

OPUNTIA 461



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.

GREY CUP FESTIVAL 2019

photos by Dale Speirs

Calgary hosted the 107th playing of the Grey Cup football championship on November 24, 2019, the fifth time it has done so. The city had it in 1975, 1993, 2000, and 2009 (see OPUNTIA #68.5A).

It came with a curse. While the Calgary Stampeders have won the Grey Cup eight times since 1948, they have never won it at home. That curse was repeated this year. They were the 2018 champions playing in Edmonton but in 2019 were knocked out of the running in the first round of the playoffs. Instead, Calgarians watched the Winnipeg Blue Bombers defeat Hamilton Tiger Cats by a score of 33 to 12. It was the first time Winnipeg had won the cup since 1990.

Below: Stephen Avenue pedestrian mall downtown.
At right: Olympic Plaza banners.



At left: Bankers Hall atrium downtown.

Below: The Earl Albert Grey, Governor-General of Canada from 1904 to 1911, wanted to give a cup for hockey, but Lord Stanley (GG from 1888 to 1893) beat him to the punch. He had to settle for rugby/football (the two sports were still evolving in North America and didn't fully separate for many years). The trophy was first contested in 1909.



Top: Olympic Plaza skating rink on a weekday afternoon a few days before the game. A young mum and her son took a few turns around the ice. It was difficult to photograph the Grey Cup logo from a low angle.



Bottom: It snowed five days before the Cup, which is why there is snow in this photo, but not the Olympic Plaza photo taken a couple of days later. So far this winter Calgary had typical seasonal weather, a 15-cm snowfall followed by a week of chinooks, then the cycle repeated. Game day was sunny and dry.





At left: I was so busy posing this Hamilton fan for his photo that it wasn't until I got home and looked at it on the computer that I noticed the couple behind him. She was dressed as the Grey Cup and he as a giant football.

Below: Let us not forget the real reason for all professional sports, to sell merchandise.





At left: There is a joke that the most common last words of men are “Here, hold my beer while I give it a try.” When I overheard this man saying “Hold my beer”, I knew I had to get a photo. Instead of a mechanical bull, it was a bucking can of iced tea. In his condition he was lucky he could get on the bull while it was stopped. He only lasted two reverse turns at slow speed before toppling off.

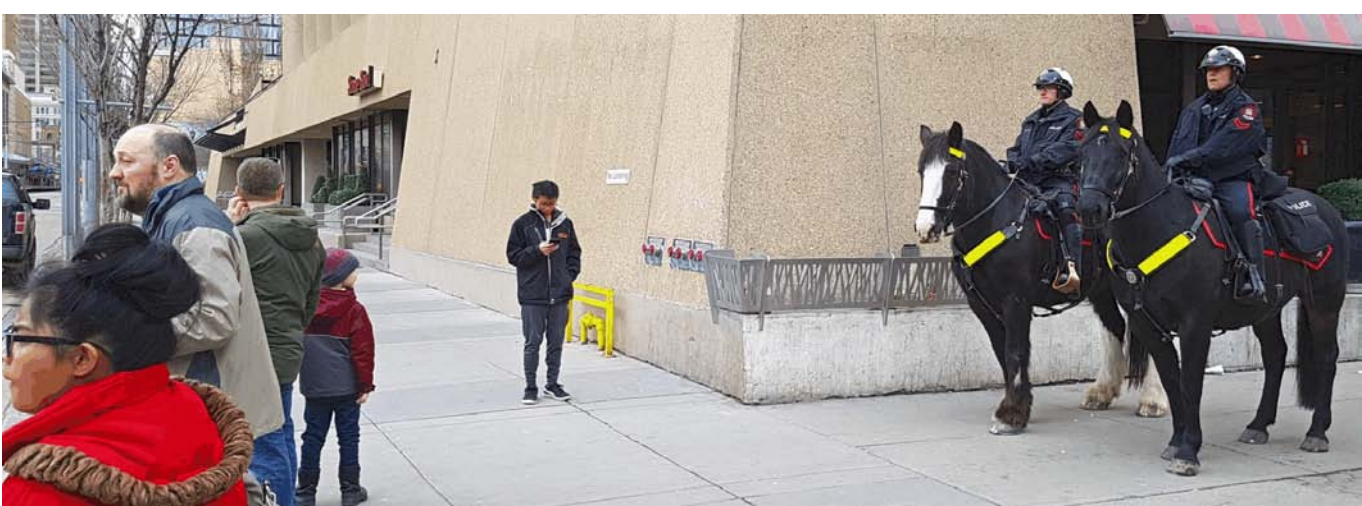
Below: Tim Horton’s is Canada’s largest coffee and doughnut chain. They were impartial at the festival, with a food truck for each team.



Below: The festival laid out artificial turf for high school teams to practice on. Spot the ball in this play.

At right: Safeway had these cupcakes with both team colours. At \$3.99 each, I left them for the fans.





At right: Constabulary across the avenue from Olympic Plaza. You can't see the sign but they are adjacent to a Tim Hortons doughnut shop. Just a coincidence I'm sure. Horses don't eat doughnuts.

Below: Olympic Plaza was busier on Saturday, November 23, the day before the Grey Cup game.



FINANCIAL FICTION: PART 2

by Dale Speirs

[Part 1 appeared in OPUNTIA #444.]

Economics Explained.

DUFFY’S TAVERN was one of the most popular comedy series on old-time radio, running from 1940 to 1952. The tavern, a cheap dive with watered drinks and bad food, was managed by Archie, no last name ever given. (This and other OTR shows are available as free mp3s from www.otrrlibrary.org.)

Each episode opened with Archie answering the telephone: *“Duffy’s Tavern, where the elite meet to eat. Archie the manager speaking. Duffy ain’t here. [pause] Oh, hello Duffy.”* The rest of the one-sided conversation would then set up the premise of that episode.

The cashier was Miss Duffy, no first name ever given. She was the daughter of the owner, but her father never appeared on the show, only being the unheard half of a one-sided telephone conversation.

“Archie Cuts Prices” was a 1950 episode written by Ed Gardner, who created the series, directed, and played Archie. As usual, the tavern didn’t have many customers, so in the opening conversation with Duffy, Archie convinced him to lower prices 10% to beat the competition, especially with their hated rival across the street, Grogan’s Bar.

It all began when Archie read a newspaper article in which an economist suggested that if all businesses cut their prices one-tenth, then the resulting savings would be 10%. As Eddie the waiter remarked, you can’t argue with logic like that.

Finnegan, the village idiot, arrived. (If you consider Manhattan a village, which was where the tavern was located, on Third Avenue.) He asked Archie to explain economics to him.

“Economics is the science that the government uses to balance our national income against our national expense.”, began Archie. Finnegan asked: *“How does it work?”* Archie was forced to concede: *“Not very well.”*

Always ready to dispense the fruits of his ignorance, Archie continued in his mangled English: *“They get around it by the Treasury Department declaring a fiscal during each twelve months per annum.”* Interjected Eddie: *“Except February.”* *“You’re thinking of judiciary.”*, replied Archie in a condescending tone of voice. *“I stand corrected.”*, said Eddie, letting Archie have all the rope he wanted.

Archie continued: *“Now normally prices fluctuate, you see, but sometimes big companies get their cartels together and they fix these prices so that they can’t flux. This is what is known as an international monotony.”*

“You mean monopoly”, corrected Eddie. *“Do you wanna give the lecture?”*, said Archie. *“Sorry, Professor.”*, replies Eddie in a sarcastic tone that Archie missed completely.

Archie went on: *“Now take money. The basis of economics is money, which was originated with the early Romans when they first took their public baths. These baths were for the poor people. People with dough couldn’t get in, hence the expression “the filthy rich”.”*

“Yes sir, there’s nothing like an education, huh Eddie?”
“Nothing like the one you got.”

“But to continue, Eddie, since the days of the Romans, money has always been the medium of exchange, except today it ain’t a very happy medium. The dollar devaluates less all the time, especially during an era of upward flux. Since we are no longer on the gold standard, and since we are no longer on the silver standard, if inflation sets in ...”

Finnegan interrupted: *“What we will be on then?”*
“I hesitate to say.”, replied Archie.

And so ended the lecture. From there, Archie launched into a crusade to have Third Avenue businesses lower their prices 10%. The butcher promised to only put nine fingers on the scale instead of ten. Nick the barber would take off 10% less hair. Cavendish the undertaker offered customers ten coffins for the price of nine.

Unfortunately the local burlesque show couldn’t figure out where to take off another 10% without being raided by police.

Foreign Exchange.

“The Cambist And Lord Iron” by Daniel Abraham is a short story from his 2010 collection LEVIATHAN WEPT AND OTHER STORIES. It is a trio of vignettes about Olaf Neddelsohn, who ran a currency exchange kiosk in a strange alternative British city, the domain of Lord Iron, a tyrannical and arbitrary satyr.

His Lordship liked to have fun with his subjects, and one day chose Neddelsohn. He brought to him brightly coloured sheets of paper that passed for currency in the Independent Protectorate of Analdi-West. Lord Iron demanded a fair rate for converting them into pounds sterling.

There was no such quote on any financial market for such an unrecognized currency. Neddelsohn was for the chop if he couldn’t prove a valid conversion from someone who would pay for the paper. But he did, selling it to a local shopkeeper, who bought the giant banknotes for use as wrapping paper. Not for much however, but Lord Iron had to admit the deal was valid. As Neddelsohn pointed out, a currency trade is worth whatever someone else will give in exchange for it, regardless of what any subsequent use by the buyer may be.

The second encounter was when Neddelsohn was asked to settle a bet between Lord Iron and another dissolute noble that anything could be valued in terms of something else. The example they used was how much a horse was worth in lemon drops. The actual bet was what the value of a day in the life of King Walther, the reigning monarch of Britain,** was if expressed as the days of an inmate in a prison.

Neddelsohn’s calculation was very clever. He noted that a prisoner was kept on a restricted diet and had enforced exercise each day. The King was a glutton, a drunk, and a hedonist. His days would be numbered sooner than a lifer in prison. Neddelsohn told the lords that a day in the King’s life was equal to 19.75 hours of a prisoner. There was a twist ending that was well done.

