

OPUNTIA 450



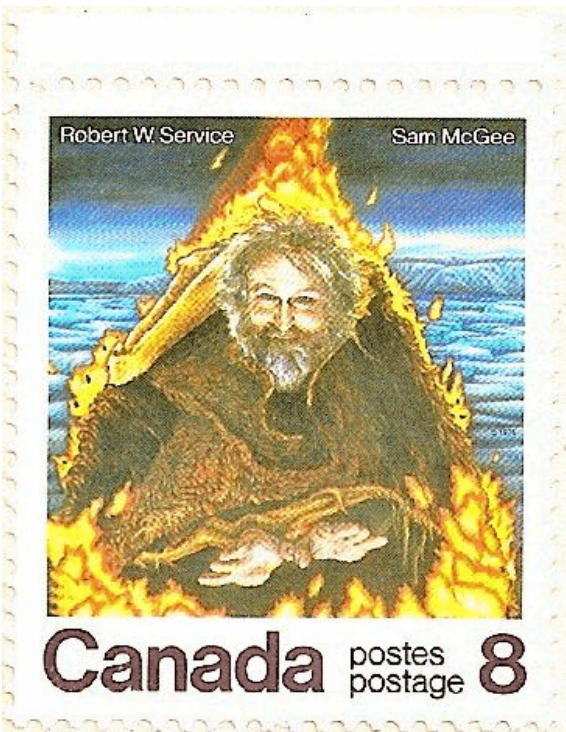
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OUT ON THE FLATLANDS

photos by Dale Speirs

The tourist brochures from Alberta don't mention the flatlands of the southern prairies, just the mountains of the southwest, rodeos, and the Red Deer River badlands. I made a trip to Level-land on June 29, not a settlement but a church and a graveyard. Its only claim to fame, and my reason for visiting, is that it is the resting place of Sam McGee, the subject of the famous poem by Robert W. Service. Level-land is about an hour's drive northeast of Calgary.

*The Northern Lights have seen queer sights,
But the queerest they ever did see
Was that night on the marge of Lake Lebarge
I cremated Sam McGee.*



Service's best-known poems are "The Cremation Of Sam McGee" and "The Shooting Of Dan McGrew". They were based on his experiences in Yukon Territory when he worked as a bank clerk in his younger days.

One of his friends was William Samuel McGee, known as Sam, who gave him permission to use his name in the poem. In later life Sam sometimes regretted the notoriety the poem brought him.

Stamp issued in 1976 by Canada Post.

*Now Sam McGee was from Tennessee, where the cotton blooms and blows.
Why he left his home in the South to roam 'round the Pole, God only knows.
He was always cold, but the land of gold seemed to hold him like a spell;
Though he'd often say in his homely way that "he'd sooner live in hell."*

The real Sam McGee was an Ontario farm boy who drifted about as a young man and never went near Tennessee. He met up with Service in Yukon. Eventually he drifted back south and lived in various locations in Alberta before settling as an old man on a farm in the Level-land district.

*"It's the cursed cold, and it's got right hold till I'm chilled clean through to the bone.
Yet 'tain't being dead; it's my awful dread of the icy grave that pains;
So I want you to swear that, foul or fair, you'll cremate my last remains."*

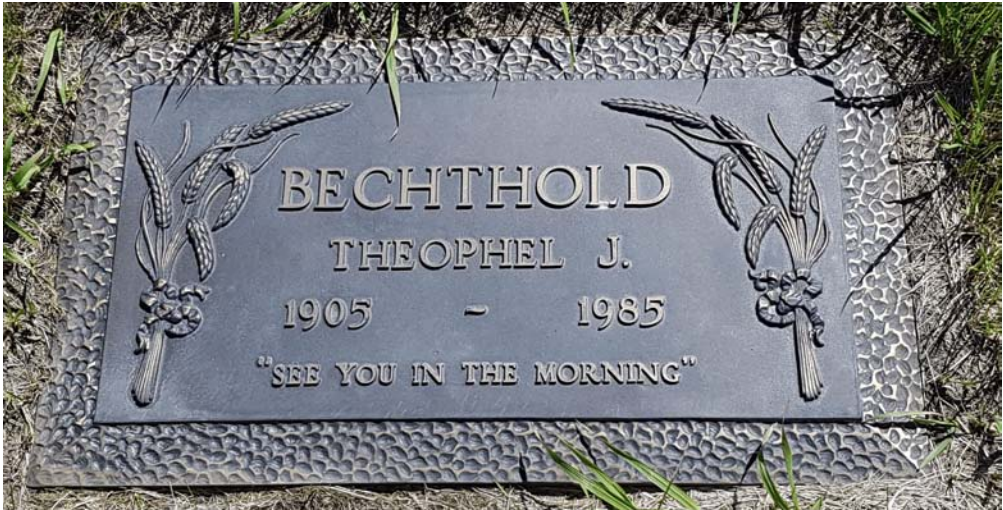
When Sam died he was not cremated but buried in the Level-land Cemetery. On the next page are views of the cemetery. His grave is near the back, second row from the big cottonwood tree.



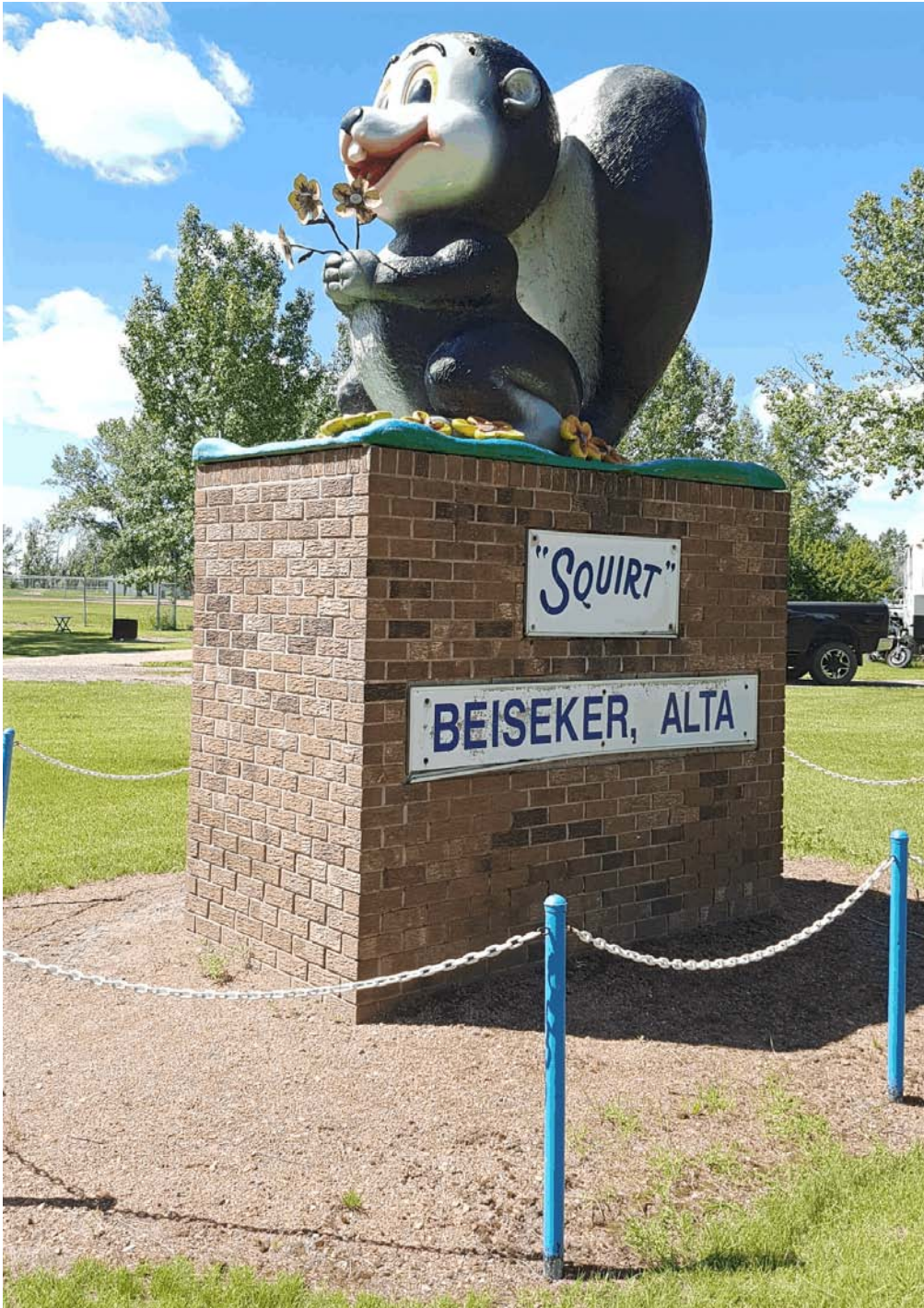


Below: Most of the tombstones had standard inscriptions such as “Gone but not forgotten” or “Til we meet again”, but a couple of stones caught my eye.

At right: In pioneer days when infant mortality was high, it was common to carve a lamb on top of the stone. Over the past century, the lambs have blurred from erosion and will eventually become shapeless blobs.



On my way back to Calgary, I stopped at the village of Beiseker, proudly boasting the world's largest skunk. I guess all the other animals were taken.



