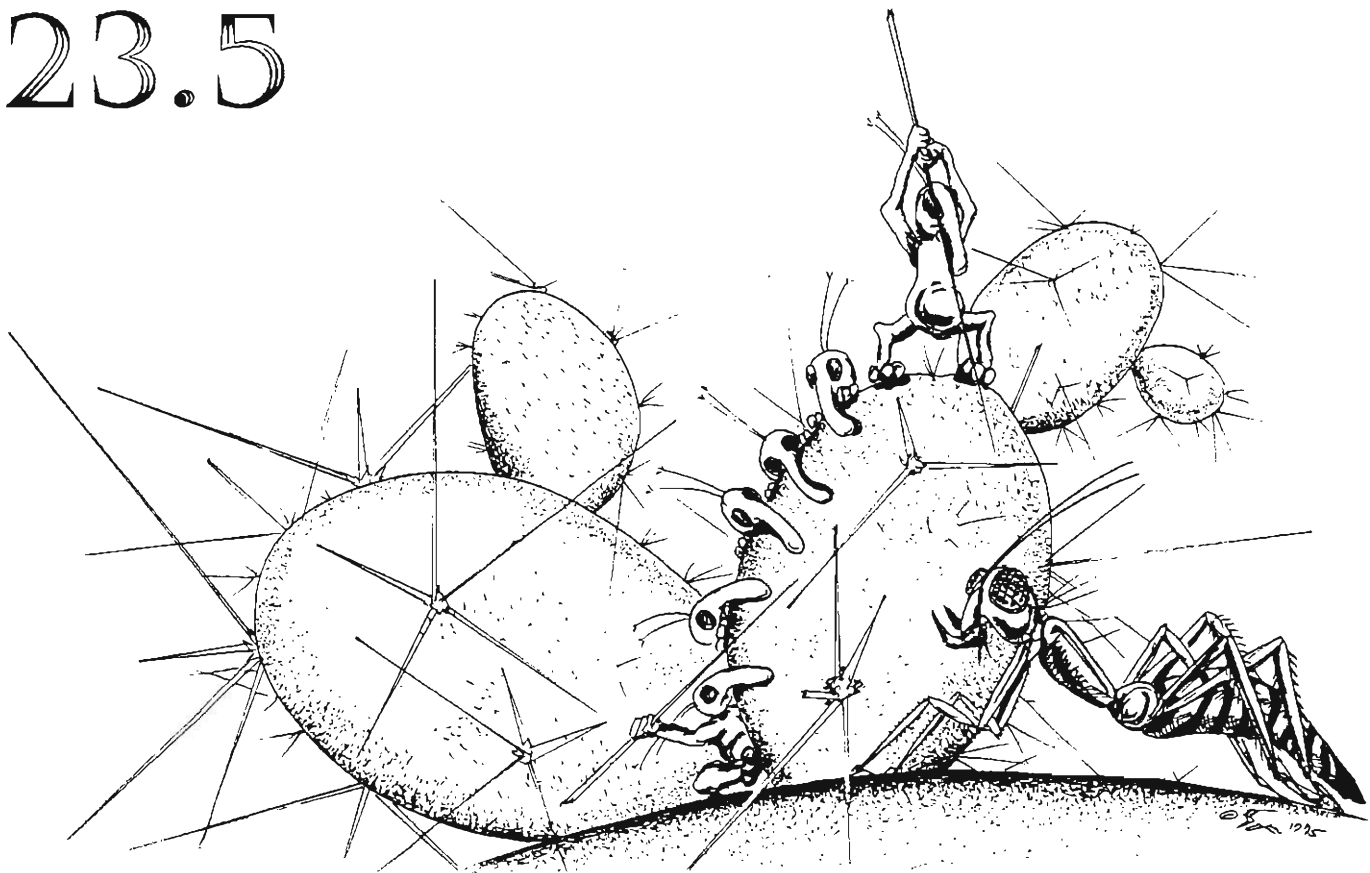


# OPUNTIA

## 23.5



ISSN 1183-2703

OPUNTIA is published by Dale Speirs, Box 6830, Calgary, Alberta, Canada, T2P 2E7. It is available for \$3 cash for a one-time sample copy, trade for your zine, or letter of comment. Whole-numbered issues are sercon, .1 issues are reviewzines, and .5 issues are perzines.

ART CREDIT: Big game hunting on OpuntiaWorld, as Wuzi explorers prepare to collect a scientific specimen for the museum back on Wuzilia. From a series by Franz Miklis, A-5151, Nussdorf 64, Austria.

WORLDWIDE PARTY #2: Don't forget to raise a glass at 21h00 on the night of June 21st (summer solstice), and toast your fellow SF fans around the world. The idea is to get a wave circling the world of fans drinking to each other's health. Tell Benoit Girard, who first proposed the idea in his zine THE FROZEN FROG, how you celebrated the event. Write him at 1016 Guillaume-Boisset, Cap-Rouge, Québec, G1Y 1Y9. Also write Franz Miklis at his address as given above in the art credit.

AS REPORTED IN THE CALGARY HERALD

1995-1-3

Total trade among the four countries, which amounted to just \$2.7 billion in 1987, has ballooned to almost \$12 billion in 1994

Canada, like other countries, is scrambling to get its share of trade with China. Over the past few years, a steady stream of delegations of increasing rank have been visiting China on trade missions. The culmination is now at hand, as all but one Canadian First Minister arrived as a group. Jocularly known as Team Canada, Prime Minister Jean Chretien and the provincial premiers are lending their prestige to the rest of the delegation, business people waving blank contracts about and buttonholing any Chinese in sight who look as if they might have signing authority.

Protocol conscious as the Chinese may be, the Canadians can give them a good run for their money. On arrival at the airport, Team Canada formed up into a convoy. Prime Minister Chretien and the federal members of the delegation led the way in limosines. Trailing behind were a string of vans, one van per province. Disputes over whose van went first were forestalled by using the traditional method of ranking provinces by the order in which they entered the Canadian Confederation. Ontario in the lead, Newfoundland at the stern, and the Arctic territories hindmost as an afterthought. (This is how seating arrangements are made in Canada for political conferences) Hopes for provincial flags flying from the vans were dashed by feds who didn't want to confuse the Chinese.

