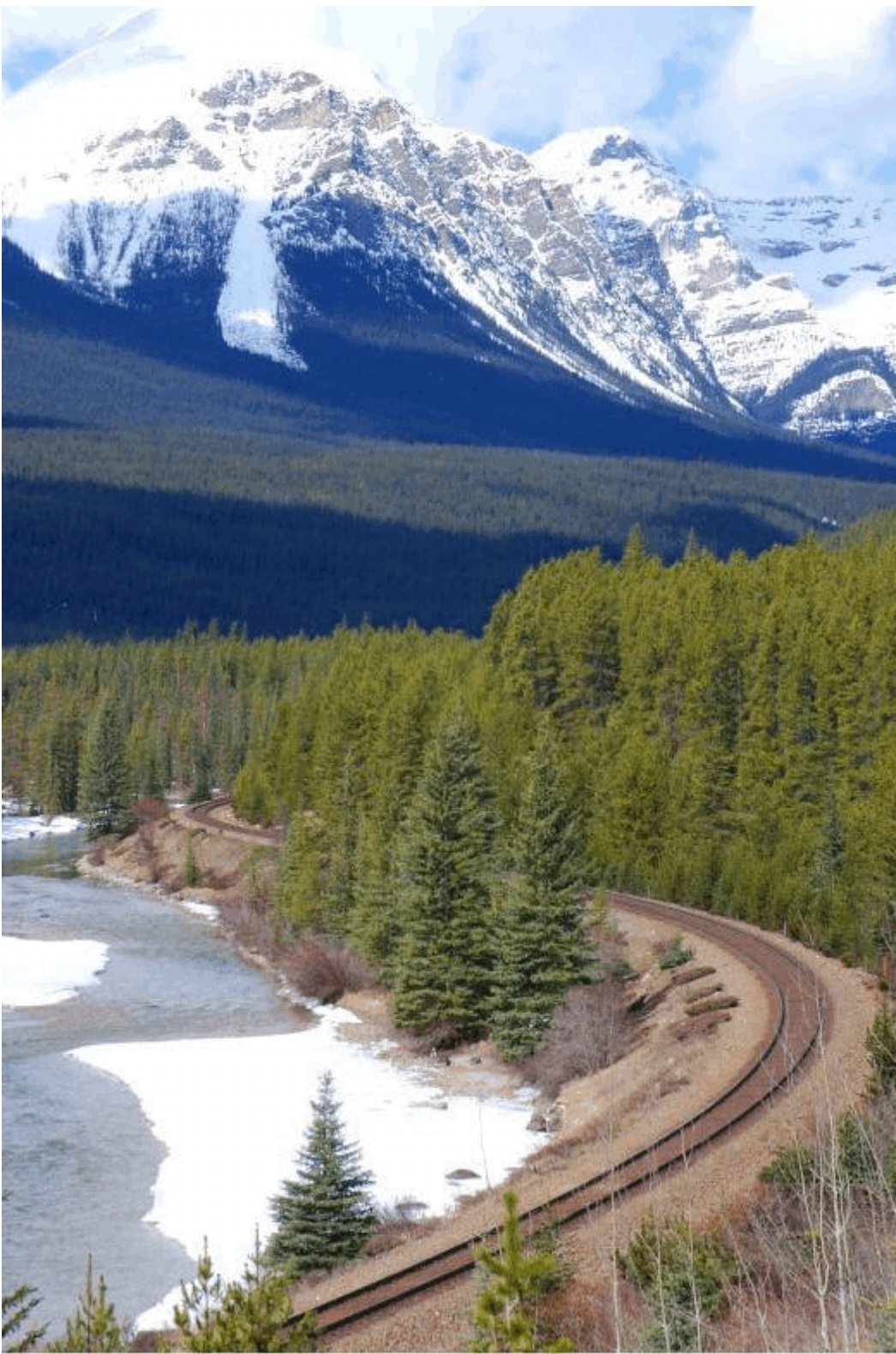
Opuntia is published by Dale Speirs, Calgary, Alberta. It is posted on www.efanzines.com and www.fanac.org. My e-mail address is: opuntia57@hotmail.com When sending me an emailed letter of comment, please include your name and town in the message.

