

OPUNTIA 495



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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.

CHINOOK BLAST 2021

photos by Dale Speirs

2021-02-19

Not everything was cancelled by the pandemic. Calgary’s annual winter lights festival, held in February, was re-organized and renamed Chinook Blast, replacing the Glow Festival. The festival was held downtown, running the length of Stephen Avenue pedestrian mall (8 Avenue South) and making a right-angle turn down the Barclay pedestrian mall (3 Street SW).

Instead of running for a week straight, Chinook Blast operated three weekends in a row. Ironically the first weekend was cancelled because we had a fortnight of -30°C weather but a chinook arrived the following Friday. The temperature was just under freezing when I took these photos. Normally masks aren’t required outdoors but people were urged to comply because of the higher pedestrian traffic. I wore my usual maple leaf bandanna.



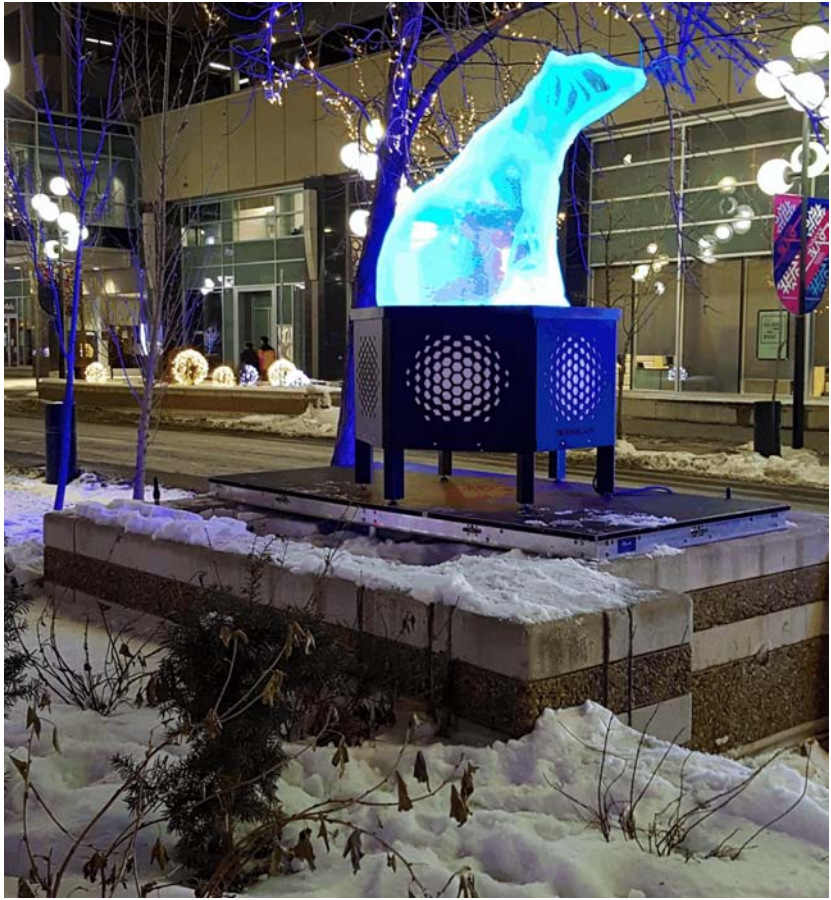
All along Stephen Avenue were freestanding doors which opened into electronic screens. This door immediately reminded me of Robert Heinlein's novel THE DOOR INTO SUMMER. The book was famously inspired by his cat, who one winter kept trying every door in the house but each time refused to go outside. His wife Virginia remarked that the cat was looking for the door into summer.



At right and on the next page are a few other doors.



Ice carvings illuminated from below by changing lights.

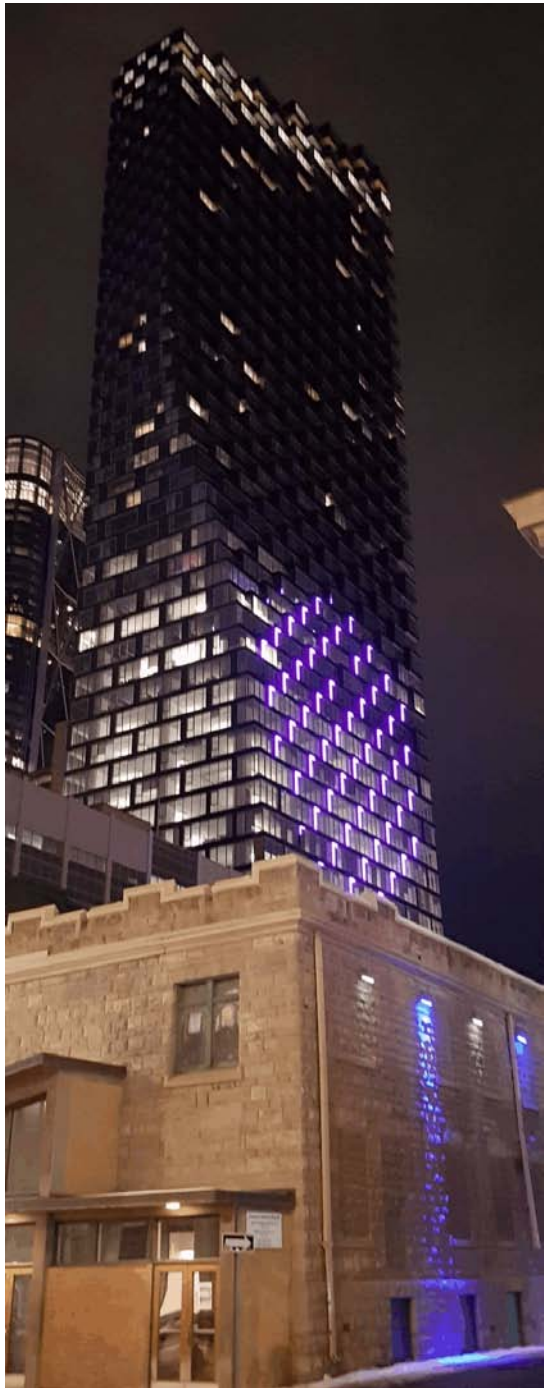




This arch was on the Barclay Mall. I could fill 50 pages with all its variations.

The newly-completed Telus tower is on the corner of 7 Avenue SW and Centre Street. The top half is residential apartments and the bottom half are offices.

The building opened just in time for the pandemic but I'm sure it will be fully occupied. The tower was designed with light show electronics in place as shown here and the next page.





TAKEN AT THE FLOOD: PART 4

by Dale Speirs

[Parts 1 to 3 appeared in OPUNTIA's #70.1G, 367, and 435.]

The Biblical flood with Noah's Ark was one of the earliest stories that humans told of great floods. Not the earliest, as that story was copied from older legends. Which brings me to THE LOG OF THE ARK (1915) by Noah himself, as told to Irwin Leslie Gordon (author) and Alfred Joseph Frueh (illustrator). This is a humorous book in diary format, available as a free pdf from www.gutenberg.org.

The first entry in Noah's Captain's Log was:

WEDNESDAY, B.C. 2349.

COURSE—to Ararat.

WEATHER—clear and rain.

WIND—starting to blow.

SEA—calm.

SHIP'S RUN—1 league.

REMARKS:

Weighed anchor: 2240 pounds.

—My rheumatism hurt. I just knew it would rain.

—A large crowd came down to see us off. Received delegation of S.P.C.A. They presented me with a gold-handled umbrella.

—Someone sent the women folks a bunch of American beauties.

—Many of my neighbours say I am crazy.

—It began to rain—crowd dispersed.

—There is a lot of hubbub in getting an Ark off.

—Half an hour late in starting. Ham doesn't understand some of the levers.

—Ship's band played the national anthems as we sailed away.

—Sent sailing lists to all my friends. Gave them to the pilot to mail.

—Dropped pilot at 7.30 P.M. I was sorry to see him go.

—Cargo all well and quiet.

—I wonder if I will be seasick?

A lot of work in running an ark. Noah was not only the captain but also the veterinarian, and had his hands full. The animals could be forgiven for misbehaving because they didn't know any better, but the human passengers were constant trouble.



The rain got tiresome after a few days. Adding to Noah's misery was his seasickness. Then some of the dinosaurs got into a big fight.

But finally to a safe landing:

SUNDAY.

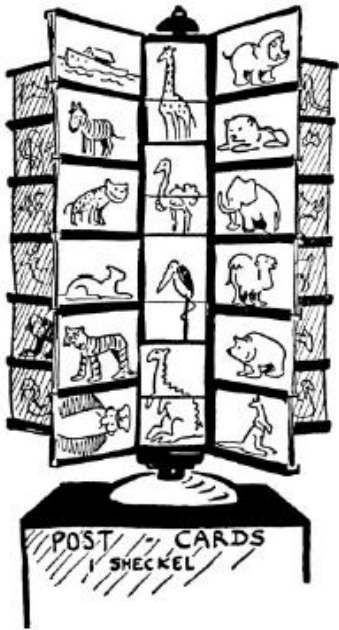
SOUNDING—5 cubits.

REMARKS:

Services.—Have been reading about Ararat. It's a mountain 16,964 feet high. Some authors

say there is snow on the top. There must be some mistake because olives don't grow in snow.

—Am not sure of the docking facilities.



A funny read, unless you're a literalist and resent anyone fooling about with the Gospel. Don't forget your postcards, only 1 shekel each.

More Seriously.

“When The Meteor Struck” by J. Lewis Burt (1936 June, AMAZING STORIES, available as a free pdf from www.archive.org) was a narrative by aliens watching over Earth. They had tracked a rogue planetoid which was on a collision course with Earth but were powerless to deflect it.

The good news was that instead it collided with the Moon. The bad news was that after things settled down, the Moon had been heated up to the point of massive lava flows and volcanoes radiating heat. In turn, the heat melted Earth’s ice caps and set off massive flooding.

The aliens put the Earthlings into contact with the Martian civilization, who agreed to help export the surplus water to Mars, thereby replenishing their oceans. This required Martian technology and Earth ingenuity to develop cheap and plentiful spacecraft that could lift a hundred thousand tonnes of water each. Quite a bit of handwaving there.