The only First Minister who did not go to China was Premier Jacques Parizeau, who put his nose in the air at the thought of doing something that might be construed as contributing to national unity. Not surprising, since he is leader of the Parti Québécois, the provincial wing of the separatists. It will, unfortunately, be Québec's loss, as the Chinese are well aware of his absence and will remember it when Québec companies come by soliciting for deals.

[continued next page]

Chinese Premier Li Peng noted the missing premier, but Chretien neatly recovered by saying "Yes, but I am from Québec". Only in Canada. The Parti Québécois are the provincial government. Their federal counterparts, Bloc Québécois, hold most of the Québec seats in the House of Commons. Because the Bloc also have the second largest number of seats, they are legally Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition. The Canadian Prime Minister is a federalist from Québec.

#### ELISETTE, AVENUE DES BRAVES

Premier Parizeau is busy moving into his new house. The house was purchased by a group of Québec City businessmen miffed by the historical fact that Québec premiers tend to avoid the capital city of the province. Ministers of the government would come into town, book a hotel room overnight, then dash back to Montréal as soon as the cabinet meeting was over. Québec becomes the first province to have an official premier's residence. The \$800,000 mansion has been dubbed 'Elisette', a combination derived from the Elysee (official residence of the President of France) and Lisette Lapointe, Parizeau's wife (a militant separatist and power-behind-the-throne in her own right within the P.Q.). As Premier, Parizeau gets a \$14,500 housing allowance, which he will apply to the rent of Elisette, which will be run by a non-profit organization. He owns a house in Montréal and a farm in the Eastern Townships. Elisette is located on Avenue des Braves, a street that is federally owned. The house lots are within municipal jurisdiction in the usual way, but the street is owned by the National Battlefields Commission because it links Parc des Braves (where the French beat the British) with the Plains of Abraham (where the British beat the French).

IT IS INDEED A GREAT WALL

1994-11-5

Meanwhile, back in China, Team Canada took the obligatory tour on the Great Wall, huffing and puffing by foot along the route and posing for a group picture. One terrorist bomb in the right place and not only would China have been deeply embarrassed, but Canada would have to put up with dozens of riding by-elections and party leadership races. Alberta Premier Ralph Klein was not at the Wall, however. Knowing him, he was probably fishing somewhere or having a beer. At the last First Ministers meeting back home, he was photographed at a press conference with a hangoverish look. Normally he never accepts appointments in the morning, "Early to bed, early to rise" not being a slogan calculated to win his approval.

IT IS INDEED A GREAT BUNKER

1994-11-28

As the threat of nuclear war recedes, the Minister of Defence is raising pin money by selling off unnecessary military bases. Today, CFD Penhold was auctioned off at the Innisfail Auction Mart, which normally deals livestock and household goods. Penhold is a village about halfway between Red Deer, where I grew up, and Innisfail, a small rural town. The base was home to the 743 Communications Squadron, and housed a Diefenbunker, as well as looking after a nearby radar station. In 1962, during the height of the Cold War, a nuclear-proof shelter was built in each province. As the Prime Minister then was John Diefenbaker, the bunkers quickly became known as Diefenbunkers. They were to be a refuge for government leaders in time of war; the general public would have to fend for themselves. The bunkers are obsolete, equipped with such things as air-conditioning to keep the vacuum tubes of the electronics cool. Everytime I went by it as a young lad, I wondered what was the point of it. We were taught in school that American missiles would intercept Soviet missiles over Alberta. Those who survived would inherit radioactive farmland.

The successful bidder was Harvey Warkentin of Red Deer, who was actually more interested in the farmland that came with the bunker. He paid \$162,000. In addition to farming, he runs a spare-parts electronics company and will salvage all those old tubes (yes, there still is a market for them). "What will you do with the bunker?", he was asked. He replied that he was going to give it to his wife for Christmas. That should certainly one-up the neighbours.

#### THE FUNGUS HITS THE FAN

1995-1-12

The thinly-populated prairies of southern Alberta have acted as a quarantine barrier against pests and diseases, but the activities of humans are rapidly nullifying that advantage. Alberta is rat-free, thanks to the Rat Patrol (their real name), which actively patrols the Saskatchewan border and checks warehouses in cities which receive out-of-province shipments. So far, no rats here.

But alas, we have just been notified that elm bark beetles, which spread Dutch Elm Disease, has been confirmed in Calgary. Traps have been set out every summer for the past few years, and the results just in from the autumn 1994 traps show elm bark beetles in 20 Calgary areas. The beetles spread the fungus which causes the disease; DED itself hasn't been spotted yet, but if the beetles have arrived then the fungus can't be far behind. The culprit is almost certainly some tourist who brought back firewood from the USA or eastern Canada infested with beetles in elm wood. There are no native elms in Alberta, so the disease could not have spread naturally. This does give the hope that DED can be controlled here, since we do not have to worry about constant re-infection of trees from natural areas. Calgary has about 100,000 elms, mostly mature trees 30 cm or more in diameter, since few have been planted in recent years in anticipation of DED. The only control is sanitary pruning; injection or spraying does not work in the long run.

We were pruning in a park and loading the branches on a truck when I spotted a soggy piece of paper in a tree well. Fifteen years of parks maintenance makes one pick up litter instinctively, and so I did. The paper turned out to be three sheets of computer printout from a BBS called the Geneva Convention. This was Chapter Three of a very bad porno story with all the usual clichés and poor grammar. I gave it to our truck driver, who is in his sixties and counting down to his retirement. "Read this to the wife tonight", I suggested, "and you might get lucky.". He looked it over, laughed, and stuffed it in his pocket. Tomorrow I start a month's vacation, so I won't be able to find out how it went, if it did.

#### HONOUR AMONG THIEVES

The federal government is proceeding steadily with new gun control legislation requiring guns to be registered with police. This naturally has the gun lobby in an uproar, but the feds released opinion polls showing the majority of Canadians are in favour. The polls also showed 72% of Albertans favour increased gun control, a claim hotly disputed by the Alberta Tory government. So hotly disputed, in fact, that Alberta Minister of Justice Brian Evans commissioned another poll to prove the first one wrong. Unfortunately for him, his poll only confirmed the first one, and worse yet, his own rural riding showed the strongest support. Evans then denounced his own poll as flawed ...