ROCKY MOUNTAIN WAY: BOW VALLEY PARKWAY AND JOHNSTON CANYON

photos by Dale Speirs

Continuing with photos from my trip into Banff National Park on May 4, here are some that I took from the Bow Valley Parkway, which is the old Trans-Canada Highway between Banff and Lake Louise. It runs along the east side of the Bow River on benchlands about halfway up the mountain slopes. It is now the scenic route, and is a narrow two-lane highway. The “new” Trans-Canada Highway, a four-lane divided highway completed in the early 1960s, runs along the bottomlands on the west side of the river, and except for a few turnouts, is screened by spruce forest. It is the major transcontinental route and is very busy with semitrailers. Since you can’t photograph the mountain you’re standing on, all these photos look west across the river from the Parkway to the mountains on the far side of the valley.





The transcontinental railroad winds its way along the east bank of the Bow River, still on its original trackbed from 1883, although of course the rails and ties have been changed many times. This section is known as Morant's Curve, after a railfan of the early and middle 1900s who took thousands of photos of trains from the exact same spot where I took this one.

During his time, Morant photographed hundreds of different steam locomotives and the various types of freight and passenger cars, a priceless trove of rail history that is still used today by researchers. He liked the curve because it showed off the full train.

Below: A short distance further south on the Parkway, I photographed this flock of bighorn sheep. They look mangy because they are shedding their winter coats. The young males are still growing their horns.



At right: Mount Howard Douglas

Below: Mount Whympre (at left) and Boom Mountain.



Storm Mountain, which got its name for obvious reasons. I have tried to photograph it many times before over the years, but its peaks were always obscured by snow or rain clouds even if the rest of the park was sunny and dry.

This is the first time I ever got a decent shot of the mountain.



Below: The Bow River is in the foreground. The muskeg flats are the outlet of Brewster Creek on the far side of the valley, not visible in this shot.



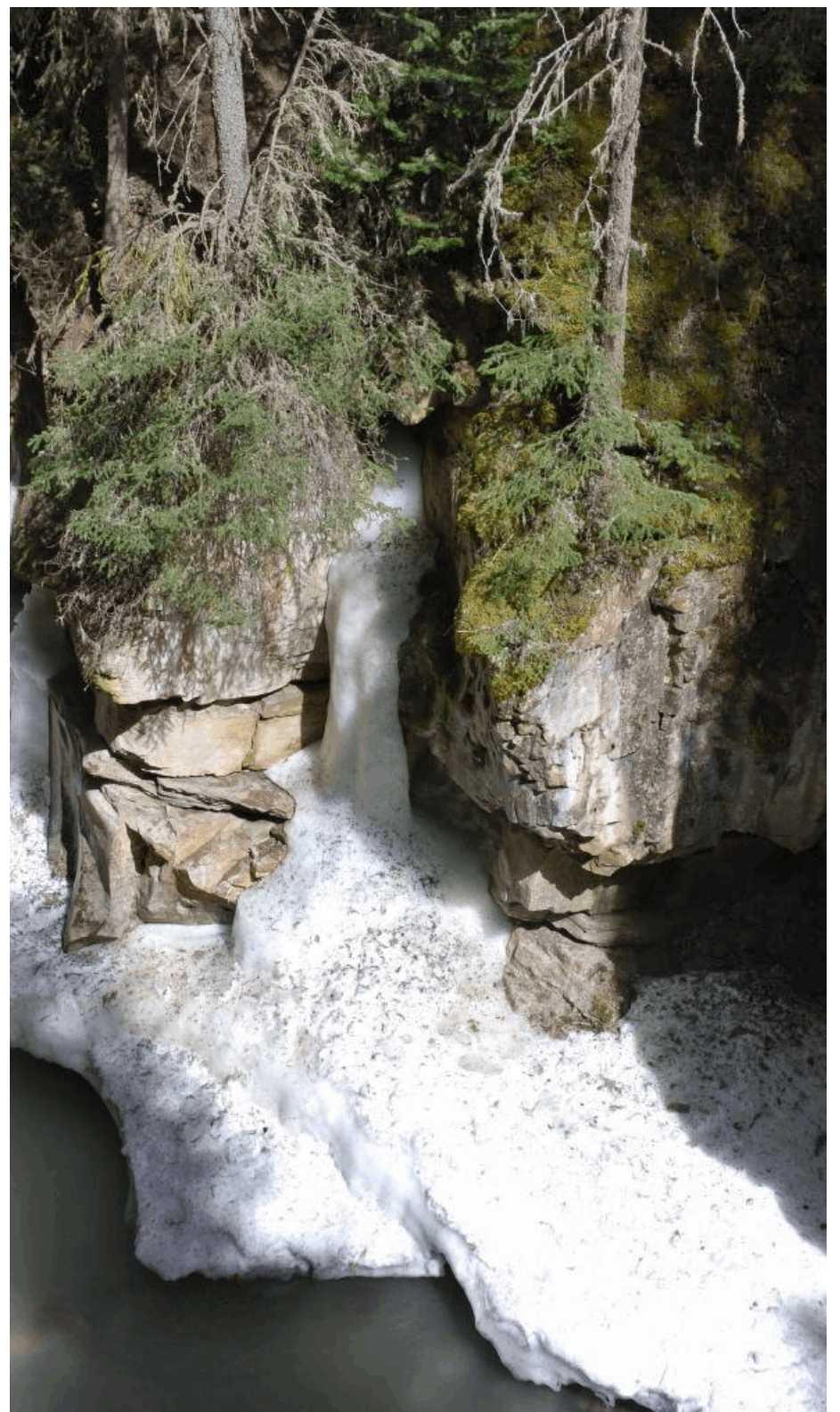
You're probably tired of looking at all these mountain photos, so next is a sequence taken in Johnston Canyon, which is about halfway along the Parkway. The trail was still icy, so I only went up to the Lower Falls, about a kilometre from the trailhead. The Upper Falls are a couple more kilometres up the canyon.

