

OPUNTIA

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[Editor's remarks in square brackets]



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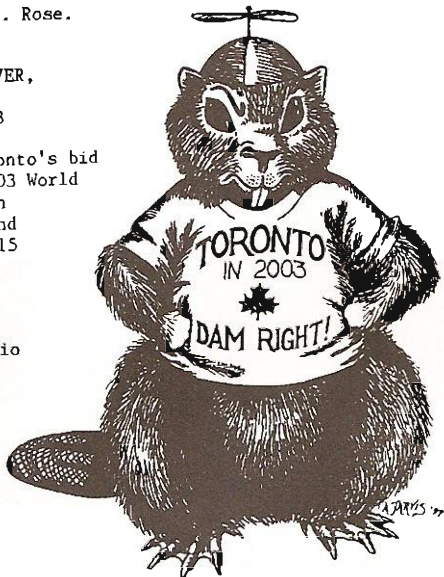
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ART CREDIT: The cover depicts Opuntia davisii, by an unknown artist, from the book THE CACTACEAE by N.L. Britton and J.N. Rose.

DETERMINED BEAVER,
OR,
TORONTO IN 2003

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FROM: Lloyd Penney
1706 - 24 Eva Road
Etobicoke, Ontario M9C 2B2

1997-7-1

June 21 was a party day for Toronto fandom. Former Irish fan Tommy Ferguson now lives in Toronto, and he threw his own 30th birthday party that day. We gathered at his home near downtown Toronto, and we had a great little gathering. We started in the early afternoon, right after an extensive Toronto in 2003 WorldCon bid meeting, and chatted throughout the day. I reminded people of the World Wide Party, and at 9 pm, we toasted absent friends, and continued with our party.

And who were we? A widely scattered group — from Toronto, there were my wife Yvonne and I, Mike Glicksohn, Andrew Specht, Drew Mathers, Darina Anakin, Larry and Jody Hancock, Alex von Thorn, Peter Halasz, Daniel Farr, and Orlando Jackson. From Seattle, Lesley Reece, who was Tommy's houseguest for a couple of weeks. Murray Moore from Midland, Ontario, Marah Searle from Buffalo, and ConAdian chairman John Mansfield from Winnipeg.

FROM: Joseph Nicholas
15 Jansons Road
South Tottenham, London N15 4JU, England

1997-7-7

[Re: the Canadian election], one is astonished how few candidates bother to respond to [Calgary arts community]. Politicians have always tended to look down on 'lurvies', finding them precious, self-absorbed, and not up to the things Real Men are supposed to do (curing inflation, closing factories, attending international summit conferences). The cultural industries, particularly film and music, are now major sources of revenue, and a government which fails to invest in culture is wildly out-of-touch with what people think and do. We spend more time going to the movies and buying CDs than we do in the polling booth, something which the Conservatives here in Britain never seem to have realized but which the army of thirty-something policy advisers which run New Labour understood immediately.

[In my opinion, the Canadian arts community is its own worst enemy when it comes to appealing for public support. Were they to emphasize that the arts are big business, and that art is a commodity like pork bellies or copper, then more people might support them. Instead they choose to appeal to loftier motives and purport that art is something special that can only be done by special people.]

FROM: Carolyn Clowes
5911 West Pay Drive NW
Depauw, Indiana 47115

1997-7-15

Up on the farm ... Are there skunks in Alberta? Last year [my pet] Sky got one, late at night just in front of the house. A mild whiff on country air is nothing like the impact at close range. It nauseates, suffocates. You'd mortgage the manor, sell your firstborn,

anything, but there's no getting away from it. A frantic call to my vet: Yes, I would wash out her eyes; yes, I had tomato juice. The temperature was 20°F, so it froze in her fur. Two cans are not enough. The outdoor water was not on, would only freeze as well. So into the house into the tub, dragging her 70 obstreperous, skunky pounds. "DON'T SHAKE! DON'T YOU DARE!" For weeks I scrubbed like Lady MacBeth but could still smell it in the house. For months, every time Sky's face got wet, she reeked. Most people laugh at the word 'skunk'. Those who have had a close encounter don't. I can always tell.