From the "Signs, Signs, Everywhere A Sign" department is this entry at the Beiseker campground washrooms.



FESTIVE COWTOWN
by Dale Speirs

After a ten-day pause for the Stampede, Calgary's festival season resumed, with every weekend a street festival somewhere in the suburbs or an ethnic festival downtown at Olympic Plaza. The first weekend after the rodeo was over, July 20 to 21, was Fiestaval at the Plaza, a joint celebration of the Latino cultures.





At right: No vegetarians here, senior!

THE REGULARLY SCHEDULED THUNDERSTORM

by Dale Speirs

All summer long on hot days, we can expect a thunderstorm in the late afternoon or early evening. These are local storms, not part of a weather system, that develop from convection cells as the ground heats up. They blow over after about a half hour. The thunderstorms drop hail but it is soft and seldom does damage. Shown here are some stones from a July thunderstorm picked off my front lawn.



FOOD COZIES: PART 10

by Dale Speirs

[Parts 1 to 9 appeared in OPUNTIA's #432, 433, 434, 436, 438, 441, 442, 444, and 447.]

Food cozies are Miss Marple style novels, very popular. Most are worth reading once if you like mysteries, although it is doubtful any of them will stand the test of time. Recipes are generally included, if not at the back of the book, then in between chapters or sometimes integrated into the text. Don't read these books if you have an appetite. I have learned from experience to read these novels on a full stomach.

Spicing Up Village Life With A Few Murders.

ROSEMARY AND CRIME (2013) by Gail Oust was the first novel in a food cozy series about Piper Prescott of Brandywine Creek, Georgia. She operated a spice shop in the village and was doing good business. The typical sort of cozy economics, where someone opened a specialty store in a rural village with no walk-in customer base. One hopes she did well with Internet sales. Her name was a little cutesy since Piper is the genus name for Old World peppers.

The novel used the standard idiot plot. Prescott had hired Mario Barrone, a temperamental local chef, to do a cooking demonstration for the grand opening of her spice shop. He never made it, having run into someone even more temperamental than he was.

When he didn't show, she went over to his restaurant and found his corpse. Seeing a knife lying nearby, she picked it up. Of course she did, for she was the idiot in the plot. This time the Deppity Dawgs were justified in thinking the worst of her, since her fingerprints were all over the place.

Fortunately the murder wasn't in her shop. Unfortunately events kept happening in her shop or when she was driving about. Nevermind someone planting evidence on her. The real problem was that she had no backup for the cooking demonstration, so she had to do it herself.

It was a slapstick routine, especially after she knocked the mutton off the table and sent it flying onto the floor. No amount of spices would ameliorate that mistake. It certainly kept the audience interested.

The standard plot was followed, with the usual alarms and excursions, and the time-honoured traditional held-at-gunpoint denouement. Since this was her first time out as a Miss Marple, she was rather inept. The murderer was a cousin of Barrone. He was jealous over family financial matters. Surprisingly there was no recipe appendix.

CINNAMON TOASTED (2015) opened as Oktoberfest did, and Piper Prescott was a busy woman in her shop. Be that as it may, her ex-mother-in-law Melly Prescott wrote software applications and had received an offer from Trustychipdesign.com. The partners, Charles Balboa and Russell Tulley, arrived in the village to sign the contract, just as Oktoberfest began.

The spice shop was doing land-office sales. Apparently in Georgia during Oktoberfest, everyone wanted to stock up on cinnamon, cloves, and cardamom instead of ales and lagers. Balboa didn't do so well, as he was found dead in Melly's house at the foot of the basement steps. Did he fall or was he pushed, the police wanted to know. Piper also investigated. Meanwhile, greedy Balboa relatives arrived in town to mourn and calculate their share of the inheritance.

In between snooping, Piper still had her store to operate, an example being a rush order for fenugreek seeds to be delivered to a villager. This incident classified the novel as fantasy, not a mystery. I've never been to Georgia, but rural villages are the same around the world, whether Down South or in west-central Alberta where I grew up. No housewife ever phoned in a rush order for fenugreek anywhere.

A character mentioned in passing at the front of the novel turned out to be the murderer. He had developed his own software that Balboa rejected and got angry enough to give in to a murderous impulse. Once the excitement was over, it was on to the recipes. They led off with Gingersnaps, and because it was the Oktoberfest season, Sauerbraten and Lebkuchen.

GINGER SNAPPED (2017) saw the death of real estate agent Shirley Randolph, who was found floating in a local fishing hole. Nothing to do with the spice shop, but Piper Prescott inserted herself into the investigation anyway. Her shop was burglarized in retaliation, and events proceeded from there.

It was coming up to the first anniversary of the shop, and Prescott was thinking about how to celebrate. Given that the murder rate had soared in the formerly peaceful village, one is surprised that an angry mob with torches and pitchforks

hadn't run her out of town. What's good enough for Frankenstein's monster should be good enough for her. She had been involved with eight or more murders (I lost track) in less than a year, which even in Chicago would attract notice. At the risk of being called unkind, perhaps a necktie party might do.

As it was, she did her snooping. Randolph had been involved in mortgage fraud and was setting up the murderer to take the fall. He struck first, and resented Prescott on his trail.

Finally the big day, not the arrest and conviction, but the first anniversary celebration. A cooking demonstration was held in the spice shop, with someone else, not the inept Prescott, doing it. The menu was Hungarian goulash and spiced gingersnaps. I hope they had lots of ice water on hand to cool the palate.

LICENSE TO DILL (2015) by Mary Ellen Hughes was about Piper Lamb, who left the big city and settled in the village of Cloverdale, upstate New York. Her store, Piper's Picklings, specialized in pickles and preserves.

The economic improbability of such a store in a rural area is typical of cozy mysteries. In the big cities, such a store might barely scrape by, but it is doubtful that it would survive three months in the country. Farm wives buy their pickles in supermarkets the same as everyone else.

Lamb's ex-fiancé Scott Littleton came to visit but visitors of greater importance were a touring semi-professional Italian soccer team, who were playing against the Cloverdale All-Stars. Raffaele Conti was their team manager but not for long, as his body was found in a field of dill grown by Gerald Standley. That upset Lamb because he supplied her store with fresh herbs, so she took up sleuthing to clear his name and resume the supplies.

Lamb preferred that Littleton go back to China or wherever it was that he had been touring. He wanted to settle down in Cloverdale, back into his law practice, and resume his relationship with Lamb. She had to advise him she had a new man in her life.

Conti had been just as upsetting to the village as Littleton to Lamb. He had insulted several restaurants and poached a few Cloverdale women. Conti's wife unexpectedly arrived to add more spice to the mix, much to his surprise and disappointment.

The murderer was an angry father wanting revenge for the way his daughter had been treated by Conti. As per usual, Lamb got herself trapped with the killer and survived by a hairs-breadth, barely making it to the recipes appendix (Pearl Onions with Dill, Green Tomato Relish).

This book had an example of an event showing up more frequently in modern cozies. The heroine had her cellphone but the battery went dead just at the climax. The modern Miss Marple apparently never recharges her cellphone overnight like the rest of the world does.

ASSAULT AND PEPPER (2015) by Leslie Budewitz was the first novel in a food cozy series about Pepper Reece, who operated a spice and tea shop in the obscure village of Seattle, Washington State. (If that doesn't get me at least one letter of comment from Sea-Tac, nothing will.) This series was different from all the other Miss Marples who operated spice stores because her name was Pepper, not Piper. So there.

The series got off to a start when a local panhandler named Doc was found dead on the doorstep of Reece's spice shop, with a paper cup of her tea in his hand, suitably poisoned. The police soon determined Doc's real name was Damien Finch, a medical doctor struck off the list for malpractice.

One of Reece's employees was Tory Finch, the estranged daughter of Doc who had disowned him years ago. Reece thus began her career (depending on sales of subsequent novels in this series) as a Miss Marple. This novel being her first time at it, her investigation was sloppy, especially in the face of search warrants and her negligent record keeping for her business.

One of Damien's patients had sued him for malpractice but lost the case. Failing that, she tried to blackmail Tory by faking evidence to show that she murdered her father. It all came to the usual conclusion.

As the novel rolled along, much information about herbal toxins was presented. They're not all healthy choices for living. The murder was done by poisoning Damien with aconite, from the monk's hood plant. Hint to would-be imitators: don't try this at home. Aconite shows up in toxicology tests quite clearly.

Thence to the recipes appendix, with a little bit of everything. The Grilled Citrus Chicken seemed like the best bet.

KILLING THYME (2016) continued the bloodshed. Pepper Reece was browsing in a market when she spotted an old acquaintance Bonnie Clay, who had dropped out of sight years ago. Clay dropped out of life a few days later when someone murdered her. Reece began Marpleing and soon found out that Clay had connections to her family. Clay's real name back when was Peggy Manning. She had a history with Reece's mother. Both were hippie protestors during the Vietnam War era.

Reece had her spice shop to look after. That included one customer who wandered in under the impression that 'spice' was a euphemism for marijuana. She disabused him of that notion, and then sold him three boxes of tea, telling him they would give him a lift. She was definitely the best salesperson in Washington State, if not the country.