The third and final vignette had Lord Iron asking Neddelsohn to value the soul for an exchange, presumably with the Devil. Neddelsohn correctly deduced that Lord Iron had already sold his soul and wanted to buy it back.

** Which led me to suspect the divergence in this history was that the German Hanovers still held the throne, not their English cousins.

The answer, Neddelsohn told him, was with a life of humility and service. The practical way was for the two men to trade places in life. And so they did. His Lordship vanished from view and changed his appearance, serving out his days behind the exchange counter. Neddelsohn was granted the lands and income (but not the title) of Lord Iron, and being a prudent man, lived a better life than his benefactor had done.

The book was good reading throughout, not just these stories. Well recommended.

Stock In Trade.

THE WHISTLER was an old-time radio series that specialized in twist endings. Each episode was narrated by the culprit and the audience followed along as the perfect crime was planned and committed.

The series was sponsored by Signal Oil. At the climax of a story, the criminal would gloat about getting away with murder. Cut to a commercial extolling the virtues of Signal gasoline, then back to the final two minutes, where the murderer would be tripped up by one little detail overlooked earlier in the show.

“Murder On Margin” was a 1948 episode written by Frank Lovejoy. It was about a stockbroker named Edward Jamieson, who was carrying on an affair with Susan. He didn’t know she was happily married and that she and her husband specialized in high finance fraud. The husband kept out of sight while pimping his wife.

Jamieson’s wife didn’t understand him. In anticipation of a divorce, and being led on by Susan, he opened a margin account in her name and transferred the bulk of his free cash and stocks, a considerable sum, into the account. The idea was that when the blowup came, the wife couldn’t soak him for as much as she thought she could. Jamieson and Susan would then start over as a happy couple.

Once the money was in, Susan closed out the account, as she could since it was in her name. She had a cashier’s cheque made out to her and sent to her apartment by courier. Jamieson found out and stormed over to Susan’s apartment to recover the cheque. She told him she was married and her husband already had the money.

Jamieson had been drinking and was in a blind alcoholic rage. As Susan went to the door to show him the way out, he fired a gun. The next thing he knew, he was sitting on a park bench, trying to remember what he had done. He decided there was only one thing he could do, and went to the police station to confess to killing Susan.

The detective heard him out, then called in Susan, who was being held elsewhere in the station. The police responding to the call of gunshots had found her standing in shock over the body of her husband. It transpired that Susan ducked as Jamieson fired, but her husband was behind the door and took the bullets.

The police thought they finally had Susan, who was wanted in several jurisdictions for fraud and theft, along with her now-deceased husband. Jamieson turned the tables on them. He had missed the person he wanted to kill. As the detective noted in the final line, it was going to be a messy case for the prosecutor to explain to the jury.

“Psipunk” by Steve Stanton (2016, ON SPEC #102) considers what stock markets would be like out in space once humans had colonized it in sufficient numbers. The protagonist was Rick St Ames, a day trader at the Luna City Stock Exchange. Aliens in the form of Aldorians had reached the Solar System and integrated themselves into human society to the extent that St Ames’ colleague was one.

St Ames received an insider tip. Since all communications of any kind, not just brokers, were logged and analyzed by computers, the tip was so vague that an outsider would think it an ordinary conversation. St Ames was able to guess what it was using information that only he would understand in context. An asteroid mining company had lost an entire asteroid and its personnel, but no one knew it just yet.

Advance knowledge like that was worth a fortune to short sellers, who sell a stock heavily and drive its price far down, sparking a panic from others who sell to avoid a loss. Traders have three days to settle their accounts, so if the price crashed far enough, traders then buy the stock back at the bottom and cover their accounts. When the stock rebounds, they sell at the higher price and take a second profit.

Don’t try this at home, as short selling is extremely dangerous if the trader can’t buy enough shares to cover his account. Lots of professional traders have successfully short sold once or twice, but those who persist will eventually come a cropper. If a stock rises instead of falling, the result is called a short squeeze. Those who owned the stocks can then indulge in schadenfreude.

The problem St Ames had was that after a market panic had come and gone, regulators would look at the first sellers and investigate any insider trading. His strategy was to walk over to his Aldorian partner’s desk and enter the first trades on the alien’s computer to produce the first drop. The aliens took no notice of investigators. Since the Aldorians had starships and humans didn’t, the regulators were careful not to step on any pseudopods.

St Ames then went back to his desk and began short selling free and clear of any suspicion, because he and all the other short-sellers were only following the market. Nice work if you can get it.

A utopian version of a stock market appeared in the short story “Money Is The Root Of All Good” by Patrick Wilkins (1954 October, WORLDS OF IF). It was set on the planet Lyrane, where citizens earned their income by doing good deeds for each other. No sillier than other utopian fiction that was published in earnest, even if a lot of handwaving was required.

“This sect maintained that an individual should not be paid on the basis of the work he did, but for the good deeds, or good thoughts he had. A small stipend was paid for actual work or production, to establish a workable basic economy and trade. This stipend was enough to cover all the basic wants of the individual.”

“To procure luxuries, a citizen had to use the money he received for his good deeds or thoughts. Every time a man helped an old lady across the street, or came up with a bit of philosophical wisdom, he could record it with a central office and receive his luxury pay from the government.”

“The purpose of the system was to make people emphasize virtue and quality in their lives. Instead of concentrating on profit for profit’s sake, they would have to consider the inherent rightness and beauty of what they were doing.”

“In such a system,” Roald asked, “how could such a thing as a stock market possibly develop?”

“Very simple, sir. This luxury pay, issued in a different currency than the commodity pay, could be used in any way a person saw fit. Some people naturally developed the idea of investing stock in a particularly virtuous or intelligent person.”

“Every time that person did a good deed, the stockholders received a dividend from his luxury pay. All of the scientists and philosophers, therefore, became corporations in themselves, with as many as five thousand people holding stock in one man.”

“Sorry, Kim, but I don’t get it. How could these incorporated individuals get any luxury pay for themselves if they had to hand it out to their stockholders?”

“The administration would allow for that. A person received luxury pay in proportion to the number of stockholders that he claimed. The government had to do this since they indirectly were investing in these corporation-men ... but I’ll explain that later.”

“The corporation-man lived off the original investments of stockholders, with some of the stock solvent for sales. In this way, the individual would profit from “good-doing” by receiving many new investments.”

“What is the social makeup of this Lyrane? It seems to me it would be a lunatic fringe de luxe, with every hack writer, thaumaturgist, or evangelist climbing aboard the gravy train.”

“On the contrary, it is a social structure of the finest minds in the galaxy. The rest are all weeded out. Although the motives of the system are idealistic, they are enforced with a rigid practicality. They demand quality and truth, and gauge it with the revealing yardstick of public consumption and approval as measured in sales and polls.”

As Godel wrote, although not in those exact words, there is no system that cannot be broken. Something was causing the Lyrane stock market to crash, so off-world investigators were sent to figure out why.

It was the usual reason, the susceptibility of humans to moral corruption. An off-world corporation instigated the economic attack to profit from the economic chaos. I’m glad such a thing would never happen on our planet.

Pause for a digression: “*Money is the root of all evil*” is a commonly misquoted saying. The actual phrase from the Bible, from the First Epistle of Paul to Timothy, is: “*For the love of money is the root of all evil*” Money by itself is neither good nor bad, only the use to which it is put.

When Things Don’t Add Up.

“The Phantom Check” by George Bruce Marquis appeared in the 1922 August issue of the pulp magazine BLACK MASK, available from www.archive.org as a free pdf. The story began with a bank clerk coming up short \$1,000 when settling his accounts for the day, then repeated shortages over the next few days. He wasn’t a suspect, for no embezzler would be dumb enough to fail the daily audit in such a blatant manner.

The bank executives were in a tizzy because if word leaked out that they failed to balance their accounts, then it might lead to a bank run. It was obvious someone was running a scheme. An outside detective was called in. He had each deposited cheque brought to him in a separate room, where he lined them up and puzzled over them.

The solution was that the thief was cashing cheques on his account that were made of flash paper. This paper is used by stage magicians. It flashes into nothing and leaves no trace. When the cheques were stacked in the cashier’s drawer, which he kept closed otherwise, they poofed into nothingness when the drawer slammed shut. The thief walked out with his cash. Except for the last time, when the detective was waiting with iron bracelets.

Immediately following that story was “The Vault” by Murray Leinster, who needs no introduction to science fiction fans. He also wrote action-adventure and mystery stories, of which this is one. It is about three different safecrackers who decided to hit the same safe on the same night.

One was sandbagged by the second thief, who intended to make him the fall guy. Mike, the third thief, barely managed to hide, and had to wait out the second thief’s action. There was a twist, and Mike managed to escape with some of the cash while leaving the second man trapped to take the heat. Hoist on his own petard.

MY FAVORITE HUSBAND was an old-time radio comedy series that aired from 1948 to 1951, a Lucille Ball sitcom based on a novel by Isabel Scott

Rorick. It was the predecessor to Ball’s first television series. On the radio show, Ball played housewife Liz Cooper, whose George husband was a rising young executive at a local bank. His boss was Rudolph Atterbury, president of the bank.

“The Math Contest” was a 1950 episode, no writer credit given. It began with George being called in by Atterbury because the bank was having difficulty with the way Liz was handling her chequing account. The tellers had trouble reading her handwriting and she was often overdrawn. George promised to speak to her and did.

They sat down and reviewed her financial procedures. George learned, for example, that she thought $9 + 9 = 17$. Many of her chequebook entries were illegible. He decided to help her by sending her to night school. She expected him to do her homework.

Meanwhile, back at the bank, Atterbury had agreed to judge the night school’s math contest. Their candidate, against a rival school, was Liz because they thought she did her homework so well. Atterbury tried to fix the contest by giving her easy questions and her opponent difficult ones.

Liz managed to mess that up when she inadvertently revealed Atterbury’s conflict of interest. He was booted as judge midway through the contest and another man appointed. He and George then tried to coach her from the audience but she kept misinterpreting their clues. This provided a very funny comedy sequence, impossible to type up but worth listening to on the mp3. Despite her incompetence, she managed to stumble to a win.

Never Run Past A Bank.

