

OPUNTIA 429

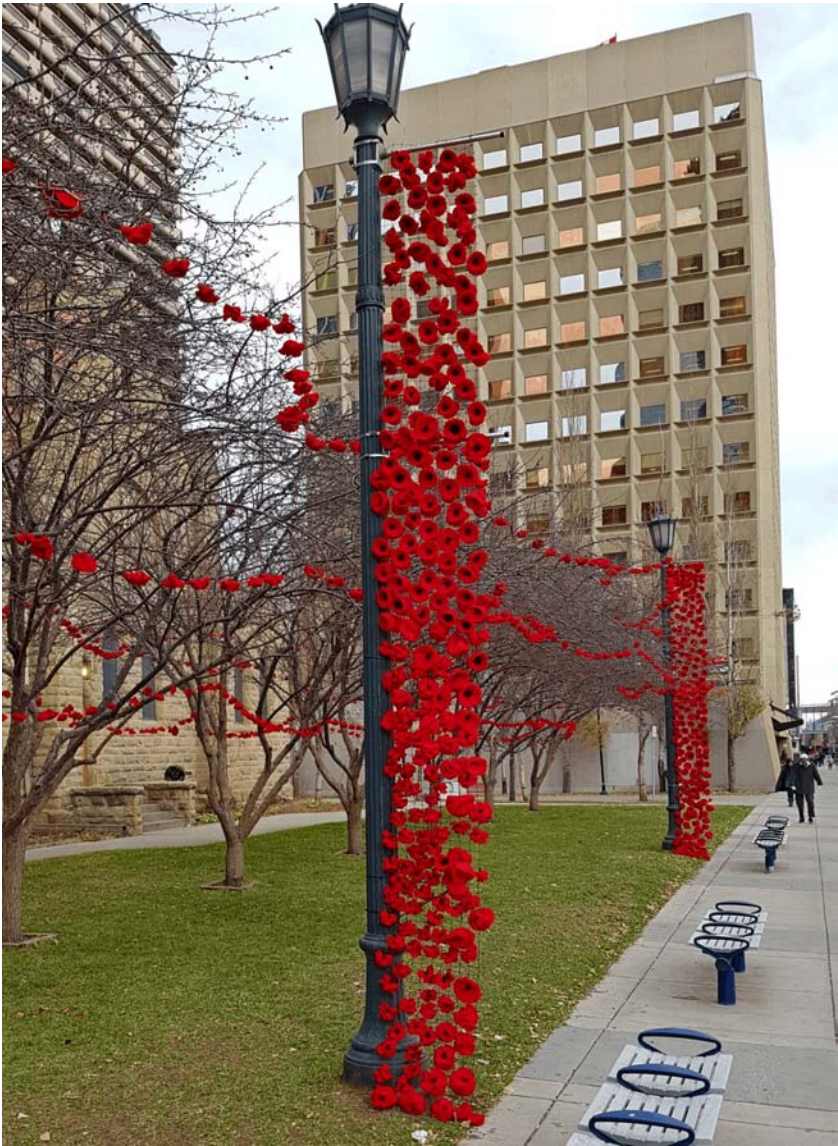


Remembrance Day 2018

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.

LEST WE FORGET
photos by Dale Speirs

The Anglican Cathedral downtown on 7 Avenue SW set up a new display of knitted poppies. This year is, of course, the centenary of Armistice Day.





This display was in the TD Square mall a few blocks away.



THE CALGARY MILITARY MUSEUMS: PART 5
photos by Dale Speirs

[Parts 1 to 4 appeared in OPUNTIA's #415, 416, 425, and 426.]

The Lord Strathcona Horse, today an armoured regiment, had a long history in Calgary, although they were always headquartered elsewhere. It was founded in 1899 by Donald Smith, a railroad baron later granted a peerage back when Canada still allowed them. His title was Lord Strathcona and Mount Royal. The regiment was 400 calvarymen.

Below: The Strathconas first fought in the Boer War. This life-size diorama showed a sergeant rescuing one of his wounded men while under enemy fire.

Upper right: World War One: A brave, and if you ask me very foolish, Lieutenant from the Strathcona Horse singlehandedly put a German machine-gun nest out of action.

Lower right: The Strathconas have served as peacekeepers with United Nation forces.



Below: The Balkan wars of the 1990s.



Below: The regiment took numerous casualties in Afghanistan in the early 2000s.



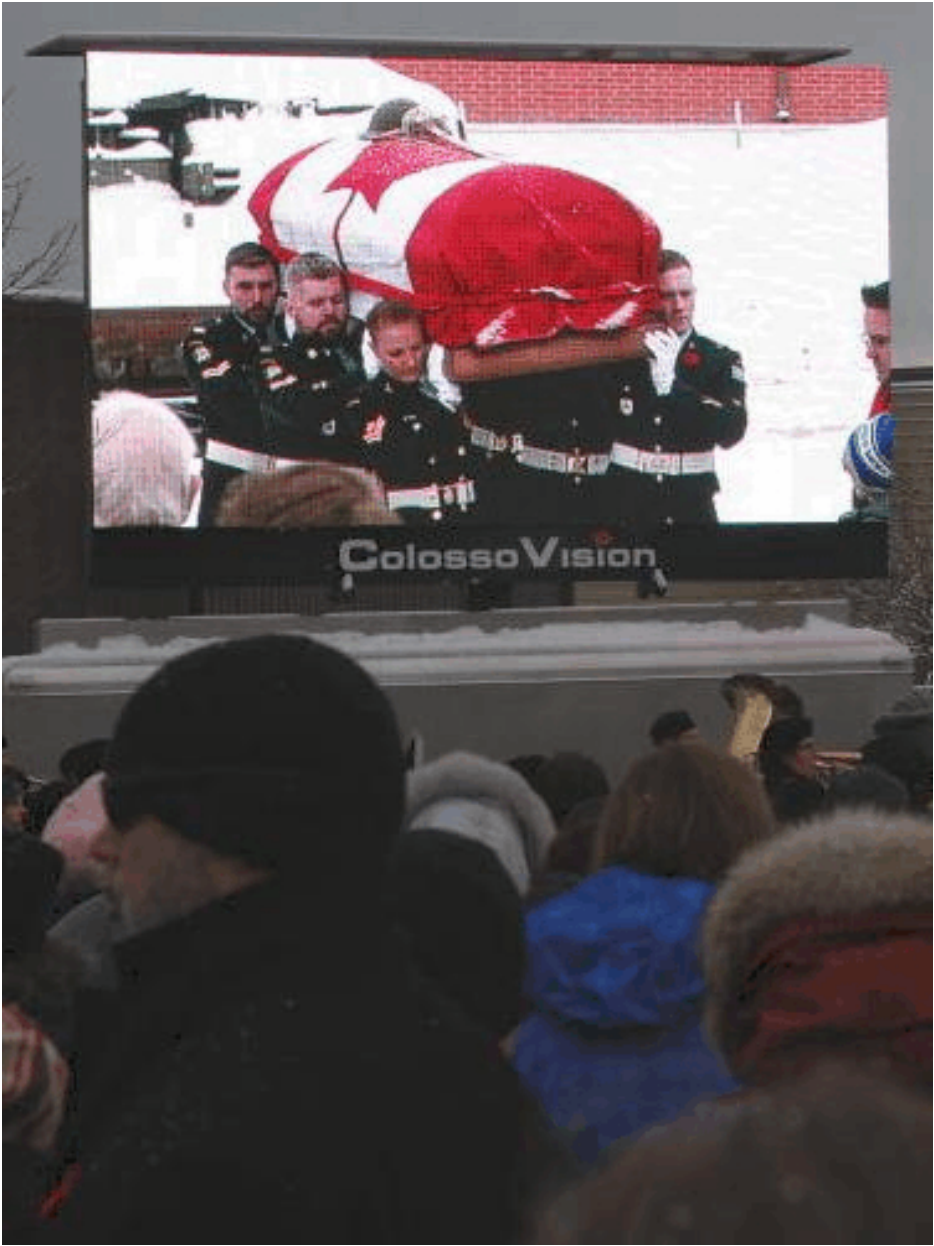
There are probably a hundred Remembrance Day ceremonies throughout Calgary, so I attend a different one each year. This year I revisited the ceremony at the Military Museums, one of the bigger events. The ceremony is held outside on the south side of the museum, where berms allow the audience to get a better view.