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 FOSSIL #386 (US\$10 for annual subscription from The Fossils Inc, c/o Tom Parson, 157 South Logan Street, Denver, Colorado 80209) This publication researches the deep history of zinedom back to the 1800s. This issue has a biography of the tragic life of zinester John Minter in the late 1800s. Elsewhere is a look at the Greenhills of the USA, the first greenbelt communities built in the 1930s and the zinesters it spawned.

LIGHTS, CAMERA, MURDER!: PART 6
by Dale Speirs

[Parts 1 to 5 appeared in OPUNTIA #394, 413, 429, 451, and 478.]

Studios Of Death.

“Death On Set 13” by Steve Fisher (1937-03-27, DETECTIVE FICTION WEEKLY, available as a free pdf from www.archive.org) took place in Hollywood where the action was behind the camera, not in front. Jack Swanson was once a handsome leading man and was now on the down slope, losing his pay at the card table as fast as he earned it or drank it.

His problems came to an end when someone threw a knife into his back from an open window of a producer’s office. The same producer whose wife had years before left him to marry Swanson. There were a cast of the usual suspects, from the card shark who was clipping Swanson to a blackmailer who thought Swanson was about to expose him.

That brought in a private investigator Tony Key, who knew the meaning of the word discretion. The movie studio preferred publicity about its movies, not murders. The murderer was exposed when he went too far, poisoning the leading lady and her maid. Each of the other suspects had a motive to kill Swanson, but none for the deaths of the two women. Only one man could have been motivated to kill all three.

DRAGNET was the most famous police procedural of them all, created by Jack Webb. It aired on radio from 1949 to 1957. The series also made it to television and movies in the 1950s. It was done in minimalist style, with Sgt Joe Friday, played by Webb, moving methodically step by step through an actual crime, not fiction. The show used police jargon without explaining it to the audience, presuming they were intelligent enough to guess the meanings.

Each episode opened with the pompous announcer sternly declaiming: “*The story you are about to hear is true. Only the names have been changed to protect the innocent. DRAGNET is the documented drama of an actual crime, written in cooperation with the Los Angeles Police Department. You will travel step by step with the law through an actual case transcribed from official police files. From beginning to end, from crime to punishment, DRAGNET is the story of your police force in action.*”

“The Big Light” aired on the radio in 1952, written by John Robinson. Sgt Joe Friday and his partner Frank Smith investigated a fatal accident at Winston Picture Studios. The deceased was Henry Wilson, the director, who was found dead after an arc lamp fell on him. It happened during the lunch hour when everyone else was in the cafeteria.

The gaffer Dick Patterson was upset because he had hung the lamps. He didn’t think the 200-pound lamp had fallen accidentally. Friday and Smith found a piece of blue cloth in the lamp mount.

Wilson had been in an argument with the assistant director Sam Phillips which developed into a physical altercation. The latter had a prior conviction for disturbing the peace. In turn, Friday interrogated Phillips, who told him the production assistant Gerald Adams had been competing with Wilson for the director’s job.

Patterson said Phillips had given Wilson a note. The piece of paper had a complicated history, and became the MacGuffin of the story. The blue cloth was traced to a suit worn by Adams, who had a torn cuff.

Adams said he found the body but said he didn’t touch the lamp. Friday and Smith caught him with the note. The note was in Adams’ handwriting asking Wilson to meet him at the stage during the lunch hour.

Adams broke and ran for it, climbing up to the catwalk. He babbled a confession from above, but eventually came down. He received judgement as prescribed by law and was sentenced to life imprisonment in San Quentin.

Filmed On Location.

The 1960s television series BATMAN was played as a mixture of melodrama, comedy, and slapstick, basically the only way that superheroes can be played. The idea of masked vigilantes barging into police or military work is risible, much less that they would long remain anonymous or their secret headquarters unknown.

“Death In Slow Motion” and “The Riddler’s False Notion” were a two-part episode written by Dick Carr, which aired in 1966 April. Supervillain The Riddler was in the movie business, but silent movies, not those new-fangled talkies.

The action began at a silent film festival, whose sponsor Mr Van Jones was a fanatical collector of silents. At the closing ceremony in the lobby, the Riddler disguised as Charlie Chaplain, and his gang (as Keystone Cops) appeared with an old-fashioned hand-cranked camera to record the proceedings. They staged a skit to the delight of the crowd.

That was a cover for the holdup of the box office. The Riddler netted \$200 in cash, which puzzled everyone because he normally didn’t deal in petty crime. The first clue he left behind was: *Why is a musician’s bandstand like an oven?*

From there, the Riddler gang set up alarums around Gotham City designed to draw out Batman and Robin. Unbeknownst to them, the Riddler was filming them with hidden cameras for his silent film.

Initially everyone thought that his pranks anticipated a big score, but as the episode went on, nothing much seemed to happen. Eventually it was revealed that Van Jones was paying the Riddler \$100,000 to create a silent movie with Batman and Robin as the unknowing stars. Van Jones intended to release the movie in an effort to restart the silent film industry.

The Riddler double-crossed Van Jones, stealing his collection of silent films, many the only existing copies. A ransom of \$1 million would then be demanded of Van Jones for the return of the silents. The plan didn’t work after the dynamic duo wrapped the film before the final act could be played.

Life Outside The Studio.

LIGHTS OUT was an old-time radio anthology series that aired from 1934 to 1947, mostly weird fiction and horror. It is available as free mp3s from the Old Time Radio Researchers at www.otrrlibrary.org

“Special To Hollywood” aired on 1941-02-17, written by Arch Oboler. A movie producer had hired a small aircraft to take him, his actress wife, and publicity agent back to Hollywood. They spent the flight arguing loudly about their movie premiere they had been attending, which had been a flop.

The pilot gave them an in-flight message, informing them the author of the book the movie was based on had committed suicide. The silly man hadn’t approved of how his book had been converted into a movie. They debated whether or not that would boost ticket sales.

The airplane encountered a storm and had to climb over it. The squabbling in the cabin continued until they noticed the engines had stopped in flight. They remained hanging in mid-air far above the clouds. The arguing continued with the addition of denial about what was happening.

The airplane remained suspended without movement. The radio was out. The pilot could not do anything. The plot paused for soppy pathos from the actress about how she made it out of the slums. When she ran dry, the agent began. Everyone regretted their lives as the hours went by, motionless in the sky.

Finally time was called. The engines suddenly started up again. The passengers agreed to keep quiet about what happened, and the plane landed safely. The sinners repented and there was rejoicing in Heaven.

THEATER FIVE was a short-lived attempt at reviving drama shows on radio. It aired for the 1964-65 season but the war against television was lost a decade prior, so it failed. The episodes were generally well written and produced, and are worth downloading from www.otrrlibrary.org. The episodes were a mixture of science fiction, fantasy, murder, and sometimes plain drama.

“Why Can’t Life Be More Like The Movies” was a comedy written by Robert Cenedella and aired on 1964-11-03. Three supporting actors, Bill, Ned, and Lulu, hadn’t worked since Trans-Republic Pictures failed. They were minor character actors who specialized in playing criminals whose schemes gang aft agley.

They decided to stage a kidnapping for big bucks, figuring that all the movies they did had done taught them what not to do. The young woman Mary they snatched thought it was all a game and went along enthusiastically with the trio. In fact, she was better at thinking of all the details than they were.

There followed a sequence of slapstick routines. Mary’s father turned out to be their former producer who not only recognized them but was as impoverished as they were. He demanded cash from them or else he would report the crime to the police. Kidnapping was a federal felony. He had them there.

WHEN WORDS COLLIDE 2021 ANNOUNCEMENT

Due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the August 13 to 15, 2021, festival will be held online. The virtual festival (WWC Online 2021) will be offered free of charge, but will require registration through Eventbrite. All paid 2021 festival passes and banquet tickets have been rolled forward to 2022.

August is now six months away. With no clear end in sight for the pandemic, and vaccine rollout to the general public scheduled to begin in Alberta in the fall, the organizers feel the chances of an in-person festival in August have fallen to zero. In response, they have begun transitioning festival planning to a 100% online event.

Like WWC Online 2020, the festival will be free of charge. However, for a number of reasons, they will be offering it as a free Eventbrite Online event. Attendees will be required to register for the festival through Eventbrite in order to access the live content. While the organizers would prefer an in-person festival, and are optimistic that such will be the case in 2022, a virtual festival in 2021 is the next best thing.

WWC Online 2021 will be the official 10th anniversary festival. Festival guests are Cathy Ace, Vicki Delany, Steena Holmes, Fonda Lee, Dave Reynolds, and Morgan Rhodes. They have agreed to join us online. WWC will also be holding online Master Classes before and after the festival.

Stay tuned for the first draft of our 2021 Program and Master Class information. Eventbrite registration will open in the near future. For those who registered for the 2021 in-person festival, they have rolled your weekend passes and banquet tickets forward to 2022. Visit www.whenwordscollide.org

It is realized, however, that the pandemic has also brought financial hardship to many. If you require a refund, please contact WWC via email citing your name, the type of pass purchased, and the approximate time frame of the purchase, and they will see what they can do. If you can forward your PayPal receipt, that would be especially helpful.

CURRENT EVENTS: PART 14
by Dale Speirs

[Parts 1 to 13 appeared in OPUNTIA's #474, 475, 479, 480, 483, 484, and 488 to 494.]

Philately.

The only thing propagating as fast as the COVID-19 variants are postage stamps depicting COVID-19. My local stamp dealer has me on a list and every so often I get an email to drop by for the latest issues. He doesn't advertise them because they sell so fast he can't keep them in stock. His assistant spends much of her time hunting down new issues on the Internet. (The stamps illustrated here are not to the same scales or actual size.)

I finally got a copy of one of the key issues of COVID-19 philately, the famous (or infamous) Austrian stamp printed on genuine 3-ply toilet paper. Since toilet paper doesn't go through printing presses on its own, it is glued to a wax paper backing.



The stamp is a reference to the Great Toilet Paper Panic that swept the world not long after the pandemic was declared.

German-speaking people refer to buying panics as Hamsterkaufe (hamster panic).