Meanwhile, Premier Ralph Klein has been busy in a power struggle. Klein is basically a Red Tory at heart, but because his election as party leader was due to support of the rural ridings, he had to yield much ground to the Blue Tory faction on the right. As he gets settled into power though, Klein is gradually re-asserting himself.

[continued next page]

The first knife sank in last October, when Deputy Premier Ken Kowalski was ousted. At first, Klein got him to go quietly by agreeing to appoint him as chairman of the Energy Resources Conservation Board, the most powerful agency of the government. The ERCB has always been chaired by an oilman, since it controls the output of oil and gas from Alberta. When the petroleum executives found out that Kowalski, a farmer, was due for the job, they raised such an outcry that Klein was forced to cancel Kowalski's appointment. Not that this saddened Klein, mind you, as it meant Kowalski was now completely out of the loop and impotent in the backbenches. Since then, Kowalski has been sniping at the government every chance he gets. This has backfired on him, as the Tory caucus generally supports Klein, even most Blue Tories, who recognize Klein's charisma is what got them back into power in the last election instead of the defeat that had been predicted. The Tory caucus is now considering expelling Kowalski out of the party.

Just before Christmas, Klein had a lovely piece of ripe fruit drop into his lap without even having to shake the tree. Minister of Highways Peter Trynchy, a Blue Tory, enjoyed the high life at public expense and didn't care who knew about it. He went too far, however, when he had his farm driveway paved by a government contractor for a lowball price that in any case was never invoiced. Once the matter became public, a cheque was on its way to the contractor to pay for the driveway, but it was too late. Trynchy was dismissed by Klein with a one-sentence letter which was remarkably restrained, considering the glee of Klein. Trynchy did not go quietly into the night, trailing behind him a cloud of threats, libel suits, and Statements of Claim against his enemies, real or perceived. He has not been heard of since from the backbenches.

Although Alberta is usually thought of as a uniformly rightwing province because of its political history, this is more apparent than real. Once in power, a party tends

to stay in power for decades. Once out of power, it fades and dies. The parties are riven with faction though; what seems to be uniform rule is actually constant struggle. In 1935, the Social Credit party evicted the United Farmers of Alberta from government, and went on to stay in power until 1971. The original Socreds under William "Bible Bill" Aberhart were monetary reformists wanting a Guaranteed Annual Income for all and the destruction of the debt money system and fractional-reserve banks. But after Rev. Aberhart died, the pragmatists took over and Ernest Manning (father of Preston, leader of the Reform party) ruled for twenty years. He gave way to a mild mannered farmer named Harry Strom, who represented what might be called the Blue Socreds. But the Socreds literally died of old age, almost all of their supporters being on the OAP. In 1971 they were swept from power by the Tories, represented by proto-yuppies such as Premier Peter Lougheed. Lougheed and his fellow Red Tories had a good run until the oil boom collapsed, when he quietly snuck out and left the mess to Don Getty to clean up. As a premier, Getty was a disaster, drifting aimlessly and building up Alberta's debt. In the absence of any real leadership, the Blue Tories managed to gain control, and thence to Klein and the present situation. The Socreds are extinct, just as the UFA died in 1935.

#### A BIRD IN HAND

1995-2-17

The damndest thing I ever saw. My bedroom is in the basement of the house. As I arose this morning and went into the next room, there on the carpet was an English house sparrow. I've had bumblebees occasionally enter the house through some crack, but how did a bird get in? I opened the backdoor at the top of the basement stairs, trying not to think of the -20°C air flooding in and running up the heating bill. After about 30 minutes of chasing the sparrow with an aquarium net, the only thing I had to catch it with, I lost sight of it and haven't

seen it since. I'm assuming that it found the staircase and flew out. Afterwards I checked the entire house for possible entry places but couldn't see anything. The only entrance I can think of is that the sparrow somehow came down the chimney while the furnace was off and managed to work its way past the burner. But there are no tracks in the dust around the furnace, so I doubt that a bird could have hopped out that way. Life's little mysteries.

DUSTED

1995-2-22

While picking up my mail at the post office I met up with a school classmate Bob. (He'll be mentioned further on in this issue in the chapter "Cretaceous Park".) Bob was an exploration geologist long ago but now earns his living as a coin dealer. He still does odd jobs as a drillsite geologist however, and today he told me of an unusual job he just finished. When an oilwell is first drilled, it cuts out cores all the way down. These core samples are analysed on the spot by the drillsite geologist. Time is definitely money at a drillsite because it is a labour-intensive process that has resisted automation. The site Bob was at was an experimental project designed to test a new drill bit that would enable the well to be sunk in record time. The bit spun at 180 rpm and cut down through the bedrock like a hot knife through butter. What wasn't foreseen however, was what that tremendous kinetic energy would do to the core samples. Instead of cylinders of rock, the samples were pulverized into dust, and Bob had nothing to analyse.

TURNING OFF ONTO THE INFORMATION FOOTPATH

1995-2-26

In the zine LITTLE FREE PRESS #113, Ernest Mann wrote as follows: "After I stopped watching TV and reading the news, I soon realized I wasn't scared any more.". That got me thinking, so much so that I'm going to try a test. I've done without a television for two decades now, and

not missed it in the least. I wonder how anyone can sit still for it, just as my friends wonder how I accomplish so much in my spare time. Mann's zine arrived just as two other things happened to me.

Firstly, I noted mentally to myself that while I was on vacation this month I had broken myself of my addiction to the radio hourly news. This was done inadvertently rather than by plan, since I was sleeping in until 10h00 every morning instead of rising to go to work and listening to the 06h00 news while shaving and washing. But I still, as I have always done, buy the daily newspaper. Normally I quickly skim over the bad news and read only what affects me personally, such as the rubbish that City Council gets up to, as well as the comics, obits (if you write local histories as I do, then you are always looking for names), and a few features. Reading the bad news only depresses me, and what happens in Grozny is nothing that affects me or I can do anything about.

But today, the bad news was particularly unrelenting. In fact, I had difficulty finding anything to read besides the comics. Even the obituaries column was unusually brief, only a dozen souls departing Cowtown. The federal budget is to be delivered tomorrow, giving pundits and reporters exceptional opportunity to declare the death of Canada. Page after page of gloom and speculation intermixed with the court reports and mountain climbers falling to their deaths. The price of gasoline is to go up to about 49¢ a litre. Photos of Grozny buildings in rubble.