It snowed overnight, and during the ceremony we had light flurries of snow pellets but thousands still turned out. I could see the stage but had to rely on the large screens to see the speakers.





The parade formations.
 Upper left: Yellow jacketed personnel are paramedics.
 Below left: Regulars.
 Below right: Militia volunteers carry an empty casket, which symbolized all those missing in action and who have no known grave.



I was astonished when I saw the featured speaker was my friend Gordon Hill, whom I've known from the Calgary Philatelic Society for decades. November 11 was also his 96th birthday. Gordon flew Spitfires for the Royal Canadian Air Force in World War Two, and shot down several Me-109s.



This year the flypast was by a Canadian Forces search-and-rescue helicopter, one of their major peacetime duties.





There were two wreath layings. One during the ceremony in front of the stage for military units, and the other afterwards on the other end of the field at the museum's Eternal Flame by ethnic or civilian service groups.





After the ceremony:

Left: The Calgary Air Cadets were reviewed by a General from the regulars.

Below: Various individual personnel paid their respects to the Unknown Grave soldiers.



LET MARS DIVIDE ETERNITY IN TWAIN: PART 12

by Dale Speirs

[Parts 1 to 11 appeared in OPUNTIA's #310, 321, 328, 332, 337, 354, 357, 369, 372, 384, and 401. Reviews of the WAR OF THE WORLDS movies appeared in #289.]

The War Of The Worlds.

STAR BEGOTTEN (1937) by H.G. Wells is a little known sequel to TWOTW. Joseph Davis was the protagonist, a writer who had reason to believe that the Martians, having failed in their frontal attack of 1898, were now using subtler means. He thought they were beaming cosmic rays at Earth to alter human chromosomes and produce ersatz Martians as a prelude to a more successful takeover.

Davis had no proof that such a thing was happening. The entire novel was ambiguous about it, and ended in uncertainty. Davis was an expectant father, and worried that the forthcoming baby might not be his child. His delusions pulled in others. While no one was fearful of the Martians as such, he managed to stir up doubt and discussion. Olaf Stapledon was dragged in (Wells had met him in person), and there was much armchair psychological diagnosing about men and supermen.

The ending made a right-angle turn when Davis, in the nursery with his wife and newborn son, decided that all three of them are Martians. It set his mind at ease, now that he knew for sure.

The book was an interesting read. It didn't quite ring true though, as the psychology was a little too pat. One can understand why it never had the success of TWOTW, but as a study in psychology it is worth reading once.

2000 PLUS was an early old-time radio pure science fiction series that ran from 1950 to 1952. (This and other OTR shows are available as free mp3s from www.otrrlibrary.org.) The stories were set in the far future, the year 2000 plus, which is our present day. Alas! No Mars shuttles or space colonies now. We took a wrong turning en route to the future.

“The Rocket And The Skull” is a 1951 episode, with no writer credited although everyone else was. It was set in the year 2000 plus 6, as stated by the announcer.

Bradbury, no first name ever given, was a rocket pilot scheduled to fly the first American lunar mission, a secret military project. He crashed his plane the day before and cracked his skull badly. The surgeon had to insert metal plates in his head. The mission was in jeopardy because he was the only person trained to fly the rocketship, a rather unbelievable premise. This leads the listener to wonder why the military never trained any backup crews. Somebody should be court-martialed.

Bradbury recovered somewhat from the trauma, albeit a changed man. He babbled something about Mars, but only at certain times of the day. It wasn't just Bradbury's superior officers who were worried. So were two different groups of spies that had infiltrated the base hospital unknown to each other, the Communists and the Martians, who presumably were humanoid and could pass as humans.

Earth politics intruded. The Communists announced they were launching a manned mission to the Moon in six days, which put pressure on the Americans to beat them into space. Presumably the Soviets were smart enough to train more than one man.

It wasn't just the Americans who were upset. The reason the Martians wanted to stop the Earth missions was because they had a secret base on the Moon, and wanted to control the Solar System. Bradbury became coherent and told his superiors about the Martian communications he had been hearing on the metal plates in his head. No one believed him except the Martian spy, who was understandably hysterical with fear at being exposed.

The Communist spy was discovered and taken out. Since nobody believed in Martians, their spy was still safe. The episode cut off with the Martian gloating because he will be able to sabotage the human spaceships without them suspecting. Mars will win. An interesting story with a non-standard plot.

THE MASSACRE OF MANKIND (2017) by Stephen Baxter is a sequel to H.G. Wells's original novel, set in 1924, fourteen years after the first invasion. The war triggered a giant leap forward in human technology but the greater changes were sociological. When new launches on Mars were spotted, humans are confident they can fight off a second attack. They failed to consider that the Martians learned from their mistakes in the first go-around and adapted accordingly.