The stamp was 2.75 Euros plus an equal surcharge for health care, and was valid for postage. It will probably be quite some time before I'll

find one used on cover. The stamp is not perforated like regular stamps but rouletted like toilet paper rolls. The inscription is a humorous guide to social distancing. One metre is approximately the length of a newborn baby elephant. The text translates as "distance that connects us".

On a more conventional note was this souvenir sheet from Chad.



French Polynesia had a colourful stamp for social distancing.

سلطنة عُمان
SULTANATE OF OMAN



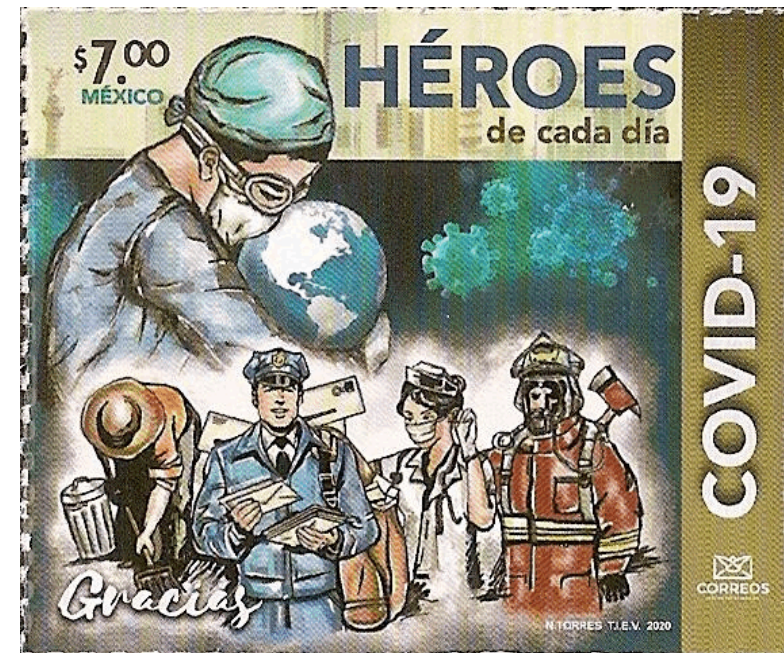
Oman Faces Corona
عُمان تواجه كورونا
Covid - 19 2020
كوفيد - 19



WE ARE ALL IN THIS TOGETHER
Help stop the spread of COVID-19



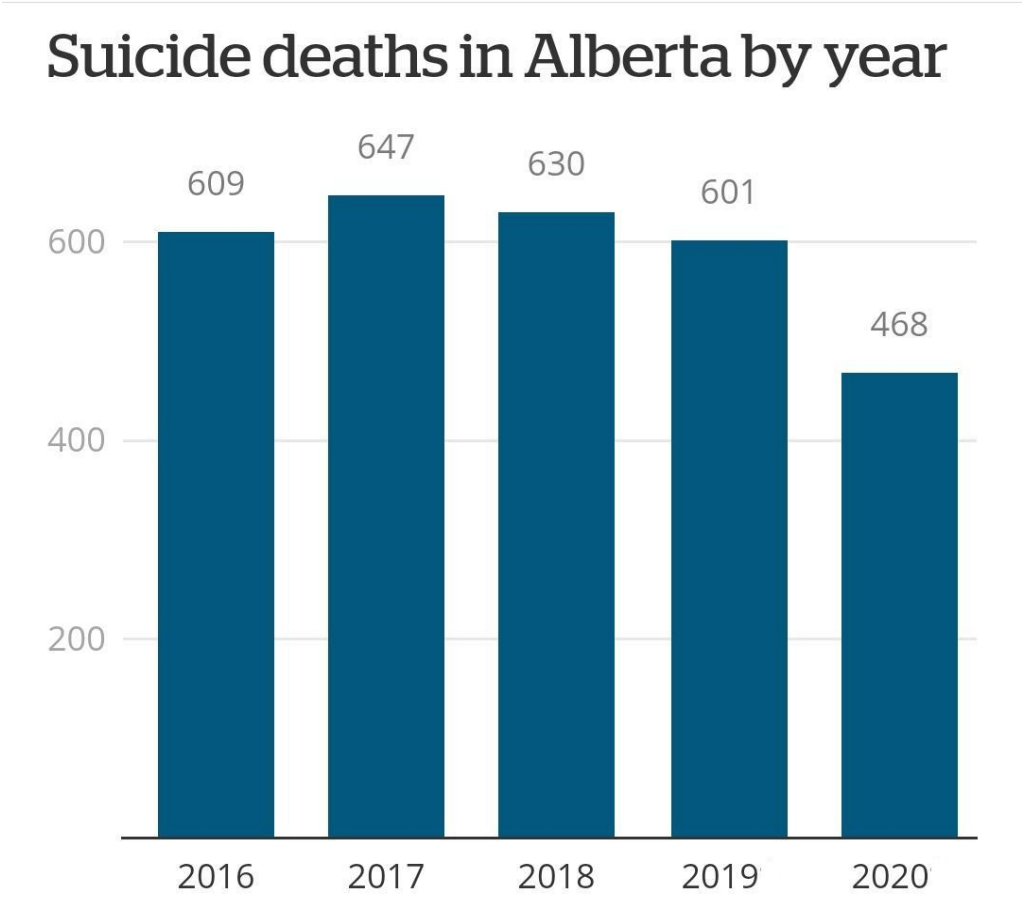
Surcharge received will help support the COVID-19 Solidarity Response Fund for World Health Organization



As of February 19, Canada had 840,581 COVID-19 cases, 21,576 deaths, and 1,401,560 vaccinations out of a population of 38,000,000.

When the pandemic first began, there were wild predictions that the suicide rate would soar. I was skeptical because I remembered from my psychology classes in university that in times of national or international trauma, such as war or a great natural disaster, the suicide rate drops. There is a feeling that we're all in this together. That makes the losers in society feel better because they see the mighty have fallen alongside them.

In my province, the suicide rate has dropped dramatically. The Alberta Ministry of Justice has released the 2020 statistics as below. Alberta's population is about 3.5 million.



The Pandemic In The Literature.

Vigfusson, Y., et al (2021) **Cellphone traces reveal infection-associated behavioral change.** PROCEEDINGS OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES USA 118:doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2005241118 (available as a free pdf)

Authors' abstract: *Epidemic preparedness depends on our ability to predict the trajectory of an epidemic and the human behavior that drives spread in the event of an outbreak. Changes to behavior during an outbreak limit the reliability of syndromic surveillance using large-scale data sources, such as online social media or search behavior, which could otherwise supplement healthcare based outbreak-prediction methods.*

Here, we measure behavior change reflected in mobile-phone call-detail records (CDRs), a source of passively collected real-time behavioral information, using an anonymously linked dataset of cell-phone users and their date of influenza-like illness diagnosis during the 2009 H1N1v pandemic.

We demonstrate that mobile-phone use during illness differs measurably from routine behavior. Diagnosed individuals exhibit less movement than normal (1.1 to 1.4 fewer unique tower locations, on average, in the 2 to 4 days around diagnosis and place fewer calls (2.3 to 3.3 fewer calls; while spending longer on the phone (41- to 66-second average increase than usual on the day following diagnosis.

The results suggest that anonymously linked CDRs and health data may be sufficiently granular to augment epidemic surveillance efforts and that infectious disease-modeling efforts lacking explicit behavior-change mechanisms need to be revisited.

Lemieux, J.E., et al (2021) **Phylogenetic analysis of SARS-CoV-2 in Boston highlights the impact of superspreading events.** SCIENCE 371:doi.org/10.1126/science.abe3261 (available as a free pdf)

Authors' abstract: *Our data suggest that there were more than 120 introductions of SARS-CoV-2 into the Boston area, but that only a few of these were responsible for most local transmission. 29% of the introductions accounted for 85% of the cases.*

At least some of this variation results from superspreading events amplifying some lineages and not others. Analysis of two superspreading events in our dataset illustrate how some introductions can be amplified by superspreading.

One occurred in a skilled nursing facility, where multiple introductions of SARS-CoV-2 were detected in a short time period. Only one of these led to rapid and extensive spread within the facility, and significant mortality in this vulnerable population, but there was little onward transmission.

A second superspreading event, at an international business conference, led to sustained community transmission, including outbreaks in homeless and other higher-risk communities, and was exported domestically and internationally, ultimately resulting in hundreds of thousands of cases.

Burak, K.W., et al (2021) COVID-19 outbreak among physicians at a Canadian curling bonspiel: A descriptive observational study. CMAJ OPEN 9:doi.org/10.9778/cmajo.20200115 (available as a free pdf)

Authors’ abstract: We conducted a descriptive study of a curling bonspiel in Edmonton held on March 11 to 14, 2020. We used standardized interviews between April 17 and May 5, 2020, to collect demographic data, travel history, symptoms (type, onset and duration), self-reported testing results for SARS-CoV-2 ribonucleic acid (RNA) using reverse transcription polymerase chain reaction (RT-PCR), and clinical outcomes.

We also obtained results of convalescent SARS-CoV-2 immunoglobulin G serology. All 73 curlers (55 active health care workers) who participated in the bonspiel were interviewed for the study. Convalescent SARS-CoV-2 immunoglobulin G serology was completed in 62 (85%) participants.

Of the 73 participants (55 [75%] male, median age 51 [range 26 to 79] years, 58 [79%] physicians), 40 curlers (55%) tested positive for SARS-CoV-2 RNA by RT-PCR. An additional 16 participants developed symptoms but had negative swabs or were not tested (14 were probable cases), for a 74% attack rate (confirmed or probable cases).

The clinical course was mild in most participants (1 emergency visit, no hospital admissions). Transmission likely occurred from multiple individuals with minor nonspecific symptoms during the event, possibly during shared meals. The 74%

attack rate (confirmed or probable cases) highlights the infectivity of SARS-CoV-2 during sporting and social events.

Canada confirmed its first case of the novel coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), a respiratory illness caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), on January 25, 2020.

The World Health Organization declared a global pandemic on March 11, 2020, which was also the date that physicians from around Canada gathered for a curling bonspiel in Edmonton (63rd Annual Western Canadian Medical Bonspiel, March 11 to 14, 2020).