I shall, therefore, stick my head in the sand. For an experiment, I will not read the newspapers during the month of March. Do I need to be 'informed'? Back about whenever it was Pope John Paul I died, I was talking to a labourer of mine. Somewhere in the conversation, I mentioned the election of John Paul II. The labourer had no idea what I was talking about, despite the news everywhere. I scorned him at the time but perhaps I was hasty.

The journey of 31 days begins with a single newspaper. I bought my final paper today before going cold turkey tomorrow. The federal budget was brought before the Commons last night by Minister of Finance Paul Martin, so the paper is full of the gory details. Calgary was hard hit by the closure of CFB Calgary, whose 3100 personnel will be transferred to CFB Edmonton by 1999. This amounts to \$205 million annually, mostly in salaries, as the land forces are consolidated up north. But as the Princess Patricia infantry and the Lord Strathcona armoured depart town, the base will become the subject of a land rush. At the time CFB Calgary was first built pre-WWI, it was far out in the countryside. It has long since been swallowed up by the expanding city and cut into thirds by two major freeways. It is now considered a central location, and real estate developers are drooling at the thought of how many houses can be built on the old base and for what price. But that is still in the future.

Martin didn't do too much tax raising, the cuts to taxes ratio being seven to one. Gasoline is up 1.5¢ a litre and smokers will pay more (which doesn't bother me since I don't smoke). Albertans will pay more for utilities because a tax rebate on privately-owned utilities has been abolished. All other provinces have publicly-owned utilities which have always been exempt from taxes. The rebate was to equalize private utilities, which was okay as long as Alberta was the only one that had them. But some provinces such as Ontario have been rumoured to be thinking about privatizing their utilities, which gave the feds a cold sweat thinking how much they would then have to rebate.

One surprise for everyone was that the \$2 banknote will be phased out by a \$2 coin, instantly nicknamed as the doubloon. (Our \$1 coin is called a loonie because it has a picture of a loon bird on it.)

Only three days now without news and I've already noticed an interesting effect. A blanket of psychological silence has settled over me. The world really does seem quieter without the news. The silence and peaceful quiet is in my mind, not my ears. I still talk with coworkers and friends, still play the tape deck in the car, still tape comedy shows off CBC Radio Canada. But my mind is not cluttered or thinking of the world's events, and it thus seems a quieter place.

For the month of March I will try to avoid even glancing at newspaper headlines in the street boxes, although I may allow myself this luxury in the future. I did unavoidably see today's headline in the tabloid CALGARY SUN, but it was something that I would have learned of at work through Parks Dept. channels (a new bylaw).

## BREAKING THE HABIT

1995-3-6

It's been relatively easy to quit the habit of buying a newspaper every morning, but very difficult to stop from glancing at the headlines in a street box or a copy some pedestrian is carrying. I never noticed how many people walk around with newspapers until now. But I have become more successful in the past few days. A couple of days ago we had 30 cm of snow, which is a lot for Calgary. Naturally there was the usual rash of accidents as commuters refused to acknowledge the ice on the roads. And as always the next day's papers had big photos and the usual "Blizzard Creates Havoc" headline. I glanced at the headlines just to confirm my prediction that that would be the top story. But since then I've been pretty good at not reading headlines. The heavy snow muffled the normal city sounds, and combined with the psychological silence of no news, I feel stone deaf, no matter how loud I play the tape deck.

## CRETACEOUS PARK

I'm probably one of the few people who hasn't seen the movie JURASSIC PARK. I don't intend to either; monster movies don't appeal to me. Watching witless people yelling and screaming while running about mindlessly is something I can see every day at work.

I do have genuine dinosaur parts in my basement, what I collected from the Cretaceous deposits of southern Alberta as a student. I quit fossil collecting in 1978, the year new legislation was passed vesting all title in fossils to H.M. The Queen In Right Of The Province Of Alberta. No point in spending gas money and wearing out my car just to stock dusty museum shelves where the fossils would be forgotten. But I still have my pre-1978 material. It includes the Cretaceous bones, mostly herbivorous hadrosaurs. Carnosaurs were rare in ancient ecosystems, so I only have a few teeth of T. rex and Albertosaurus. I also have a lot of Palaeocene plant material from the Red Deer River exposures, where my mother now collects for the University of Alberta. She does quite a bit of palaeontological work and has four Palaeocene species named after her: two trees (Platananthus speirsae and Joffrea speirsii), a fish (Speirsaenigma lindoei), and an aquatic insect (Pseudolimnophila speirsae).

I started fossil collecting in the Drumheller badlands on the initiative of two high school classmates. I had a car and they had gas money, so it all worked out nicely. Bob and Wayne both went on to study petroleum geology at the University of Calgary (Calgary is the headquarters of the Canadian petroleum industry) while I went to the University of Alberta (my mater's alma mater) to study palaeobotany. We all graduated in 1978 but in the meantime I switched my major to horticulture, having noticed there were only four full-time palaeobotanists in western Canada. With horticulture, there is always at least a prospect of seasonal work pushing a lawnmower. The oil boom collapsed in 1982; Wayne is now a schoolteacher in Red

Deer and Bob is a numismatist who runs a coin shop here in Calgary. I haven't seen Wayne for more than a decade, but Bob has his box number at the same post office as I do, so I meet him occasionally. Each time we chat, we covertly eye each other's expanding waistlines and the increasing amount of grey in our beards. Where did those skinny young students go?

As I mentioned, I had a car to go fossil hunting. It was a Volkswagen Beetle, excellent for cross-country travel. The engine sits over the rear axle and gives tremendous traction; I was never once stuck in mud or snow. The high clearance of the body is good for charging over snowdrifts or grass tussocks. The Beetle was handed down to me by my father; he had used it for farm calls in his veterinary practice. It came to me after years of service bumping across cow pastures and slewing along overgravelled country roads. I had the Beetle for fifteen years. Near the end it was so rusted out that three of the fenders were tied on with rope, the running boards had fallen off, and there was a hole in the floorboard. Beneath my feet I could see the road passing by. Going down a rough road the Beetle would flap its fenders like a seagull taking off from the water. When I drove it at night I always stuck to the backroads to avoid the police checkpoints on the freeways. It says much for how lenient Calgary police were that no constable ever pulled me over in the day and took the licence plates off. Finally I had to admit defeat. I drove the Beetle up to Red Deer and parked it on my father's farm, out back where all our cars go to die. In our family we don't trade in cars; we drive them until they are no longer repairable. The Beetle sat for years until my brother cannibalized it for his Beetle, so parts of it are still going strong.