Her investigations didn't go well. Every police officer anywhere near the market had his eye on her, for by now her reputation as a Miss Marple preceded her. She was, as the saying goes, known to police. The killer was someone who feared the reappearance of Clay might reveal who murdered a man during the 1970s demonstrations. There is no statute of limitations for murder.

What I do wish is for a statute law prohibiting cozy writers from imitating each other so blatantly. Let's start with banning any future cozies about spice store owners named Piper or Pepper.



When eating spicy foods, I prefer only mild sauces. Popeyes opened franchises in Calgary a few years ago. What puzzled me about the above packet was that the Louisiana food company is headquartered in Georgia.

Baking Made Difficult.

So you want to open a village bakery, and are willing to get up earlier in the morning than farmers. Stay on good terms with the local constabulary, because in the cozy mystery world, you will be finding bodies wherever you go.

DEATH BY DEEP DISH PIE (2004) by Sharon Short is a novel in a cozy series about Josie Toadfern of Paradise, Ohio. She owned a laundromat but the food connection was there. The Breitenstrater Pie Company was a major employer in the village. They were sponsoring a pie eating contest for Founders Day. One did not have to read the blurb on the back cover to guess that somebody was going to eat a pie spiced with something poisonous.

The Breitenstrater family had internal feuds that were becoming public feuds. The company itself was in trouble, and the quality of its pies were declining due to ill-advised cost-cutting measures. At the pie eating contest, Alan Breitenstrater ate a lemon ginseng pie, part of the company's new line in health food baked goods. Not that healthy as it transpired, for he turned bright red in the face and plopped dead onto the table. A heart attack, it was thought.

In between removing stains from clothing and running the laundromat, Toadfern went Marpleing. The Deppity Dawgs barely got a look-in. She found out about ginseng poaching and the different types of the root. One of those differences may have been used to trigger Alan's heart attack.

There was trouble at the mill. The Good For You Foods conglomerate was looking to buy out Breitenstrater or, failing that, destroy it by dirty tricks. There was a disputed inheritance within the Breitenstrater clan which supposedly would nullify the will of the founder a century after he died.

I didn't believe that part. I'm not a lawyer, but having been an estate executor twice, I know a fair amount of inheritance law. Probate cannot be reversed after a century and several generations.

After all the bad guys, whether murderer, blackmailer, or corporate executive, had been disposed of, the Breitenstrater Pie Company became an employee owned business. It returned to the straight and narrow path of good baking and pure ingredients.

APPLE TURNOVER MURDER (2010) by Joanne Fluke was an installment in a food cozy series about Hannah Swensen, who operated The Cookie Jar bakery in the village of Lake Eden, Minnesota. This was the thirteenth novel in the series, so her reputation as a murder magnet and resident Miss Marple had solidified. Recipes were interspersed between the chapters, in case you get hungry while reading.

Swensen was a busy woman, it being the June bridal shower season, plus an order for 1,100 cookies for a charity event. She also had a booth in the fete, selling apple turnovers. A glutton for punishment as well as baked goods, she agreed to assist community college instructor Bradford Ramsey in his magic act.

Ramsey had romanced both her and her sister Michelle in the past, and was still a skirt chaser. He made it as far as Chapter 12 before he was found dead backstage, with an apple turnover in his hand. Fortunately for Swensen, if not him, the cause of death wasn't poison; he was stabbed to death. The recipe just before Chapter 13 began was for Aggression Cookies. Really.

There was a long list of suspects, either jilted women or cuckolded husbands. Ramsey made one of them pregnant, and her brother took care of him. After a pause for the Watermelon Cookies recipe, Swensen confronted the killer in an isolated graveyard and had the usual near-death experience.

The grand finale was a recipe for Good Doggy Cake, whose ingredients included ground beef, ground chicken, turkey, cream cheese, and liverwurst. Decorated with Milk Bones as an option. Refrigerate until served.

RASPBERRY DANISH MURDER (2018) took place after Hannah Swensen's husband Ross Barton disappeared two weeks into their marriage. Thanksgiving was nigh and her bakery was busy with orders for pumpkin pie, pumpkin scones, and anything else baked that could have pumpkin added to it. Swensen had little time to mourn as she and her assistants worked overtime to fill the demand. A new item for the menu was raspberry danish, the recipe for which followed Chapter 1.

Barton worked at KCOW-TV. His assistant, referred to only as P.K., took over his job, desk, and car. P.K. was poisoned by some candy left in the desk, so he never got to the Mixed Berry Muffins recipe at the end of Chapter 5. The question was who the intended victim had been, P.K. or Barton.

Meanwhile, and there always was a meanwhile, a Holiday Gift Convention was suddenly introduced into the plot. It was held at a local hotel, and Swensen was asked to run a cookie booth. The reader will therefore not be surprised to encounter at the end of the chapter a recipe for Pineapple Raisin Whippersnapper Cookies.

Swensen had to do her sleuthing while her heart was breaking over her husband's disappearance, but economics and the bakery came first. Barton had done some mysterious things before vanishing, implying that it was planned, not happenstance or an accident.

Pausing only for cookies at the end of each chapter (she must have a weight problem), Swensen ploughed up office politics at KCOW and financial suspicions about Barton, while alternating between her shop and the convention booth. The murderer was determined to have been after P.K., who had done his woman wrong. The killer then came after Swensen to silence her but with less successful results.

The final twist was that someone located Barton in another city. He was with his wife. Not Swensen but the woman he was married to when he married her. Bigamy ended the final chapter, not a recipe.

KILLER SWEET TOOTH (2011) by Gayle Trent was a novel in a cozy series set in Brea Ridge, Virginia, where Daphne Martin operated Daphne's Delectable Cakes out of her house. The novel began with Martin taking her neighbour for an emergency visit to their dentist Dr Bainsworth. The real emergency turned out to be his murder as they found his body in his office.

After hours of police interrogation, Martin returned home. Waiting in her driveway was Elvis Presley, or at least an impersonator named Scottie Phillips. The Elvis Impersonators' Evangelical Interdenominational Outreach was in town. (They were called that because the founder of the EIEIO was named MacDonald.)

For the convention, Phillips ordered a large cake in the shape of Elvis' pink Cadillac, made with peanut butter and bananas. Given what Elvis looked like in middle age, the batter would probably have several cups of white sugar in it.

Martin was a person of interest in the Bainsworth murder, so she began Marpleing to save herself. Bainsworth had been a philanderer who not only

cheated on his wife but his mistress. Martin was distracted by the need to earn her living. In addition to the pink Cadillac, she had orders for football cakes (the big game was near) and to cater a quinceanera party.

Bainsworth and one of the Elvis impersonators had been fencing stolen jewelry. They had a falling out, and the rest was just details, given at great length in the denouement. Phillips was embarrassed at a fellow EIEIO member holding Martin at gunpoint, so he paid her a bonus for being all shook up like that.

From there to the recipes, two for Banana Pudding (one of them low-fat) and a Peanut Butter And Banana Cake. Good food for your little teddy bear.

BREACH OF CRUST (2016) by Ellery Adams is a novel in a food cozy series about Ella May LeFaye, proprietor of a pie shop in Sweet Briar, Georgia. Beatrice Burbank, president of the high-society Camellia Club, asked LeFaye to assist the club members. They were preparing a dessert cookbook as a centennial project for their club.

LeFaye was to teach at the club's annual retreat at Lake Havenwood, with emphasis on pie recipes for those with food allergies and dietary restrictions. It was an interesting challenge for her that she eagerly anticipated.

What the reader will anticipate, nor be disappointed, was that LeFaye would discover the first corpse. Burbank wound up floating in the lake just when LeFaye went out for a paddle. *"You and I keep meeting over dead bodies, Ms LeFaye", said Officer Jon Hardy. "I wish that weren't the case."*

There were the usual suspects such as estranged family members and very vicious club politics. Magic worked its way into the story, with assorted witches and elders strutting about and showing off their dignity. LeFaye had a pie shop to run, which crimped her sleuthing but not too much. She could always interrogate customers as they stepped up to the counter for a slice of pie.

The denouement veered into fantasy as it transpired a witch needed to recharge her powers by killing Camellia Club members. Notwithstanding the magic, the final struggle was settled with shotguns. Them Georgia women learned how to handle firearms from their daddies.

And so the recipes appendix, with Black Bottom Peanut Butter Pie and Lactose-Free Key Lime Pie among others.

GLUTEN FOR PUNISHMENT (2013) by Nancy J. Parra was the first novel in a food cozy series about Toni Holmes of Oiltop, Kansas, the proprietor of a new bakery. She was newly divorced and too weak willed to deal with sponging relatives. Holmes decided to advertise her shop as gluten-free, which did not go well since the village was in the heart of the wheat lands.

George Meister, local wheat farmer and all-around cranky old coot, publicly argued the matter with Holmes. A day later, he turned up dead in front of the bakery. The Deppity Dawg figured it was an open-and-shut case against Holmes, so she had to go detecting in self defense, assisted by her grandmother Ruth, also a cranky old coot. Notwithstanding the stressful situation, the bakery did great business once the word got out.

As some dark family histories and romantic entanglements were excavated, there was more excitement. Another murder, and the bakery was vandalized. The denouement was bloody and brutal, with Holmes beaten unconscious by the murderer. Fortunately she had her cellphone on, and the killer's confession was recorded. Modern technology is sometimes wonderful. The culprit had anger management and control problems.