The sequel is narrated by Julie Elphinstone, sister-in-law of Walter Jenkins, who was the narrator of the original WOTW novel. Governments were still jittery about the Martians. Britain became a police state where unlicensed telescopes were illegal. Travelers inside England are often stopped by men in black uniforms asking them “Papers please”. A major divergence was that Jupiter has a civilization which had been watching both Mars and Earth. The Martians were afraid of them, although the Jovians never showed their faces directly.

Britain braced for the second invasion. This time the Martians softened up the British with an advance salvo of bolides blasting huge craters across the countryside, destroying half their army with the shock waves from the impacts. Then came their spaceships. Incoming artillery shells were vapourized by Martian heat rays coupled to radar. The Martians spread out across Europe and the Americas, and into the Arctic.

They were not invading with just weapons. They brought with them an improved strain of their red weed which, given time, would alter Earth’s atmosphere to better suit them. Their Black Smoke was now resistant to water, that is, it could not be washed out by rain.

The ending was a *deus ex machina*. Earth scientists managed to establish indirect communications with the Jovians, who were always offstage. In turn, the Jovians told the Martians to cease and desist. The ending was utopian and cringeworthy.

Excluding the poor finish, the novel as a whole was quite readable. Baxter set up a reasonable alternative history after the first invasion. He carried it forward to 1924 without using large infodumps to explain the divergences. The characters were well developed. In particular, the bloodymindedness of the British police state was perfectly drawn.

Old Mars.

“It’s A Small Solar System” by Allan Howard (1957 September, FANTASTIC UNIVERSE) is about the first expedition to Mars, which made a successful landing on the red planet. They made a few orbits prior to check out the canals and cities, and then chose a landing site near one of the cities.

The humanoid inhabitants rode out on multi-legged steeds, carrying lances, swords, and tubular devices that were probably weapons. In the skies above,

aircraft of strange design came and went. The leader of the welcoming party approached the Captain of the Earthlings, and welcomed them to Barsoom. This was a one-trick-pony story.

Also from the 1957 September FANTASTIC UNIVERSE was “I Like Martian Music” by Charles E. Fritch. Two Martians, not Barsoomians, were musicians composing on their instruments. One of them, Longtree, was having difficulty finishing its latest instrumental. As they fretted about the music, a rocket ship from Earth landed. Two humans were on board, husband and wife, the last of their kind escaping from a nuclear war ravaging the third planet.

The husband tried to explain himself to the Martians, but they didn’t understand the low-pitched rumbling of human speech. Longtree decided that perhaps music would help and therefore played its composition. The extremely high-pitched music pulped the brain of the human. The Martians decided they needed a second try at it, and went for the wife.

“The Burial Of Sir John Marue At Cassini” by Chaz Brenchley (2014 Spring, SUBTERRANEAN MAGAZINE) is set on a Mars where the British Empire rules and Queen Victoria reigns on Earth. Venus was controlled by her nasty little cousins in Russia. Sir John was hanged after a secret trial on unspecified charges. He was popular with the citizens of Mars, who turned out to give him an impressive cortege.

The native Martians have an alternate-bearing two-stage life cycle, which the earliest human settlers found out the hard way was not to be disturbed. Eventually peace was established and a treaty signed. Sir John breached the peace with a scientific experiment that got him hanged. The Empire, hypocritical and class-conscious as ever, will make use of those data and eventually force a new treaty on the natives, the better to exploit them.

X MINUS ONE was one of the few science fiction series on old-time radio, running from 1955 to 1958. It was a direct descendant of its predecessor DIMENSION X and repeated many of its episodes under a new intro. The two series were essentially a single series in two parts. By and large the quality was excellent, and these half-hour episodes make good listening for your morning commute instead of some droning audio book.

They are recognized as the best among science fiction series but were crippled by constant schedule changes, which meant that science fiction fans of the

1950s had to hunt around the frequencies and pay close attention to newspaper listings to find them. Since listeners had difficulty finding the show, the ratings were poor and finally used as an excuse to cancel the series, even though it was the network's fault.

Most of the stories were adaptations from GALAXY magazine, but there were a few originals. Ernest Kinoy adapted most of the stories but occasionally wrote originals of varying quality. His original stories included "The Martian Death March", which I reviewed in OPUNTIA #369, and which was very good indeed.

At the other end of his spectrum was the 1957 episode "Martian Sam". The plot was set in what was then the far future in the 2000s, when the Los Angeles Dodgers were in the basement of the league. They traveled to out-of-town games by ballistic rockets, so that made it science fiction.

The main problem was a chintzy owner who didn't like to spend money on good players. When the old man keeled over from a heart attack, his playboy son, who raced rockets, took over the team. Unfortunately the son didn't want to spend money on the team either. However, he was not entirely unfeeling. He brought back a Martian from his next trip.

Martians were 18 inches tall with a 32-foot-long tentacle that whipped out from its body. The opposing team protested, but the Dodgers pointed out that a treaty between Mars and Earth specified that their citizens, when visiting the other planet, would be treated the same as the natives. That meant a Martian had a right to play baseball in an Earth league.

The one the Dodgers hired was called Sam because no one could pronounce its real name. A dirty little secret was that chicle, the basic ingredient of chewing gum, was extremely addictive to Martians. It was outlawed on that planet though with no better results than outlawing cocaine on Earth. Sam was a chicle addict.

The Dodgers swept the other teams with Martian Sam pitching fastballs from his tentacle. They made it to the final championship game, only to lose Sam because it was the molting season for him. Shedding all his scales in the locker room, Sam was in too much pain to play.

The team had to fall back on their human pitchers, none too good. It was the final inning, the opposing team has three men on base, and two outs. Sam

dragged itself out of the sickbed and attempted to save the game for the team and the championship. The opposing team then brought in an intelligent microbe from the moons of Jupiter. As legal as Martian Sam was, but of course no being could pitch to the strike zone of the Jovian. A silly ending. Mighty Kinoy had struck out.

The episode was so reminiscent of James Thurber's famous 1941 short story "You Could Look It Up" that it seems to be the obvious inspiration. That story was about a baseball team owner who hired a midget as a batter, the idea being that he would be walked every time at bat because a pitcher would have great difficulty throwing the ball through such a low strike zone. In 1951, the owner of the St Louis Browns tried it out, although the midget only lasted for a single at-bat. You could Google it.

The third episode of the OTR series 2000 PLUS was "The Men From Mars" (1950), written by Peter Berry. Although the series was supposed to be adult SF, this episode could have run on any kiddies show without editing. Two teenagers in the year 2000 plus 40 (as announced on the show) bought a used spaceship for modification the way their great-great-grandfathers used to make hot rods out of old stock cars.