But I digress. The Palaeocene sites along the Red Deer River were easy to reach by road, then a short walk. We excavated exposures halfway up the riverbank cliff. Fishermen would wander over and ask "Looking for gold?". Now I don't expect the public to be well educated (or even



just educated) about geology, but it was still annoying that someone would think I was clinging to the cliffside just for gold. The area was littered with broken slabs of leaf fossils, but fishermen took no notice of what they walked on.

Cretaceous fossicking was done in remote areas of the Red Deer River badlands far, far downstream, so rubber-neckers were not a problem. The hunting area was about 200 km long, down the river valley. Starting at the north end, the edge of Cretaceous fossil exposures begins at Morrin Bridge. Going south downstream, the next settlement is Bleriot Ferry, founded by the brother of the first man to fly the English Channel. I carried a case of cold soda pop in the back seat of the Beetle and when riding the ferry would sell a bottle to the thirsty ferryman. The ferry was a roll-on-roll-off flatdeck scow with a maximum capacity of four cars. There were lineups during tourist season but I usually timed my crossing to avoid the peak traffic. The Red Deer River is not a wide one, and the ferry crossed in a few minutes. I would get out to stretch my legs, leaning on the rail watching the shallow river bottom glide by or look up at the overhead cable that guided the ferry. There was the quiet putt-putt of the engine. The ferryman stood on the deck and shifted gears on the engine. The engine came from a truck and had a longhanded stick shift exactly like a large truck. Sometimes I arrived when the ferryman was eating lunch on the other side or in the washroom. There was a buzzer to summon him. After ringing it, a few minutes later he would amble out of his shack, start up the engine and slowly putter over. The scow ferries have pretty much vanished from Alberta now, replaced by bridge or hovercraft. But for decades they were a low-tech solution for rural areas that couldn't afford a bridge.

Next downstream is the city of Drumheller, now home to the Royal Tyrrell Museum of Palaeontology, the largest such museum in the world. It wasn't built until after I quit collecting, so I still haven't been in it. I really

should, since some of Mom's fossils are on display, but then again I've lived in Calgary since 1978 and still haven't been to the top of the Calgary Tower. Downstream of Drumheller the river swings left and by Dinosaur Provincial Park is now flowing westerly. Past the park is where I did most of my fossicking, where the great cattle ranches come down to the river. The far end, beyond which I never went, was CFB Suffield, a large firing range and armoured training ground rented out to the British Army.

There are rattlesnakes in southern Alberta but they are shy and I have never seen one in all my years of walking through the badlands and steppes. I did see large bull snakes and, along the riverbank, garter snakes, both of which are harmless. It was, however, common sense not to stick a hand up on a ledge while climbing a hill if you couldn't see what was on it. More frightening were the Canada geese, which nested in potholes up on fossiliferous slopes. Every so often as I came round a hill or a ledge, a huge goose would explode into flight from my feet, scaring the daylight out of me. Pronghorn antelopes stayed out on the steppes, but mule deer and white-tailed deer would shelter in the badlands coulees, so I occasionally saw one bounding away down the ravine. The jackrabbits were rarely spotted but their droppings were everywhere. And, of course, cattle, but these were range cattle, very shy of humans and they always moved away if they saw me.

No matter how remote the terrain, every patch of badlands was sure to yield at least one empty pop can or crisps packet.

The technique in fossil hunting is to walk along the bottom of the hills looking for 'float', a fan-shaped scatter of fossil fragments. One then followed the float up the hill to locate the 'mother lode', that is, the ledge of rock from which the fossil eroded. It can be difficult to hunt more than one type of fossil at a time. If you are looking for bone, your eyes will miss the

fish or crocodile scales because the brain is locked in a different pattern recognition. Wayne, Bob, and I were a team, each looking for a different thing. As an example we were walking in single file, Wayne first, myself, and Bob bringing up the rear. Wayne walked over a sequoia cone fossil, putting his foot right on it. He was looking for long bones though (leg, arm, rib) and I, the palaeobotany student, was looking for plant fossils. So he walked over it, his eyes and brain locked into a different pattern. Without missing a beat, I leaned over and picked up the fossil cone. Seconds later, Bob, who was looking for short bones (foot bones, skulls, vertebrae) picked up some vertebrae I had put my hand within a metre of while picking up the cone. I hadn't seen them. When on hands and knees while searching bone beds, it was almost impossible to spot fish scales if looking for crocodile scutes or small teeth. You had to look at each patch of ground several times, each time for a different fossil.

Experiences like this have convinced me that many (not all, granted) accidents, typographical errors, and false testimony by courtroom witnesses often happen because we are locked into the wrong pattern recognition. The road looked clear but the accident happened because one didn't actually see the oncoming car even though looking directly at it. The brain was locked into an empty-road pattern. Typos are missed by proofreaders because they read what they expected to see, not what was actually there. Police constables know from experience how many eyewitnesses can innocently convince themselves that an event happened differently than it actually did.

I worked the summer of 1976 at the experimental farm in Brooks, on the Trans-Canada highway about halfway between Calgary and the Saskatchewan border. (Wayne and Bob were out on oil rigs.) Brooks is in the heart of treeless prairie, very thinly populated. Now when I look back on it, I shudder to think of how many fossil trips I was

on by myself in remote terrain; even a twisted ankle and I would have been in serious trouble. How do you make a crutch to walk back to the car in a land of no trees or fences? North of the Trans-Canada the Cretaceous sediments are mostly terrestrial, with lots of hadrosaurs, crocodylian-type reptiles, turtles, and a few carnosaurs. South and east of Brooks are older sediments, still Cretaceous but marine, with lots of shelled nautiloids known as ammonites and baculites. At the start of the Cretaceous, a long seaway ran from the Gulf of Mexico to the Arctic. When the Rocky Mountains began to rise, the Gulf Seaway slowly withdrew, starting at the north end and filling in southward from sediments deposited by erosion of the new mountains. What was a marine environment became swampland, inhabited by hadrosaurs. A cooling trend set in because the Gulf Seaway was not there anymore to moderate temperatures. In the Palaeocene, after extinction of the dinosaurs, the climate was cool and wet.