Bank runs are rare nowadays, the last being in 2008. Left uncontrolled, they can destroy lives on the other side of the planet by chain reaction economic collapses. That is why it is wise to own some gold and silver coins.

An example of an obsolete type of short story was “How The Run Was Stopped” by Richard Stillman Powell (1896 October, THE BLACK CAT, available as a free pdf from www.archive.org). A competitor successfully started a rumour that the bank at Copper Dip, Colorado, was about to fail, triggering a run by depositors. No insurance in those days.

Banks then and now never carry more than a small amount of currency in their branches. If they ran out of coins and banknotes, customers panicked and closed their accounts, or at least tried to. As the Copper Dip bank paid out its withdrawals, they sent an appeal for \$18,000 in coins, which were shipped by express train. Said train derailed en route.

All seemed lost, so a clever bank teller rode off at high speed and returned with bulging bags to show the customers in the lineup that all was well. The bags were not opened, for they actually contained casino chips. Nonetheless, the bank was able to stall depositors long enough until the coins arrived and the panic subsided.

“The Posterity Fund” by Raymond Emery Lawrence (1929 May, AMAZING STORIES, available as a free pdf from www.archive.org) is a post-apocalypse story set in the future several hundred years hence.

Various towns and cities decided to establish trust funds that would mature in 200 years, the money then to be used for the public good. That premise alone made the story fantasy, as politicians do not have the fiscal discipline to maintain large trust funds without somebody looting them along the way.

Setting that aside, two centuries from now, all the funds were being cashed out. The banks were having trouble meeting the demands for cash but were struggling through because they owned assets to back up their liabilities. The problem was that just before the funds came due, some bright spark invented a method of synthesizing food from raw minerals. That made farm land worthless, as a result of which the banks had little collateral to sell in order to raise cash.

Once the depositors learned there was no security for their money, the bank runs began. The largest bank protected its vaults with a superscience poison gas generator. When an angry mob of depositors broke into the bank, they triggered the machine, which kept going and going, eventually killing off most of Earth’s human and animal life. The recovery was long and slow, and four centuries later, humans were still at the peasant level of society.

What is especially interesting about this story, and is a context that modern readers would miss, is that it was published six months before the Panic of 1929. Just as the May issue appeared at the news agents, the initial failures and shakedown of the market had begun. Volatility increased over the summer, and

finally the stock market crashed and brought down the economy of the world in a chain reaction.

THE DARLING DAHLIAS AND THE SILVER DOLLAR BUSH (2014) by Susan Wittig Albert was a novel in a cozy series set during the Great Depression in the village of Darling, Alabama. There wasn't just one Miss Marple but a group of them, the Darling Dahlia Garden Club.

This novel began in the spring of 1933 when the Darling Savings and Trust closed. This triggered a local panic and a shortage of ready cash. Like many places, the town leaders resorted to scrip, which they called Darling Dollars. The project was headed by Alvin Duffy, the bank's new president, parachuted in by another bank that bought out the Trust. He had trouble explaining it to the villagers, who kept thinking of it as counterfeit money, although it was nothing of the sort.

Digression: During the Great Depression, a number of towns in Canada and the USA did issue scrip. The scrip was to be redeemed in cash at a later date when the economy had improved, or so everyone hoped. In the meantime, the town issuing the scrip would accept it as payment for taxes and fees, which made it acceptable. The town also paid their employees in scrip. It was a method of increasing the velocity of currency, which during the nadir of the Great Depression fell to near zero.

The novel meandered its way through the back stories of the characters, which included trouble with revenueurs killing local moonshiners. The scrip wasn't printed until three-quarters of the way through the book. It was promptly stolen and Duffy had to go detecting.

The thief was a local who had betrayed the moonshiners. Duffy got most of the scrip back and the novel petered out to a conclusion. The Dahlias didn't have a part in the recovery but supplied most of the back stories with their gossiping and snooping.

The novel is an interesting look at how people struggled to survive during the Great Depression. My parents grew up in rural Alberta and Saskatchewan during that time. The stories they told us kids match the Texas setting in this novel. The Millennials and subsequent generations have not heard these stories from kinfolk, long since dead, but only know it as dull history.

Fiat Currency.

The currency of a country is accepted by its denizens because it can be used to pay taxes and fees, although this acceptance breaks down during hyperinflation. In recent years, cryptocurrencies have arisen, with the idea they would not be depreciated by inflation and be independent of governments. That idea will eventually be squashed. Currently only about 1% of cryptocurrencies are used to pay for actual goods or services. The rest wash about between speculators hoping to make a profit and then cash out into fiat currencies.

Facebook recently announced it would be issuing its own cryptocurrency, the libra. Where that might lead to was anticipated by a story "Free As The Air" by David H. Keller (1931 June, AMAZING STORIES). A group of robber barons engaged in a successful conspiracy to monopolize markets and jobs during a depression.

Having done so, to the point where 80% of the workers were employed by them, they then issued scrip. Since they controlled all the stores, which would only accept scrip, the other 20% of the population starved because they couldn't get scrip unless they worked for the monopoly.

A nice try, but the government introduced legal tender laws stating that only fiat currency could be used, and broke up the monopoly. It was a straw man argument, because no government will concede power except by defeat in war.

The interesting aspect of this story is that two years later, Franklin Roosevelt made gold illegal for transactions because it was uncontrollable by the government, which wanted to inflate the fiat currency in the hopes of reviving the velocity of money. Instead, what would have been a two or three year recession was stretched into a lost decade.

Eventually governments around the world will squash independent cryptocurrencies. They may issue their own, but I have always wondered how long it will be until someone succeeds in hacking blockchain software. Blockchain is algorithmic mathematics.

Godel's theorem states that all mathematical systems have a breaking point. No doubt the finest minds have been working on a hack for the past several years, and eventually someone will figure out how to break cryptocurrencies.

The Taxman Cometh.

“The Tax On Moustaches” by H.J.W. Dam (1899 January, THE BLACK CAT, available as a free pdf on www.archive.org) was about two English newspaper correspondents stationed in Rome. The arrival of an American heiress touched off a rivalry for her hand.

One of them permitted her to write an innocuous despatch under his name. When she saw it in his newspaper a few days later, she was thrilled to be a published writer, even if it was only a paragraph about the olive oil harvest.

Not long after, he had to leave town on urgent business. Trying to get in on her good side, he allowed her to send despatches under his name subject to strict rules about what to write. His rival saw an opening and hoaxed her into writing a story that the Italian government was going to introduce a tax on moustaches.

It sounded like something the Italians would do, so back home the editor allowed it in print. Italian newspapers then picked up the story and for the next few days the barbers of the nation were busy. The government was in delicate negotiations with minority parties over the forthcoming budget, so they didn’t deny the story. They let it stand as a bargaining chip.

The story worked out the consequences of the non-existent tax and ended happily with the marriage of the put-upon correspondent and the budding suffragette. I’d call it ridiculous fiction, but considering the taxes the Liberal and Dipper governments brought in, it may be premature to laugh. For the record, I have a moustache and goatee.

Tontines.

A tontine is a last-one-standing lottery, now pretty much extinct but popular in past centuries, especially before life insurance became available. A group of young people would each contribute a sum of money, say \$10,000, into a pool. The money was invested to earn income which in the early days would be reinvested to boost the size of the pool.

In later years, when the investors were in middle age, they received a dividend. If one of them died, the dividends were redistributed to the survivors and the capital remained in the fund.

Thus, over time, the survivors would get an increasing share of dividends because the capital remained unchanged and its income was distributed among fewer and fewer shareholders.

The last survivor got the entire capital. One can easily see why tontines were outlawed in many countries. There was a temptation to speed up the increase in dividend size by eliminating a few others in the tontine.

“The Old, Old Men” was a 1945 episode, no writer credited, of the OTR series THE HAUNTING HOUR. The story was set in a boarding house whose inhabitants all belonged to a tontine. It wasn’t much of a tontine since the boarders were poor elderly men with meager pensions and savings. Said one of the boarders: *“Not one of us who doesn’t look forward to the others’ funeral.”*

Until, that is, 78-year-old multimillionaire Larry Stebbings gave up his mansion and moved in to join the tontine. His stepdaughter Diana and her husband Ralph tried to convince him to move back to the manor, but he refused, saying he enjoyed slumming. The tontine was suddenly a huge temptation, and someone took action to cash in.

Stebbing disappeared, and murder was suspected. Diana and Ralph went searching for him but instead found the bodies of two other boarders. They went to fetch the police but when they returned, the bodies had disappeared. The police went straight to the boarding house and found another corpse. Someone was pruning the tontine in a hurry.

Meanwhile, Diana and Ralph found Stebbings alive. For all their concern and trouble, he locked them in a closet with the missing bodies. There followed much running about by the three surviving boarders. The boarding house landlord was the killer. Everyone had forgotten that he was in the tontine.

TRAIN OF EVENTS: PART 3

by Dale Speirs

[Parts 1 to 2 appeared in OPUNTIA #403 and 416.]

Oceanic Subways.

“The Undersea Tube” by L. Taylor Hansen (1929 November, AMAZING STORIES, available as a free pdf from www.archive.org) was about a trans-Atlantic tunnel, although no one shouted hurrah. The train tunnel worked on the hydraulic principle, using compressed air to push individual tube-shaped cars through from Liverpool to New York City.

The construction had its difficulties, particularly with respect to one crack in the bedrock which could not be sealed properly regardless of grouting. The work-around was to install pumps and just live with it. What no one realized was that the crack was an active tectonic fault, although that word didn’t exist in 1929. It finally snapped with results to the tube that were obvious.

During construction, the crews had found a crevasse with a coffin containing a woman’s body. When they opened it, the body quickly decayed and nothing was left for scientists to analyse. The event was a mystery but soon forgotten.