At right is the catwalk just inside the entrance to the canyon. More views on the next page.



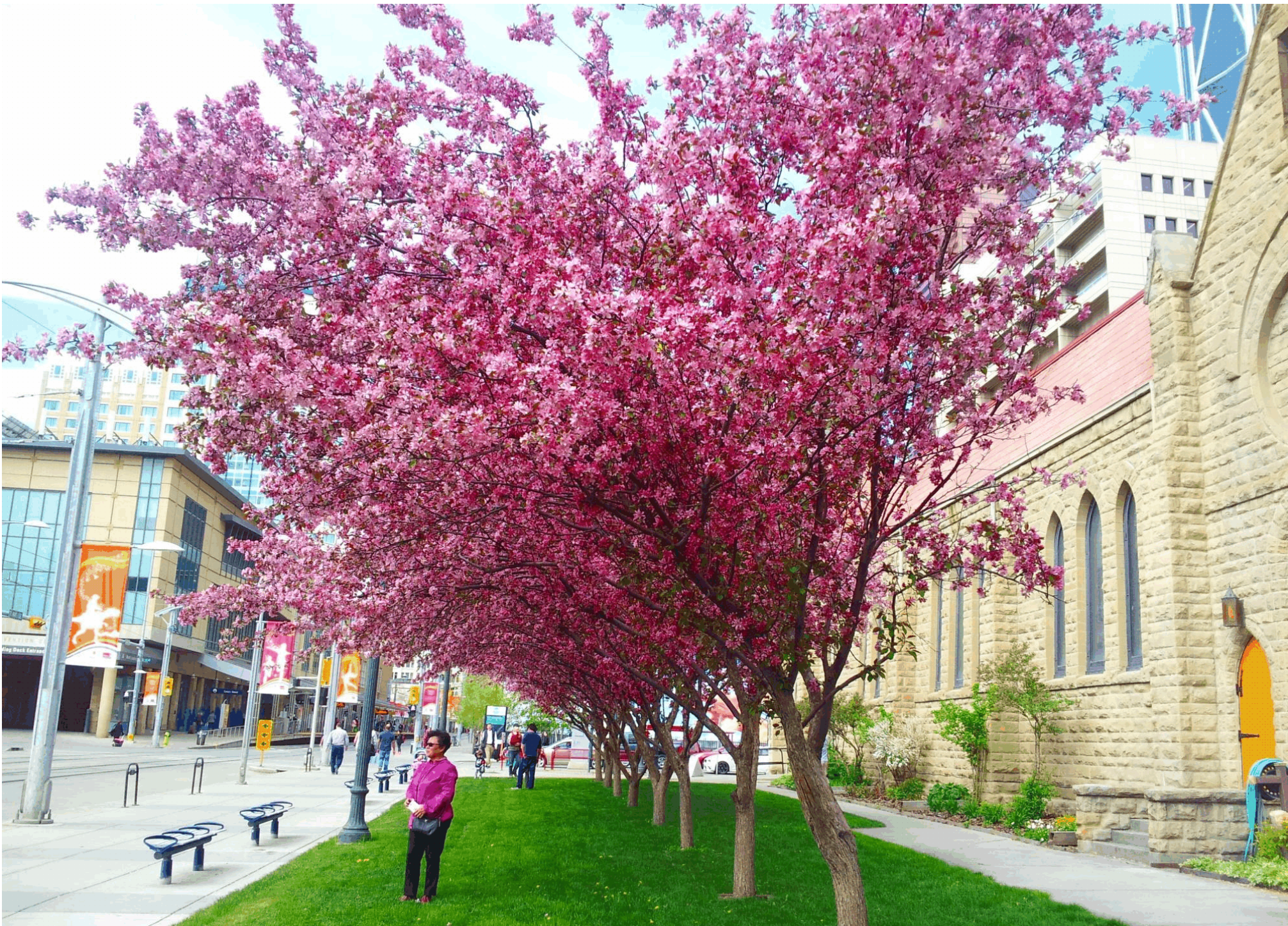


Frozen
seepages



The Lower Falls. There is a natural tunnel that brings one onto a ledge for a closer view.





At right: Yarnbombing at Knox United Church on 6 Avenue SW.

Below: Prince’s Island in the Bow River along the north edge of the downtown core.



RADIO FICTION: PART 8

by Dale Speirs

[Parts 1 to 7 appeared in OPUNTIA's #301, 302, 310, 319, 330, 353, and 370.]

Palaeofiction.

Radio took a couple of decades to get going after the basic discoveries and prototypes were made. It wasn't until the late 1920s that broadcast radio began to spread and be heard by more than a few dozen techies. Until the early 1930s, radio stories were exciting scientific romances (the term "science fiction" hadn't been invented yet). Incidentally, the reason why radio was and often still is called the wireless is because the original name for it was "wireless telephone". The oldest fiction about radio frequently uses the full name.

Like SF in general, the introduction of a new device triggers Tom Swift type stories about how the device will be used to save the world or rescue a fair maiden in distress. The real ramifications don't appear until much later. The automobile was written up as a device to explore strange lands or stop villainy by racing to the scene of the crime faster than a horse could go. Suburban sprawl, smog, and freeways that turned into parking lots during rush hour were not thought of at the time.

Likewise, radio had non-obvious ramifications. It destroyed vaudeville and reduced legitimate stage theatre to a shadow of itself. Orators found it a perfect device to stir up crowds and pump out propaganda to the masses. The palaeofiction stories missed these trends.

Which brings us to THE RADIO BOYS' FIRST WIRELESS, OR, WINNING THE FERBERTON PRIZE, by Allen Chapman, a 1922 novel available free from www.gutenberg.org. This was published at the dawn of the radio age. How could I not review this book when the resident mad scientist is Dr Dale?

The rooms were comfortably filled when Dr. Dale, with a genial smile, rose and took up his stand near the table.

"Now, boys," he said, "I've asked you to come here to-night so that we can talk together and get a little better idea of some of the wonders of the world we are living in. One of those wonders and perhaps the most wonderful of all is the wireless telephone," and here he laid his hand on the box beside him. "Most of

you have heard of it and want to learn more about it. I'm going to try to explain it to you just as simply as I possibly can. And I'm not going to do all the talking either, for I want you to feel free to ask any questions you like. And before I do any talking worth mentioning, I'm going to give you a little idea of what the wireless telephone can do."