Curling is a winter sport that originated in Scotland, but today 90% of all curlers worldwide come from Canada. At the onset of the event, there were only 24 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Alberta. These cases were directly associated with international travel, and no known community spread had been documented.

In early March 2020, local public health guidelines in Alberta included limiting indoor gatherings to groups of less than 250 people, and there were no recommendations for using face masks in public places.

During the bonspiel, enhanced safety measures included use of hand sanitizers, discouraging pre- and postgame handshakes, and sanitizing curling stones with disinfectant wipes between games. Despite these measures, an outbreak of COVID-19 occurred after the event.

Our data suggest that attending buffet lunches in the curling rink lounge may have been important for transmission. Interestingly, the single team with no confirmed cases did not attend any social events outside of their curling games, suggesting that social activities associated with sporting events may be as, or more, important for transmission.

Analysis of transmission clusters, or “superspreader events,” has shown that they usually occur indoors, often when people are speaking loudly or are in proximity to each other, usually without the use of masks. In our study, symptomatic curlers reported that 35 family members developed symptoms of COVID-19. Although we did not perform formal contact tracing, only 3 of these symptomatic family members attended the bonspiel as a guest, suggesting a high rate of secondary transmission in the home during self-isolation.

Dan, J.M., et al (2021) **Immunological memory to SARS-CoV-2 assessed for up to 8 months after infection.** SCIENCE 371:doi.org/10.1126/science.abf4063 (available as a free pdf)

Authors’ abstract: *The study involved 254 samples from 188 COVID-19 cases, including 43 samples at 6 to 8 months after infection. 51 subjects in the study provided longitudinal blood samples, allowing for both cross-sectional and longitudinal analyses of SARS-CoV-2-specific immune memory.*

Antibodies against SARSCoV-2 spike and receptor binding domain (RBD) declined moderately over 8 months, comparable to several other reports. Memory B cells against SARS-CoV-2 spike actually increased between 1 month and 8 months after infection. Memory CD8+ T cells and memory CD4+ T cells declined with an initial half-life of 3 to 5 months.

This is the largest antigen-specific study to date of the four major types of immune memory for any viral infection. Substantial immune memory is generated after COVID-19, involving all four major types of immune memory.

About 95% of subjects retained immune memory at ~6 months after infection. Circulating antibody titers were not predictive of T cell memory. Thus, simple serological tests for SARS-CoV-2 antibodies do not reflect the richness and durability of immune memory to SARS-CoV-2.

Lavine, J.S., et al (2021) **Immunological characteristics govern the transition of COVID-19 to endemicity.** SCIENCE 371:doi.org/10.1126/science.abe6522 (available as a free pdf)

Authors’ abstract: *Our analysis of immunological and epidemiological data on endemic human coronaviruses (HCoVs) shows that infection-blocking immunity wanes rapidly, but disease-reducing immunity is long-lived.*

Our model, incorporating these components of immunity, recapitulates both the current severity of CoV-2 and the benign nature of HCoVs, suggesting that once the endemic phase is reached and primary exposure is in childhood, CoV-2 may be no more virulent than the common cold.

[Speirs: The common cold is a coronavirus that humans have been adapted to for thousands of years.]

We predict a different outcome for an emergent coronavirus that causes severe disease in children. These results reinforce the importance of behavioral containment during pandemic vaccine rollout, while prompting us to evaluate scenarios for continuing vaccination in the endemic phase.

Signs, Signs, Everywhere A COVID Sign.

I took this photo on 2021-02-18 at the downtown Hudson’s Bay store. A year ago the slogan would have made no sense to anyone, but now we all understand it since so many of us attend Zoom meetings.



When the pandemic began, a popular phrase was that we were all in this together. That was soon proven demonstrably false, beginning the day after the pandemic was declared a public emergency, when a worldwide Hampsterkaufe erupted. Canadians have been no better, with CERB cheaters, anti-maskers, anti-vaxers, snowbirds, cross-border vacationers, and hoarders.

The sign on the building window was an office tower on 3 Street SW, mostly empty since the pandemic began.



Meanwhile, my neighbour on Amiens Crescent SW continues with her yarnbombing. I await with interest how she will band the tree in the week of March 11, the first anniversary of the pandemic emergency declaration.



LET MARS DIVIDE ETERNITY IN TWAIN: PART 15

by Dale Speirs

[Parts 1 to 14 appeared in OPUNTIA's #310, 321, 328, 332, 337, 354, 357, 369, 372, 384, 401, 429, 437, and 466. Reviews of the WAR OF THE WORLDS movies appeared in #289.]

Old Mars.

“A Message From Mars” by Derek Ironside (1930 November, WEIRD TALES, available as a free pdf from www.archive.org) was an obsolete story even for its time. A 7-man expedition was launched in a spaceship, fired from the bottom of a giant cannon embedded into the earth. Destination: Mars. Plagiarized: Verne.

They made it, using retro-rockets to slow down their spaceship as they whizzed by Mars. On that point, the story was prescient. The landing was a hard one, but they survived. The air was thin but breathable. After some time had lapsed, they got their television transmitter working (which was the real science fiction of 1930).

Mars had vegetation, canals, and giant ants. The explorers discovered too late that the ants were sapient and had technology. The last images transmitted showed a swarm of ants in fighter planes overwhelming the explorers. The question back on Earth was whether or not the ants would figure out where the spaceship came from.

What amazed me was how this story was accepted. Undoubtedly the editor was short of material and had to accept what came along to fill the pages.

“Dateline: Mars” by Richard Wilson (1951 May, PLANET STORIES, available as a free pdf from www.gutenberg.org) began with an interesting example of why science fiction is not that good in predicting little details. Ace reporter Scott Warren was on Mars, where the Earth colonists and native Martians were in the midst of a festival.

After watching events on a vision screen and puffing on a cigarette, he sat down at his typewriter to compose a story for his newspaper back on Earth: *Scott rolled the paper up in the carriage of his typewriter and jagged a line through what he had written.* No doubt the spaceship pilots used slide rules to calculate their courses.

When the Earthlings first landed, their contact was with a fascist regime that had just won a civil war. Decades later, a revolutionary movement had arisen to fight a guerilla war. A democracy of sorts had been established. The problem now was that having established a popularly supported government, the Martians turned their attention to their next target. They didn’t want to be an Earth colony.

The Earth government was trying to keep the troubles a secret, including putting a lid on the reporters. The story was mostly about the political maneuvering before a compromise was established and all was well.

A change from the usual type of Martian story, where the hero helped the brave princess regain her place on the throne, nevermind the right of her subjects to make their own decisions. With a little updating, such as replacing typewriters with laptops or tablets, the story could run again in today’s science fiction magazines.

Mars Invades.

Almost every alien invasion story took place in contemporary times, yet there would be no reason to exclude them arriving in the past, whether medieval or Cretaceous, as a few stories have done. Fermi’s Paradox, by the way, ignores the idea that aliens may have already come and gone before humans evolved.

“Peril Of The Blue World” by Robert Abernathy (1942 Winter, PLANET STORIES, available as a free pdf from www.gutenberg.org) takes up this idea. The Martians landed their first expedition in England. Their first contact is with a 4-legged Earthling carrying a metal robot on its back. It was, as the reader will quickly realize, a knight in shining armour.

There was an unfortunate misunderstanding, culminating with the Earthling being stunned unconscious. The Martians established communication with it and learned it lived in a nearby stone house called a castle. They gave him a ride back home, causing a sensation in the village that clustered around the castle.

The Englishmen told them stories about dragons, werewolves, and vampires, which shook the Martians. Further questioning revealed that none of them had actually seen any but they existed in foreign lands. The Martians were skeptical so they decided to test the Earthlings by interrogating them with lie detectors.

The fallacy of lie detectors, and the reason why courts don't like them, is that they don't verify facts, only if the subject thinks he is telling the truth. Since the Englishmen genuinely believed in dragons, werewolves, and vampires, the Martian lie detectors said they were telling the truth.

The Martians made the wrong conclusion. Deciding that it would be too much trouble to invade a planet full of dragons, werewolves, and vampires, they abandoned their expedition and returned to Mars. I'd laugh except on our planet, innocent people have been convicted in court on the basis of false interpretations of lie detectors.

Martian Tourists.

"The Lost Martian" by Henry Harbers (1929 December, SCIENCE WONDER STORIES, available as a free pdf from www.archive.org) concerned the voyage of Ruthen, the lost Martian. He had detected radio waves coming from Earth and made the obvious conclusion that there was a technological civilization there. Ruthen departed aboard his levitator in our year 1931 and was never heard from again.

The story switched to Earthlings in the Amazon jungle who had the pleasure of making Ruthen's acquaintance. Led by a missionary Dr James, and assisted by spear-carrying natives, communication was established between the two sides. The spaceship needed repairs, not likely to be done in the depths of the jungle, so Ruthen went off to be introduced to English society.

Many alarums and infodumps came and went. By 1933, the Martians were preparing a rescue mission. At that point the story fizzled out. Fzzzzzz.

Terraformed Mars.

TALES OF TOMORROW was an old-time radio series based on stories from GALAXY science fiction magazine. It aired in 1953 from January 1 to April 9. Strangely enough, it was adapted from a television series. Normally, in the early 1950s, old-time radio series were converted into television series, not the other way around.

The episodes were live-to-air. They were considered to be like stage shows, where players strutted and fretted their half-hour and then were heard no more. The host was Omentor, played by Raymond Edward Johnson, better

remembered as the host Raymond on INNER SANCTUM MYSTERIES from 1941 to 1945.

The mp3s are air checks with scratchy sound and high compression, made by radio fans. Many are unlistenable but a few are worth listening to once. A few episodes are available as free mp3s from the Old Time Radio Researchers Website at www.otrrlibrary.org.

"Morrow On Mars" aired on 1953-04-02. No writer was credited, either the original (and unknown) story or the radio adaptation. It was apparently not a GALAXY story. An annoyance was that the dialogue was set against continuous background and incidental music, occasionally drowning out the actor's voice.