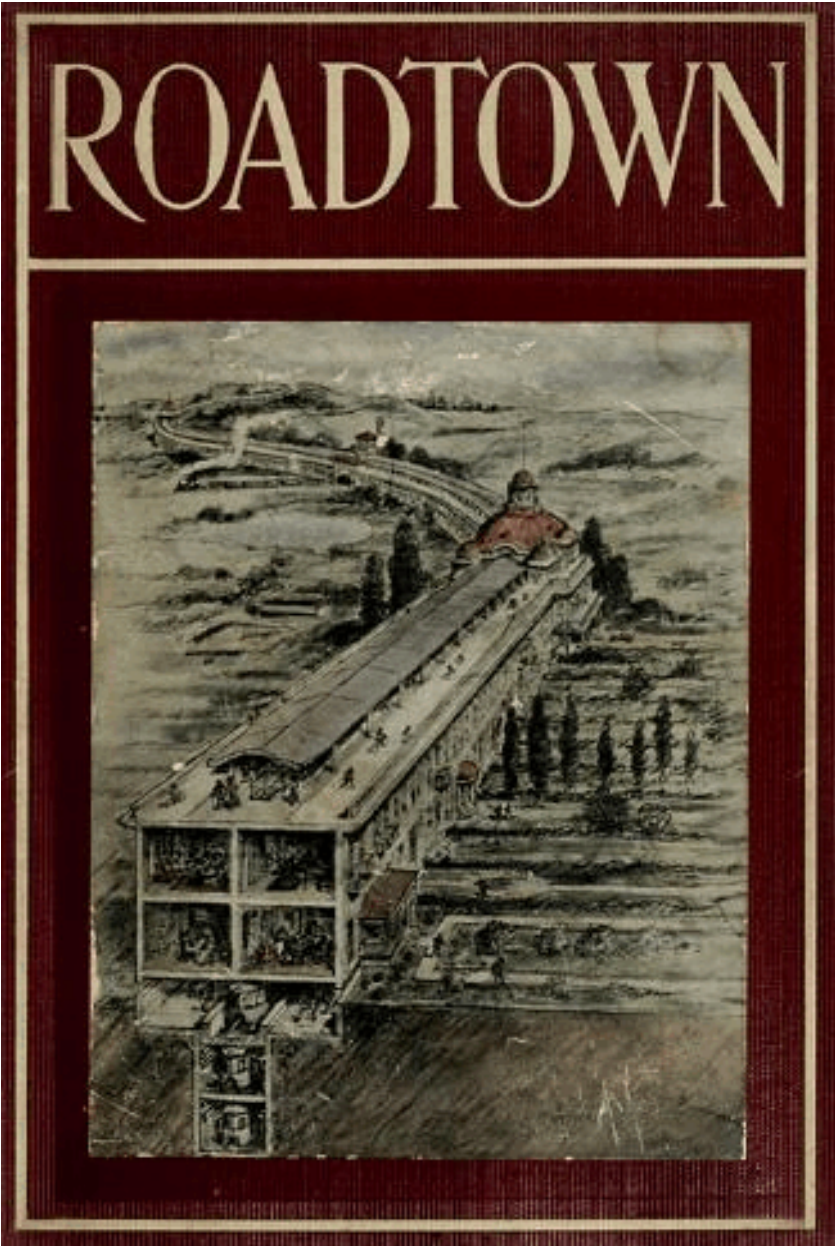
The narrator of the story was in a car when the earthquake hit. He alone survived long enough to see a giant cavern when its wall collapsed and exposed it to him. There was an underground city in it, but not for long. Lava began flowing in from the earthquake and the city was melted away. The narrator could not prove his story or his sanity.

Alternative Transcontinental Railroads.

ROADTOWN (1910) was a novel by Edgar Chambless, available as a free download from www.gutenberg.org. He explained in his foreword what inspired him to write it. *This book is dedicated to J. Pierpont Morgan, a straight player of a crooked game, who, it is said, played his usual role in the Wall Street manipulations of the Central Railroad of Georgia securities, which adroitly and legally absorbed the small savings and happiness of many unsophisticated investors, an action which, in my case at least, proved to be a blessing in disguise, for it made me suffer first and then made me think.*

Hence the gratitude and consequent dedication to Mr. Morgan for starting the train of thought, which finally resulted in the invention of Roadtown, a plan for side-stepping the crooked game as now played so that henceforth whosoever will may become a straight player of a straight game.

Roadtown was an idealized utopian city, linear and well organized, as opposed to regular cities with winding streets and congested sprawl. The cover illustration pretty much summed up the concept.



Roadtown was to be built along or on top of several railroad lines. Chambless wrote in standard utopian mode. That is, humans of the future would be selfless, each to their appointed place, and everything working smoothly, all white tiles and automata. He went into detail about utilities such as water, sewer, and electricity. Like most utopias, Roadtown would be a socialist paradise. There would be no trusts, as monopolies and conglomerates were known in those days.

Housekeeping would be automated. Beds would be made up each morning by machines, certainly a thing we would all wish for. Cooking would be done in communal kitchens, a thing I doubt would work well. I base this on my university student days sharing digs with others and squabbling over who made a mess or ate someone else's food. Anyone who has ever had roommates knows what I mean.

The trains would run on time. The linear city would be serviced by monorails, also a frequent indicator of utopias. I've known a number of railway men, one in my family. In talking occasionally about the future of railroads, the topic of monorails would arise and was always dismissed with one word 'switching'. Even if a single line, switches are still needed at intervals for sidings or bypassing broken-down trains, and they work best with twin rails. Of course in a socialist utopia the trains never break down.

The appendix included a detailed financial breakdown for the cost of constructing a linear city, which would be offset by rents and fees. Chambless had way too much time on his hands after the Wall Street gang wiped out his savings, but he put it to use thinking about all these details.

Roadtown is a logical well-thought idea, which is why it will never be implemented. Humans are not logical. An interesting read.

Cozy Mysteries.

FLAMENCO, FLAN, AND FATALITIES (2015) by Mary McHugh was part of a series about five women who had a dance troupe called the Happy Hoofers. Wherever they went, the murder rate suddenly spiked, leading one to ask why Interpol hadn't put them on a watch list. In this novel, they were booked to perform on a luxury train tour through northern Spain.

The tour was marred by a loud-mouthed television host named Dick Shambless, an ill-mannered boor who fortunately didn't make it past Chapter 1. There was

a brief pause for recipes, including Calamari a la Plaucha (spicy squid) and Galacian lobster with potatoes. This seemed strange because the novel was not a food cozy. Each chapter began with a few lines about how to take photographs (ex. put on makeup before taking selfie) which was equally strange.

Be that as it may, the show must go on. Chapter 2 opened with a jump shot to the Happy Hoofers, clattering through the flamenco to distract the passengers from the murder. When the train arrived at the next station, it was detained while police investigated. Poisoning was suspected in Shambless's death. No passenger was allowed off, although the Hoofers managed to sneak off for some tourism.

The novel almost turned into a cookbook. Besides the recipes between chapters, the passengers were entertained on board by chefs demonstrating Spanish recipes, with blow-by-blow accounts on how to prepare the dishes and histories about the food.

The tour finally restarted. Shambless's cameraman became victim #2 because he may have filmed the murderer dousing the food with poison powder. The killer was drifting along the edge of insanity. After taking out the two men, she went after one of the Hoofers and almost succeeded.

The book wobbled about too much. A food cozy is all very well when advertised as such, but this one is combined with too much clutter. The photography hints were unnecessary. The overall plot is a variation of murder on the Orient Express, plus some politically correct backgrounds. Too unfocussed.

Suave Mysteries.

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. The series fluctuated between serious spy-counterspy adventures and parodies of then-current movies. 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 much advanced for their time. They were not screamers who stood about helplessly 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.

“A Funny Thing Happened On The Way To The Station” is a 1967 episode of the series, written by Brian Sheriff. Almost all of it took place on trains on the London to Norborough route.

Agents had sniffed out some sort of spy operation on the line but what it was about was not certain. An agent was murdered using a fake train stop at an abandoned station temporarily given a name plaque that said Norborough. The whole train crew was in on the job, and deluded the agent into stepping off into the derelict station where a hit man was waiting for him.

They shouldn't have done that. The Ministry sent in Steed and Peel. The spy ring was collecting information about something but how they did it and why remained to be seen. The duo visited the traveling secretary, an Admiral, who was responsible for planning travel for agents.

No one was aware that the Admiral's assistant was part of the spy ring, busily photographing travel documents, reducing them to microdots, and embedding them into railway tickets. The conductor on the Norborough line was the ringleader. He punched the ticket over the microdot, palmed the chad, and later read it. An elaborate procedure, and one that suggested there must be a big payoff to justify it.

The payoff was the assassination of the Prime Minister, by ensuring that his compartment in a special carriage had a bomb hidden under the seat. Since the entire crew were in on it, they could counter the usual security measures that bodyguards put into place.

The plot failed, thanks mostly to Peel. Steed was the one who needed rescuing, not her, having been captured by the spies. There were assorted alarms and excursions. A railfan barged into the middle of things, aghast that a conspiracy would blow up an antique carriage.

As with such mysteries, the paranoia and skullduggery were amplified by everyone being confined to the train, with no escape possible. Spies and counterspies could not escape each other and were forced into more drastic actions than they would take in the freedom of a large city.

Not So Suave Mysteries.

THE BLACK BOOK was an old-time mystery radio series with 15-minute episodes. It was a very short-lived series in 1952, of which only four episodes survive. (This and other OTR shows are available as free mp3s from www.otrrlibrary.org.) It was like THE WHISTLER, where the audience followed along as the killer planned the perfect crime, only to be tripped up in the last few minutes by a surprise twist.

“On Schedule” was written by Nelson Bond, about a brokerage executive named Foster who had been embezzling \$100,000 per year with fake stock trades. He discovered a young accountant named Prentice who was a small-time embezzler, a few hundred here and there. The two men had each other at a disadvantage, so they agreed to co-operate in their thefts.

Eventually the auditors found them out. Prentice agreed to turn state's evidence against Foster. The implausible part was that Foster found out which train they were taking in a few days to go into the big city for depositions. Foster planned to kill Prentice en route. To be certain of his method, Foster took the same train several times at night after work, using a stopwatch and counting his steps so that he could operate in a dark passenger compartment.

At exactly the same time, the train plunged into a tunnel for several minutes. Foster sneaked over to a control panel and shut the lights off in the passenger compartment, then walked in the pitch dark to the compartment where Prentice and a detective were. He intended to stab Prentice in the dark, then get back to his compartment unseen.