[My father had more to do in his veterinary practice with dogs encountering porcupines, since he had to extract them, whereas most farmers would simply wash down skunked dogs and keep them outside. I remember Dad saying that tomato juice wasn't much of a cure. Your anecdote did remind me of when I was a lad back in the 1960s and some hunter brought in a litter of skunk kittens which had been orphaned. Dad de-scented the kits for him and my brother and I enjoyed playing with them before they went off to be pets on the hunter's farm. Nowadays one is not allowed to keep skunks due to endemic rabies.]

FROM: Paul Olson
Box 3472
Minneapolis, Minnesota 55403

1997-6-21

[Paul celebrated World Wide Party #4 by getting married. But at 21h00, the wedding party stopped for a moment to celebrate ...] At 9 p.m., we raised our glasses with our toast: "To absent friends". We restarted the music and the party continued ...

I ALSO HEARD FROM: John Held Jr, Sean McLachlan, Buck Coulson, Sheryl Birkhead, Chester Cuthbert, Henry Welch, Teddy Harvia

The April 2 meeting of the Calgary Philatelic Society was the 75th anniversary of the club. It was on April 22, 1922, that five stamp collectors got together at the urging of Dr. Edward George Mason and decided there was enough interest to warrant forming a club. They would be pleased to know that 75 years later the club was still going strong with more than 200 members.

Being the club Archivist and Historian, it fell to me to present the evening's programme. I showed specimens from the Archives such as the minutes of the first meeting, a photograph of the first public stamp show in Calgary in 1927, and other items. The club is very fortunate that it has all its records preserved from 1922 to present date. I also plugged my book HISTORY OF THE CALGARY PHILATELIC SOCIETY, published in 1992 and still in print. Actually, after the initial burst of sales it was obvious that this book will still be in print when the 100th anniversary comes around. (\$4 per copy, in case anyone is interested.)

After my talk, I led the 100 or so members present in a rousing chorus of "Happy Birthday To You". There was a cake cutting; we had two large cakes that soon vanished. The oldest member did the honours of cutting the cake. We also had the Honourary Life Members stand and be recognized. Life membership in the C.P.S. cannot be purchased. It is only given for long service to the club, and only 26 people have received that honour in 75 years.

In September, the C.P.S. will be hosting the 69th annual national convention of the Royal Philatelic Society of Canada. The last time we had it was 1980. I've been pressganged into doing the programme book. Someone else will put the copy on computer; it'll be about sixty pages with card cover.

The mowing machines are starting to catch up on the usual spring rush, and I was able to divert one of my mowers to Southland Natural Park. We don't mow the whole park of course, just a one-metre swath along the pathway edges to keep the vegetation from overgrowing it. After seeing how the mower was doing, I wandered over to a slough on whose banks we had a few weeks previously put in a few hundred balsam poplar sprouts. Existing poplars are dying of old age (they only live to about 100 years) and flood control dams upstream of Calgary prevent re-vegetation by natural means, as balsam stands normally start on silted floodplains where the seeds germinate in the rich mud. The sprouts were doing well, thanks to the spring rains. I noticed redwing blackbirds in the reed beds at the centre of the slough, but paid little attention.

As I tramped along the edge of the slough, the redwings became louder and more conspicuous, flying ahead of me and twittering away in full song. A bit too full, and I looked straight up above me to see a redwing hovering about two metres directly above my head, maintaining position as I walked. I wasn't too worried about being slashed on my head by claw or beak, but I was at Ground Zero for an airburst of defecation. I strode up out of the slough and out onto the grassland surrounding it to get away from the redwing, but it followed me. I thought the redwing would give up pursuit once it saw me moving away from wherever its nest was, but it followed me at least twenty metres before veering back home in triumph.

I stopped and turned to look back at the slough. I took a few steps back to the slough, and in an instant the redwing had returned, its calling redoubled. This time it followed longer and louder, almost right back to the parking lot out by the freeway.

But it was a lovely day for a walk, redwing and all. It beats being accosted by a pashandler on a downtown sidewalk.