Off they go into the wild black yonder, or at least somewhere not too far from Earth. They received transmissions from fluently anglophone voices telling them they are from Mars, and are going to invade Earth. Some assorted alarums but not too violent. One of the Martians occasionally slipped into a gangster voice not heard since the days of Damon Runyon.

The supposed Martians were human space pirates. The teenagers inadvertently helped the Space Patrol to capture them. The uranium shipments from Mars to Earth were now safe. The kids got a reward and a victory parade, wish fulfillment for juvenile listeners if there ever was any. The dialogue of the episode was done in gosh-wow-boyoboy style. Cringeworthy.

Another episode of this series, aired a couple of months later, was of better quality. "When The Worlds Met" was written by Judith and David Bublick. It was set in 2000 plus 20, when the Federated World Government was headquartered at Washington, D.C., and the USA was the only country with space travel. (This sort of thinking was part of the reason why Sputnik was such a terrific shock to the Americans.)

Signals were received from an unknown source in space, and were eventually decoded and confirmed as being from Mars. Earth had lunar colonies but no spacecraft capable of reaching Mars. Not to worry, because the Martians could cross the distance in seven days with their spaceships. They repeatedly said they came in peace.

Much excitement ensued on Earth, as might be expected. Demagogues wanted an armed response, while others counseled peace. Earth sent out armed spaceships to meet the Martians in near space and escort them to a landing at Los Alamos spaceport. The military ringed the landing pad with massive weaponry.

The episode tried to build up suspense as characters speculated at length what the Martians looked like. Both the warhawks and the peaceable vented at length. Der Tag arrived and a 20-story-tall Mars ship settled down onto the desert.

The Martians didn't show themselves but asked for an Earthling to come aboard. They did not reveal themselves but instead lectured the man about how Earth's warrior society was not yet ready. They were aware of the military precautions, and were disappointed because they had come in peace in an unarmed spaceship. The Martians left without ever showing themselves, saying they would return when they were convinced that Earth was ready to receive them.

For a 1950 episode, this wasn't bad writing. No monsters, no invasion, and not the stock evil alien style that was to develop over the rest of the 1950s as a result of the Cold War.

New Mars.

"In Panic Town, On The Backward Moon" by Michael F. Flynn (2015, from MISSION: TOMORROW, edited by Bryan Thomas Schmidt) is a Bat Durston story set on Mars and its satellite Phobos. There had been aliens on Mars when apemen were just learning to stand upright. Now the humans arrived on Mars to colonize it, and discovered the few traces left of the aliens.

The analogy to the Old West included the Mars spaceport having a town marshal. An alien artifact was stolen, and the search was on by the posse. A good story for a Western. Perhaps I should have put this review in my column "Out Where The West Commences".

YOU'LL NEVER SEE IT
IN GALAXY

Jets blasting, Bat Durston came screeching down through the atmosphere of Bbllzznaj, a tiny planet seven billion light years from Sol. He cut out his super-hyper-drive for the landing...and at that point, a tall, lean spaceman stepped out of the tail assembly, proton gun-blasters in a space-tanned hand.

"Get back from those controls, Bat Durston," the tall stranger lippled thinly. "You don't know it, but this is your last space trip."

Hoofs drumming, Bat Durston came galloping down through the narrow pass at Eagle Gulch, a tiny gold colony 400 miles north of Tombstone. He spurred hard for a low overhang of rim-rock...and at that point a tall, lean wrangler stepped out from behind a high boulder, six-shooter in a sun-tanned hand.

"Rear back and dismount, Bat Durston," the tall stranger lippled thinly. "You don't know it, but this is your last saddle-jant through these here parts."

Sound alike? They should — one is merely a western transplanted to some alien and impossible planet. If this is your idea of science fiction, you're welcome to it! **YOU'LL NEVER FIND IT IN GALAXY!**

What you will find in GALAXY is the finest science fiction...authentic, plausible, thoughtful...written by authors who do not automatically switch over from crime waves to Earth invasions; by people who know and love science fiction...for people who also know and love it.

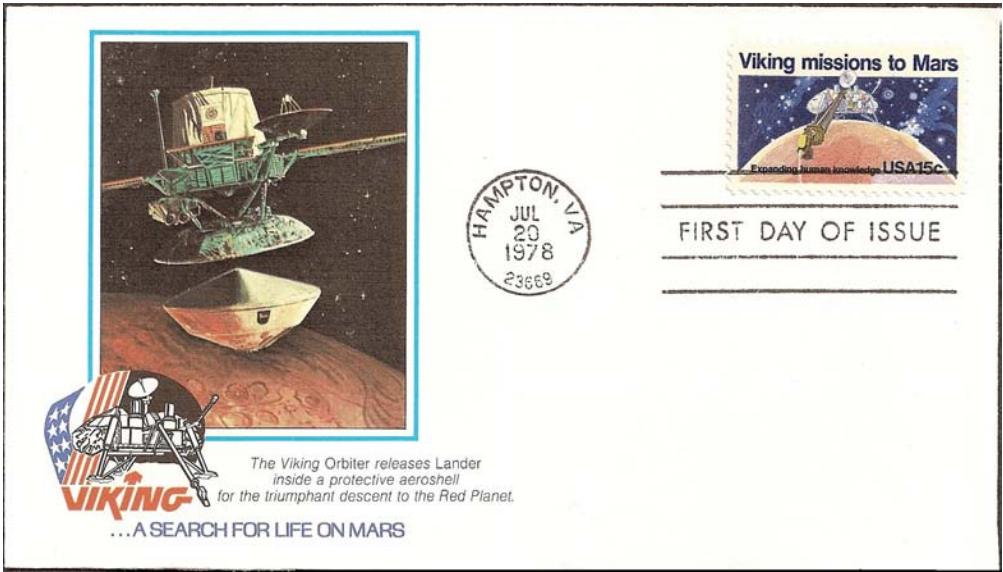
From the back cover of 1950 October GALAXY.

“Vortex” by Gregory Benford (2016 Jan/Feb, MAGAZINE OF FANTASY AND SF) is a near-future story about the initial exploration of Mars. Humans found a giant underground biofilm living deep in caverns and tunnels. Marsmat, as it was named, spanned the planet way down below, living on vented heat and gases from the interior. It was not a single organism, but an interconnected network of microbial mats forming a single ecosystem.

The humans learned it was slightly sentient but not sapient. Benford did an excellent job working out the details of Marsmat. The conflict of the story was what happened when one colony messed up Marsmat by using a cave as a sewage pit. Marsmat reacted in self-defence by expelling the waste in a burst of planetary flatulence. An amusing conclusion to a logically derived plot.