Just as he started to plunge the knife into Prentice, a brilliant shaft of light lit up the compartment and the two men saw him. There was a struggle and Foster lost. The light blinked out again until the train came out of the tunnel. That trip was being made during the day. What Foster hadn't known, because he did his timing at night, was that halfway along the tunnel there was a giant vertical ventilation shaft, which allowed the sunlight down.

As George Carlin Once Said, “Well, It's A Mystery”

“The Phantom Express” by H. Thompson Rich (1926 October, WEIRD TALES, available as a free pdf from www.archive.org) was about a train driver behind schedule. He was trying to make up the time by speeding.

At each stop he was closer to scheduled time but still had to run hot. After one station, he saw the taillights of an express train ahead of him, a train that wasn't supposed to be on the tracks. It stayed ahead of him but nonetheless was a possible danger. His fireman couldn't see the lights, and at each stop the stationmaster denied any train had been running ahead of him.

Finally, as they approached a long trestle bridge, the driver saw the ghost train collapse the bridge and tumble into the abyss below. He dynamited the brakes and barely stopped the train in time, for the bridge had been washed out much earlier.

“The Train” by Zoran Zivkovic (from his 2006 collection IMPOSSIBLE STORIES, translated from the original Serbian by Alice Copple-Tosic) was about a banker riding in a first-class compartment of a train. The only other passenger who came in was a man who introduced himself as, and was indeed, God.

After the conversation got going, God agreed to explain the banker's future. The only catch was that when God left the train at the next station, he erased the banker's memory of the meeting and his future. Predestination, don't you know.

THE TWILIGHT ZONE television series was Rod Serling's masterpiece, aired from 1959 to 1964. “A Stop At Willoughby” was a 1960 episode, written by Serling about a New York City advertising executive who went off the deep end of a train.

The executive had a very bad day, losing a major account and suffering a flare-up of his ulcer. His wife had pushed him to buy a fancy house he really couldn't afford, and wanted to party hearty instead of staying at home as he needed to do to recover from his day's work.

It was a snowy November day when he took the commuter train home. He fell asleep. When he woke up, the train had stopped at the village of Willoughby. There was no such village on his line, he was in an antique passenger car, it was a hot day in July, and a different conductor mentioned in passing it was 1888.

He kept drifting between the two worlds, never quite certain which was the dream and which was reality. Finally, several days later, he again woke up to find the train stopped at Willoughby. This time he ran out the back platform because he wanted to stay there.

Jump cut to his body being removed from under a railroad bridge in the modern era. The conductor testified the executive had suddenly jumped out of his seat and dashed out the back end of the train, falling to his death in the November snow. The body was removed to the morgue by the local funeral home, Willoughby & Son. The train never left our world, but the executive went into the twilight zone.

The Real Thing.

UNSTOPPABLE was a 2010 movie, screenplay by Mark Bomback, about a runaway freight train in Pennsylvania. It was based on an actual incident in 2001 when an Ohio freight train ran away under power and traveled halfway across the state at full speed with no one in it. The movie was bookended by the Lac Mégantic, Québec, disaster on July 6, 2013.

In the Ohio incident and the movie, which was faithful to the facts to a large degree, the trains were finally stopped and a hero saved the day. There was no hero to save the citizens of Lac Mégantic. 47 people died and 39 buildings were destroyed by a runaway tanker train that derailed in the middle of the town.

As an action-adventure, the movie was well done. The terminology and job procedures were not explained in infodumps but demonstrated on camera. There were no computer effects. The trains were real and the stuntmen moved along them as they thundered down the tracks, chased by several camera cars.

In both the movie and the real-life incidents, it was demonstrated that all the safety equipment and procedures will not avail if the engine driver took shortcuts. Someone was in a hurry and couldn't be bothered to set the air brakes just to move a short distance. A track switch was incorrectly set, and one error after another compounded quickly, within a few moments.

The movie was well paced and moved almost as fast as the train. Recommended. I bought the DVD from Amazon.

FOOD COZIES: PART 16

by Dale Speirs

[Parts 1 to 15 appeared in OPUNTIA's #432 to 434, 436, 438, 441, 442, 444, 447, 450, 454, 456 to 458, and 460.]

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.



These doughnuts were all from the Jelly shop in Calgary. From left to right: apple pie, Nanaimo, and root beer float.

Bloody Baking.

In these reviews I'll use the spelling 'doughnut' except when quoting text where the novel used the American spelling 'donut'.

DEADLY DONUTS (2013) by Jessica Beck (pseudonym of Tim Myers) was a novel about Suzanne Hart of April Springs, North Carolina, who owned a bakery called Donut Hearts, and was the local Miss Marple. A stranger came into town trying to blackmail the Hart family with details about Suzanne's late father but wound up dead.

Hart did her Marpleing in the afternoons because the doughnut shop kept her busy in the morning and closed after the lunch hour. Bakers are perforce early risers. This time around she was digging out nasty secrets about her own family, not impartially exposing the lives of others. Pausing every so often for a doughnut recipe, Hart doggedly searched for the truth about her father.

There were diversions along the way, from a search for a bomber, assorted blackmailers trying to take each other out, melodrama, and doughnut recipes. (I liked the Lemon Bangs.) It all ended in gunfire and tears, but no doughnuts.

LEMON LARCENY (2014) opened with the death of Suzanne Hart's aunt. The doughnut shop hardly got a look-in as Hart and her mother cleared away the estate and discovered not a few disturbing facts about Aunt Jean. The neighbours were not the kind you'd like to have. One of them had been stealing Aunt Jean's jewelry and killed her when she was discovered in the act.

No doughnut recipes between chapters as the alarums mounted, but the novel ended well with Baked Lemon Glazed Donuts.

OLD FASHIONED CROOKS (2014) began on Spirit Night, a village fete for April Springs' high school football team. They were playing a big game just before Halloween. They take the sport seriously down there. Suzanne Hart created the Band Buster Donut in the school colours of blue and gold. The Spirit Donut was a solid yeast doughnut covered with white icing with chocolate for the eyes and mouth.

The peace couldn't last, otherwise there wouldn't be a novel. As the big bonfire was lit, Hart's shopgirl Emma Blake saw the body of her boyfriend Rick Hastings hidden inside the wood. He had been a ne-er-do-well but nonetheless didn't deserve stabbing to death.

There were old romantic entanglements that came back to life, and at least two different psychopaths fixating on different victims. The denouement took care of the main murderer, who killed Hastings because he jilted her, but some loose threads were left dangling for the future. This time the doughnut recipes were at the back of the book, including Orange Dunkers and Apple Drop Treats.



More from Jelly: lemon curd, maple cream, and pecan

CAKE AND PUNISHMENT (2018) by Maymee Bell (pseudonym of Tonya Kappes) was the first novel of a cozy series about Sophia Cummings of Rumford, Kentucky. She was a professional pastry chef who came back to her native village after a romantic affair gone wrong in the big city. Her first job was a wedding cake for an old high school classmate.

Since Cummings didn't have any facilities of her own, the cake was to be prepared at the local country club. Their head chef was Emile, no last name given but which didn't matter because his head was quickly bashed in with an iron skillet.

Cummings took over his job, although as a first-time Miss Marple she had to defer to the local police. The details of running a country club restaurant kept her busy. She noticed when going over Emile's menu ledgers that there seemed to be some minute discrepancies. Further investigation revealed he had been involved in a love triangle and was an all-around crazy guy.

About half the scenes took place in various kitchens around the village. The murderer was aiming for Emile's job and was resentful when he didn't succeed. After the denouement was out of the way, the next step was an encore in which Cummings announced she was here to stay. She was going to open a bakery called For Goodness Cakes.

The recipes appendix began with Red Velvet Crunchies, then on to Surprise Puffs (a different filling in each puff), Southern Skillet Apple Pie, Banana Pudding Cupcakes, Kentucky Butter Cupcakes, and Kentucky Derby Pie (not made from the also-ran horses).

MIDNIGHT SNACKS ARE MURDER (2018) by Libby Klein (pseudonym of Lisa Schwartz) was a novel in a cozy series about Poppy McAllister of Cape May, New Jersey. She had just started a gluten-free bakery, was remodeling a house into a bed-and-breakfast, and had a sleepwalking aunt who went into neighbours' homes and stole their snacks.

A local man who worked with troubled teens was murdered. Police suspected the Snack Bandit, so perforce McAllister had to go Marpleing before they arrested her aunt. In between baking muffins, that is. Various family sagas were extracted, one of which proved to be the murderer's motive, revenge for a long-ago tragedy.

The bakery and the bed-and-breakfast were still works in progress at the close of the novel but the recipes appendix gave a taste of things to come. Paleo Espresso Brownies was one that I'll skip. The Gluten-Free Blueberry Buttermilk Muffins were followed by Chocolate Orange Muffins, Banana Walnut Muffins, Honey Maple Pecan Shortbread, and Butterscotch Oatmeal Bars, all designed to expand your waistline in no time.

PLUM DEADLY (2013) by Ellie Grant (pseudonym of Joyce and Jim Lavene) was the first novel in a cozy series about Maggie Grady, once a financial wizard on Wall Street, now reduced to waitressing for her Aunt Clara in Durham, North Carolina. Grady's downfall was a failed audit that got her cashiered. No one in the banking industry would hire her, so she ended up in her aunt's bakery and restaurant, the Pie In The Sky.

Her former boss came to visit and told her he was about to identify the real crook. He didn't get around to telling her just yet and never did, as shortly thereafter his body was found behind the pie shop. That being one of the standard tropes of cozies (corpse found in or behind Miss Marple's house or shop), Grady therefore had to become an amateur sleuth.

Aunt Clara was way behind on the pie shop's property taxes. She was becoming quite forgetful as Grady discovered when she found out the shop had no insurance. Strangely that buildup went nowhere, but was pushed aside by a group of nasty bankers from Manhattan. The culprit was an even nastier banker's wife who didn't like being pushed out from under the money tree.

The arrest of the murderer brought in crowds of customers to the pie shop. Rubberneckers are good for business, and they sold out of apple pies. And so to the recipes appendix, with three pies: Lemon Meringue, Deep Dish Cherry, and Coconut Custard. Fortunately I had just eaten lunch, so with a full stomach there was no need to dash out to the nearest bakery.