The good news was, as the final chapter began: *"It seemed being beaten half to death was also profitable. Monday was busy. Lucky for me, there had been a surge in online orders. ... After we opened, we had a steady stream of curious customers come in, not so much for the food as to get a peek at my battered face."* And so to the recipes appendix, all gluten-free.

MURDER GONE A-RYE (2014) was the second novel in the series. It began in anticipation of Oiltop's biggest festival, Homer Everett Day, in honour of a local boy made good, the only Oiltop resident to play professional football. Plus, almost as important, a Congressional Medal of Honor winner for his war service. Toni Holmes was going to enter a float in the parade to advertise her bakery. Everett died in 1975, so what he would have thought of gluten-free bakeries can only ever be a matter of speculation.

Her grandmother Ruth was suspected in the murder of her rival Lois Striker, mainly because scooter tracks were found at the crime scene. The two women went Marpleing around town, churning up secrets that others would prefer to keep hidden. Granny was as wide as she was tall, hence her need for a scooter most of the time.

The novel exhumed a wide variety of back stories, family histories, and suppressed scandals. Somewhat annoying to read, as many times the characters didn't come straight to the point but meandered around while telling their story. Assorted alarums had the benefit of boosting business at the bakery. There was an episode of poisoned cookies, but they were baked by the murderer and thus no reflection on the bakery.

After the hoorah was over and the events explained away at length, everyone relaxed. On the final page, one of the supporting characters remarked to Holmes: *"I have to say, things sure have gotten interesting in Oiltop since you moved back."* And so to the recipes, gluten-free, all of them.

FLOURLESS TO STOP HIM (2015) was the third installment. Christmas was nigh and the bakery was in its busy season. Toni Holmes was a busy woman when a body was found in the bathtub of a room registered to her brother Tim. It was a frame-up, so Holmes and Granny were in full cry.

Meanwhile the bakery was still having problems. The locals refused to eat gluten-free food, and bankers wouldn't finance her because they didn't think the bakery would survive.

The astute reader will notice a trend here. The only time the bakery did good business was when Holmes was mixed up in a local murder. The rest of the time it struggled and only survived with online sales. Maybe the Deppity Dawgs were right to suspect her. After all, three murders in two years, in a village that had none for decades prior, makes a person think.

The story got uglier as it went on. Police corruption, drug dealing, and embezzlement weren't the half of it. Tim had been set up as a fall guy. Holmes got in deep, and barely escaped. Not to worry though, as all were exposed in the end. Christmas turned out well. On to the recipes, such as Gluten-Free Chicken Salad Puffs and Gluten-Free Lemon Tartlets.

IF THE WIND COULD BLOW MY TROUBLES AWAY: PART 6

by Dale Speirs

[Parts 1 to 5 appeared in OPUNTIA's #326, 355, 382, 392, and 408.]

Tornados.

What's inside a tornado? Although we know more now than we did, much of the interior behaviour of a tornado is still wild surmise. It was even more so a century ago. "Professor Whirlwind" by Allen Quinan (1896 November, THE BLACK CAT, available as a free pdf from www.archive.org) was an as-told-to story about a man who survived a balloon ride into a tornado, although his wife did not, and years later he still mourned.

Most of the story was taken up by description of the interior of the tornado. The balloon was quickly shredded but the car managed to stay upright and its two occupants inside it. The initial sights were obvious extrapolations.

We were in the interior of an immense revolving flue, into which, as it traveled forward, powerful ascensional currents of air were indrawn at the earth below, and it was these upward spiral streams, howling and shrieking as they were sucked into the vortex, by which we were carried round and round like a leaf in a small dust storm.

From there, the author extrapolated as the Professor told his tale, his wife having been killed by electrical discharges inside the tornado: *"The upper portion of the funnel was filled, almost to the central axis, with a luminous mist, which was apparently in a state of rapid vibration, and through which could be dimly seen, floating on its upper surface, a phosphorescent disk of light, about the size of a dinner-plate, from which there radiated towards the outer wall of the funnel concentric rings of light that were continually shifting and wavering in their hues."*

Things got bad and things got worse: *"To add to the horror of the moment, I now discovered that our car was ascending. Instead of traveling horizontally in our circuits, it would shoot spirally upwards for a few feet, where it would make the circuit of the tunnel till another stronger current from below would whirl it up a few feet farther. Another foment and the funnel was lit up with an intense light. Again I glanced upwards. The disk that had hung at the top of the funnel was sinking towards us, and we were slowly rising to meet it!"*

“Like a bird before a basilisk, I gazed at the fiery disk. Nearer and nearer it came, larger and larger it grew ! Swimming about in the mist, now fiercely luminous and shooting from side to side of the funnel, now of a dull and dying red, and slowly rotating on its axis, now blazing with intolerable glare as it gyrated wildly and dropped from its periphery crimson particles that splashed about in the mist like bits of molten metal, but ever sinking, sinking!”

At this point the author apparently wrote himself into a corner and couldn't think of anything else to add. He therefore cut off the narrative by having the Professor swoon. After he had been taken into medical care, the listener to the tale arose the morrow morn a sadder, wiser man.

Weather control has long been a popular idea for science fiction writers. “Reaping The Whirlwind” by Alfred I. Tooke (1930 December, AMAZING STORIES, available as a free pdf from www.archive.org) is an early example of what might be done. Prof. John Crockett had invented wind controlling devices for which some sharp practice men had stolen the patent rights.

Notwithstanding that, he started over and quickly built a new machine that could generate and control tornadoes of any size. The small ones were just the thing to vacuum the floor with. What the big ones would do was obvious.

“Is it your intention to make tornadoes by the dozen, and sell them through jobbers,” I asked jocularly, “or will you just rent them out by the day or the hour? Possibly you could fix them up with cabins and use them instead of steamships for foreign travel!”

Too late I realized that my allusion to steamships was not a happy one, for his previous invention, stolen from him by his so-called friends, had been a wind-driven motor for ships. Nevertheless he still smiled.

“That reminds me”, he said. “I am going to present the first tornado to my friends over there!” He pointed toward the town, dimly seen in the distance, where the factory that had been built to produce his inventions showed faintly against the skyline.

There is a saying that before you seek revenge against someone, dig two graves. After obliterating the factory, the tornado returned to its point of origin. Crockett couldn't stop it because a part on the controls broke at exactly the wrong time. The tornado swept him and his laboratory into oblivion.

A different type of tornado featured in the movie METAL TORNADO (2010), written by Jason Bourque and Andrew C. Erin. I have it on the bargain bin DVD pack “4-Film Disaster” (2018) from Echo Bridge.

It is about a project by the Helios World corporation to produce unlimited energy from solar flares via the ionization layers of the atmosphere. Even Nikola Tesla wouldn't have touched that idea. The resident mad scientist was Stephen Winters, who invented the solar flare device but was later evicted from Helios World by the CEO Jonathan Kane.

The first test of the device was in Pennsylvania, which made for a refreshing change from the usual disaster localities such as Manhattan or Los Angeles. The second test was in France. Unbeknownst to Helios World, the tests spun off self-sustaining magnetic vortices, call them tornados if you will. They sucked in metal objects such as tin cans, tools, silo roofs, and anything else that can be torn loose. (Sudden thought: sharks are non-magnetic.)

The Pennsylvania vortex followed a vein of iron ore and headed off to trash Philadelphia. The French vortex headed to Paris because, as we all know, the Eiffel Tower is iron and therefore will attract such anomalies, as it has in many other disaster movies.

To ensure the audience understood how electricity and magnetism work, one of the subplots was a high school science teacher explaining the subject to his class. This eliminated the “As you know, Professor” infodumps and replaced them with “Pay attention, kids” lectures.

Winters was killed by one of his private bench-top experiments when he learned the hard way there was a flaw in his device. The one that Helios just downloaded umpty megawatts into from the power satellite. The vortex took out a Pennsylvania service station, trashed the house trailers of assorted rednecks as any good tornado would do, and headed out to Philadelphia for some serious urban renewal.

The US Air Force had spent big money on EMP (electromagnetic pulse) drones, and welcomed the opportunity to use them in a real field trial. One of the drones got through and saved Philadelphia, much to the regret of the audience, who were hoping for some more SFX. Everyone celebrated except Kane, who was indicted for good and sufficient reason.

The SFX, the main reason for watching the movie, were uneven. The power satellites were too coarsely rendered. The French satellites pointed in the opposite direction than the Pennsylvania ones, presumably because the producers thought they were on the opposite sides of the Atlantic Ocean and the Sun was in the middle. In reality, they would have been pointing in the same direction as they orbited Earth. The metal tornados were reasonably done.

Hurricanes.

“Hurricane Jonah” by T.J. MacGregor (2019 May/June, ELLERY QUEEN) took place in southern Florida as a hurricane drew near. A woman was suspicious that her husband was seeing another woman. Despite the weather warnings, she trailed him to his place of assignation and saw him with his mistress.

The final confrontation took place as the full blast of the hurricane hit, a Category 4. There were two fights to the death, one against the cheating husband and the other against the hurricane. She won both, using the flood waters to drown him and his mistress, thereby committing the perfect crime.

And The Wind Never Stops But Always Complains.