In 1922, it was not a given that the reader would know what a radio was. The author was obliged to do some "As you know, Professor" explaining: *From the time the boys entered the room their eyes were fixed on a box-like contrivance that was placed on a table close up against the wall of the further room.*

It had a number of polished knobs and dials and several groups of wires that seemed to lead in or out of the instrument. Connected with it was a horn such as was common enough in the early days of the phonograph. There were also several pairs of what looked like telephone ear pieces lying on the table.

They eyed it with intense curiosity, not unmixed with awe. They had already heard and read enough of the wireless telephone to realize that it was one of the greatest marvels of modern times. It seemed almost like something magical, something which, like the lamp of Aladdin, could summon genii who would be obedient to the call.

Dr Dale demonstrates his wireless telephone: *A moment later they heard the clear, vibrant notes of a violin playing a beautiful selection from one of the operas. The music rose and swelled in wonderful sweetness until it filled the room, with the delicious melody and held all the hearers entranced under its spell. It was evident that only the hand of a master could draw such exquisite music from the instrument.*

The doctor waited until the last notes had died away, and smiled with gratification as he saw the rapt look on the faces of his visitors. "Sounds as if it were in the next room, doesn't it?" he asked. "But that music came from Newark, New Jersey."

A new world is being born, much like the Internet. *"And you can pick out any kind of entertainment you want," the doctor went on. "The great stations from which this music was sent out have programs which are published every day, together with the exact time that the selections will be given. At a given minute you can make your adjustment and listen to a violin solo, a band concert, a political speech, a sermon, or anything else that you want. If it doesn't please*

you, you can shut it off at once, which is much easier and pleasanter than getting up and going out from an audience.”

Like the Internet, radio broadcasting was initially touted for its educational value. That didn’t last long, of course, as the people preferred soap operas and comedies, much like Internet users prefer YouTube videos of Russian dashcam auto accidents. Dr Dale goes into an extended explanation about how radio works, and then at last the plot starts rolling.

This being a school chums book, the story brings in the usual stereotypes, such as the rich kid who leads a gang of bullies, a fair damsel suitably distressed, a villain foreclosing on a mortgage, and bumbling adults who get in the way of the boys. The Ferberton Prize has been offered to the boys who build the best radio set, and you can bet there will be skullduggery along the way. There are no prizes for guessing how everything ends.

THE VOICE FROM THE VOID is a 1922 novel by William Le Queux (1864-1927), available from www.gutenberg.org. It is an action-adventure spy novel with liberal helpings of melodrama and what today we call rom-com. Le Queux was a journalist who was also an enthusiastic aviation pioneer and an early ham radio operator. He broadcast music from his station during the earliest years when only a few dozen people might listen. As a consequence, this novel has a number of infodumps about early shortwave radio, although to be fair, they would have been needed to educate the average reader of this book.

The novel begins with that time-honoured cliché of the villain about to foreclose on a mortgage, adds in the hero trying to get an emerald mine developed, two or three romances, sharp practice, and espionage. There is an interesting description of how the villains bugged a room with a button-sized hidden microphone. Kidnapping, assault, and attempted murder are part of the background, almost incidental to all the other subplots and twists.

Both sides, the good (hero, damsel in distress, foreclosed vicar) and the bad (forger, forecloser, vixen) use shortwave radios the way others used telegrams or telephones. The frequent use of radio by almost every character allows the author to insert infodumps. No one just picks up the microphone; they must first explain some technical detail to the nearest innocent bystander.

The villains have their own problems, such as one of them who doesn’t understand there is no privacy on the airwaves: *“Or else bluff it out, Freda!”*

interrupted Gray. “Yes, you’re right! But to deliberately ask after the health of Roderick Homfray over the wireless telephone, well, it’s simply courting trouble.”

“Why?”

“Well, don’t you know that there’s an apparatus invented by two clever Italians, Bellini and Tosi, which is called a direction-finder?” asked her rather good-looking companion, as he removed his cigar from his lips. “That apparatus is in use all over the country. That’s how they find aircraft lost in fogs, and that’s how they could find to a yard exactly the position of this secret set of ours from which you spoke those silly jeering words.”