FUDGE CUPCAKE MURDER (2004) by Joanne Fluke was a novel in a long-running series about Hannah Swensen of Lake Eden, Minnesota. She operated The Cookie Jar when not Marpleing and finding bodies, usually in or around the bakery.

This time she found the corpse of Sheriff Grant in a dumpster behind the high school where she had been teaching a cooking class. It happened that municipal elections were underway and her brother-in-law was running against Grant for

sheriff. Just to solidify suspicion, fudge icing from one of Swensen's fudge cupcakes was smeared on his shirt.

The chapters on her Marpleing were interspersed with recipes. The murder was, as always, good for business at the bakery, also known to the villagers as Gossip Central. This enabled Swensen to get in most of her sleuthing without leaving the shop.

The recipe for Fudge Cupcakes, the ones that caused a lot of the trouble, didn't show up until just before the denouement. The murderer had been running a chop shop for stolen vehicles, hence the connection to Sheriff Grant. Swensen almost got chopped herself, but lived to bake another day.



The most impressive cupcakes I've ever seen, from Calgary Co-op bakery. These flower buds are coloured icing sugar on top of fudge chocolate cupcakes.

Foodies And Critics.

We're all foodies at heart, but some people go further and form clubs to enjoy food in friendly company. J.B. Stanley is a pseudonym of Ellery Adams, who has several different mystery series. Under the Stanley name she wrote a cozy series about the Flab Five Supper Club. Their village, Quincy's Gap, Virginia, therefore had to suffer not one but five amateur sleuths running up the death toll.

STIFFS AND SWINE (2008) was a novel in that series which began with the Hudsonville Chamber of Commerce inviting them to the local Hog Festival as judges. One of the Flab Five was a vegetarian but the others had visions of barbecue dancing in their heads, so away they went. The Blueberry Pie Eating Contest was the clincher.

After a pause for the Warm Chicken Salad recipe (Chapter 4) it was on to the festival. I had difficulty finishing Chapter 5 because the description of the beef brisket was so good that I almost left the house and drove to a barbecue restaurant. I finally made it past all the descriptions of barbecue foods. As I have warned before, never read a food cozy on an empty stomach.

The Flab Five would have had a great time at the barbecue if one of their number hadn't gotten into a brawl with a contestant. Not long after, she was arrested for his murder.

Some ugly back stories alternated with the recipes. The deceased had won the barbecue contest but lost his life trying to cheat a drug dealer. The supper club survived for another day and another novel. All ended well with a recipe for Oven Barbecued Brisket (takes five hours to cook).

BLACK BEANS AND VICE (2010) began with the Flab Five considering hypnotherapy to lose weight. Meanwhile, there was trouble down at the village when a noisy animal rights group made itself known. Two murders later, the supper club was in full cry.

Embezzlement of town funds, copyright infringement on the Internet, family feuds, and romantic entanglements were served up, along with herbal tea poisoned with natural toxins. A conspicuous local vegetarian made a run for it but didn't succeed.

The recipes were all compiled into an appendix with assorted baked goods and salads. There was a recipe for Black Bean Burgers, a no-meat alternative which seemed likely to generate more methane gas than any other source of greenhouse gases. My advice is keep a window wide open the day after you eat one of them.

STEAMED (2006) by Jessica Conant-Park and Susan Conant was the first novel of a cozy series about Chloe Carter of Brighton, Massachusetts, a Boston suburb where she was a graduate student living off an inheritance. She was a foodie known online as GourmetGirl.

At a dating service she hooked up with DinnerDude, real name Eric Rafferty. He invited her to help him check out a restaurant he was thinking of buying into. He never got the chance because someone stabbed him to death while he was in the men's washroom.

Carter's life suddenly became busier. Her university classes, dealing with Rafferty's next of kin, and the police asking impertinent questions as they so often do during murder investigations. The Rafferty parents wanted a gourmet meal served at the funeral reception in honour of the occasion. I'd list the menu but it would take a half-page.

The funeral got funnier when Carter met Josh Driscoll, the chef who catered the reception. On their first date he mentioned that he was the main suspect. That pulled Carter into the competitive and often nasty world of fine dining while doing some involuntary Marpleing.

Most of the action and dialogue took place in various restaurants and kitchens. The cast of characters, other than the police, spent all their time either cooking or eating. Even the denouement was in a restaurant when the crazed murderer, a sous chef, tried to kill Driscoll.

The recipes appendix began with Bibb And Radicchio Salad With Three-Tomato Vinaigrette, or, translated into English, lettuce and goat cheese with dressing. The Spiced Tuna seemed down-market and the Baby Bok Choy Slaw pretentious. Following on were Cardamom Sweet Rice and Warm Chocolate Cake.

FED UP (2009) had solidified the relationship between Chloe Carter and Josh Driscoll. He was competing in a reality show the premise of which was that

chefs would intercept grocery shoppers in the produce aisle and offer to follow them home and prepare a gourmet meal. The winner of the contest would get his own 8-episode cooking miniseries.

The camera crew followed Driscoll to the home of Leo and Francie, no last names given. It was not a pleasant meal. There was a problem with the lamb, which ended with Francie's death from poisoning. She had been a restaurant reviewer who was not liked by more than a few chefs.

Fortunately Driscoll was not a suspect as it was quickly determined that the poison had been added after serving. Leo was a suspect, as were several others who had access to the food between preparation and serving. The question was how the food could have been spiked around all the television cameras.

Carter went snooping but had difficulty as she was not the most tactful interrogator. Eventually she found the poison was scripted murder by the television crew who were desperately trying to boost the ratings. In the denouement, the matter was resolved with shotguns.

The recipes appendix began with Roasted Rack Of Lamb, minus the poison. Following on were Spinach And Artichoke Eggs Benedict, Pumpkin Stew, and many others of that ilk. Some of the recipes were of the everything-but-the-kitchen-sink when it came to adding herbs, spices, chopped veggies, and fruit.

COOK THE BOOKS (2010) brought some changes into Chloe Carter's life. She had broken up with Josh Driscoll, was in her second year of graduate studies, and due to poor budgeting needed a job.

The position she found was assisting Kyle Boucher in writing a book of recipes used by Boston's top chefs. Trouble was, she had to deal with many of Driscoll's friends, including the chef who took over for him, known only as Digger.

That man liked to cook at home when trying out new recipes. As he specialized in flambé foods, the kitchen fire that killed him seemed plausible. There was more to the matter though, otherwise the novel would have ended on page 60.

Alternating between her university classes and transcribing notes for Boucher's book, Carter got in some sleuthing in the odd moments. The murderer was really upset about family and romantic issues, which Digger had barged into the

middle. The final scene was the usual yelling and screaming, but the killer fell off a balcony, saving the expense of a trial.

The recipes in the appendix were not the kind you get at a fast food outlet. Grilled Ohio Lamb Steak (with three veggies) was a three-page recipe by itself. The Shrimp And Brie Purses With Apricot Vinaigrette followed, then Oysters With Asian Pear And Fennel.

Next up was Seared Scallops On Polenta With Red Pepper And Chive Jam, then Pepper Encrusted Beef Tenderloin With Creamy Horseradish, and several more of that ilk. The kind of food you normally eat while wearing formal dress.

Food critics are just foodies who get paid for eating. Lee Hollis is the pseudonym of siblings Rick Copp and Holly Simason, who have a long-running cozy series about food columnist Hayley Powell of Bar Harbor, Maine.

DEATH OF A LOBSTER LOVER (2017) was an installment in that series. Due to her presence as the local Jessica Fletcher, the village was in danger of being depopulated, so Hayley Powell went away for the weekend to the Lobster Bake Festival in the formerly placid fishing village of Salmon Cove. She went with a couple of friends, Liddy and Mona.

There the tale began, after a quick pause for a Lobster Rolls recipe. Liddy met a handsome hunk named Jackson Young. The romance had no chance to develop because the next morning Powell found his body on the beach. There was an overturned lobster pot beside him, and three escaped lobsters crawling back into the ocean, indicating the murder had just happened.

Another recipes interlude followed, for Lobster In Spicy Tomato Sauce, washed down with Whiskey Peach Cocktail. The local Deppity Dawg had heard of Powell and was none too pleased to have an amateur detective messing up the crime scene. After trying to intimidate Powell and only partly succeeding, the Lobster Tacos recipe imposed a truce.

The reader will sympathize with the police, who had sealed off Young's hotel room, only to have Powell break in and contaminate the evidence. She was caught in the act but managed to beat the rap in time for the Lobster Dip.

The denouement revealed that Young was an investigative reporter on the trail of a retired Mafia boss, got too close, and was taken out by the don's

granddaughter. The final wrap-up was a recipe for Lobster Mac And Cheese and Red Wine Spritzer. Comfort food, I suppose.

DEATH OF A COOKBOOK AUTHOR (2018) was the next novel. This time Hayley Powell went to Seal Harbor, Maine. Between her and Jessica Fletcher, one would think that by now the coast of Maine would be a barren wasteland of deserted fishing villages.

Powell was invited by cookbook author Penelope Janice to a celebrity cook-off in Seal Harbor. It got off to a bad start when Powell came down with food poisoning the first night. Her problems were minor compared to Janice's husband Conrad, whose body was found at the foot of a cliff. It certainly wasn't poisoning from the preceding recipe for Creamy Baked Goat Cheese Mac And Cheese, washed down, as it should be, with Rum Sunsets.

Conrad had not been a nice man. He was a loud-mouthed boor, philanderer, and threatened lawsuits at the drop of a rum bottle. As past histories were revealed, alternating with recipes, there was a plethora of suspects. Most of the recipes were of the kind you wouldn't eat twice, such as Zucchini Lasagna or Summer Squash Taco Casserole.

It transpired Conrad's death was accidental. He got into a fight with one of the suspects and slipped over the edge of the cliff. With nothing more to be written, those who drink alcohol can then finish up with the Last Word Cocktail.