Today is Canada Day, the 130th anniversary of Confederation. In addition to the usual hoopla, the World Police and Fire Games are in full swing here in Calgary, and one sees burly men and women everywhere in the colours of their national teams. Traditionally Cowtowners celebrate Canada Day either by going down to Prince's Island (in the Bow River adjacent to the downtown core) or out to the Calgary Zoo (on St. George's Island just downstream from the core). As I am a life member of the Calgary Zoological Society, I chose the latter. I got there just before the crowds started to build up, passed through the gates, and so over the bridge onto the island. Miniature flags are often handed out by businesses and charity groups for Canada Day, so many of the people had them. Rather than carry them about as one more piece of clutter, the popular thing to do is stick the maple flag in one's hair, or hat, or backpack, or baby pram.

The Zoo had set up special signs highlighting plants and animals native to Canada, with the logo "Proud to be Canadian". I was pleased to see one for prickly pears, although the Latin name was mis-spelt 'Opuntia polycantha' instead of 'Opuntia polyacantha'. It was of no real importance anyway, since the sign was set up in front of a begonia bed and one searched in vain for prickly pears. The signs for polar bears and other zoo denizens had no Latin names inscribed, so one wonders why they bothered with the plants.

In the zoo conservatory, the tropical opuntias were in full bloom. I stopped off at the restaurant there and had a chicken breast sandwich, the real thing, not the pressed stuff many restaurants serve. The Zoo restaurant separates the arid house (where the opuntias are) from the humid house. Tropical birds range freely as they have for thirty years since the place was built. A few months ago, the Ministry of Health issued a notice against the Zoo because it was felt that the birds were unsanitary. Since no problems

have ever been reported, there was a public uproar. Half the fun of eating there is having some brilliantly coloured bird hop up to your table and beg for a crumb. The health inspectors about-faced and issued a 'grandfather' certificate that let the Zoo operate as it always has done.

Weaving one's way down the Zoo pathway, one had to do so because of all the children chalking flags and birthday greetings to Canada on the pavement. The Zoo hands out chalk to the kids so they can express themselves and brighten up the grounds. Peacocks roam freely through the Zoo, mooching popcorn from the visitors and poaching food from other inhabitants' pens, which they hop in and out of with the casual arrogance of a shopbreaker.

Overhead, the thunder of jet aircraft every few minutes, as the Zoo is directly under the flight path of the airport. I made my way to the Customer Service kiosk, as I had been advised that my membership card had to be upgraded to a new photo I.D. plastic card. I was expecting a Polaroid-and-laminate facility, but they had a new digital camera that extruded the card in about five seconds. Judging by the photo quality, the resolution was apparently about 10 dpi. The membership card is not transferable, but anyone with short hair, glasses, and a goatee could use my card without being challenged.

Later today I went to Fort Calgary, on the south bank of the Bow River directly across from the Zoo. This was where the Mounties founded Calgary in 1875. There was a craft fair, singers, archaeological demonstrations (the site of the old fort is still being excavated), Mounties strolling alone in dress scarlet and posing for photographs with tourists, and a Siksika native demonstrating how to put up a teepee. He was wearing the traditional garb of jeans, baseball cap, and safety boots.

Normally one seldom sees an RCMP patrol car in Calgary because the city has its own police force, but they are everywhere today, undoubtedly due to the World Games. I have also seen a few Montana and California police cars.

Stampede parade day today but I am at work. To the Douglasdale riverbank this morning in the southeastern suburbs, while 350,000 Calgarians fought their way downtown for the parade. Silence for the space of a half-hour on the riverbank, save for birds twittering and the soft padding of an occasional jogger on the path. The joggers all wear Sony Walkmans rather than listen to the birds, and they keep their eyes forward with no glances at the scenery. I checked the balsam poplar seedlings I had come to inspect, then walked a short distance to view the scenery. The scent of sagebrush was heavy, and the wild roses were in full bloom. Looking out across the Bow River to Fish Creek Provincial Park on the far side, I saw pelicans on the opposite bank, preening themselves and basking in the morning sun. The river flowed along placidly. The air was black with newly-hatched caddis flies, but they were no bother as I watched the pelicans. These birds are awkward and ugly looking on the ground, but when seen flying low over the riverbank cottonwoods they are an impressive sight. Their slow wing beats and huge size are the epitome of graceful flying. And so, reluctantly, back to civilization, to check the contractor mowing on a crowded freeway.