“January March” by Tom Purdom (2019 Mar/Apr, ASIMOV’S) is not really science fiction but then again neither are most stories in this prozine. (I read it at the library, as ASIMOV’S is not worth buying.) This story was set in the near future at a blimp parade in Philadelphia during a windstorm.

The blimps were in the shapes of various animals or characters and controlled by fancy avionics. One of them was an elephant. Its operators were having difficulty keeping it on the level as the wind funneled down the parade route between the skyscrapers. They had a few close calls because of gusts but nothing much happened. This is the kind of story that literary small-press magazines print.

PEARLS OF GREAT PRICE

by Dale Speirs

Doing as many reviews as I do, I come across similarities among some stories. It is said there are only six basic plots in fiction, and I am prepared to believe that. Consider if you will, the best place to hide jewels.

Pearls.

LET GEORGE DO IT was an old-time radio series that ran from 1946 to 1954. (This and hundreds of other OTR shows are available as free mp3s at www.otrrlibrary.org) George Valentine was a private detective who ran a classified ad in the newspapers which was quoted by him in the opening of the show: *Personal notice: Danger’s my stock in trade. If the job’s too tough for you to handle, you’ve got a job for me. Write full details.*

The episode would usually open with the voice of someone writing the letter out loud, appealing for help. Sometimes Valentine would do the opening narration. The cases were not necessarily criminal investigations. The client might need him to courier a package or do some other strange, seemingly innocuous task. His secretary/girlfriend was Claire Brooks, whom everyone called Brooksie. She often accompanied him out into the field on a case.

“42 On A Rope” was a 1947 episode written by David Victor and Jackson Gillis that demonstrated the difference between this series and other bang-bang-bang detective series. Valentine was out walking when he found a woman in distress, trying to gather up 42 pink pearls that rolled around the sidewalk when her necklace broke. He helped her gather up the pearls, but she ran off.

The incident happened outside a walk-up jeweler, so Valentine played a hunch and asked the jeweler if he knew the woman. He did, and it turned out he had manufactured the pearls for her. Valentine tracked down the woman and learned that she was on the run from a French gangster. She had been returning from France and he had paid her to smuggle in a batch of rare pearls. He put the pearls inside a bottle of wine, then put a fresh seal on it.

On arrival in America, she checked the wine bottle and to her horror saw the pearls were gone, even though the seal was intact. She, with Valentine mixed in, was evading the gangster for good reason. She was hoping the fake pearls would get her out of the jam, but that failed. It all came down to a final meeting

in Valentine's office where everyone who had even just a walk-on part met up for the denouement.

Valentine and Brooksie had done some research, which in those days meant borrowing books from the public library. The gangster was ready to kill everyone because of the missing pearls when Valentine invited him to read a page from one of the reference books. The gangster read it silently, put the book down, apologized to everyone for the trouble he caused, and then with his henchmen he quietly walked out.

Pearls are a special form of calcium carbonate called aragonite. Wine is acidic, containing acetic acid, which in a purer form is vinegar. The pearls simply dissolved in the wine. Since the gangster was the one who put them in the bottle, he had to accept the blame for their loss and did so like a gentleman.

That sort of ending to a detective episode is certainly rare in mysteries. No blazing gun battles or last-minute arrests by police, just a quiet twist ending that was oddly satisfying.

A variation on that theme was "Legacy Of Death", written by Terry Nation. It was a 1968 episode of THE AVENGERS, the original British television series, not all those American superheroes. The protagonists were John Steed and Tara King, agents for MI5. This episode was a humorous parody of THE MALTESE FALCON, with lookalikes of Sidney Greenstreet and Peter Lorre chasing after a giant black pearl the size of a cricket ball.

The main story began with Steed inheriting an ornamental dagger from an anonymous benefactor. Unbeknownst to him and King, there were a horde of treasure hunters and spies after the dagger, which would lead to the pearl.

All the clichés of old spy movies were there. The German count, who had ways of making King talk when he captured her. The American gangster straight out of the 1920s, wearing spats and a snap-brim hat. The Chinaman dressed in florid robes as if China was still an empire and not a Communist republic.

Steed gave the dagger to King for research, which brought other hunters after her. She knew martial arts, so bodies began piling up in her apartment as well. This series was a pioneer in chop-socky fights, and the women were strong-minded and able to hack and slash to protect themselves.

The episode was played with broad humour, as indeed it had to be. As the plot progressed, the bodies piled up, mostly in Steed's living room. Very annoying, given the difficulties in disposing of the corpses with discretion. He made a phone call (off stage) to the Ministry because they were gone a few scenes later.

In a different episode of the series, when he phoned (on screen) twice in one day for a cleanup squad, Steed got into an argument with the dispatcher who refused to make it a rush job the second time around. It was like booking a plumber.

After about half of the supporting characters were thinned out, the final venue was the mansion of the benefactor. The dagger was a key to the hiding place of the black pearl of great price. The surviving hunters, Steed, and King all arrived at once and had it out.

In the free-for-all, the pearl went flying through the air, landed in a large goblet of wine, and was dissolved in moments. During the epilogue, Steed shared the wine with King, pointing out that it was the most expensive glass of wine in human history.

An amusing show. The DVDs of the Tara King seasons are hard to come by; mine were inherited from my uncle. The Emma Peel seasons have recently been re-released as a boxed set, although she was long gone from the series by this episode.

The old-time radio series BOSTON BLACKIE aired from 1944 to 1950. There were also movies and books. Not a detective, private or police, but always barging into crimes, Boston Blackie, real name Horatio Black, was a former jewel thief.

He now lived the life of a supposedly honest citizen, although his source of income was never specified. He lived well in a nice apartment, squired a girlfriend named Mary Wesley about town, and always had time to interfere in the casebook of NYPD Inspector Faraday.

In the early part of the series, Faraday was constantly trying to run Blackie in for murder. He leaped to unsupported conclusions so often that one wonders how he made it past the rank of foot patrolman. It didn't help that Blackie kept turning up like a bad penny and razzing Faraday about his incompetence.

This act grew old quickly, so in the later part of the series Faraday no longer automatically tried to arrest Blackie but grudgingly accepted his help. There was a lot of verbal sniping between them but they had moderated into friends.

“The Amadon Pearls Murder” was a 1949 episode, no writer credit given. A millionaire by the name of Morris decided to have some fun, and let word get out that he kept the famous Amadon Pearls at home in his office safe.

Three burglars hit the place on the same night, Doc Singer, Marsha Keegan, and Boston Blackie. Each came away with what proved to be fakes. Morris had been watching them from a hiding place and after each of the thieves came and went, had replenished the safe with a fresh necklace of fakes.

One of the thieves got angry when a fence told him they were fakes and shot him dead, which brought Faraday into the matter. Police were stymied when Morris refused to file a complaint about the pearls. He had placed the real Amadon Pearls in a different safe elsewhere in his mansion. Much to his dismay later, it transpired that someone had indeed stolen the real pearls.

After a bit of to-ing and fro-ing, Blackie ‘helped’ Faraday to a logical conclusion about who the murderer was. An amusing episode that alternated between the three sets of thieves as they worked at cross-purposes to each other.

Diamonds Are Forever.

A diamond of the first water is a cut and polished flawless stone so clear that when it is placed into water it cannot be seen. The refractive index of the diamond is the same as the water and thus it becomes invisible. A popular method of stealing such diamonds soon suggested itself to fiction writers.

“The Heart Of God” by Joanna E. Wood (1898 March, THE BLACK CAT, available as a free pdf from www.archive.org) is an early story that makes use of this premise. Some British soldiers serving in India managed to steal a large diamond embedded in an idol of a Hindu temple.

Once back home, they were gloating over it after a private dinner when it was stolen by an Indian servant. He was immediately searched but nothing was found on him and nothing could be proved. Some years later, the secret was revealed.

The servant had palmed the diamond and then immediately dropped it into a glass of water on the table. The Brits did not know what ‘first water’ meant and were unaware the diamond was still within their reach. After the hoorah died down, the servant came back to clear the table and carried away an innocent looking glass of water.

In his 1975 book THE SHUDDER PULPS, Robert Kenneth Jones wrote a paragraph that caught my eye. He was discussing pulp fiction writer Arthur J. Burks.

... G.T. Fleming-Roberts remarked how Burks once built a story around a glass doorknob which concealed a diamond. After that, he said, “the entire detective field became cluttered with stories concerning stolen diamonds concealed in anything of cut glass from Lady Windfall’s punch bowl to milady’s perfume bottle stoppers.”

Nick Carter was one of the oldest private detective series, beginning in print in 1886 before Sherlock Holmes, and as NICK CARTER, MASTER DETECTIVE on radio from 1943 to 1953. Nick Carter employed his girlfriend Patsy Bowen as an assistant, who accompanied him to crime scenes. Her main role was to scream and have the plot explained to her in the epilogue.

“The Case Of The Invisible Treasure” was a 1948 episode written by Jim Parsons. Carter and Bowen were at the perfume counter of a department store. A harried manager was substituting for the regular clerk, who had suddenly been stricken with appendicitis and rushed to hospital. The store had received a package of six bottles of Heavenly Sin cologne, which he put out on the counter. The bottle was an average looking one but had a noticeable cut-glass stopper.

Bowen decided to buy a bottle, as did two other women. As the manager was rushing to complete the transactions, a goon showed up and demanded to buy all of them but was told one bottle to a customer. There was a scene. After leaving the store, Carter and Bowen went their separate ways to run errands.