Set in the year 4000 when Mars was long since colonized, the protagonist was Matt Morrow, publisher of a telepaper. As the episode opened, he had just finished a conversation with Earthlings about an unfounded rumour that Mars was wobbling on its axis.

A strange man came into his office, dressed in a blue serge suit and straw hat. Very strange, for as Morrow commented, that style of clothing had been extinct for centuries. An analogy would be someone wearing a Roman toga in our world today. The man introduced himself as Prof. Able Winkler from Earth.

Their conversation was interrupted by a videophone call from Morrow's wife Gwen, who said she had lost her wedding ring, made of trineutrium. When the call concluded, Morrow turned around but Winkler was gone. He left his wristwatch, also made of trineutrium, which was now floating in mid-air.

The Morrows went out to visit a trineutrium mine that Winkler had mentioned. Matt talked with the mine superintendent Sedgewick, who said Winkler had been there annoying them about trineutrium smugglers.

The mining company had been treating the trineutrium to make it lighter than Mars gravity, so they could lift it off Mars without requiring a huge delta vector. Some of that metal had leaked out into the marketplace, which was why people were having problems with wristwatches and rings floating away.

Assorted alarums occurred, including Matt and Winkler being shanghaied aboard the smuggler's ship. The miners were stealing so much trineutrium that

they were altering the balance of Mars’ gravity. They intended to sell the trineutrium on Earth, forgetting or not realizing how such a large quantity would collapse the price.

The smugglers decided to put the two men into spacesuits and shove them out the airlock. Since Morrow was narrating the story in past tense there was no suspense. They were rescued by a spaceship of the Mars police. Sedgewick and company got what was coming to them.

CONVENTIONAL FICTION: PART 13

by Dale Speirs

[Parts 1 to 12 appeared in OPUNTIA #70.1A, 270, 285, 313, 364, 385, 398, 414, 421, 439, 459, and 488.]

There was a time when “social distancing” was a nonsensical oxymoron, and masking meant cosplaying. Science fiction conventions will return some sunny day and we’ll meet again over the white cliffs of Dover. In the meantime here are some memories from days of yore.

Fans Of A Feather.

“Con-Fen” by James R. Adams (1953 May, PLANET STORIES, available as a free pdf from www.gutenberg.org) was about a pair of Martians visiting Earth incognito. All went well until they entered a Chicago hotel hosting a science fiction convention. The fans saw through them and started a commotion. It did not end well for the Martians, who fled into the street and were run over by a delivery truck.

The New Paradigm.

In our modern era, science fiction conventions mean sci-fi cons to most fans. They are happy to pay \$200 or \$300 to a commercially run convention for the right to line up for hours to see a panel featuring an actor who played the second Klingon from the left in a TNG episode. They read comic books, not novels or fiction magazines. To them, sci-fi means superheroes and fantasy barbarians.

A good demonstration of this was the hit television series THE BIG BANG THEORY, which ran for 12 seasons from 2007. The central characters were young scientists and engineers heavily involved in science fiction and fantasy as fans, but in the form of board, card, and video games, cosplaying, watching television series and movies, and attending commercial comic cons.

Novels were never mentioned, but Stan Lee was idolized and even made a guest appearance on the show. The characters had incessant discussions about superhero powers but never about generation starships.

The main protagonists were roommates Leonard Hofstadter and Sheldon Cooper. Their friends were Howard Wolowitz and Rajesh Koothrappali. For the first three, their girlfriends, later to become their wives, were Penny (no last name ever given), Amy Farrah Fowler, and Bernadette Rostenkowski, respectively. Raj had several girlfriends during the series.

I have the complete set of this series on DVD. During the dark nights of the pandemic I binge-watched the whole series at the rate of two or three episodes per night. That compressed the series and made a few things stand out which would have been overlooked over twelve years. In particular, I noticed the emphasis on commercial comic cons, never a fan-run affair.

“The Bakersfield Expedition” was a Season 6 episode that aired on 2013-01-10. Normally I try to credit the writers, but the episodes of this series were usually written by a committee. Six names were normally credited with the story and/or teleplay.

The episode opened with Leonard and Sheldon preparing for a trip to the Bakersfield Comic Con. Sheldon was steam-cleaning his Star Trek uniform while Leonard checked his makeup kit, an elaborate box at professional level. Penny remarked that he had more and better makeup than she did. Leonard took a selfie of himself and Penny holding that day’s newspaper while he was giving her a peck on the cheek. He wanted to be able to prove to other con-goers that he had a girlfriend.

The B-story of the episode was Penny, Amy, and Bernadette having brunch and wondering why grown physicists were still cosplaying at conventions. Their conclusion was that because the boys had been bullied so much as children they sought solace by pretending to be heroes.

Leonard, Sheldon, Howard, and Raj were on the highway to Bakersfield when they passed the Vasquez Rocks. This was a popular location for several Star Trek episodes, so they decided to stop there, dress up in Star Trek costumes, and take photos. While doing so, their car was stolen, leaving them stranded.

They never did make it to the convention and had to return home on foot, hot, sweaty, and exhausted. Much like a real convention actually.

“The Convention Conundrum” was a Season 7 episode airing on 2014-01-30. The four boys were crouched at their laptops trying to get onto the San Diego Comic Con Website to buy tickets. The tickets sold out in minutes before they could move up the queue. Their reactions were different.

Sheldon decided he was going to start his own convention. How difficult could that be? Book a star like Robert Downey Jr for the opening panel and away you go. Sheldon quickly discovered that Hollywood sci-fi stars were not available. Too bad others hadn’t learned that. Read Garth Spencer’s histories of Canadian conventions in the early issues of OPUNTIA and you’ll see nothing has changed.

Sheldon did, however, stumble across James Earl Jones in person at a restaurant. Jones was in a good mood and instead of rebuffing Sheldon, invited him out for a night on the town. Sheldon had the time of his life partying with him. Alas, at the end of it all, no one would believe the story.

Meanwhile, the other three were trying to buy scalped tickets to Comic Con. They became nervous about the illegality and wavered back and forth about doing the deal. They finally wimped out despite reassuring each other “Are we not men?”.

“The Fetal Kick Catalyst” was a Season 10 episode that aired on 2016-10-27. Penny was an aspiring actress who had appeared in SERIAL APE-IST movies #1 and #2, about a woman turned halfway into an ape by a mad scientist. Since then she had married Leonard.

The episode opened with Penny at her laptop. She had just received an email from the Van Nuys Comic Con. Not knowing anything about it, she asked Leonard. He replied that it was a “*dinky little convention where they sell collectibles and get sad D-list celebrities to appear.*”

She told him she had just received an invitation to sign autographs there. Leonard did an impressive 180° pivot: “*That’s awesome*”.

Penny was reluctant to attend but Leonard convinced her. The other guest of honour was George Lucas’ dermatologist. Leonard went to town, printing headshots of her, buying markers, and getting a cash box and change maker. And so to the convention.

It was held in a typical hotel ballroom, like any you have ever seen in Calgary or Dallas or Boston. Sitting at her table, Penny remarked that she felt like she was selling candy to raise money for new team uniforms.

Her customers were what you would expect. Most of them said their favourite scene of her was the shower scene. One of them had it as a screenshot on his smartphone and showed her. “*Yep, there they are*”, said Penny sadly.

Many fans found it difficult to believe Leonard was her husband, he having a typical fan resemblance. He soon collected a circle of awestruck fans who wanted the details on how he got a hot wife. Penny was ot amused.

“The Conic-Con Conundrum” was a Season 10 episode that aired 2017-02-23. It was a standard plot about a couple misunderstanding each other. Penny reluctantly decided to accompany Leonard to the San Diego Comic Con. He wasn’t happy because he knew she would be a drag but he didn’t have the heart to say no. That part of the plot was stretched out with predictable dialogue.

Meanwhile, Raj and Howard wanted to go but faced roadblocks. Raj had run into financial problems and was on a tight budget that precluded the Comic Con. To fund his ticket, he began selling his figurines and comics, only to discover the difference between wholesale buying price and retail selling price.

Bernadette had just given birth, so she wasn’t happy about Howard running off for five days to San Diego. In the end, no one went to Comic Con except Sheldon.

To an old-time science fiction fan, most of whom are retired or in nursing homes, these episodes highlight the difference between the original style of convention and the post-Star Trek era. Writers, unless they scripted comic books, were conspicuous by their absence. The actors are now the big draws. Asimov? Heinlein? Clarke? Who are they?

REVIVAL RADIO

by Dale Speirs

THEATER FIVE was a short-lived attempt at reviving drama shows on radio. It aired for the 1964-65 season but the war against television was lost a decade prior, so it failed. The episodes were generally well written and produced, and are worth downloading from www.otrrlibrary.org. The episodes were a mixture of science fiction, fantasy, mystery, and weird fiction.

“The \$245,000 Dollar Smile” was a 1964 episode written by Richard Holland. Harry Owens and his wife hired a male escort named Charles Frederickson, ostensibly for a social engagement. They wanted him as a doppelganger so he could be murdered and passed off as Harry, who was in an awkward financial situation. He had to have perfect teeth like Harry. The idea was to claim a \$250,000 insurance policy, less \$5,000 for the deductible.

Harry was a confidence man by trade. Unfortunately he had defrauded the wife of a District Attorney, and had to make himself scarce. By burning Frederickson in a fire, he could fake his death.

Harry and his wife were having difficulty committing the murder. They slugged Frederickson, tied him up, and put him in a bedroom closet while they prepared to set the fire. Frederickson escaped out the window. When the couple discovered he was gone, they tried to flee. Frederickson had called the police and they were arrested as they went out the front door. He had chewed off the ropes that bound him with his perfect teeth.

“A Little Knowledge” was written by Phyllis Coates and aired on 1964-11-25. The mystery began with the body of an unknown man in a hotel. The police had no leads, so they published his photograph in the newspapers.

Martha identified the deceased as her husband Malcolm Hergert, who had skipped out on her two months prior. She unloaded much angst about the failure of the marriage to the officer in charge. While she was doing that, a second woman Lylah arrived at the police station, also claiming to be Mrs Malcolm Hergert.

Obviously he was a bigamist. Martha was a weak-willed woman, and Lylah was a battleaxe in denial. Most of the episode was soap opera dramatics, with the two women screaming at each other much of the time.