“Mars Abides” by Stephen Baxter (2016 August, OBELISK) is an alternative history where the Mariner 4 mission in 1964 returned images of craters, but ones filled with lakes and forests. That triggered a race between the USA and the USSR to establish colonies on Mars.

Just after they succeeded, full-scale thermonuclear war broke out on Earth, leaving the Martian colonists to their own resources. They learned too late that Mars had just completed a warm climate cycle and was heading back into a long winter, a deeper winter than they could survive. Martian life went back into hibernation, but human life could not.



LIGHTS, CAMERA, MURDER!: PART 3
by Dale Speirs

[Parts 1 and 2 appeared in OPUNTIA #394 and 413.]

The Drama Behind The Camera.

There is a lot more to making movies than just lining up the actors in front of the camera and shouting “Roll ‘em”. Consider the legalities. “Partner In Panama” was a 1949 episode of the old-time radio series LET GEORGE DO IT, written by David Victor and Jackson Gillis. (This and other OTR shows are available as free mp3s from www.otrrlibrary.org.)

This series was about George Valentine, not so much a private investigator as he was an odd-job man who would courier items and do other errands that might raise eyebrows in respectable circles. In this episode, a movie producer had made a film about Vic Ruskin, a gangster who was on the lam in Panama.

It had been supposed that he was dead the last ten years, but Ruskin resurfaced and demanded \$50,000 to sign a release. On a strictly legal basis, he didn’t have a case, but one has to consider that organized crime does not always waste its time in the courts. As the producer wished to live long and prosper, he agreed to the payoff. Valentine was hired to courier the money.

It is never that simple of course. The guide Ruskin sent to Valentine after he arrived in Panama never made it to the airport alive. A sharp-practice man who comes forward to do the job is victim #2. A Ruskin imposter was the third victim. Finally though, Valentine tracked down his quarry after a couple more double-crosses. Ruskin’s estranged wife had her own ideas about the money.

It all ended up with Valentine alive and Ruskin extradited to stand trial in the USA. Since lawyers are expensive, he upped the price for signing the release to \$500,000, much to the agony of the movie producer. Valentine suggested a workaround, to use his story as the plot for another movie. The producer rejected it as too implausible.

The constant switcheroos and fake identities complicated the plot, but the final identity of the real Ruskin is one the listener would not have guessed. Not too bad of an episode. Worth listening to once.

LAST SCENE ALIVE (2002) by Charlaine Harris is a novel in the Aurora Teagarden cozy series, set in Lawrencetown, Georgia, near Atlanta. Roe, as she is known, was mourning the recent death of her husband.

Her ex-boyfriend Robin Crusoe (his parents were cruel to give him that name) wrote a book about their shared sleuthing into previous murders in the blood-soaked village. He sold the film rights to a movie company which had now arrived in town to begin shooting. Jobs for the locals, which pleased them, but not Teagarden.

After assorted contretemps with Crusoe, Teagarden resigned herself to the situation. The leading lady, playing the part of Teagarden, was Celia Shaw. She was murdered in her room, which started another round of amateur detecting. Just one complication; Shaw was Crusoe's girlfriend.

Crusoe was barely tolerated on the set, standard practice for Hollywood, where the writer is the least important person. He showed Teagarden around, introducing the list of characters from the producer on down. Some of the back stories were filled in, for while none of us are without sin, this is particularly so in Hollywood.

Teagarden learned that Shaw had incipient Huntington's chorea, inherited from her mother. The autopsy showed that Shaw had taken an overdose of tranquilizers, was then smothered with a pillow, and finally had her skull bashed in with her Emmy statuette, which she always took with her. It probably wasn't suicide.

Threatening notes were sent to Teagarden. Someone slugged her from behind in a parking lot. A stalker was discovered working as a flunky on the movie set, but even a novice reader of cozies can see she was a red herring. Teagarden met up with the murderer, who said Shaw's death was an assisted suicide, except that she didn't realize she was being assisted. A couple more twists, and it's a wrap.

HOW TO PARTY WITH A KILLER VAMPIRE (2011) by Penny Warner is a novel in a cozy mystery series about Presley Parker, who runs an event planning company that stages corporate parties and murder mystery dinners in the San Francisco Bay area. Her latest contract is for a wrap party hosted by Lucas Cruz, producer of the film REVENGE OF THE KILLER VAMPIRES. At his request, it was being staged in a local cemetery at night.

As the party wound down, Parker said to a friend: *"There were no real dead bodies, only the costumed kind. Can't ask for more than that."* No sooner were those words spoken than a scream alerted everyone to the discovery of the body of a paparazzo. Earlier he had been banned from the party, but he disguised himself as a vampire and sneaked his way back in.

There are suspects. The leading man and the leading lady were having an extramarital affair and wanted to keep it quiet. Cruz issued restraining orders against people the way that others hand out business cards. A stalker, who had worked as an extra, died elsewhere in the cemetery under mysterious circumstances. There was a nutcase neighbour who claimed he owned the cemetery and it was sacrilegious to party in it.

Parker kept up with modern methods in her sleuthing. Much of the middle part of this novel was taken up with her texting or voice-mailing people, or vice versa, and using cellphone spyware. Miss Marple would be envious.

She was trapped with the killer of course, an actor who liked his women to be really dependent on him. His film career was over when Parker escaped from the fire he set. He was badly burned in his own trap. Even if his lawyer got him off the charges, no one will hire an actor with a burn-scarred face.

The novel was a fair read, although there were places where it came close to using idiot plots, mainly with the cellphones. A new rule of modern cozies is that whenever the heroine makes an urgent call or text, the recipient doesn't pick up, thereby extending the crisis of the moment.

DEATH MAKES THE CUT (2012) by Janice Hamrick is part of a mystery series about Jocelyn Shore, a Texan Miss Marple. She teaches at a high school, where an argy-bargy between fellow teacher Fred Argus and an angry parent started off the novel. Shore had problems with her twin cousin (it's complicated) Kyla, who just got run in for a concealed carry violation and was now doing community service. Pay attention to Kyla's handgun; it will reappear in the denouement.

Argus was murdered at the start of the second chapter, and away goes the novel. It happened on the first day of school. While Shore was snooping, in between getting her new students settled in and teaching a bit, a movie crew appeared and tried to take over the campus. No one mentioned them to the teachers.

The initial contact did not go well but was eventually smoothed over. The movie's working title was TEENAGE ANGST, about teenaged werewolves. As the director Michael Dupre said, vampires are passe.

As bad as the movie people were, the school's Drama Dept. was even worse. Shore got into an argument with their teacher over violation of school regulations for over-rehearsing students. Indeed, the first half of the novel was not only about Shore's investigations, but how effortlessly she made new enemies. (The school principal was a given.)