“Gad! you’re a fool, Freda! Shut up, and don’t meddle with this wireless transmitter in future! Remember, I’ve got no official licence. This room”, and he swept his hand around the small apartment filled with a marvellous collection of wireless apparatus, “is our secret. If the authorities discovered it, well, it would, no doubt, be the end for both of us, the Old Bailey and, well, just jug for both of us. I know something about wireless, and as you know it bears us in good stead. We’ve profited thousands on the stunt, you and I, Freda, ...”

“And Roderick Homfray also knows something about wireless, my dear old thing,” laughed the handsome woman, lazily taking a cigarette from her gold case, tapping it and lighting it.

“That’s just it! You’re a priceless fool to have taken such a risk as to speak broadcast as you did. What did you say?”

“I only asked how 3.X.Q. Roddy Homfray of Little Farncombe, was getting on, and gave my name as Freda!”

“Fool!” yelled Gordon Gray in fury.

I don’t blame him for shouting. They get theirs in the end though, so rest easy on that part. This novel reminded me of the cyberpunk era, when SF writers wrote cutting-edge novels that are now hopelessly obsolete. Techno-thrillers have the same problem.

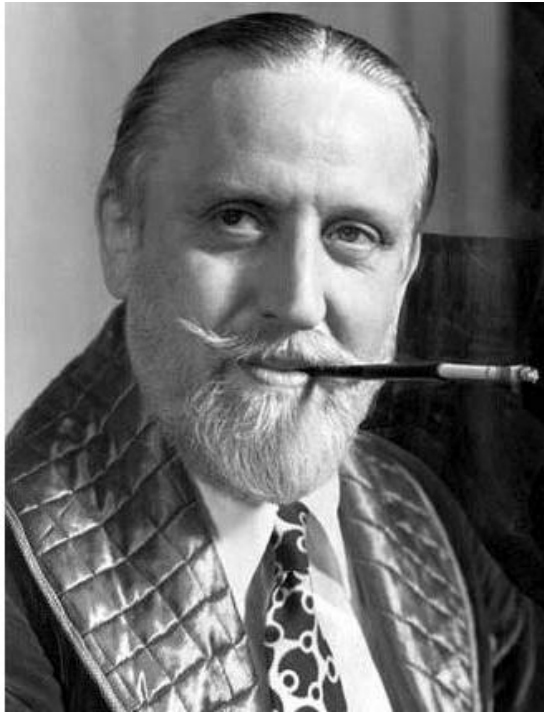
Putting in too many specific details may make a book trendy and cutting-edge at the time, but will render it quaint in the not too far distant future.

Cyberpunks, for example, used giant computers with several megabytes capacity, chased around trying to find floppy disks with secret information, and jacked in with headpieces instead of using Bluetooth.

Humour On The Air.

Edgar Montillion Woolley (1888-1963) is forgotten today, but in his time he was a memorable actor who specialized in roles as egotistical pompous men.

He was born into a wealthy family, taught as a university professor at Yale, was a commissioned officer in WW1, and trod the boards for decades. Monty Woolley was a closeted gay man (as he had to be in those days when it wasn't just a sin but a felony) who was noted for his impressive beard.



His best remembered character, one that he performed many times on stage, screen, and radio, was Sheridan Whiteside in comedy THE MAN WHO CAME TO DINNER. Whiteside was based on drama critic Alexander Woolcott, who was a real-life egotistical pompous man, and someone who was notorious as an obnoxious house guest.

During 1950-51, Woolley had a radio comedy series called THE MAGNIFICENT MONTAGUE, available as free mp3s from www.archive.org. He played the part of Edwin Montague, a Shakespearean stage actor who had sunk so low in life as to become a radio actor. Throughout the series, he was always desperately trying to hide the fact that he was Uncle Goodheart on an afternoon soap opera. His wife Lily had got him the part. It paid well, enough to enable them to keep a live-in maid Agnes.

One of the recurring characters was Montague's father, also a Shakespearean actor and with a bigger ego than the son. Both parts were voiced by Woolley, which explains the hysterical audience laughter every time the old man showed up in the script. Sometimes Woolley got mixed up and traded their voices, for an even louder reaction.

Agnes had been Lily's dresser before she retired from the stage, and was a sharp-tongued woman who was quite the match for Montague. Agnes enjoyed Montague Senior's lascivious attentions when he came to visit.