A moment later, someone shoved Bowen to the ground and grabbed one of her packages. Not long after, Carter learned that customers who bought Heavenly Sin departed for Heaven sooner than they expected. Someone wanted those bottles badly enough to kill for them.

Eventually it was discovered that the cut-glass stoppers had diamonds embedded in them, \$20,000 worth (in 1948 dollars that would buy a mansion on an acreage). The diamonds were of the first water and thus invisible inside the glass.

The clerk had not been selling the Heavenly Sin over the counter. When the perfume arrived from France, where the smuggling gang had embedded the diamonds inside the stoppers, she distributed them to gang members posing as customers. Her sudden illness disrupted the operation. The manager who had to relieve for her on a moment's notice had no idea about it, and put them out on the counter, forcing the gang to come out into the open.

Bowen was kidnapped, as she so often was, by the gang, but Carter and a few uniforms came to the rescue just in time. They recovered the diamonds and claimed a reward from the government, which no doubt helped defray the costs of Carter's detective agency.

"The Star Of Evil" was another 1948 episode of the series, again written by Jim Parsons. It was first aired two months after the perfume escapade, and used the same idea. Parsons must have been a big fan of Arthur J. Burks to keep recycling the diamond idea. Also a lazy writer, but to be fair it was difficult to keep churning out episodes of a weekly series with fresh ideas.

Carter and Bowen had been summoned to a luxury hotel by Irving Malcolm, president of Gigantic Films, a Hollywood movie studio. Also staying at the hotel was a Maharajah, who had the 14th and 15th floors. He wore a turban which had as its centrepiece a 100-carat diamond called the Star of Evil.

Throughout the episode, an annoying elevator operator named Jerry kept barging into the scenes. In the opening sequence, he overheard Carter explaining to someone else that a diamond of the first water is called that because it is invisible in pure water. Note that well, because Jerry did.

Carter and Bowen met Malcolm in his hotel suite. He was in a dither because his 17-year-old daughter had eloped with an actor named Romney Lewis. Malcolm did not approve, notwithstanding that Lewis was the leading man in Gigantic Film's latest epic.

Meanwhile, the Star of Evil had been stolen, and the Maharajah was missing. He made his final appearance soon enough, as a corpse in his hotel suite. Only

then was it discovered that he was an imposter, none other than Lewis, who used tanning oil to pass himself off as a Hindu. It was for a publicity stunt that Malcolm didn't know about, although it became the wrong kind of publicity. The diamond was a fake, only worth about \$200.

Malcolm was the main suspect, and police hauled him to jail. All manner of clues kept appearing which pointed to him. Too convenient. Carter knew better and set out to save Malcolm. While he was doing that, Bowen was in Malcolm's room. Jerry intruded, and suggested that they search the room for clues. If they found the diamond, that would convict Malcolm.

Bowen told him no, but as she went to open a window for some fresh air, Jerry excitedly told her that he had just found the diamond hidden in a glass of water on the table. Bowen advised him that she had just filled the glass because she was thirsty and there was no diamond in it.

Having been caught planting more evidence, Jerry tried to push Bowen out the window, but after the obligatory damsel-in-distress screaming, she was saved by Carter.

The epilogue was Carter's reconstruction of the crime. Jerry had been unaware that both the diamond and the Maharajah were fakes. He had tried to steal it but was caught by Lewis, who was then killed in the struggle that followed. Jerry will go up the river, not of the first water, to sit in Old Sparky.

The Burks idea was used again in THE NEW ADVENTURES OF NERO WOLFE, an old-time radio series which ran from 1943 to 1951. Nero Wolfe, a mountain of a man, was a private detective loath to leave the security of his brownstone, preferring to tend his orchids in a rooftop greenhouse of his Manhattan brownstone, eat gourmet meals prepared by his chef, and read books.

The practical work of investigating his cases was done by his secretary Archie Goodwin. The original stories and novels by Rex Stout (died 1975) are referred to as the corpus, and stories by other authors as pastiches.

Murder was often done during the cases or was the cause of the investigation. The duo were therefore well acquainted with the local NYPD Homicide Squad, headed by Inspector Cramer. The NCO was Sergeant Purley Stebbins, and the 2-in-C was Lieutenant Rowcliff, a nasty man in the corpus, as a result of which many pastiche writers liked to give him a nasty death.

“The Disappearing Diamonds” was a 1951 episode written by Mandred Lloyd. A sneak thief named Willy Inch comes to Wolfe for help. He had been prowling the house of Mrs Florence Avery Marsh and helped himself to whatever loose jewelry he could find when he stumbled across her body.

Foolishly he left fingerprints before he fled the scene. The police were now looking for him on a charge of murder plus the theft of \$250,000 in diamonds, which he said he didn’t take. He mentioned in passing that the room was dark, and a floor lamp in the room wouldn’t turn on when he flicked the switch. As Inch finished his story, the police arrived and took him away.

Some of Marsh’s acquaintances came by the brownstone, ostensibly just curious about the events but obviously fishing to find out where the diamonds were. Goodwin had a few alarums with a femme fatale who got the better of him. Wolfe cogitated on the fact that no one could have gotten the diamonds out of the house before the police arrived, nor since, because the murder room was still sealed.

A house guest named Anthony Stark, who was in the vacuum tube business, as many were in 1951, was fingered as the murderer and diamond thief. He had brought with him a disassembled light bulb and some adhesive. After killing Marsh, he put the diamonds in the bulb and sealed it. Taking the working bulb out of the floor lamp, he substituted his loot-filled bulb and tossed the good bulb into the waste basket.

All Stark had to do was wait a few days until the heat died down, then return to the house and collect his loot. When Wolfe considered the chain of events, the case of the light bulb that wouldn’t work stuck in his mind. A good place to hide diamonds where no one would notice. Stark was the only one who could have done it.

Nautical Gems.

Stories of maritime gem smuggling go a long way back. THE COLLECTED FICTION OF WILLIAM HOPE HODGSON is a series of volumes of nautical stories by Hodgson from the early 1900s, edited by Jeremy Lassen.

Volume 1 contains a batch of stories about Captain Gault, known to Customs officers around the world as a jewel smuggler. Jewels are small and high value, and thus favoured by smugglers as a method of moving wealth across frontiers.

In consequence, Gault had to resort to ever more elaborate methods to get his stones ashore and away from the docks. Hodgson had gone to sea, and the evidence suggests he was basing his stories on real incidents.

“The Diamond Spy” is about a European voyage in which an undercover Customs agent tried to figure out how Gault was getting diamonds into Britain. The ship’s cargo included a coop of black ringneck hens, ostensibly for Gault’s brother, a poultry breeder. There was also a separate shipment of homing pigeons. Gault put on a show of feeding the hens with large bread crumbs, of a size that the suspicious agent concluded that each one had a diamond embedded in it.

On arrival, Customs swarmed the ship, and under the direction of the agent, killed and opened each hen. Gault arranged the coop so that when they opened it, the officers accidentally released the pigeons, who flew for home. Nothing was found inside the hen’s stomachs, and Customs was greatly embarrassed at having killed fine breeding birds for no result. The diamonds were actually in small packets, a few stones in each, which were then embedded under the feathers of the pigeon.

“The Problem Of The Pearls” was a similar story. Gault was observed in Amsterdam buying six pearls for £12,000 the lot, which was US\$60,000 at the time in 1915. Say \$6,000,000 in today’s depreciated currency. The American Customs officers were waiting for Gault’s ship, and did a detailed search of it and him to no avail. That included a body cavity search, so you see there is no new thing.

Gault had sealed the pearls inside eggs in a certain manner, and put them in plain sight in the galley. After the Customs officers gave up, he painted those eggs black, wrote the word ‘pearl’ on each, and made a show of smuggling them ashore.

The Customs officers pounced, and opened his package and found the eggs. Gault said he was taking the eggs to a friend and just wanted to have a little fun. No hard feelings, eh? They handed the eggs back, told him not to be such a smart ass, and sent him on his way. The story is perhaps a little too clever.

“The Jewel Thieves And The Straw-Filled Dummy”, written by Gil Doud and Bob Tallman, was a 1947 episode of THE VOYAGE OF THE SCARLET QUEEN. This was a short-lived old-time radio adventure series that lasted

about eight months. It was mostly narrated by Elliott Lewis, who played the part of Capt. Philip Carney, master of the ketch Scarlet Queen.

The episode began in Hong Kong where the ship was waiting unsuccessfully for orders from its owner. Meanwhile, Carney met up with a damsel in distress. After a few alarums and excursions, he took time out to romance her.

There was trouble in paradise when the bad guys caught up with her, seeking £200,000 in jewels her husband had stolen. Where he hid it before disappearing, she didn't know, but they thought she did. The title of the episode gave away any suspense. The woman didn't make it to freedom, and the Scarlet Queen sailed away to its next adventure. A routine action-adventure story but with no mystery left in the plot.

THE HAUNTING HOUR aired on old-time radio from 1944 to 1946. Despite its title it was mostly mystery stories. No credits of any kind were ever given. "The Mystery Of The Southern Star" was a 1945 episode that began with a passenger ship voyaging from South Africa to New York City. Frederick and Emily Ashley were on board.