With only a few minutes left of airtime, they suddenly agreed that both were lucky to be rid of him. On that point the episode abruptly ended and shifted into a public service announcement encouraging listeners to help set up community fallout shelters.

THE ZERO HOUR was aired on radio in 1973 and 1974 as an anthology series, with Rod Serling as the host. Think of his television shows as if they were done on radio. He did the intro and outro for each episode but the series was produced by Elliott Lewis. It is available as free mp3s from the Old Time Radio Researchers at www.otrrlibrary.org. The episodes were a mixture of science fiction, fantasy, and mystery.

The series was crippled in the opening season by an awkward format of five-part episodes daily per week, which might have worked during the 1930s and 1940s, but not in the era of television. The format was later changed to five single unrelated episodes a week, with the gimmick that a Hollywood star would be the leading character for the five episodes of each week.

The series featured big name Hollywood stars but failed because the network executives didn’t advertise it. As the director Elliott Lewis remarked: “*They wanted as much name value as possible to help with sales. They forgot they had to sell it. Everybody sat in the office and waited for someone to call them up and buy the show.*”

“Dr. Rivington, Presumably” was written by Kim Weiskopf. It aired on 1974-05-27 after the series had changed from five-parters to single 30-minute episodes.

The episode starred William Shatner as millionaire Kingston Wonderlik, a hypochondriac. Shatner did not play it as Capt. Kirk but as a milquetoast character. He has played parts like that since and is surprisingly good at it. Shatner is a better actor than many people give him credit for.

Dr Rivington was treating an elderly woman, Wonderlik’s mother, for supposed cancer. He guaranteed a cure for \$10,000, say \$100,000 in today’s depreciated currency. She said her son was not to know, but she did tell her stepson Clarence, an alcoholic.

He wasn’t too drunk to realize Rivington was an old friend of his, a sharp practice man named Carlson. He paid a visit and demanded half of whatever

amount Carlson qua Rivington soaked his stepmother for. Kingston and his wife Dinah were en route to the Caribbean and stopped over to see his dear mother. The two women detested each other. All told, not a family that prayed together.

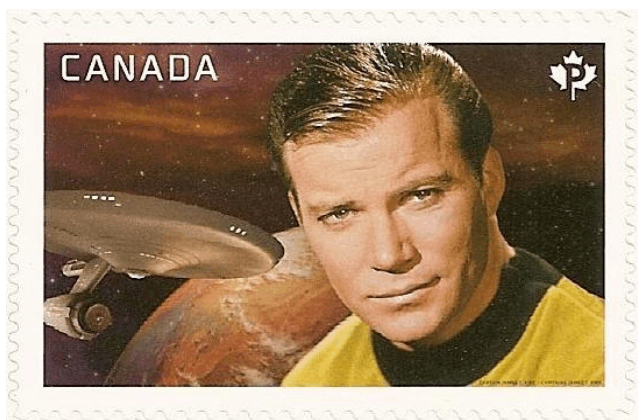
Dinah and Clarence met up accidentally in a tavern where they had both stopped for a drink. They were two of a kind and were soon scheming to separate Mrs Wonderlik from her money and Kingston from his life so that Dinah would inherit.

Meanwhile, Rivington was not happy about Clarence cutting in for a share of his fees, so he began plotting with his nurse. Poison in a drink, and no one would bother with a toxicology test for a known alcoholic.

Kingston wasn't as naive as everyone thought. He poisoned Dinah before she could kill him. Rivington poisoned Clarence. In a neat twist, Kingston pinned the blame for both deaths on Rivington and the nurse. He then took his mother on that Caribbean cruise she always wanted.

“A Favor You Can't Refuse” was written by Keith Walker and aired on 1974-05-31, with William Shatner as a Mafioso named Elliott Angeleno. He had appropriated \$1 million which someone else appropriated in turn. With that set up, there was a commercial break for a rosé wine suitable for any elegant occasion.

A Mafia don then put out a contract on Angeleno for skimming the money. Many alarums followed, mostly because the Mafioso wanted the money. To muddy the waters, there was also a power struggle within the ranks. I use that metaphor because most of the action took place on boats or in marinas. The sound man splashed a lot of water.



There were several twists in the plot. Everything ended well, including the don paying off Angeleno with a cheque. Really? The Mafia write cheques?

“Death At Half A Length”, written by Keith Walker, aired on 1974-06-03, with Greg Morris as the star playing insurance investigator Jason Kelly. As you guessed from the title, this episode was set at the race track. Two horse owners were feuding. Threatening notes were received. Fisticuffs were exchanged. Just an average day out in the barns. Things went from bad to worse when the favourite Pleasure Honey suddenly collapsed dead just before the finish line.

Jim Howard owned the unfortunate nag, insured for \$100,000 by Kelly's company. The death was murder, done with a curare-filled dart shot into the horse. Kelly and his girlfriend, actress Nana Gregory, were quickly on the scene.

She checked up on the jockey Billy Bangle and crossed paths with Howard, who mentioned Bangle's wife Lily had been in hospital for a year with Parkinson's disease. Gregory went there on a whim to visit her. Howard had been paying the hospital bills.

While she was doing that, Kelly was checking through a telephone directory's worth of track officials, bookies, and horse grooms. Rumour had it that Howard owed big money to one of the bookies. To stir the plot up after the third commercial, Howard was shot but only slightly wounded.

He had received another threatening note, this time about another of his horses, Sunshine Lady, who was running the next day. That horse was insured for \$500,000. (Sound of ominous music, and rightly so.)

Kelly and Gregory did a break-and-enter at the office of rival horse owner Sutton Cragley to get samples from a typewriter for a possible match with the threatening notes. They found a drawer full of darts while they were at it. Kelly thought they might have been planted.

Notwithstanding that, Kelly put surveillance the next day onto Cragley. Kelly contradicted himself further by saying he thought Howard killed the horse. Sunshine Lady won by a nose, ridden by Billy.

The denouement trotted in the Bangles. Pleasure Honey wasn't shot by a gun but stabbed with the dart by Billy in mid-race. Howard wanted the insurance money to help with Lily's medical bills. Billy had a change of heart with Sunshine Lady and did not stab her with a dart.

Cragsley had been framed by Howard. Kelly told Howard there would be no insurance payout. Since Howard had not yet filed the papers for the insurance claim, Kelly did not notify the police. That was that. An abrupt ending.

“Bonny And Clyde Are Alive And Living As Mary And Bill” was written by Glenhall Taylor and aired on 1974-06-10. It began with a Justice of the Peace officiating at the marriage of William Baker and Mary Sherman. After the vows they gunned him down and stole his money. Then they stole a getaway car for the honeymoon. Stopping at a restaurant, they enjoyed a steak dinner before robbing the proprietor when the check was presented.

The happy couple carried on their crime spree across the state. A sheriff caught them in a motel but was careless enough to let Sherman get her gun out of her purse and shoot him. They holed up in an apartment to plan their next job.

In a rather blatant piece of foreboding, Sherman, who loved cooking, mailed a coupon for a free cookbook from the last motel they stayed at. Police found the clipped magazine and put the Post Office on alert to watch the mails for anything addressed to Mary Sherman or Mrs Baker.

The takedown was routine. No final drama, just yet another abrupt finish. “You’re under arrest!”, and then a jump to the final commercial. The psychopathic couple were played straight, for indeed psychopaths are often mundane.

“The Mannequin Sham” was written by Kim Weiskopf and aired on 1974-06-12. Bill and E.J. Quinn had a trial separation. Their marriage was failing because both were more wedded to their jobs. He was a police detective and she was an investigator for a consumer protection agency.

Her current case was a fraudulent modeling agency run by Margo Mandell. E.J. went undercover but the fraudsters were suspicious of her and on their guard. Bill wasn’t happy either. He became involved despite himself when a gangster named Diamond Jim Lazarian disappeared, abandoning a car registered to Margo Mandell.

Assorted alarums followed. Mandell hired Lazarian to dispose of E.J. and another model. Bill arrived in the nick of time. No suspense at all, since the plot could be guessed five minutes ahead of time. There was not the slightest doubt he would get there in time, as predictable as the #7 bus in Calgary.

The only twist was Bill and E.J. didn’t reconcile. That reminded me of the #13 bus, the worst route in our city for staying on schedule, frequently vanishing for an hour at a time.

“Death On Canvas” was written by Sue Dunham and aired on 1974-06-21. Set along Gallery Row in Hollywood, the episode opened at a showing by John Duggan. An old acquaintance Gary Xeno happened by and talked about past times.

A painting on display depicted Duggan’s ex-wife Marianne. Their daughter Linda was at the showing, as was his second wife Christine. Having introduced the cast, they were promptly reduced with the strangulation of Christine just outside the gallery.

Duggan suspected his agent Fitz Emmanuel, recently by Christine fired for fiddling the books. Linda lived with Marianne’s mother, a battleaxe who remembered Xeno from the old days and not favourably. He inserted himself into the plot and the family.

Duggan dropped out of sight after his wife’s murder, always a good way to attract the notice of the police. Emmanuel was the next to depart this world, also strangled.

Xeno tracked down Duggan, who was busily burning threatening letters previously received which claimed Emmanuel and Christine had been having an affair. The very thing a prosecutor would love for Exhibit A at the trial.

Xeno took one letter and went sleuthing. Back to Marianne’s place for the J’accuse! meeting. As the police arrived, Marianne confessed all without any prompting. Pretty fast work for an amateur detective. Despite the title of the episode, the paintings had nothing to do with the murders.

“The House That Clemont Built”, written by Keith Walker, aired on 1974-06-24. Inspector Foché was introduced in the opening scene. The name translates into English as ‘wrong’, and the character was played as a bumbling fool, much like Inspector Clouseau of the Pink Panther movies.

André Clemont was a fashion designer. The house he built wasn’t a building but a house of fashion. A magazine feature writer Libby Mann found him defunct in his house, this time the building. She fainted. When she revived the

body was gone and a man named Paul Bouchard was hovering over her. He demanded to know what she was doing there.