YEEHAW, ETCETERA

1997-7-5

Lovely weather today, and so to the Calgary Stampede, the largest rodeo in the world, with over 1.1 million visitors expected over ten days. Parked the car at an LRT station early in the morning while there was still a chance at a stall, then took the train to the grounds. Wandered about doing the usual things, such as looking at the exhibits, the livestock, the free acts, and eating. Rested my feet by sitting and watching the Ejector ride, a bungee jump in reverse. In this one, two people at a time ride in a cage suspended by bungee cords. The cage is released and the

occupants flung about 100 metres into the air for a wild ride over the rooftops. A pair of young women got on the ride and seemed rather giggly. They squirmed about and at first I thought they were just adjusting the seat belts. In fact, they pulled their shirts down to waist level and sat there bare-breasted a moment before the cage was released and up they went. Cheers from spectators on the ground, and the lasses returned to earth to general applause.

As the two women left the Ejector ride, one could hear female voices in the crowd of spectators telling their husbands or boyfriends "No, I will not!".

The actor Jack Palance was Parade Marshall for the Stampede this year, and had a booth on the grounds where he was autographing his book and posing for tourists. I had a vision of him being a lean, suntanned man and was surprised at how pasty-faced he looked.

The free band acts included Sixties Mania, a band from Sydney, Australia, doing covers of all the golden oldies heard on the radio station that sponsored the act. Since most Canadians have trouble telling an Australian accent from an English one, the band did well with Beatles and Rolling Stones, but the Beach Boys standards seemed a bit off.

I always enjoy leaning on corral fences at the Stampede and admiring the livestock. This has not a little to do with not having to be the one to muck out their pens and haul in their feed. No Charolais on view (which was the breed on our farm) but some nice oxen. In retrospect, I think it is the first time I have actually seen oxen, as no farm around Red Deer kept them and I can't recall I saw them at previous Stampedes. Also Boer goats, the first ones imported into Canada in 1993. No cloned sheep, but I did watch the collie dog trials, where they herded sheep in competition. One was disqualified for taking a mouthful of wool off one stubborn ewe.

Calgary's annual SF convention was held this year at the Carriage House hotel on Macleod Trail, the main drag into Cowtown. ConVersion 14 went the weekend of July 18 to 20, 1997.

After fourteen years, ConVersion has settled into a routine, perhaps even a rut. Not always such a bad thing; registration was fast and efficient, Opening Ceremonies were over in five minutes, and panels that I went to started on time and were mostly well moderated. In the past few years, ConVersion has taken a distinct shift to being a writer's workshop, in part due to the influence of a local club called IFWA, who are workshop addicts, pro wannabes, and improv writers. Not to deny that one still sees the occasional Klingon wandering about, but one sees mostly sercon fans during the day and the costumes only come out at night during the parties.

The Friday panel that I took notes on was "Fantasy by Streetlight", a look at a new subgenre of urban fantasy. The panel started off with the usual define-your-terms discussion as to what urban fantasy is. A rather inadequate start to defining it was that it is a type of magic realism, but the best seemed to be Ann Marston's thought that urban fantasy was a way of putting fantasy into our daily lives as city dwellers as opposed to having it set in some ancient society or wooded grove. Janis Svilpis felt that urban fantasy would ultimately fail, as people read fantasy to get away from their own lives, not have it displayed in front of them. Will the audience that reads traditional fantasy go for elves in the downtown core? He felt not; people complain to the By-Laws Officer of their neighbours having plaster gnomes on the front lawn. I'm not sure if that was a valid argument but it did get a good laugh from the audience. Ed Willett

noted that in urban fantasy the author has to work harder to make the reader accept dragons or elves in a city. We know how our world operates and thus pick up on nitpick details, whereas we accept sloppier backgrounds in mythical lands.

As an aside, Svilpis, who is a University of Calgary professor with the English Department, noted that when the university offers courses on SF, fantasy, and detective fiction, they fill up quite fast. He said that in his dealings with students and general public, there is a lot more interest in the genres than fans may realize. They just do not attend cons or join clubs, anymore than dog owners all join a kennel club or people with VCRs join a film club.