He worked for the Du Bois diamond firm and was bringing back with him a big one called the Southern Star. Instead of putting it in the ship's safe, as one would expect the firm to insist upon, he kept it in their cabin in Emily's dresser drawer. Cue the theft of the diamond and Emily's disappearance.

It was presumed that the thief surprised her in the cabin, killed her in a struggle, and dumped her overboard. That presumption didn't last after the ship arrived in New York City, when Customs officers found her body in one of Frederick's trunks. The police initially thought the killer had done that to shift suspicion to Frederick.

They changed their mind when they examined the body at the morgue. Emily had been strangled by the murderer's bare hands. Her mouth should have been open as she gasped for breath, but it was closed.

Combined with the failure of the murderer to simply dump the body overboard, it became obvious that the body was being used to smuggle in the diamond, in this case by stuffing it down her throat. A background check revealed that Frederick had serious financial trouble. The rest of the investigation was just attention to details.

RESULTS, INC was a short-lived old-time radio mystery series that aired in the autumn of 1944. The protagonists were private detectives Johnny Strange and Theresa Travers. The latter was ostensibly Strange's secretary but she worked for 25% of the commission and went along on his investigating.

The series was played as a comedy although without a live audience. One suspects that wouldn't have made much difference. It wasn't bad but it never grew wings and flew. The series was competently done but was a standard private investigator show. Worth listening to once.

The final episode was "Mummy Sitting With Queen Sheshack", written by Paul Stein and Martin Wood, broadcast on December 30, 1944. The scene opened on Sunday afternoon of New Year's Eve Day, with Strange trying to clean up some bookkeeping before he and Travers went out on the town. A client came in and despite being told the place was closed, managed to hire them to guard a newly imported Egyptian mummy.

At the warehouse the aforesaid mummy generated all manner of alarums despite the dear lady having been dead for millennia. Two gangsters eventually arrived and hauled away the mummy as a prize. Back at the hideout, they unwrapped it for jewels that had been hidden inside the defunct. Travers and Strange were variously the victims and then the victors.

From there it was off to a restaurant for Auld Lang Syne and all that. I'm sure it must have been bittersweet to the cast and crew knowing that's all there was and there ain't no more.

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.]

CHRISTIAN NEW AGE QUARTERLY V24#1 (US\$5 from Catherine Groves, Box 276, Clifton, New Jersey 07015-0276) has a couple of articles about an episode of STAR TREK: VOYAGER titled "Mortal Coil". Neelix, one of the

main characters, had been taught that when he died he would go to the Great Forest where he would live happily ever after with his friends and family gone before him. Neelix was accidently killed but then revived by Star Trek superscience, only to be dismayed that he had not gone to an afterlife.

The discussion of two articles in this issue was about how we should be living our life to the fullest now, because habits being what they are, we probably wouldn't do it in an afterlife. Perhaps we are already in the afterlife.

THE FOSSIL #380 (US\$10 per year from The Fossils Inc, c/o Tom Parson, 157 South Logan Street, Denver, Colorado 80209) For those interested in the history of zines since the 1800s, this journal contains articles of interest.

This issue looks at political correctness from the 1870s to 1890s, when xenophobia was accepted by the younger generation. Show this to any young blogger today and remind them their grandchildren will repudiate today's beliefs.

Also in this issue is a discussion of an H.P. Lovecraft article that was only a legend until someone discovered it in a zine. During the 1920s, all zinedom was plunged into warfare, with HPL trying to moderate the flamers or, if they wouldn't listen to reason, go around them. Cancel culture and toxic tweets are the modern version of what went on in some apas.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

[Editor's remarks in square brackets. Please include your name and town when sending a comment. Email to opuntia57@hotmail.com]

FROM: Ray Palm
Plattsburgh, New York

2019-07-22

Good photographs from various issues of the Calgary Stampede. Until the last couple of years I didn't have cable TV. I noticed that a Canadian network was covering the event live. Montreal is about an hour away from here so some of its stations overlap the border. I didn't realize the prominence of the Stampede.

[It is mandatory for federal party leaders and Alberta party leaders to make an appearance at the Stampede. The standard photo opportunity is the party leader flipping pancakes at a Stampede breakfast. Even Trudeau had to show up.]

OPUNTIA #448: [Re: Stampede food concessions] Squid on a stick? Can't be worse than the time I ate a deep-fried Oreo cookie at the New York State Fair.

[I read that the specialty of the Iowa State Fair is deep-fried butter, which is a frozen stick of butter wrapped in batter and then fried until the butter melts inside. One hopes that health warnings are posted. I wouldn't eat one without first swallowing about five Lipitors.]

OPUNTIA #443 The Fibber McGee and Molly radio series. Here's a coincidence. Before I read this issue I had just wrapped up the latest edition of my zine that included an article discussing the episode where a flying saucer landed in McGee's front yard.

The show had an appearance from a Johnson Wax salesman who wanted to expand his territory, selling Glo-Coat floor wax to housewives on other planets. Did most of the Fibber McGee and Molly episodes feature this product placement schtick?

[Here's a greater coincidence. I just reviewed the same episode for Part 3 of my column "Alien Invasions", which won't appear for a while yet because I don't have enough copy for it. (Parts 1 to 2 appeared in OPUNTIA #407 and 424.)]

[It was standard practice in old-time radio comedies to integrate the commercial into the show so it wouldn't disrupt the flow. The commercials were done with good humour. Harlow Wilcox was the Johnson Wax spokesman for decades, and was also the show's announcer.]

SEEN IN THE LITERATURE

Cruikshank, D.P., et al (2019) **Prebiotic chemistry of Pluto.** ASTROBIOLOGY 19:831-848

Authors’ abstract: *We present the case for the presence of complex organic molecules, such as amino acids and nucleobases, formed by abiotic processes on the surface and in near-subsurface regions of Pluto. Pluto's surface is tinted with a range of non-ice substances with colors ranging from light yellow to red to dark brown; the colors match those of laboratory organic residues called tholins.*

Tholins are broadly characterized as complex, macromolecular organic solids consisting of a network of aromatic structures connected by aliphatic bridging units. The synthesis of tholins in planetary atmospheres and in surface ices has been explored in numerous laboratory experiments, and both gas- and solid-phase varieties are found on Pluto. A third variety of tholins, exposed at a site of tectonic surface fracturing called Virgil Fossae, appears to have come from a reservoir in the subsurface.

Eruptions of tholin-laden liquid H₂O from a subsurface aqueous repository appear to have covered portions of Virgil Fossae and its surroundings with a uniquely colored deposit that is geographically correlated with an exposure of H₂O ice that includes spectroscopically detected NH₃. The subsurface organic material could have been derived from presolar or solar nebula processes, or might have formed in situ.

Photolysis and radiolysis of a mixture of ices relevant to Pluto's surface composition (N₂, CH₄, CO) have produced strongly colored, complex organics with a significant aromatic content having a high degree of nitrogen substitution similar to the aromatic heterocycles pyrimidine and purine.

Experiments with pyrimidines and purines frozen in H₂O-NH₃ ice resulted in the formation of numerous nucleobases, including the biologically relevant guanine, cytosine, adenine, uracil, and thymine. The red material associated with the H₂O ice may contain nucleobases resulting from energetic processing on Pluto's surface or in the interior.

Some other Kuiper Belt objects also exhibit red colors similar to those found on Pluto and may therefore carry similar inventories of complex organic materials.

The widespread and ubiquitous nature of similarly complex organic materials observed in a variety of astronomical settings drives the need for additional laboratory and modeling efforts to explain the origin and evolution of organic molecules. Pluto observations reveal complex organics on a small body that remains close to its place of origin in the outermost regions of the Solar System.

Krumenacker, L.J., et al (2019) **Taphonomy of and new burrows from Oryctodromeus cubicularis, a burrowing neornithischian dinosaur, from the mid-Cretaceous (Albian-Cenomanian) of Idaho and Montana, U.S.A.** PALAEOGEOGRAPHY, PALAEOCLIMATOLOGY, PALAEOECOLOGY 530:300-311

Authors’ abstract: *Vertebrate assemblages from the mid-Cretaceous (Albian-Cenomanian) Wayan Formation of Idaho and Vaughn Member of the Blackleaf Formation of Montana are dominated by the small burrowing dinosaur, Oryctodromeus cubicularis. Specimens can be assigned to three distinct taphofacies dependent on degrees of skeletal articulation and associated lithofacies.*



[image from Wikipedia]

Taphofacies A comprises mostly to fully articulated specimens in bioturbated sandstones. Taphofacies B comprises partially articulated to associated

collections of skeletal elements in pedogenic mudstones, siltstones, and fine-grained sandstones. Taphofacies C comprises isolated skeletal elements within the debris-flow deposit of the Robison Bonebed.

Except for one associated nodosaur skeleton, Oryctodromeus is the only vertebrate represented by significant associations of skeletal elements or portions of articulated skeletal elements within the Wayan Formation/Vaughn Member units, and occurrences represent a paleocommunity dominated by a small cursorial and fossorial vertebrate.

The co-occurrence of multiple individuals, representing presumed juvenile and adult growth stages, reinforce previous suggestions of parental care in this species. In addition, newly reported Oryctodromeus burrows compare in overall morphology and size with the burrow containing the holotype of Oryctodromeus.