The attending police detective was Foché. A ransom note was found but Mann insisted Clemont was dead, not kidnapped. Bouchard lived in the house and Marn had been invited to stay there by Clemont, so they settled in for the night. Foché left, or at least tried to, as the first door he exited by was a closet.

Later that night Mann heard Bouchard sobbing in the night and found him with Clemont’s body. He said they had an argument during which Clemont suffered a fatal heart attack. There was a big fashion show coming up with Clemont’s latest designs.

Bouchard feared his death would ruin the House of Clemont, and tried to cover it up. Mann happened to walk in at the wrong moment. She negotiated a deal with Bouchard to carry on the showing and publicize the event in her magazine.

Shelley Berman, a stand-up comedian more familiar to Boomers than Millennials, played the part of Bouchard. The comedy was mild and there was no real mystery, just Foché doing Clouseau’s routines. Something to listen to once on your morning commute, then delete the mp3.

SEEN IN THE LITERATURE

Tang, M., et al (2021) **Orogenic quiescence in Earth’s middle age.** SCIENCE 371:728-731

[The Boring Billion lasted from 1.8 gigayears to 0.8 gigayears ago. There was only one supercontinent and erosion was minimal, so nutrients were lacking in the ocean. As a result, evolution stalled and while there were some changes in microscopic life, little happened either biologically or geologically. When the supercontinent broke apart, life began evolving at a more rapid pace.]

Authors’ abstract: *Earth’s crust has changed over time as supercontinents formed and broke apart. Tied into this cycle are the building and erosion of high mountains, which are tied to collisions between tectonic plates. Mountain building, and the subsequent erosion, was less intense for about a billion years,*

roughly correlated with a so-called “boring billion” period of biological evolution. Mountain belts modulate denudation flux and hydrologic processes and are thus fundamental to nutrient cycling on Earth’s surface.

We used europium anomalies in detrital zircons to track mountain building processes over Earth’s history. We show that the average thickness of active continental crust varied on billion-year time scales, with the thickest crust formed in the Archean and Phanerozoic.

By contrast, the Proterozoic witnessed continuously decreasing crustal thickness, leaving the continents devoid of high mountains until the end of the eon. We link this gradually diminished orogenesis to the long-lived Nuna-Rodinia supercontinent, which altered the mantle thermal structure and weakened the continental lithosphere.

This prolonged orogenic quiescence may have resulted in a persistent famine in the oceans and stalled life’s evolution in Earth’s middle age.

Siraj, A., and A, Loeb (2021) **Breakup of a long-period comet as the origin of the dinosaur extinction.** SCIENTIFIC REPORTS 11:doi.org/10.1038/s41598-021-82320-2 (available as a free pdf)

Authors’ abstract: *The origin of the Chicxulub impactor, which is attributed as the cause of the K/T mass extinction event, is an unsolved puzzle. The background impact rates of main-belt asteroids and long-period comets have been previously dismissed as being too low to explain the Chicxulub impact event.*

Here, we show that a fraction of long-period comets are tidally disrupted after passing close to the Sun, each producing a collection of smaller fragments that cross the orbit of Earth.

This population could increase the impact rate of long-period comets capable of producing Chicxulub impact events by an order of magnitude. This new rate would be consistent with the age of the Chicxulub impact crater, thereby providing a satisfactory explanation for the origin of the impactor.

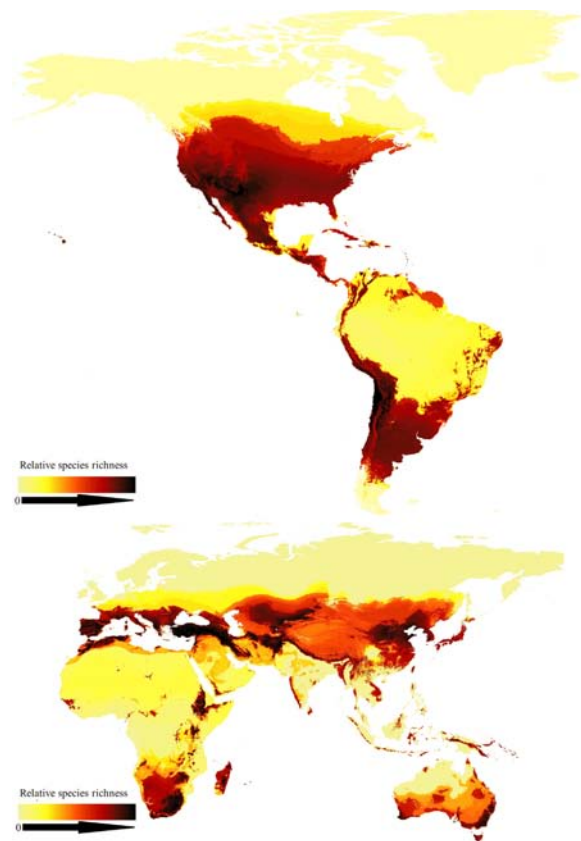
Our hypothesis explains the composition of the largest confirmed impact crater in Earth’s history as well as the largest one within the last million years. It

predicts a larger proportion of impactors with carbonaceous chondritic compositions than would be expected from meteorite falls of main-belt asteroids.

Orr, M.C., et al (2021) **Global patterns and drivers of bee distribution.** CURRENT BIOLOGY 31:451-458 (available as a free pdf)

Authors’ abstract: Here, we combine a uniquely comprehensive checklist of bee species distributions and >5,800,000 public bee occurrence records to describe global patterns of bee biodiversity. Publicly accessible records are sparse, especially from developing countries, and are frequently inaccurate throughout much of the world, consequently suggesting different biodiversity patterns from checklist data.

Global analyses reveal hotspots of species richness, together generating a rare bimodal latitudinal richness gradient, and further analyses suggest that xeric areas, solar radiation, and non-forest plant productivity are among the most important global drivers of bee biodiversity.



[Map is from this paper and shows distribution of bee species worldwide.]

Kuna, V.M., et al (2021) **Seismic crustal imaging using fin whale songs.** SCIENCE 371:731-735

Authors’ abstract: Probing the structure of the ocean crust requires a wave source. The most common source is an air gun, which is effective but potentially harmful for ocean life and not easy to use everywhere. Fin whale songs can also be used as a seismic source for determining crustal structure.

Fin whale vocalizations can be as loud as large ships and occur at frequencies useful for traveling through the ocean floor. These properties allow fin whale songs to be used for mapping out the density of ocean crust, a vital part of exploring the seafloor.

Fin whale calls are among the strongest animal vocalizations that are detectable over great distances in the oceans. We analyze fin whale songs recorded at ocean-bottom seismometers in the northeast Pacific Ocean and show that in addition to the waterborne signal, the song recordings also contain signals reflected and refracted from crustal interfaces beneath the stations.

With these data, we constrain the thickness and seismic velocity of the oceanic sediment and basaltic basement and the P-wave velocity of the gabbroic lower crust beneath and around the ocean bottom seismic stations. The abundant and globally available fin whale calls may be used to complement seismic studies in situations where conventional air-gun surveys are not available.

Bergström, A., et al (2021) **Origins of modern human ancestry.** NATURE 590:229-237

Authors’ abstract: Here we review our current understanding of how the ancestry of modern humans around the globe can be traced into the deep past, and which ancestors it passes through during our journey back in time. We identify three key phases that are surrounded by major questions, and which will be at the frontiers of future research.

The most recent phase comprises the worldwide expansion of modern humans between 40 and 60 thousand years ago (ka) and their last known contacts with archaic groups such as Neanderthals and Denisovans. The second phase is associated with a broadly construed African origin of modern human diversity between 60 and 300 ka. The oldest phase comprises the complex separation of

modern human ancestors from archaic human groups from 0.3 to 1 million years ago.

We argue that no specific point in time can currently be identified at which modern human ancestry was confined to a limited birthplace, and that patterns of the first appearance of anatomical or behavioural traits that are used to define Homo sapiens are consistent with a range of evolutionary histories.

De Tiège, A., et al (2021) **From animal signals to art: Manipulative animal signaling and the evolutionary foundations of aesthetic behavior and art production.** QUARTERLY REVIEW OF BIOLOGY 96:1-27

Authors' abstract: *As humans are evolved animals, we propose a non-anthropocentric framework based on animal signaling theory to understand the evolutionary foundations of human art, instead of a classical anthropocentric approach based on sociocultural anthropology that may incorporate evolutionary thinking but does not start with it.*

First, we provide a concise review of the basics of the evolutionary theory of animal communication or signaling. Second, we apply this theory to specifically human aesthetic behavior and art and provide four empirical arguments or factors that reduce the conceptual gap between nonhuman animal signaling and human aesthetic-artistic behavior (two from the nonhuman and two from the human side) and that, as such, grant an implementation of human aesthetic behavior and art production within animal signaling theory.

And, third, we explore the theory's explanatory power and value when applied to aesthetic behavior and art production through proposing four valuable insights or hypotheses that it may contribute or generate: on art's operation within multiple functionally adaptive signaling contexts; on the basic evolutionary economics of art or what art is (for); on why art is functionally adaptive rather than a nonfunctional byproduct; and on how art is functionally rooted in competitive-manipulative animal signaling and, unlike language, only to a lesser extent in cooperative-informative signaling.

Overall, animal signaling theory offers a potentially integrating account of the arts because humans and their signaling behaviors are conceptually situated within a broader, transhuman field that also comprises nonhuman species and

their behaviors, thus allowing for an identification of deeper commonalities (homologs, analogs) as well as unique differences. As such, we hope to increase insights into how acoustic, gestural/postural, visual, olfactory, and gustatory animal signaling evolved into music, dance, visual art, perfumery, and gastronomy, respectively.

Perri, A.R., et al (2021) **Dog domestication and the dual dispersal of people and dogs into the Americas.** PROCEEDINGS OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES USA 118:doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2010083118

Authors' abstract: *Advances in the isolation and sequencing of ancient DNA have begun to reveal the population histories of both people and dogs. Over the last 10,000 years, the genetic signatures of ancient dog remains have been linked with known human dispersals in regions such as the Arctic and the remote Pacific.*

It is suspected, however, that this relationship has a much deeper antiquity, and that the tandem movement of people and dogs may have begun soon after the domestication of the dog from a gray wolf ancestor in the late Pleistocene.