If you prefer brewed rather than distilled beverages, then go on to TANGLED UP IN BREW (2016) by Joyce Tremel. This was a novel in a cozy series about Maxine O'Hara and her boyfriend Jake Lambert. They operated the Allegheny Brew House in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Their microbrew was competing in the Three Rivers Brews and Burgers Festival, where they hoped to win the coveted Golden Stein.

The event was a nightmare. Cranky food critic Reginald Mobley spit out their beer, and fell dead to the ground after trying one of their burgers. The police detective in charge decided it was an open-and-shut case, so O'Hara had to go sleuthing.

The funeral was livened up when the deceased's trophy wife of a few months got into a fight with his ex-wife. The body count increased, and so did the back stories about family feuds and past murders. The awards ceremony and

presentation of the Golden Stein were the scene of an attempted third murder. They do things differently in Pittsburgh.

There being too much poisoned beer in the plot, it was just as well that brew-your-own was not mentioned in the recipes appendix. The Brew Burger recipe did specify a bottle of ale though. For teetotalers such as myself, there followed Apple Cinnamon Muffins, Caramel Pecan Brownies, and Tomato Basil Chicken.

A KILLER EDITION (2019) by Lorna Barrett was the latest novel in a cozy series about Tricia Miles, bookstore owner and resident Miss Marple of Stoneham, New Hampshire. The villagers by now were registering the shock of realizing Stoneham had become a nightmarish bloodbath with no end in sight. At least not until sales drop off or the author dies.

The village, in a desperate bid for survival, had dubbed itself Booktown to encourage the tourist trade. Tricia’s store Haven’t Got A Clue specialized in mysteries. Her friend Joyce Widman operated the Have A Heart romance bookstore, the most successful one in the village. Tricia’s sister Angelica had the Cookery bookstore, plus the Booked For Lunch café, plus a half-interest in the Sheer Comfort Inn.

Having set up all that, the plot began with three threads. There were suspicions about a possible puppy mill operation. The Miles sisters entered the Great Booktown Bake-Off in competition against each other. Widman had an argument with neighbour Vera Olson, who was soon after found dead in Widman’s garden. *The 9-1-1 dispatcher didn’t seem at all surprised when Tricia identified herself.*

The dispatcher wasn’t the only one. “Oh no”, Angelica wailed. “Don’t tell me you found another body?” Tricia frowned. “Now why would you automatically think of that of all things?” “Because I know you. And when you have bad news to report, you’ve usually found a corpse.”

Tricia did some Marpleing but she had more serious problems, such as trying to find a winning recipe for the Bake-Off. She tried yellow sponge cupcakes with almond-flavoured frosting but knew they were too bland to win. She thought about bringing in a ringer, a professional chef, but that was just an idea.

Angelica had her problems too. The chef judging the Bake-Off condescended to sign books at the Cookery but was a boor. He sneered at the used books because he didn’t get royalties from them. The contest was delayed, giving Tricia time to have the usual confrontation with the killer, whom Olson was about to expose for his puppy peddling.

The Bake-Off was won by an outsider who borrowed a maple flavour from Angelica without her knowledge. For the recipes appendix there were cupcakes: Lemon, Pistachio, and Maple Walnut, they being the top three in the Bake-Off.



Cupcakes from Calgary Safeway:
chocolate fudge, orange on fudge,
and an orange cone decorated with pretzels

WHEN WORDS COLLIDE

The tenth annual When Words Collide will return to the Delta South Marriott Hotel on the weekend of August 14 to 16, 2020. It will incorporate the Aurora Awards and Canvention 40. WWC always sells out by June, as do the banquet and hotel. The membership is capped at 750. Details from www.whenwordscollide.org

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: Lloyd Penney
Etobicoke, Ontario

2019-11-21

OPUNTIA #456: [Re: cover photo of cattle herd, abandoned railroad, and steer looking at the camera] Perhaps the Angus steer was merely protecting his territory and his herd from any threats, like you in your car. There's a lot of abandoned rail line in Toronto, and many of them are being converted into walking trails and bicycle paths.

[Steers don't have any territorial imperative. He was just plain curious about the strange biped looking at the herd.]

Just last night, Yvonne and I were at a gathering at Bakka-Phoenix Books in the downtown area, celebrating the first anniversary release of the newly-incarnated AMAZING STORIES magazine. I have acted as editor/proofreader for the last four issues, plus an upcoming book that Amazing is issuing.

This has led to a similar role on a manuscript from horror writer Nancy Kilpatrick, and an upcoming role on a manuscript from old friend and SF writer Shirley Meier. I have some hopes that doing all this may lead to a new career as a book editor, but time will tell.

I am sure you're right, a century from now, someone else will revive AMAZING STORIES yet again. For Steve Davidson, the current publisher and copyright holder, I think he's having some fun with this, and I am pleased to getting in on it myself.

[Re: old recording technology] Every so often at antique shows, I see gramophone tubes, even before the 78rpm disks. Of course, there's nothing to play the tube on, so if anyone purchases them, they are held as curiosities, from an age, none of us remember, but sure heard enough about.

[Betamax and 8-track players are much the same. Even if in working condition, there is little to play on them.]

OPUNTIA #457: We've had our first snowfall, too, and there was the usual rushed panic to get snow tires on the car. However, Yvonne remembers what happened in past years. The fall temperatures eventually returned, so many are running on their snow tires, and we aren't. It will come, and we will take the car in, but not just yet.

[I drive the Opuntiamobile on snow tires all year round, as they provide excellent traction in rain or mud. It used to be that snow tires had to be taken off for the summer because they were made of soft rubber and would wear out faster. Nowadays the synthetic rubber will last just as long as the so-called all-season tires (which aren't).]

There are now so many fan-written stories of any given literary/movie/television property, you name it, it is difficult to keep canon well defined. Pastiches are the proper term, to be sure, but more and more, I hear the term fanon. In some cases, the fanon writings have their own listings and websites to keep them separate from the real writings.

[Not to mention avoiding lawsuits from copyright owners of the originals.]

I do indeed have a copy of THE STEAMPUNK USER'S MANUAL by Desirina Boskovich and Jeff Vandermeer. I have read extensively, but not much steampunk fiction. Indeed, I was attracted to steampunk because of our own costuming background. I find many steampunk novels dreary and difficult to get through.

[That is why the next installment of my steampunk column will be sometime in coming. I skim the current output on the shelves but the blurbs don't impress me, especially when they insist on mixing in magic or elves.]

OPUNTIA #458: Once again here, Halloween was a non-event. We did vend at a pre-Halloween event in Mississauga, but that was the extent of our costuming.

The federal election was the usual circus. I pulled out my old Rhinoceros Party button, and Yvonne worked one of our local polls as a deputy returning officer. All party representatives were friendly, except for the local Conservatives, who were brusque and demanding.

OPUNTIA #459: Well done to the fanac.org organization. I wish I had something to add to it all, but time may show something from me for posterity, who knows.

[Now that they are adding thousands of pdfs of old zines, one hopes to see more research done on them by people around the world. The study of zinedom has historically been crippled by lack of resources. Until now, few zines were available to read, unless you wanted to travel to a university library.]

OPUNTIA #460: For us, our own local Remembrance Day ceremonies were just up the street at the Etobicoke Civic Centre cenotaph. A cold day, but worth standing up for the soldiers who have fought for us.

I know Canadian Tire is trying to eliminate the CT bills, but without success. They are simply too much a part of Canadian life. Around here, our currencies are, in order: Canadian dollars, CT bills, U.S. bills and coinage, TTC tokens (soon to be eliminated), and McDonald’s coffee card stickers.

[Unlike the TTC, Calgary Transit doesn’t use tokens, just monthly passes and books of tickets. They have announced, for the third time in as many years, a tap-and-ride system for smartphone users. Cowtowners are cynical about it working, since the previous two versions were miserable failures.]

ZINE LISTINGS

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

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

BANANA WINGS #75 (The Usual from Claire Brialey and Mark Plummer, 59 Shirley Road, Croydon, Surrey CR0 7ES, England) SF fanzine in the traditional style. Commentary on conventions and local fandoms.

There is a memorial to the late Irish writer James White, who was actively involved in fandom before becoming a novelist, best remembered for his Sector

General series. Like another Ulster fan, Walt Willis, the Troubles disrupted White’s life, and SF fans could seldom meet crossing the barricades. That any kind of fandom could survive the sectarian bombings and terrorist raids showed the indomitable spirit of Irish fans.

CHRISTIAN NEW AGE QUARTERLY V24#2 (US\$5 from Catherine Groves, Box 276, Clifton, New Jersey 07015-0276) The theme of this issue is cognitive dissonance and the fussing between the Christian side and the New Age side.

SEEN IN THE LITERATURE

Engler, J.O., and H. von Wehrden (2019) **‘Where is everybody?’ An empirical appraisal of occurrence, prevalence and sustainability of technological species in the Universe.** INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ASTROBIOLOGY 18:495-501

Authors’ abstract: *We use recent results from astrobiology, particularly the A-form of the Drake equation and combine it with data on the evolution of life on Earth to obtain a new assessment of the prevalence of technological species in our Universe. A species is technological if it is, in theory, capable of interstellar communication.*

We find that between seven and 300 technological species have likely arisen in the Milky Way until today, the current state of which however unknown. Assuming that we are currently alone in our Galaxy, we estimate that we would need to wait for roughly 26 million years for a 50% chance of another technological species to arise.

By relating our results to the much-debated Fermi-Hart paradox, we discuss if and to what extent our results may help quantify the chances of humanity to manage the transition to a long-term sustainable path of existence.

Battersby, Stephen (2019) **What are the chances of a hazardous solar superflare?** PROCEEDINGS OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES USA 116:23368-23370

Author's extracts: *Flares happen because of convulsions in the Sun's magnetic field. ... Strong concentrations of the field form sunspots, and when two spots with opposite polarity come close together they can create a flare. Tens of thousands of kilometers above the spots, in the solar corona, opposing field lines squeeze close together, until eventually the field snaps into a lower-energy configuration.*

This process, known as reconnection, whips electrons up to high energy. They spiral down the field lines and collide with ions in the lower atmosphere of the Sun, generating a flash of X-rays and other forms of electromagnetic radiation. Sometimes a flare heralds another kind of solar eruption called a coronal mass ejection (CME) when the reconnection process also unleashes a ball of plasma that races away from the Sun.