There are also extracts from the Uncle Goodheart show, in which he dispensed soppy anecdotes meant to be heartwarming, and gave people advice whether they wanted it or not. The show was a straight-faced parody of radio soap operas, not a difficult thing to do.

The sound quality of the mp3s is excellent, and the show is well written. Each episode is a half-hour, so they would make good listening for you on your commutes.

Murder On The Air.

LET GEORGE DO IT was an old-time radio (OTR) series about private detective George Valentine who, each week, was always stumbling into a murder, usually the client who hired him. (This and thousands of other OTR shows are available as free downloads at www.archive.org)

The 1951 episode "Off The Record", written by Lloyd London, is about a radio crusader named Dan Dana who hires Valentine to find out who has been sending Dana threatening letters telling him to get off the air. Dana is intending to reveal a scandal involving a prominent politician. Just as he is about to name the scoundrel, there is the inevitable gunshot and he falls dead at the microphone. Someone sniped at him through a studio window from a distance, so the murderer wasn't seen.

Dana had his enemies. He was hired by order of the station owner who wanted ratings, against the objections of the station manager, who was grooming a different reporter for the job. Dana was having an affair with his secretary, so his wife is another suspect.

The man who was passed over for Dana's job had a hobby of recording radio shows off the air on his tape deck at home. His alibi is broken when Valentine realizes the tape recorder was set on a timer to record while the culprit was down at the station committing the crime.

The story moves briskly, but with a few of the standard logic gaps that P.I. series are prone to. Valentine burgles the suspect's apartment to get clues, and contaminates the evidence. The culprit breaks down after fifteen seconds of questioning and sobs "Yes! I did it! And I'd gladly do it again!". Had he kept his mouth shut, a first-year law student could have gotten him acquitted.

Murder On The Screen.

While browsing Amazon, I came across a couple of cozy mystery DVDs about murder in the radio studios. They follow standard procedure of cozies, such as meddling Miss Marples solving the case, and Suspect #1 becoming Victim #2.



DANGER ON THE AIR is a 1938 movie based on the book DEATH CATCHES UP WITH MR KLUCK by Edith Meiser, who published her novel under the pseudonym Xanthippe. The screenplay was written by Betty Laidlaw and Robert Lively. Meiser's day job was writing and producing for radio, so she

knew whereof she spoke, and slipped in several sly digs and in-jokes about the industry. This is a witty comedy, well worth watching.

Caesar Kluck, a boorish radio show sponsor, departs this life suddenly and unmourned by all who knew him. Someone injected poison gas into the sponsor's booth. He was a skirt chaser, so Christina MacCorkle, a beautiful young advertising executive who handled the account, and had repelled his advances, is in a mess. Her brother Alexander and studio engineer Ben Butts, her romantic interest, try to solve the mystery to clear her name.

Besides Christina, there are other suspects. The station janitor's daughter is a receptionist and has been showered with jewelry by Kluck, which the father insisted she return. Kluck used underworld characters to help muscle out his competitors, and just before dying had an argument with a gangster.

The network owner is beside himself with fear about what the murder will do to the studio's reputation. Once it becomes known that poison gas was used, the actors and crew refuse to enter the building. However, a studio messenger gets his big break. He does impersonations and sings, but previously no one would give him a chance. Now he becomes a dozen different performers and keeps the station on the air.

The MacCorkle siblings and Butts carry out the investigation and are ready to identify the killer. As per tradition in cozy mysteries, there is a J'accuse! meeting.

The ending is a cheat though, with previously unmentioned facts suddenly coming to light. The murderer, a studio announcer barely mentioned before, blurts out a confession. His father's business had been ruined by Kluck, and it was all for revenge. Had he kept his mouth shut, it would have been impossible to convict him.