Here, by comparing population genetic results of humans and dogs from Siberia, Beringia, and North America, we show that there is a close correlation in the movement and divergences of their respective lineages. This evidence places constraints on when and where dog domestication took place.

Most significantly, it suggests that dogs were domesticated in Siberia by ~23,000 years ago, possibly while both people and wolves were isolated during the harsh climate of the Last Glacial Maximum. Dogs then accompanied the first people into the Americas and traveled with them as humans rapidly dispersed into the continent beginning ~15,000 years ago.

Cooper, A., et al (2021) **A global environmental crisis 42,000 years ago.** SCIENCE 371:doi.org/10.1126/science.abb8677

Authors' abstract: *Do terrestrial geomagnetic field reversals have an effect on Earth's climate? We created a precisely dated radiocarbon record around the time of the Laschamps geomagnetic reversal about 41,000 years ago from the rings of New Zealand swamp kauri trees. This record reveals a substantial*

increase in the carbon-14 content of the atmosphere culminating during the period of weakening magnetic field strength preceding the polarity switch.

We modeled the consequences of this event and concluded that the geomagnetic field minimum caused substantial changes in atmospheric ozone concentration that drove synchronous global climate and environmental shifts.

Geological archives record multiple reversals of Earth’s magnetic poles, but the global impacts of these events, if any, remain unclear. Uncertain radiocarbon calibration has limited investigation of the potential effects of the last major magnetic inversion, known as the Laschamps Excursion (41 to 42 thousand years ago (ka)).

We use ancient New Zealand kauri trees (*Agathis australis*) to develop a detailed record of atmospheric radiocarbon levels across the Laschamps Excursion.

We find that geomagnetic field minima ~42 ka, in combination with Grand Solar Minima, caused substantial changes in atmospheric ozone concentration and circulation, driving synchronous global climate shifts that caused major environmental changes, extinction events, and transformations in the archaeological record.

Fritz, C., et al (2021) **First record of the sound produced by the oldest Upper Paleolithic seashell horn.** SCIENCE ADVANCES 7:doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.abe9510 (available as a free pdf)

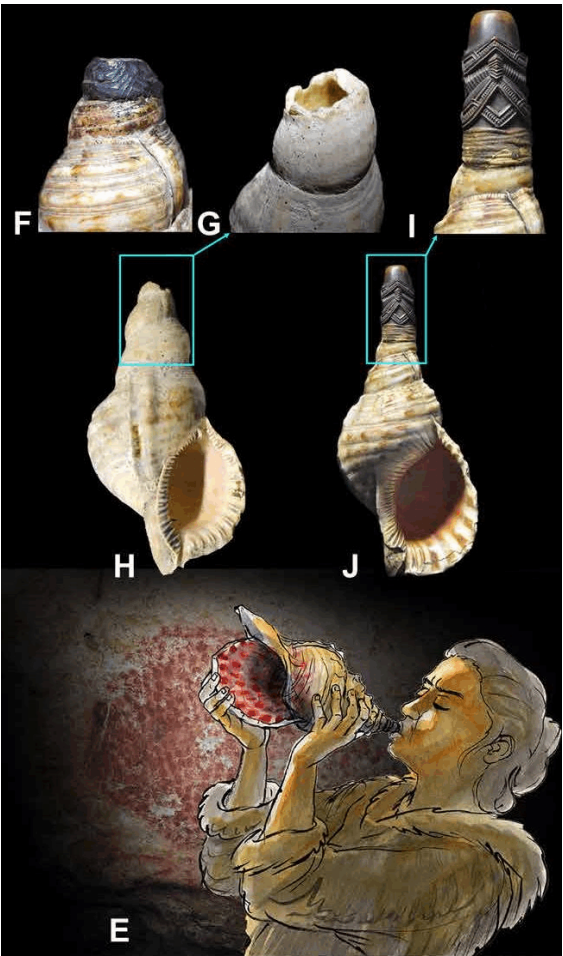
Authors’ abstract: Anthropologists and ethnomusicologists assert that there is no society without song, and more specifically, there is no ritual or celebration without accompanying sound. The production of sounds in social contexts is very ancient.

Here, we report on the study of a seashell from the decorated cave of Marsoulas and demonstrate that the Magdalenian occupants of this site transformed this shell into a wind instrument. It is one of the very rare examples, if not the only one for the Paleolithic period, of a musical instrument fashioned from a large shell, and the first conch shell of this use thus far discovered.

We already know that prehistoric people transformed many shells into portable ornaments and that they thus attributed substantial corporal symbolism to them. This seashell horn, with its unique sonority, both deep and strong with an enduring reverberation, sheds light on a musical dimension until now unknown in the context of Upper Paleolithic societies.

The seashell horn was discovered in the cave of Marsoulas (Haute-Garonne, France), located in the Pyrenean foothills. Marsoulas was the first decorated cave to be discovered in this region in 1897 and has been studied from the end of the 19th century until the present day.

In addition to the abundant and complex art on its walls, it contains archaeological levels attributed to the early Pyrenean Magdalenian, recently dated to 18,261 to 18,011 years cal before present (BP) (14,850 ± 120 years BP; wood charcoal, GifA 17257) and 18,064 to 17,731 years cal BP (14,590 ± 70 years BP; bear bone, Lyon 43054).



[Image is from this paper.]

Fabricant, A., et al (2021) **Action potentials induce biomagnetic fields in carnivorous Venus flytrap plants.** SCIENTIFIC REPORTS 11:doi.org/10.1038/s41598-021-81114-w (available as a free pdf)

Authors’ abstract: *Upon stimulation, plants elicit electrical signals that can travel within a cellular network analogous to the animal nervous system. It is well-known that in the human brain, voltage changes in certain regions result from concerted electrical activity which, in the form of action potentials (APs), travels within nerve-cell arrays.*

*Here we demonstrate that APs in a multicellular plant system produce measurable magnetic fields. Using atomic optically pumped magnetometers, biomagnetism associated with electrical activity in the carnivorous Venus flytrap, *Dionaea muscipula*, was recorded. Action potentials were induced by heat stimulation and detected both electrically and magnetically.*

Furthermore, the thermal properties of ion channels underlying the AP were studied. Beyond proof of principle, our findings pave the way to understanding the molecular basis of biomagnetism in living plants. In the future, magnetometry may be used to study long-distance electrical signaling in a variety of plant species, and to develop noninvasive diagnostics of plant stress and disease.

*The bilobed trap of the *Dionaea muscipula* plant, formed by the modified upper part of the leaf, snaps closed within a fraction of a second when touched. Three trigger hairs that serve as mechanosensors are equally spaced on each lobe. When a prey insect touches a trigger hair, an AP is generated and travels along both trap lobes.*

If a second touch-induced AP is fired within 30 seconds, the visco-elastic energy stored in the open trap is released and the capture organ closes, imprisoning the animal food stock for digestion of a nutrient-rich meal. The leaf stalk, or petiole, is not excitable and is electrically insulated from the trap.

[Image of the flytrap wired up for experimentation is from this paper.]



Spotswood, E.N., et al (2021) **The Biological deserts fallacy: Cities in their landscapes contribute more than we think to regional biodiversity.** BIOSCIENCE 71:148-160 (available as a free pdf)

Authors’ abstract: *Cities are both embedded within and ecologically linked to their surrounding landscapes. Although urbanization poses a substantial threat to biodiversity, cities also support many species, some of which have larger populations, faster growth rates, and higher productivity in cities than outside of them.*

Despite this fact, surprisingly little attention has been paid to the potentially beneficial links between cities and their surroundings. We identify five pathways by which cities can benefit regional ecosystems by releasing species from threats in the larger landscape, increasing regional habitat heterogeneity and genetic diversity, acting as migratory stopovers, pre-adapting species to climate change, and enhancing public engagement and environmental stewardship.

Increasing recognition of these pathways could help cities identify effective strategies for supporting regional biodiversity conservation and could provide a science-based platform for incorporating biodiversity alongside other urban greening goals.

Speirs: The paper caught my eye because I worked 31 years for the City of Calgary Parks Dept. as a district maintenance foreman and my final decade as Trouble Calls Supervisor. Cities do indeed have more wildlife than people realize.

In Calgary, for example, coyotes are abundant inside city limits because they feed on the equally abundant whitetail deer and snowshoe hares. Aerial surveys show that 40% or more of Calgary's surface is covered by tree canopy, not exactly the concrete and asphalt wasteland that many people think.

Seraj, S., et al (2021) **Language left behind on social media exposes the emotional and cognitive costs of a romantic breakup.** PROCEEDINGS OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES USA 118:doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2017154118

Authors' abstract: *By analyzing language on the social media platform Reddit, we tracked people's social, cognitive, and emotional lives as they dealt with the breakup of a close intimate relationship. Language markers can detect impending relationship breakups up to 3 months before they occur, with continued psychological after-effects lasting 6 months after the breakup.*

Because the language shifts are also apparent in subreddits (forums) unrelated to relationships, the research points to the pervasive impact personal upheavals have across people's social worlds.

Comparable cognitive and social effects are apparent among people undergoing divorce or dealing with major life secrets. The analysis of subtle shifts in pronouns, articles, and other almost-invisible words can reveal the psychological effects of life experiences.

Using archived social media data, the language signatures of people going through breakups were mapped. Text analyses were conducted on 1,027,541 posts from 6,803 Reddit users who had posted about their breakups. The posts include users' Reddit history in the 2 years surrounding their breakups across

the various domains of their life, not just posts pertaining to their relationship.

Language markers of an impending breakup were evident 3 months before the event, peaking on the week of the breakup and returning to baseline 6 months later.

Signs included an increase in I-words, we-words, and cognitive processing words (characteristic of depression, collective focus, and the meaning-making process, respectively) and drops in analytic thinking (indicating more personal and informal language).

The patterns held even when people were posting to groups unrelated to breakups and other relationship topics. People who posted about their breakup for longer time periods were less well-adjusted a year after their breakup compared to short-term posters.

The language patterns seen for breakups replicated for users going through divorce (n = 5,144; 1,109,867 posts) or other types of upheavals (n = 51,357; 11,081,882 posts).