A lot of the panels had Mars as a subject, both fact and fiction, in honour of GoH Kim Stanley Robinson. Each year Alan Dyer of the Calgary Science Centre presents an astronomy panel, and for the last few years he has been fortunate enough to have some major event to discuss. This year's good timing was the Mars Pathfinder project, and Dyer presented up-to-the-minute results to a packed room. It was unfortunate that this panel was scheduled against the dinosaur panel, also popular because it is presented by Dr. Phil Currie, head of the Royal Tyrrell Museum of Palaeontology in Drumheller, Alberta. Science panels always have a good turnout at ConVersion.

A Saturday panel on "History As A Source of SF" had well prepared panelists; too well prepared in the case of one who read a three-page essay on the theme. Connie Willis (not the essayist) said she does research for all her books, even if it doesn't show up in the story. She researched the 1918 flu epidemic for her plague novel, to see how a technological society reacted as compared to a medieval society. When the question of Great Man versus Inevitable Trends history theory was discussed, Willis adhered to the belief that history is a set of chaotic events and nothing more.

Stan Robinson said that the French Revolution was the turning point in history when humans first thought they could alter the future into a controlled course, consciously directed, as opposed to just drifting and only reacting to events.

As much as the title of the panel "Why Piers Anthony is Evil" intrigued me, I skipped it. I did go to the annual Writers At The Improv, performed by members of the Imaginative Fiction Writers Association. In this trashsport, audience members suggest a word. The six IFWA writers then produce as many sentences in a race against the clock. The sentences are read aloud, the audience votes on their favourite, and the process is repeated until a short-short story is built up. One does not expect a fully-developed theme, characters that come alive, or insightful philosophy under these conditions, but the audience does expect humour and general rowdy participation. The story below is the result of this improv session. The underlined words were the ones suggested by the audience.

"Bartholomew courageously threw himself on the atomic waffle iron, crying "Run for it, boys, she's gonna blow!" Before anyone could move, Bart's pancreas had been splattered across the warp drive control, sending the ship careening helplessly through hyperspace. Fortunately the explosion also knocked the badger off his wheel, causing the ship to come to a sudden and complete stop. The planet Quill, dystopian habitat of the bronze-bra'ed bustier babes of Betelgeuse, now lay off the port bow. "Shore leave", yelled the fading captain, his mind filled with visions of his last visit to the famous communal bathtub of the BBB of Betelgeuse. "Captain! Captain! Don't you remember what happened before, with the gerbil, the pumpkin, and saxophone?", gasped Badger. "Exactly" leered the captain. Badger tried a different tack. "I thought they banned you, your ship, your crew, and all your offspring for life after the circus midget pressed charges". Bart, a member of the Reformed

Narcoleptic Church, dropped his head on his chest in silent prayer and said, "It was but a tiny little thing". "You insulin bastard", said Bart, as the blood loss from his gaping pancreatic wound sent him back once again into slurring delerium. Bart expired with a noisy, sucking sound, reminiscent of a wet vacuum cleaner consuming a Jello sundae. Badger looked sadly at the remains of his blonde, blue-eyed, white-skinned former captain. "There went the best damned veteran Aryan* I ever met", he said, and sent the SS Adolph on course for home."

(* actual word suggested was 'veterinarian', and no, I was not the audience member who suggested it.)

The masquerade maintained its tradition by starting late and the bored audience played an equally traditional game of balloon volleyball. Male fans are now dressing as the Men in Black, which isn't a bad thing as it makes them certainly look more presentable than usual. With any luck, MiB will catch on as a series and we will no longer be embarrassed by overweight Klingons. This might frustrate newspaper editors though, who can't get much mileage out of nerds who look like management trainees at some accounting firm. The masquerade was brief when it finally did get going, and if you've seen one at your local con then you've seen ConVersion's.

The Sunday GoH speeches had Connie Willis as Toastmaster in a humorous routine. She started off by mentioning her problems coming through Canada Customs at the Calgary International Airport. The duty officer asked her the usual question about why she was in Canada. She replied that she was attending a writers' workshop and convention. He told her that he was writing an SF novel, and immediately launched into its plot, without waiting for her response. As he was holding her passport, she had no choice but to listen politely while he regaled her with his literary efforts. She finally got through by telling him that a famous writer named Kim Stanley Robinson was coming into Calgary on a subsequent flight and he would be delighted to arrange publication for him.