These data suggest the possibility that evidence for additional fossil taxa having had a communal and fossorial lifestyle may be discerned through further focused taphonomic investigations.

Verdugo, M.P., et al (2019) **Ancient cattle genomics, origins, and rapid turnover in the Fertile Crescent.** SCIENCE 365:173-176

Authors' abstract: Genome-wide analysis of 67 ancient Near Eastern cattle, Bos taurus, remains reveals regional variation that has since been obscured by admixture in modern populations. Comparisons of genomes of early domestic cattle to their aurochs progenitors identify diverse origins with separate introgressions of wild stock.

A later region-wide Bronze Age shift indicates rapid and widespread introgression of zebu, Bos indicus, from the Indus Valley. This process was likely stimulated at the onset of the current geological age, ~4.2 thousand years ago, by a widespread multi-century drought.

In contrast to genome-wide admixture, mitochondrial DNA stasis supports that this introgression was male-driven, suggesting that selection of arid-adapted zebu bulls enhanced herd survival. This human-mediated migration of zebu-derived genetics has continued through millennia, altering tropical herding on each continent.

Waters, M.R. (2019) **Late Pleistocene exploration and settlement of the Americas by modern humans.** SCIENCE 365:doi.org/10.1126/science.aat5447

Author's abstract: North and South America were the last continents populated by modern humans. The timing of their arrival, the routes they took, their homeland of origin, and how they explored and settled diverse environments filled with now-extinct animals have been debated for over a century.

The study of the first Americans made slow but steady progress during the 20th century. The first half of the century brought the realization that people had entered the Americas at the end of the Pleistocene. The second half of the century brought the ability to radiocarbon date early sites and the belief that the ~13,000-year-old Clovis lanceolate fluted projectile points associated with mammoth remains represented the first people to enter the continent.

This view began to change with the discovery of artifacts dating ~14.2 thousand years (ka) ago at the Monte Verde site in southern Chile. This discovery signaled that people must have been in the Americas before Clovis and that early sites should be present in other parts of the Americas.

Initially, many sites proposed to predate Clovis did not stand up to scrutiny, having issues with geological context, dating, or even the archaeological evidence itself. However, the last 30 years have seen an increasing number of sites providing evidence of early occupation that cannot be dismissed.

These sites show that people were present and successfully occupying different areas of North and South America between ~15.5 and ~14 ka ago, thereby leading the way to a new understanding of the first Americans. In the last 15 years, genetic information from contemporary Indigenous Americans and the remains of ancient individuals from Asia and the Americas has transformed our understanding of the ancestry of the first Americans.

These genomic studies have conclusively shown that the first Americans were the result of ancestral east Asian and northern Eurasian admixture. This founder population made its way to eastern Beringia and after additional population splits traveled south of the continental ice sheets covering Canada sometime between ~17.5 and ~14.6 ka ago. These genetic results agree with the emerging late Pleistocene archaeological record.

Davies, K.W., and C.S. Boyd (2019) **Ecological effects of free-roaming horses in North American rangelands.** BIOSCIENCE 69:558-565

Authors' abstract: *Free-roaming horses are a widespread conservation challenge. Horse use (grazing and related impacts) is largely unmanaged, leading to concerns about its impact on native plant communities and ecosystem function. We synthesized the literature to determine the ecological effects of freeroaming horses in North American rangelands.*

Largely unmanaged horse use can alter plant community composition, diversity, and structure and can increase bare ground and erosion potential. Free-roaming-horse use has also been linked to negative impacts on native fauna. Horses have repeatedly been shown to limit and even exclude native wildlife's use of water sources.

Self-sustaining populations of free-roaming domestic horses (Equus caballus) in North America established in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries from domestic stock introduced by Spanish explorers. Free-roaming horse-occupied areas also overlap with habitat for many species of conservation concern, including sage-grouse and other sagebrush obligate species.

Fleming, M.B., L.M. Hill and C. Walters (2019) **The kinetics of ageing in dry-stored seeds: a comparison of viability loss and RNA degradation in unique legacy seed collections.** ANNALS OF BOTANY 123:1133-1146

Authors' abstract: *Determining seed longevity by identifying chemical changes that precede, and may be linked to, seed mortality, is an important but difficult task. The standard assessment, germination proportion, reveals seed longevity by showing that germination proportion declines, but cannot be used to predict when germination will be significantly compromised. Assessment of molecular integrity, such as RNA integrity, may be more informative about changes in seed health that precede viability loss, and has been shown to be useful in soybean.*

Decreased RNA integrity was usually observed before viability loss. Correlation of RNA integrity with storage time or storage temperature was negative and significant for most species tested.

Exceptions were watermelon, for which germination proportion and storage time were poorly correlated, and tomato, which showed electropherogram

anomalies that affected RNA integrity number calculation. Temperature dependencies of ageing reactions were not significantly different across species or mode of detection. The overall correlation between germination proportion and RNA integrity, across all experiments, was positive and significant.

Changes in RNA integrity when ageing is asymptomatic can be used to predict onset of viability decline. RNA integrity appears to be a metric of seed ageing that is broadly applicable across species. Time and molecular mobility of the substrate affect both the progress of seed ageing and loss of RNA integrity.

The duration that seeds remain alive (i.e. germinable) depends on storage temperature and moisture, as well as circumstances during development and maturation that are not well understood. Before succumbing, germinating seeds occasionally show evidence of age-related damage in the form of delayed germination, abnormalities or stunted growth.

However, the transition between being alive and not alive usually occurs discreetly in a dry seed because typical signs of life are only apparent when water, and other germination requirements, are provided. Therefore, reliably predicting the onset of lost viability is difficult because biological factors contributing to survival (or death) are not yet known, and the moment when germination potential is lost cannot be observed.

El Mir, C., K.T. Ramesh, and D.C. Richardson (2019) **A new hybrid framework for simulating hypervelocity asteroid impacts and gravitational re-accumulation.** ICARUS 321:1013-1025

Authors' abstract: *We present a hybrid approach for simulating hypervelocity impacts onto asteroids. The overall system response is separated into two stages based on their different characteristic timescales.*

First, the short-timescale fragmentation phase is simulated using a modified version of the Tonge-Ramesh material model implemented in a Material Point Method framework. Then, a consistent hand-off to an N-body gravity code is formulated to execute the long-timescale gravitational reaccumulation calculation.

We demonstrate this hybrid approach by considering the 5 km/s head-on impact of a 1.21 km diameter basalt impactor on a 25 km diameter target asteroid. The

impact event resulted in the fragmentation, but not complete disruption, of the entire target. A granular core is observed at the end of the fragmentation simulations, which acts as a gravity well over which reaccumulation occurs in the N-body simulations. Our results suggest that disruption thresholds for rocky asteroids are higher when energy-dissipating mechanisms such as granular flow and pore collapse are included.

Speirs: This destroys all those nuke-the-asteroid disaster movies, since if an asteroid is hit, the target will only crack a bit and reassemble from gravitational pull. Rather than Earth being hit by a rifle shot, it would be hit by a point-blank shotgun shell.

Chan, D., et al (2019) Correcting datasets leads to more homogeneous early-twentieth-century sea surface warming. NATURE 571:393-397

Authors' abstract: Existing estimates of sea surface temperatures (SSTs) indicate that, during the early twentieth century, the North Atlantic and northeast Pacific oceans warmed by twice the global average, whereas the northwest Pacific Ocean cooled by an amount equal to the global average. Such a heterogeneous pattern suggests first-order contributions from regional variations in forcing or in ocean-atmosphere heat fluxes.

These older SST estimates are, however, derived from measurements of water temperatures in ship-board buckets, and must be corrected for substantial biases. Here we show that correcting for offsets among groups of bucket measurements leads to SST variations that correlate better with nearby land temperatures and are more homogeneous in their pattern of warming.

Offsets are identified by systematically comparing nearby SST observations among different groups. Correcting for offsets in German measurements decreases warming rates in the North Atlantic, whereas correcting for Japanese measurement offsets leads to increased and more uniform warming in the North Pacific. Japanese measurement offsets in the 1930s primarily result from records having been truncated to whole degrees Celsius when the records were digitized in the 1960s.

These findings underscore the fact that historical SST records reflect both physical and social dimensions in data collection, and suggest that further opportunities exist for improving the accuracy of historical SST records.

De Middeleer, G., et al (2019) Fungi and mycotoxins in space: A review. ASTROBIOLOGY 19:915-926

Authors' abstract: Fungi are not only present on Earth but colonize spacecraft and space stations as well. This review provides an extensive overview of the large and diverse group of fungal species that have been found in space, as well as those corresponding detection methods used and the existing and potential future prevention and control strategies.

Many of the identified fungal species in space, such as Aspergillus flavus and Alternaria sp., are mycotoxigenic; thus, they are potential mycotoxin producers. This indicates that, although the fungal load in space stations tends to be non-alarming, the effects should not be underestimated, since the effect of the space environment on mycotoxin production should be sufficiently studied as well.

However, research focused on mycotoxin production under conditions found on space stations is essentially nonexistent, since these kinds of spaceflight experiments are rare. Consequently, it is recommended that detection and monitoring systems for fungi and mycotoxins in space are at some point prioritized such that investigations into the impact of the space environment on mycotoxin production is addressed.