One of the most powerful solar flares ever seen, the Carrington Flare of 1859, was accompanied by a CME that hit Earth and buffeted the planet's magnetic field, generating electric currents strong enough to melt telegraph wires. The flare energy is estimated at around 5×10^{25} joules, equivalent to 10 billion megatons of TNT.

If a solar superflare ever strikes Earth, the first thing to hit us will be an intense flash of X-ray and ultraviolet radiation. This would disrupt the ionosphere, scrambling the satellite navigation signals needed in critical services and infrastructure. The burst of radiation would heat the outer layers of Earth's atmosphere making them expand, increasing drag on satellites so much that some might be lost.

A wave of high-energy protons, accelerated by shockwaves in the Sun's atmosphere, would hit Earth a few minutes later. These could cripple satellites, compromising global communications. ... If the flare also spawns a supersize CME that happens to be aimed at Earth, it could cause a violent geomagnetic storm, inducing electric currents that could be strong enough to paralyze even modern power grids. A 9-hour blackout in Quebec in March 1989 was caused by a much more modest CME.

Wilks, J.M., et al (2019) **Bacterial growth in saturated and eutectic solutions of magnesium sulphate and potassium chlorate with relevance to Mars and the ocean worlds.** INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ASTROBIOLOGY 18:502-509

Authors' abstract: *Liquid water on Mars might be created by deliquescence of hygroscopic salts or by permafrost melts, both potentially forming saturated brines. Freezing point depression allows these heavy brines to remain liquid in the near-surface environment for extended periods, perhaps as eutectic solutions, at the lowest temperatures and highest salt concentrations where ices and precipitates do not form.*

Perchlorate and chlorate salts and iron sulphate form brines with low eutectic temperatures and may persist under Mars near-surface conditions, but are chemically harsh at high concentrations and were expected to be incompatible with life, while brines of common sulphate salts on Mars may be more suitable for microbial growth.

Microbial growth in saturated brines also may be relevant beyond Mars, to the oceans of Ceres, Enceladus, Europa and Pluto. We have previously shown strong growth of salinotolerant bacteria in media containing 2M MgSO_4 heptahydrate (~50% w/v) at 25°C. Here we extend those observations to bacterial isolates from Basque Lake, BC and Hot Lake, WA, that grow well in saturated MgSO_4 medium (67%) at 25°C and in 50% MgSO_4 medium at 4°C (56% would be saturated).

Psychrotolerant, salinotolerant microbes isolated from Basque Lake soils included Halomonas and Marinococcus, which were identified by 16S rRNA gene sequencing and characterized phenetically. Eutectic liquid medium constituted by 43% MgSO_4 at -4°C supported copious growth of these psychrotolerant Halomonas isolates, among others. Bacterial isolates also grew well at the eutectic for K chlorate (3% at -3°C).

Survival and growth in eutectic solutions increases the possibility that microbes contaminating spacecraft pose a contamination risk to Mars. The cold brines of sulphate and (per)chlorate salts that may form at times on Mars through deliquescence or permafrost melt have now been demonstrated to be suitable microbial habitats, should appropriate nutrients be available and dormant cells become vegetative.

Jenny, J.P., et al (2019) **Human and climate global-scale imprint on sediment transfer during the Holocene.** PROCEEDINGS OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES USA 116:22972-22976

Authors' abstract: *Accelerated soil erosion has become a pervasive feature on landscapes around the world and is recognized to have substantial implications for land productivity, downstream water quality, and biogeochemical cycles.*

However, the scarcity of global syntheses that consider long-term processes has limited our understanding of the timing, the amplitude, and the extent of soil erosion over millennial time scales. As such, we lack the ability to make predictions about the responses of soil erosion to long-term climate and land cover changes.

Here, we reconstruct sedimentation rates for 632 lakes based on chronologies constrained by 3,980 calibrated 14C ages to assess the relative changes in lake-watershed erosion rates over the last 12,000 years. Estimated soil erosion dynamics were then complemented with land cover reconstructions inferred from 43,669 pollen samples and with climate time series from the Max Planck Institute Earth System Model.

Our results show that a significant portion of the Earth surface shifted to human-driven soil erosion rate already 4,000 years ago. In particular, inferred soil erosion rates increased in 35% of the watersheds, and most of these sites showed a decrease in the proportion of arboreal pollen, which would be expected with land clearance.

Further analysis revealed that land cover change was the main driver of inferred soil erosion in 70% of all studied watersheds. This study suggests that soil erosion has been altering terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems for millennia, leading to carbon losses that could have ultimately induced feedbacks on the climate system.

Sinha, A., et al (2019) **Role of climate in the rise and fall of the Neo-Assyrian Empire.** SCIENCE ADVANCES 5:doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.aax6656

Authors' abstract: *Northern Iraq was the political and economic center of the Neo-Assyrian Empire (c. 912 to 609 BCE), the largest and most powerful*

empire of its time. After more than two centuries of regional dominance, the Neo-Assyrian state plummeted from its zenith (c. 670 BCE) to complete political collapse (c. 615 to 609 BCE). Earlier explanations for the Assyrian collapse focused on the roles of internal politico-economic conflicts, territorial overextension, and military defeat.

Here, we present a high-resolution and precisely dated speleothem record of climate change from the Kuna Ba cave in northern Iraq, which suggests that the empire's rise occurred during a two-centuries-long interval of anomalously wet climate in the context of the past 4,000 years, while megadroughts during the early-mid seventh century BCE, as severe as recent droughts in the region but lasting for decades, triggered a decline in Assyria's agrarian productivity and thus contributed to its eventual political and economic collapse.

Farinotti, D., et al (2019) **Large hydropower and water-storage potential in future glacier-free basins.** NATURE 575:341-344

Authors' abstract: *Climate change is causing widespread glacier retreat, and much attention is devoted to negative impacts such as diminishing water resources, shifts in runoff seasonality, and increases in cryosphere-related hazards. Here we focus on a different aspect, and explore the water-storage and hydropower potential of areas that are expected to become ice-free during the course of this century.*

For roughly 185,000 sites that are glacierized at present, we predict the potentially emerging reservoir storage volume and hydropower potential. Using a climate-driven glacier-evolution model and topographical analysis, we estimate a theoretical maximal total storage and hydropower potential of 875 ± 260 cubic kilometres and $1,355 \pm 515$ terawatt-hours per year, respectively (95% confidence intervals).

A first-order suitability assessment that takes into account environmental, technical and economic factors identifies roughly 40 per cent of this potential (355 ± 105 cubic kilometres and 533 ± 200 terawatt-hours per year) as possibly being suitable for realization. Three quarters of the potential storage volume is expected to become ice-free by 2050, and the storage volume would be enough to retain about half of the annual runoff leaving the investigated sites.

Although local impacts would need to be assessed on a case-by-case basis, the results indicate that deglaciating basins could make important contributions to national energy supplies in several countries, particularly in High Mountain Asia.

Clark, M.A., et al (2019) **Multiple health and environmental impacts of foods.** PROCEEDINGS OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES USA 116:23357-23362

Authors' abstract: Food choices are shifting globally in ways that are negatively affecting both human health and the environment. Here we consider how consuming an additional serving per day of each of 15 foods is associated with 5 health outcomes in adults and 5 aspects of agriculturally driven environmental degradation.

We find that while there is substantial variation in the health outcomes of different foods, foods associated with a larger reduction in disease risk for one health outcome are often associated with larger reductions in disease risk for other health outcomes. Likewise, foods with lower impacts on one metric of environmental harm tend to have lower impacts on others.

Additionally, of the foods associated with improved health (whole grain cereals, fruits, vegetables, legumes, nuts, olive oil, and fish), all except fish have among the lowest environmental impacts, and fish has markedly lower impacts than red meats and processed meats.

Foods associated with the largest negative environmental impacts, unprocessed and processed red meat, are consistently associated with the largest increases in disease risk.

Thus, dietary transitions toward greater consumption of healthier foods would generally improve environmental sustainability, although processed foods high in sugars harm health but can have relatively low environmental impacts.

Lo, F., et al (2019) **Pollen calendars and maps of allergenic pollen in North America.** AEROBIOLOGIA 35:613-633

Available as a free pdf from: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10453-019-09601-2>

Authors' abstract: Pollen is a common allergen that causes significant health and financial impacts on up to a third of the population of the USA. Knowledge of the main pollen season can improve diagnosis and treatment of allergic diseases.

Our objective in this study is to provide clear, quantitative visualizations of pollen data and make information accessible to many disciplines, in particular to allergy sufferers and those in the health field.

We use data from 31 National Allergy Bureau (NAB) pollen stations in the continental USA and Canada from 2003 to 2017 to produce pollen calendars. We present pollen season metrics relevant to health and describe main pollen season start and end dates, durations, and annual pollen integrals for specific pollen taxa.

In most locations, a small number of taxa constitute the bulk of the total pollen concentration. Start dates for tree and grass pollen season depend strongly on latitude, with earlier start dates at lower latitudes. Season duration is correlated with the start dates, such that locations with earlier start dates have a longer season.

NAB pollen data have limited spatiotemporal coverage. Increased spatiotemporal monitoring will improve analysis and understanding of factors that govern airborne pollen concentrations.

It is often assumed that trees only release pollen in spring, grasses in summer, and weeds in fall. The pollen calendars for Ulmus show that some species of Ulmus release pollen in the late summer and early fall; Poaceae pollen is detected in the atmosphere from March through November; and Cupressaceae pollen can be found in atmosphere in the fall and winter.

Speirs: This is an open-access article that will benefit any of my North American readers who suffer from hay fever.

AROUND CHEZ OPUNTIA

photo by Dale Speirs

I took this photo on November 22 as I was returning home from the Grey Cup Festival. Every house in my neighbourhood seems to have one or two snowshoe hares. They nibble on the lawn grass. If I could train them to eat parallel rows up and down the lawn, then I wouldn't have to mow my yard.

This one has taken up residence against the front steps, from the top of which I took this photo. It is a yearling which I first saw in late summer. Initially it would bolt out of the yard as I approached the front door, but now it has become habituated to me and recognizes that I am not a threat.