The movie casting director wanted some of Shore's students as extras. This threw gasoline on the fire she started earlier with the drama teacher. Understandably the Drama Dept. was miffed that non-drama students should get the parts.

On the day of filming, someone viciously assaulted her near where the scene was being shot. Shore stumbled out into the take, which upset Dupre because now he'll have to reshoot it. The list of suspects who would do harm to Shore was long. In most mysteries, people like her are usually the first murder victim. All who knew her would then say they weren't surprised it happened. While Shore was in hospital, someone trashed her house. After she returned to the school, she found the next body.

Between the drama class and the movie crew, there was enough soap opera going on for a dozen episodes. It all finished up on the school stage when one of the drama coaches went berserk. After the blood was mopped up, it was revealed there were two murderers. Blackmail, embezzlement, you name it, somebody was doing it. This is why so many parents want to home-school their kids.

MALLED TO DEATH (2013) by Laura DiSilverio is a cozy novel set in the Fernglen Galleria mall, where Emma-Joy Ferris was a security guard. She had hoped to be a police officer but during her military service in Afghanistan, a land mine left her with a bad leg.

Her father, who uses the stage name Ethan Jarrett, was an action-adventure movie star whose production company had rented parts of the mall for his latest film MAFIA MISTRESS. He was trying to convince her to join the production company but she wanted to be independent.

The filming kept mall security busy, what with fans lurking about, huffy actors on ego trips, and officious production flunkies. Jarrett got threatening letters, and there was a bad scare with a prop gun. It became more than a bad scare when the prop master was shot dead the next day and her body found in a mall washroom.

The production company was indignant at having to halt filming for the police investigation, but after all, it was their employee who was murdered. They had a dozen extras dressed as cops for the scenes, and when the real police arrive, Ferris couldn't help but think that it looked like a police convention. Given the fatality rate at the mall from previous novels in this cozy series, the police weren't too happy to get yet another call to the Homicide Squad.

The mall manager had his problems. The Galleria is owned by a national corporation, and he got a cold reception when explaining matters to top executives. *"I don't understand. None of the other malls has murder-of-the-month issues. Sure, some of them have gang problems, and one in Texas got blown up when the gas line ruptured, but my mall is the only one with dead bodies littering the place. ... Do you know how bad it looks at board meetings when I have a murder or two to report every quarter?"*

Ferris sorted out a lot of clues from the movie production and mall security staff. For some annoying reason, the police seem disinclined to share their data with her. She one-upped them by figuring out that an extremely jealous actress had a crush on her father. A woman scorned and all that.

After taking out the first victim, a competitor in the mind of the actress, the killer decided to settle up with Jarrett using real bullets in a prop gun. If she can't have him, then nobody will.

His daughter had her own gun with real bullets, and finished the scene with a gun battle in the mall. A bloodier finish than most cozies.

Unreality Shows.

Barbara Allan is the pseudonym of husband and wife Barbara and Max Allan Collins, who reside in Iowa. They write a cozy series about Brandy Borne and her mother Vivian, who have an antiques shop in the village of Serenity, Iowa. It is anything but serene when the duo are involved.

ANTIQUES SWAP (2015) began with the possibility of Brandy and Vivian Borne getting their own cable television series. The pilot episode of ANTIQUES SLEUTH had mostly been filmed. All that remained was to pick up some second-unit sequences at Serenity’s annual swap meet. The blood will flow there.

There was a strange pause in the middle of Chapter 1 for a recipe for fried butter, it apparently having been invented in Iowa. Strange, not only because someone would eat a stick of butter fried in funnel cake batter, but because this is not a food cozy. I insert a smartphone photo of this part of the text herewith:

FRIED BUTTER

- 1 stick butter, chilled
- funnel cake batter mix
- 1 tsp. cinnamon
- vegetable oil
- honey glaze

Prepare cake batter as instructed, adding cinnamon. Cover chilled butter with batter. Heat vegetable oil to 375–400 degrees. Fry battered-butter in hot oil 1 to 1½ minutes. Remove to paper plate to drain, then drizzle with honey.

(WARNING: Fried Butter is not for everyone, as some serious, even fatal, side effects have been reported. These include—but are not limited to—dizziness, numbness of extremities, nausea, increased sweating, blurred vision, third-degree burns, shortness of breath, stroke and/or heart failure. Do not consume if you have a cholesterol level over 200, are allergic to butter, have hepatitis B, glaucoma, lupus, or have traveled to parts of the country where certain fungal infections are common.)

Enjoy!

Be that as it may, Brandy met up with an old flame, now handsome billionaire, Wesley Sinclair III. She inadvertently incurred the wrath of his wife Vanessa. The wrath didn’t last, as not long afterwards the body of Vanessa, head bashed in by a blunt instrument, was found by Brandy. After a pause for yellow pea soup, recipe in the middle of Chapter 3, the sleuthing began.

Wesley was the main suspect, hauled away to the county jail. His lawyer sprang him from the hoosegow, after which Wesley and Brandy found the second body. Hardly have the police had time to deal with that, than Vivian was beaten in her driveway and left for dead. She pulled through, since she was booked for the series, while the other two victims were walk-ons.

It transpired that the assault was separate from the two murders. Vanessa had been murdered with a blunt instrument which was an antique beer stein. A dumpster diver found it and brought it in to the Borne antique shop. Sinclair collected steins. He and the assault perp got theirs yet.

The best news came last. The pilot episode went well, and the cable channel approved them for a series. The management evidently did not research the past history of the Borne, but they’ll find out soon enough.

And so they do, in ANTIQUES FRAME (2017), which carried on the saga of the Borne television series. It started off well but later the ratings began to sag. Like all reality shows, it is carefully scripted, with pre-selected customers who just happened to drop by the store with an unusual curiosity for the Borne to appraise.

A complication was that Brandy was dating Tony Cassato, who was in the middle of a nasty divorce from his wife Camilla. She was a rival antiques dealer who showed up at location shoots and disrupted the events. Push came to shove, and not just figuratively, when Brandy and Camilla got into a physical altercation on camera. The director was smiling after the combatants had been separated, for he knew he had good footage indeed.

Camilla exited the novel at the end of Chapter 2, having been done in by a blunt object. Brandy found her body. Surprise! With her past record, it was no surprise when the police arrest her. She spent about one-quarter of this novel in the county jail, making new friends with women such as Three-Fingered Frieda.

Not to worry, as she got out in time to help her mother do more sleuthing, in between recipes inserted into random chapters. The result was the discovery that the television producer had been paying Camilla to deliberately disrupt the *Bornes*. He was desperate to boost the ratings.