The best spot I found for marine fossils was in the area south of Cypress Hills. No trees, no water, located near Dead Horse Coulee, which gives you an idea of the countryside. No livestock either; it was semidesert. The problem I had was trying to crack open slabs of shale while being harassed by vicious biting flies. Where did they come from? No water to breed in, no livestock to sustain themselves on, save perhaps the occasional herd of pronghorn antelope passing through. Entering that part of Alberta, one sees the cheerful road sign "Check Your Fuel Gauge. No Services or Inhabitants Next 80 Km."

I drove through most of southern Alberta in the 1970s while fossicking. Endless horizons of treeless prairie, rolling hills, coulees, blue sky with fluffy clouds. And always the wind. Down in the coulees and valleys there was dead silence, sometimes unnerving for those used to the muted roar of the city. But crest a slope up onto the steppes and the wind would slam into your face.

A month of liberation from the news has gone quite well. I still can't break myself of the habit of glancing at newspaper headlines, but I'll allow that as nothing to feel guilty about in the future. And I may buy an occasional Saturday paper to get the movie listings or find out when Daylight Saving Time starts (the government keeps changing it each year; almost as bad as determining when Easter is).

I had one lapse from grace today. On my way to work this morning down Blackfoot Trail, I was forced to detour via a residential neighbourhood. The police had closed off a section of the freeway. As I turned onto the detour, I could see in the distance a car on the wrong side of the road, nosed against a streetlight.

[Pause for a digression. Why is it that if a road has a bare boulevard except for distantly spaced lightpoles, an automobile swerving off the road will always hit the pole instead of harmlessly driving onto the 99% of the boulevard that has nothing on it?]

My depot sits at the south end of Blackfoot Trail, where the freeway forms a T-intersection with an east-west road. In fact, my office is directly on top of what used to be part of Blackfoot Trail, before most of it behind the building was converted to a golf course. As I came down the other road to my depot, there was a blockade at that end of the freeway as well. Police only block roads in this type of situation if there was a fatality.

A bit later, my gardener arrived, she too having been detoured. Gail told me the radio news said the driver of the car was drunk. The car was travelling at high speed at 02h30 (that is, just after the taverns closed) when it crossed the wide grassy median, flipped several times and hit the pole head on. The driver was not wearing a seat belt and died when he was thrown from the car. His drink-

ing companion was in hospital. The driver really must have been drunk, since that part of Blackfoot Trail is a level straightaway with no side road accesses, and the pavement was bare and dry.

We were glad that it was not our depot that suffered. It would have been only about twenty seconds more travelling time and the drunk would have ended up in our yard, or worse still, our building. The original landscaping of my depot in the front yard is now gone, courtesy of three drunks in the past two years. We are now sheltered behind a screen of posts and reflective signs, which so far seem to be working. Coming to work in the dark of the morning, I can see the reflections a kilometre back. Even the worst drunk would at least be startled by the sudden burst of reflected light, assuming he had his headlights on, and perhaps yank the wheel to the left and roll into the berm protecting the side yard. Or perhaps become airborne, fly over the chainlink fence, and pancake onto the fuel shed. It wouldn't surprise me.

During the day, I listened to the radio news to hear any further details. The drunk was only the second item, as the school budgets are presently being debated. But that was the only time this month I've listened to radio news.

Blackfoot Trail was blocked during the morning rush hour, which no doubt had commuters fuming. When it was reopened later in the day, I drove down it to the Area Office. A street cleaner was mopping up the remaining glass shards and spilled gas; the wreck was gone. Along the median I could see widely spaced dig marks in the turf where the car had touched down each time it rolled. One more job for my maintenance crew to do, rehabbing the turf this spring when the ground thaws out.

Almost there. A month without news, although I gather from occasional glances at newspaper street boxes that Canada and Spain are at war over fish, Klein was popular in Texas for budget-cutting, and some lunatic Japanese released poison gas in a subway. I didn't miss anything.

When I was in Winnipeg for the 1994 WorldCon, I happened to see postcards on sale depicting a mosquito and titled "The Official Bird of Winnipeg". I thought this was funny and mailed one to my co-worker Todd Reichardt, who is the Parks Dept. Entomologist and looks after Calgary's mosquito control program.

Fast-forward seven months. I was today on a Natural Area Management course with about a dozen others, including Reichardt. I don't see him that often since he works out of another depot on the far side of the city. The rare occasions we cross tracks we have time for no more than a quick chat as we pass each other. Today as we tramped in the natural areas (saw the first crocus of spring) we had more time to talk, and he thanked me for the postcard. He asked me what I was doing in his old hometown of Winnipeg and I told him about ConAdian. He was surprised to hear of my interest in SF, and told me that his brother is Randy Reichardt, who figures prominently in Garth Spencer fanhistories of Winnipeg and Edmonton. Todd then rattled off a series of names he knew from his Winnipeg days. Did I know a Chester Cuthbert, by any chance? I told him that I had visited Cuthbert during ConAdian, and yes, the house was still full of books.

I'm beginning to think everyone in the Parks Dept. is an SF fan. This is not the first time I've discovered by accident that a colleague was a fan and neither of us knew about the other. We all keep quiet for the same reason; we're tired of cringing when people ask us why we believe that crazy Star Trek stuff.

The tour of the natural areas was quite interesting. In a park we were tramping through, someone in the group remarked out loud that the area seemed barren of wildlife. Dave, our group leader, replied that this was apparent than real, and proved it by whistling a generic bird song.

Within thirty seconds or less, three chickadees, a magpie, and an owl arrived in the treetops around us trying to locate the source of the sound. They gradually came lower down the trees, fluttering about in investigation. Bird song is not to attract mates, it is to mark out a territory and warn away intruders.