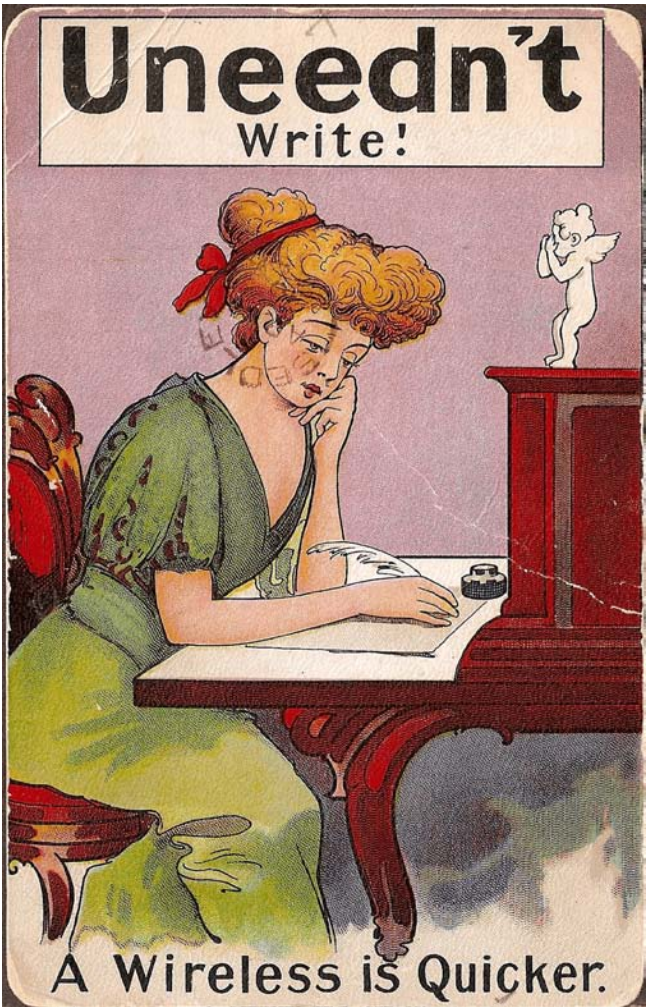
UP IN THE AIR is a 1940 movie written by Edmond Kelso, about a diva who dies in mid-song while on the air. The movie is unusual in that the main male lead actor is Mantan Moreland, a black man in the mode of Jack Benny's Rochester, or Amos and Andy.

As the DVD package carefully notes: "Some of the scenes are inappropriate by today's standards and reflect the attitudes prevalent when the film was created."

The movie is padded out with musical, dancing, and blackface acts, the latter two of which seem out of place for the radio station in which it is set. But then again, one of the biggest names in real-life OTR was Edgar Bergen, a ventriloquist.

The plot starts rolling during a studio rehearsal when Rita Wilson, an unpopular chanteuse, is shot while performing. The killer turned off the lights, fired a shot, hid the gun, and then resumed his seat while someone else turned the lights back on again.

The prime suspect is singing cowboy Tex Barton, who looks suspicious in the nth degree, but he follows tradition and becomes victim #2. A radio station messenger Frankie Ryan and his black sidekick Jeff (Moreland) take up amateur detecting, much to the annoyance of the Homicide detective.



After various alarms and excursions, Ryan is about to incorrectly name the murderer. He never gets a chance to start the J'accuse! meeting.

Before he can say anything, the real murderer, a station announcer, pulls a gun, and confesses to the crowd. There was no evidence linking him to the two murders, no one thought of him as a suspect, and yet he immediately blabs all. The guilty flee when no one pursues.

ZINE LISTINGS

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

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

FLAG #19 (The Usual from Andy Hooper, 11032 - 30 Avenue NE, Seattle, Washington 98125) The main article is about the history of fanzine publishing by the Los Angeles Science Fiction Society, followed by many letters of comment.

WORLD WIDE PARTY ON JUNE 21

Founded by Benoit Girard (Quebec) and Franz Miklis (Austria) in 1994, the World Wide Party is held on June 21st every year. 2017 will be the 24th year of the WWP.

At 21h00 local time, everyone is invited to raise a glass and toast fellow members of the Papernet around the world. It is important to have it exactly at 21h00 your time. The idea is to get a wave of fellowship circling the planet. Rescheduling it to a club meeting or more convenient time negates the idea of a wave of celebration by SF fans and zinesters circling the globe. Raise a glass, publish a one-shot zine, have a party, or do a mail art project for the WWP. Let me know how you celebrated the day.

At 21h00, face to the east and salute those who have already celebrated. Then face north, then south, and toast those in your time zone who are celebrating as you do. Finally, face west and raise a glass to those who will celebrate WWP in the next hour.