Camilla had also been fencing stolen goods through her antique shop, and, for some extra cash, using hollowed picture frames to smuggle drugs for another kind of dealer. It was the latter which brought her death at the hands of a supplier who didn't like her attempts to crowd in on the trade.

The really bad news was that the television series was canceled after the first season.

Improv The Hard Way.

THE AVENGERS, to those of an older generation, isn't a prolific mob of American superheroes prancing about in brightly-coloured spandex, but a British television show from the 1960s. John Steed was the main protagonist, a suave, bowler-hatted debonair agent working for the Ministry of something or other.

His assistants were comely women who were, however, much advanced for their time. They were not screamers who stood about helplessly during a fight, but were trained in the martial arts. They regularly fought and won against men. That was highly unusual for the times. The woman who stayed longest and became most famous was Mrs Emma Peel, husband's status uncertain until her final episode when he returned.

The series fluctuated between serious spy-counterspy adventures and parodies of then-current movies. Some episodes drifted into weird fiction or avant garde. An example of the latter was the 1967 episode "Epic", written by Brian Clemens.

Emma Peel had been kidnapped by a trio of elderly screen stars who then used her to make a silent film "The Destruction Of Mrs Emma Peel". In the 1960s, any silent stars still around could be as young as in their 50s or closer to their 70s and 80s.

Peel woke up on a set in an isolated abandoned studio. She found herself being shifted around from one scene to another, with hidden cameras grinding away

and no script for her to read from. The director, a mad German left over from the 1910s, was using her to make a film with an ending that will have her actual death on camera to sensationalize the movie.

The ingenue and the leading man were both in their 60s or 70s, hoping to make a comeback. Peel wandered from set to set, enacting every cliché the silent movies (and more than a few talkies) were susceptible to.

The three leftovers from the silent era had delusions that their masterpiece would somehow restore their cinematic glory. The problem was that Peel wasn't cooperating and kept messing up the scenes where she was supposed to die. The director was very annoyed.

It wasn't difficult for Peel to escape her death scenes, given that she was an athletic young woman who knew judo, and was defending herself against a leading man long since eligible for the pension.

The stakes were escalated, as they tried to kill her for real, or for the reel, if you'll pardon the spelling. Unfortunately for them, an amateur dramatics fan made his way into the set, a wild card for the director that required some improvisation and rewrites. The absurdities continued to pile up until an equally absurd ending had Steed finally showing up and rescuing Peel during a buzzsaw scene in which she was about to be sliced longitudinally.

The episode was played as a music hall comedy, as indeed it had to be. Worth watching once. One suspects that the script was approved because most of the scenes took place on back lots and stages of the television studio, reducing location costs to zero.

Home Movies.

THE WHISTLER was a long-running old-time radio mystery series that ran from 1942 to 1955. It specialized in trick endings. The narrator was the murderer and his/her guilt was never doubted because the listener followed every step of the way. An elaborate fool-proof plan would be developed and carried out. Just before the final commercial, the culprit would be gloating at having successfully gotten away with murder. On the return after the break, the police arrived and made an arrest because of one detail overlooked by the murderer.

“Death In Sixteen Millimeters” was a 1949 episode written by Nancy Cleveland. It began with the usual sort of infidelity romance. Paul was a lawyer courting wealthy young heiress Cynthia. His wife Edith was in the way of something more.

Cynthia was not a wide-eyed innocent. She invited Edith to go sailing on the lake. Paul overheard the invitation and, correctly guessing Cynthia’s intent, devised his own plan. Part of it involved stealing Cynthia’s handgun during his next visit to her apartment without her knowledge.

Paul visited Fred, a movie producer friend down on his luck and hurting for money. The proposed plan was for Fred to zoom a movie camera on the sailboat to see if anything happened, in exchange for \$10,000 and a promise by Paul to keep quiet about a hit-and-run accident Fred was in which the police don’t know about. The idea didn’t work; Fred refused to do the job and called Paul’s bluff.

Paul had no choice but to take a telephoto camera out and do it himself, keeping his motorboat at a distance from Cynthia’s sailboat. Cynthia staged a drowning accident, not knowing that Paul was aware of her plan and was watching. She sailed away. Paul motored out to the spot and discovered Edith still struggling in the water, half-dead. He finished her off by running her over.

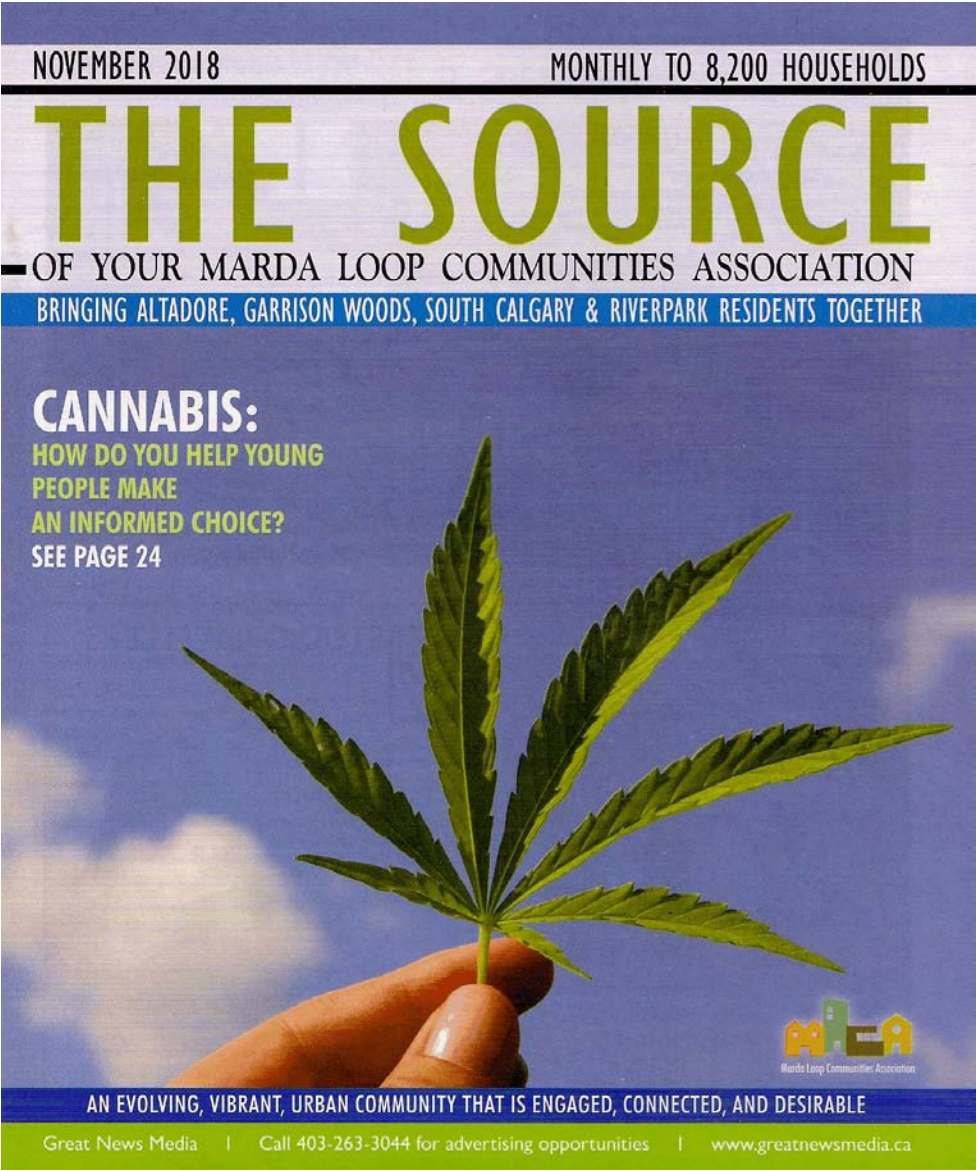
A fortnight later, after the funeral, Paul showed his movie to Cynthia and demanded \$100,000 in blackmail (about \$1 million in today’s money). He hardly had time to enjoy the fruits of his labours before Fred appeared with his movie. Fred, suspicious of what was going on, had taken his own boat out and filmed Paul giving the coup de grace to Edith.