Yet another course, this time on tree valuation, taught by an American arbourist, James Rocca. Before coming to Calgary, he obtained a book on Alberta horticulture and made a list of trees to use as examples in the course. The principles of establishing the dollar value of a tree are the same worldwide but it makes classroom instruction go easier if the audience knows what the tree is. Unfortunately Rocca guessed wrong on one species, the hackberry, which is a rare ornamental in Edmonton (200 km north of Calgary) and unheard of in Calgary. Our first exercise of the course was to rank species in order of desirability and explain why. Since none of us had any knowledge of the hackberry, that species was ranked last. This puzzled Rocca because hackberries are considered desirable trees; they are cousins of the elm and used as replacements where Dutch Elm Disease wiped out the original trees. However the misunderstanding was cleared up and throughout the rest of the course we were constantly making hackberry jokes. Rocca was a good speaker and the course went quite well.

The International Society of Arbourists (ISA) has the legally accepted procedure for pricing trees. There is a basic value per square centimetre cross-section of a species, established by using thousands of home sale records comparing the price of homes with and without trees. Foresters have their own methods based on lumber value, but ISA calculates based on dollar value for air filtration, noise reduction, shade, and ornament.

What Rocca was teaching us was how to take the basic value and adjust it for location and condition. The same tree is worth less on a freeway boulevard than if it were in a manor yard. A tree with trunk cavities or deformed shape is worth less than a sound tree. Very few, if any, trees are worth their basic value; most have defects of location or condition which reduces their value.

In the morning, we had the theory of tree valuation. After lunch at a Chinese restaurant we went to a field location to try the practice of valuation. The area chosen turned out to be one that I had looked after about six or seven years ago, so the trees were old friends. In our practical work, we tended to over-value trees. Our group calculated a 1 m diameter elm on a residential boulevard at about \$10,000 whereas Rocca said he would have called it \$8,000. We valued a plains cottonwood at \$30,000; he said about \$20,000. We spent more time than expected in the field because our pocket calculators slowed down or quit in the cold. The cottonwood, by the way, was growing in the centre of a park and is the only known pure-blooded western plains cottonwood in Calgary. All other cottonwoods here were planted by humans and are hybrids with balsam poplars. This tree had a trunk 1.5 m in diameter and a branch spread of 100 m. How it came to be in this park is lost in the mists of history.

NO NEWS IS INDEED GOOD NEWS

1995-5-4

I'm trying hard, really I am, not to read the headlines of newspapers as I drive by street boxes. Unsuccessful in a lot of cases though, but with practice I want to become totally oblivious of world news. Other hazards include newsmagazines at supermarket checkouts and large-screen television in restaurants. The latter is where I learned of the Oklahoma bombing, while munching on a hamburger. I don't know how I'll fare when the Bernardo/Homolka case is decided.

RED SHALE

1995-5-7

I came home from rubbernecking at a collapsed building in central Calgary to find a message on my answering machine from Paula Johanson of Victoria. She was phoning from the Calgary International Airport on a stopover to Toronto, it being her first book tour. The book is NO PARENT IS AN ISLAND, in chainstores. She mentioned she had a television interview on channel 3 on Mother's Day. She also wanted to know what all those red shields were scattered throughout the city, ball diamonds perhaps? Indeed they are; all our ball diamonds are cut out of the turf and spread with red shale from Lethbridge or Drumheller (depending on who the lowest bidder is, usually Lethbridge). I've never noticed that flying over Calgary, but then I'm too busy looking for my house or work depot. Heading west from Calgary by air, planes go over Drumheller, whose red shale mine makes a bright splash of colour. If Robert Runté happens to see a pup trailer loaded with red shale in Lethbridge, now he knows where it is bound. (After it dumps the shale in Calgary, the driver goes into interior British Columbia for a load of mine ore concentrates, and brings it back to Lethbridge. One round trip a day.)

That collapsed building was a shopping plaza with a flat roof. We've had a lot of rain the last few days, and it seems apparent that the water must not have drained off as it should have. The roof sank in under the weight of the water, pushing the walls outward and making a thoroughly spectacular sight. It happened during the night, so no one was in the building.

It being a rainy Sunday afternoon, I decided to dash over to a Coles bookstore, being careful to choose a newer mall with a hopefully well-drained roof. Found Paula's in the childcare section, bottom shelf, the book an even \$16 with GST inclusive. Large-format softcover, distributed by Temeron Books, #210 - 1220 Kensington Road NW, Calgary, Alberta, T3A 2G3. Add \$3 for postage.

## A BOOK REVIEW (NO K.T.F., APOLOGIES TO TED WHITE)

Paula Johanson has been involved with westCanfandom for a number of years, fluctuating between Victoria and a farm near Edmonton. Robert Runté has essayed that the demise of at least one SF club in western Canada was partly due to its members moving on to professional careers as writers. Paula is of that nature, with NO PARENT IS AN ISLAND being her first book.

This is an autobiographical account of raising twins and trying to retain a bit of what life used to be like before late-night feedings and hourly diaper changes. In reading the book, I got to thinking this would be a good gift to any new mum you might know, to help her realize that she is not alone. Other than a passing mention of Paula and Bernie's SF interests, there is not much here for strictly-SF readers, but it will fill in the details for those who know Paula. Sometimes embarrassingly so, such as more than I cared to know about nursing babies. On the other hand, I'm not the intended audience, so I guess it doesn't matter.

I almost made this a K.T.F. review when I got to page 79, where Paula writes: "There was an astonishing amount of just plain nothing on our trips, too. Nothing between Calgary and Edmonton, but fields and blue sky." Well actually there is a city of 60,000 almost exactly halfway between, called Red Deer, where I spent my teenaged years. But I'll let that go.

I liked the account of practical jokes, particularly the one about Bernie attaching a Christmas light blinker to Paula's typewriter. If I was closer to my pension, that would be one I'd be willing to try at work on my secretary's computer. By the way, Paula collects tractor ads, so do send her as many as you can find.

Practical advice for Prairie kids includes that standby about never touching metal with your tongue in -20°C. I

was instantly transported by memory back to the North Hill Elementary School, where my friend Jimmy (this was about Grade 3) licked a metal pole on a dare and was frozen to the post. Many tears later, the school principal thawed out Jimmy's tongue with hot water. On his own initiative Jimmy later that spring decided to eat some fertilizer to see what it tasted like. What it tasted like was stomach pump. Paula's life on the farm rang true to my experience. I kept nodding in agreement, yes, that's exactly what it was like in Red Deer.

## FOR THOSE WHO YEARN FOR THE SIMPLE LIFE IN THE COUNTRY

Having done my share of pitching hay bales to unappreciative cattle, I smile when I hear people talking about how they want to give up the rat race of urban life and enjoy the simple pleasures of farming. It's me for city life.

## Things to consider about farming:

If you keep livestock, you are tied down, unless you can arrange for someone to take over while you are away. Cows must be milked, penned animals must be fed.

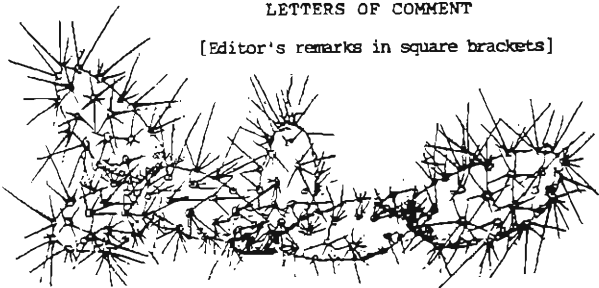
Car trouble is a lot more serious when you are on an isolated country road. Life-threatening even, in winter.

Better be mechanically inclined, as you'll have to fix a lot of stuff on your own. Repair technicians, assuming they make farm calls, charge a fortune in mileage fees to the jobsite.

In the city, we expect emergency services in minutes. In the country, expect response times measured in halfhours, or even hours if the roads are bad.

Can you make your own fun? I know city slickers who sold their acreages and moved back to the city because there were no theatres, libraries, or museums out there.

[Editor's remarks in square brackets]



FROM: Buck Coulson  
2677W-500N  
Hartford City, Indiana 47348

1995-2-2

Your comments on finding cows in a dim light reminded me of our last landlord. He raised Angus but said he'd got tired of going out after dark and not finding any cattle, so he began crossing them with Herefords, producing cattle entirely black except for their white faces. For a time I noticed several other farmers around here doing the same. Juanita was amused at the idea of the stubby little Hereford bull managing to impregnate those big Angus cows, but he did it. One of my correspondents speculated on the reaction of a stranger noticing a ghostly cow's face looming out of an otherwise dark field.

Most filkers, and probably all professionals, tune their guitars and other instruments electronically. Juanita has one of the little dinguses to tune with, though now and then she does it by ear.

FROM: Walt Willis  
32 Warren Road  
Donaghadee, Northern Ireland BT21 OPD

1995-3-12

I was puzzled by the reference to your car being "hailed on". Do you mean that in Canada ordinary hail can be so damaging it can actually injure the paintwork of a car? This to me is a new hazard of life in America, ranking with earthquakes, tornadoes, and mudslides.

[Alberta is at the junction where polar fronts from the Arctic travelling at high speed collide with maritime fronts from the Pacific or Montana, producing vertical walls known as cold-front storms. Because of Calgary's altitude and hot dry summers, we also get severe thunderstorms with large hailstones that dent metal bodywork. The hailstorm that dented my new car (requiring a new

FROM: John Thiel  
30 North 19th Street  
Lafayette, Indiana 47904

1995-2-2

I'm glad to see the cosmic manifestations [by Franz Miklis] that have begun to accompany your cactus cover. The Wuzis are superior in craftsmanship and conception to the occasional Gumbys who appear on MF&SF. I was interested too, to note the progress of a mythos accompanying it in the art credit.

FROM: Lloyd Penney  
412 - 4 Lisa Street  
Brampton, Ontario L6T 4B6

1995-1-30

Suddenly, after Lucien Bouchard's bout with necrotizing fasciitis, a dozen other cases sprung up here and there. It had the appearance of an epidemic, but it was only because of its sudden high profile. I think that as our numbers increase, nature continually puts up blocks to try to keep our numbers down, just as it does when wild animal populations get too high. Some of the blocks are big ones like AIDS, but nature will continue to try to re-balance itself, despite our best efforts otherwise.

hood and restoration of the roof) only lightly brushed my neighbourhood in southwest Calgary. It was concentrated over north-central and east Calgary about 20 km away, where it did \$300 million in damages in a half hour. It was the worst disaster in Calgary's history, mostly roofs hammered into dust and cars dented, as well as backed-up storm sewers and the occasional drowning from that. We did console ourselves that at least we don't have earthquakes, hurricanes, or rats.]

The particulars about the free food [at the Calgary Stampede] were interesting. I was brought up short by the reference to chocolate-covered strawberries. This seems to me a sinful kind of perversion.

[Fresh fruit dipped in chocolate is a staple at bakeries in Calgary.]

FROM: Joseph Major 1995-1-31  
4701 Taylor Boulevard #8  
Louisville, Kentucky 40215-2343

The USA Constitution says " ... The judges ... shall, at stated times, receive for their services, a compensation, which shall not be diminished during their continuance in office." The idea was to keep judges from being intimidated by threats to cut their pay if they ruled against the government.

[The 1982 Canadian Constitution does not address this. It appears that the Alberta Tories lost their attempt to make provincial judges take a 5% pay cut like all other civil servants because it violated the contract signed by the judges' union, pardon me, association.]

That tribunal cleansing that Marcel Masse carried out is a sign of real economy. Down here we have an Interstate Commerce Commission that has had next to nothing to do for some ten years, since Ronald Reagan decontrolled the rates

it had been set up to enforce. Italy, in the late 1960s, had a government board tasked with distributing clothing to WW2 orphans, all of whom by then were theoretically able to get it on their own.

[I've since come across a story in THE BROADVIEW BOOK OF CANADIAN PARLIAMENTARY ANECDOTES as follows. The Rev. J.S. Woodsworth, first leader of what is now the New Democratic Party (labour-socialist), was irritated to see a Mountie on duty everytime he went into the Parliamentary Library to borrow a book. Since the House of Commons and the Senate were only guarded by commissionaires, he asked the Minister of Justice why this was so. A while later, the Minister came back and asked Woodsworth not to publicly discuss this matter. It seems that when the original Parliamentary buildings burned down in 1916, a Mountie was ordered to guard the Library, the only part to escape the fire, against possible looters. No one had ever countermanded the order after things returned to normal, and it wasn't until Woodsworth a couple of decades later that the Mountie was removed.]

I ALSO HEARD FROM: Chester Cuthbert, Harry Warner, Henry Welch, Rodney Leighton, Bridget Hardcastle