Paul was made of sterner stuff and shot Fred with Cynthia’s gun, destroyed the negative and print of Fred’s film, and then set up Cynthia to take the rap. From Fred’s apartment, he went over to Cynthia’s place to collect his \$100,000. To his shock, she had her movie projector prepared to show him Fred’s film, who had run off an extra print to work a double-cross and given it to her.

The police arrived to arrest Cynthia for the murder of Fred. The evidence was unrefutable. Paul’s set-up to convict her was perfect, and the police had no suspicions about him. There was a pause for the final commercial, extolling the benefits of Signal gasoline. Back to the last moment of the story. The inspector noticed the movie projector ready to go in the living room. The police run the movie ...

HOW GREEN WAS MY VALLEY

Canada legalized marijuana and all cannabis derivatives by federal law on October 17. Most provinces are regulating it like alcoholic beverages. Lots of worrying about the details. My local community newsletter is titled THE SOURCE and has been for years. Unfortunately the latest issue has a cover that produced an incongruous perception.



SOLIDARITY FOREVER

by Dale Speirs

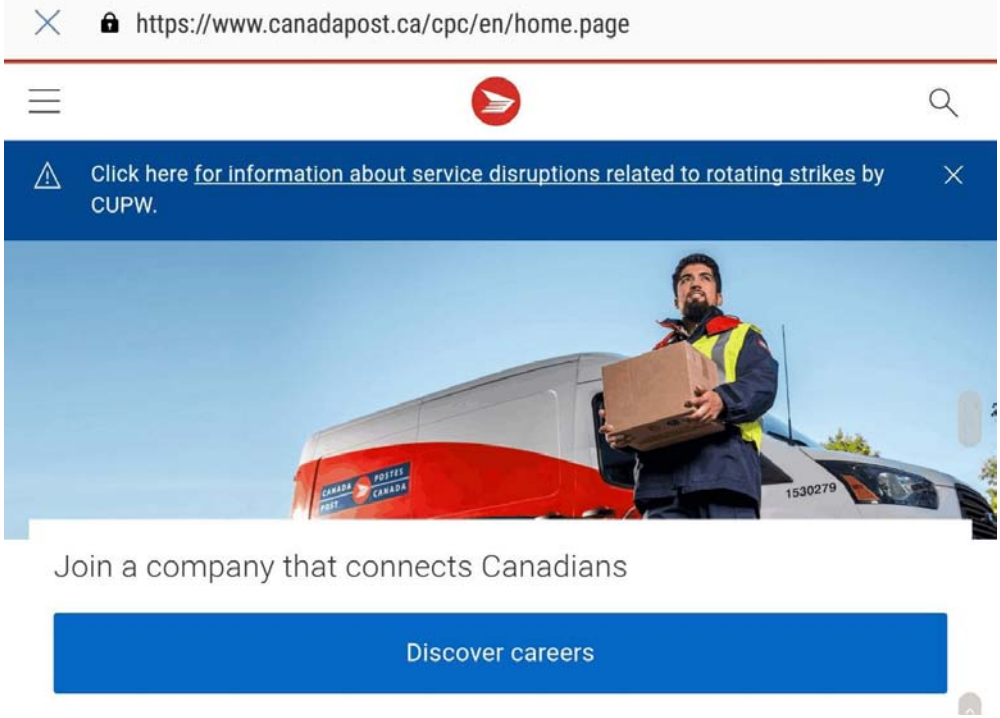
One of Canada’s hoariest traditions is the postal strike. They’re at it again, starting off with rotating 24-hour strikes across Canada. The first cities were struck on October 22, and Calgary’s turn came on October 25. I took this photo in front of the Central Post Office, where I have my box number. None of the posties in this photo worked there; I know all the regular staff.



What amused me was the Canada Post Website, where they posted daily updates about which city was out on the day. No one was paying attention to the incongruous (there’s that word again) juxtaposition with the rest of the front page. The screenshot says it all.

As a postal historian, a while back I compiled a list of all the postal strikes, which I will be updating as we go.

- 1919 - one month in June (part of Winnipeg General Strike)
- 1924 - two weeks
- 1965 - 8 days (15 days in Montreal)
- 1968 - 22 days



- 1970 - 15 weeks
- 1974 - 15 days
- 1975 - rotating strikes from February 18 to March 28
 - national strike beginning October 2 and lasting 42 days
- 1978 - 3 days in September (inside workers)
 - 3 days in October (outside workers)
- 1980 - rotating strikes in September and October
- 1981 - 42 days (Canadian Post Office then changed from a government department to the Crown corporation Canada Post)
- 1987 - 18 days in June (letter carriers)
 - 16 days in September (inside workers)
- 1988 - August and September. Technicians and supervisors strike. Mail service slowed but not stopped.
- 1991 - rotating strikes in August, one day national strike in October. All posties merged into one union.
- 1997 - national strike November 19 to December 4
- 2011 - June 3 to 28. Rotating strikes began June 3. Canada Post locked out all posties June 12. House of Commons passed back-to-work legislation, which was given Royal Assent the next day. CUPW returned to work June 28.