[continued next page]

Willis mentioned that she and the other GoHs had been on a tour of the Royal in Drumheller, where they got a behind-the-scenes look at the museum courtesy of Phil Currie. Robert Sawyer, Canadian GoH, did the guiding for the public galleries, and proved himself very knowledgeable about dinosaurs. He was a very good talker, said Willis, and kept up the flow of conversation on the drive back to Calgary. So good, in fact, that the car driver was too busy listening to him and almost broadsided a tanker truck. Had Sawyer been just a bit more eloquent, ConVersion might have had to cancel its GoH speeches, and LOCUS would have enough copy to fill two issues. Fortunately for fans of Willis and Robinson, their biographies will not terminate abruptly on Secondary Highway 9, Alberta.

Robert Sawyer talked about the chancey life of a first novelist. Last year's boom in Canadian SF was mostly due to first-time novelists, and their success will determine the shape of CanSF over the next few years. Stan Robinson talked about why so little science is in most SF these days, and said we live in an SF novel. He mentioned one of his party games, that of drawing an X-Y graph where X is scientific accuracy or plausible extrapolation and Y is the fantasy element. One then plots writers on the graph to see if they qualify as hard-SF writers or fantasy trilogists and can have a lot of fun arguing with others about who belongs where.

The panel on cross-genre stories was the only one I was at that did not start on time, as only one panel member showed. However, J. Brian Clarke and Ann Marston were press-ganged from the audience to help out Ed Willett (author of SOULWORM, the only SF novel set in Weyburn, Saskatchewan). Some of the usual suspects were trotted out for the lineup, such as H. Rider Haggard and Asimov (his SF mysteries). Willett said that one has to be careful not to make technology too advanced for detective stories, which might leave the constabulary with nothing to do.

The general consensus of the panel was that cross-genre stories fail more often than they succeed, and that they have to be better than average to convince publishers to handle them. The problem is bookstore categories, as a distributor wants every book neatly slotted into one genre, not a source of confusion to buyers.

The "Social Responsibilities of SF Writers" was rather boring, as everyone nodded agreement that the first responsibility is to provide good entertainment, then the message or new idea. Janis Svilpis said that what was needed was John Norman (of Gor infamy) on the panel, to provide opposition and liven up the debate.

The Art Show was the typical mix of fantasy and media SF with a high proportion of 3-D art (sculpture, bookends, and masks). The Dealer Bourse had a good representation of book dealers this year, with stock not normally seen in Calgary. I picked up some Australian stuff from a Saskatchewan dealer who specializes in it, and I noticed a dealer with lots of new small-press American novels.

At the freebie table, Robert Sawyer gave away chapbooks of his 1997 Aurora-nominated "Peking Man". Setting aside the collectibility of such unpublishized printings, it is interesting to see an author actively campaigning for the Aurora in such fashion. This is similar to the Hugo campaign launched by the zine NOVA EXPRESS, which sent e-mail to SF fans offering free copies. That might be a bit too in-your-face, but Sawyer's method does not impose on fans; you could take it or leave it at the table as you chose. It does indicate that the Auroras have reached the point where they are considered valuable and worth working for.

ConVersion 14 had 400+ attending, and was generally considered one of the better editions. ConVersion 15 has already booked J. Michael Straczynski (BABYLON 5) as GoH and will be held July 17 to 19, 1998. Details from www.nucleus.com/~garyf/conver.html

Back down to the Douglasdale riverbank. Calgary is in the middle of a long hot dry spell, not enough to be a drought just yet, but getting there. The sunlight burned down in the open areas, but when I passed under the cottonwoods it was instantly cool, like stepping into an air-conditioned room.

The pathway veers off the riverbank and climbs up the side of a steep cliff. On its way to the heights, it passes over two culverts draining creeks and backwaters along the bottom of the cliff. A beaver had jammed one of the culverts with mud and branches, and quite a sizeable slough had developed as a result. In time the impounded water reached the height of the path and was now cascading over it. Fortunately that section of the pathway is still the developer's responsibility, so they will have to muck around trying to get it clear.

Walking back through the cottonwoods, there were two crows having a squawking contest high up in the trees, fluttering from branch to branch at full volume. No doubt some sort of territorial dispute. On the far bank of the Bow River where I had seen the pelicans, I saw a doe grazing on the shoreline. Just upstream I saw 13 pelicans spiralling around in the air, soaring on a convection current.

AND THIS TIME WE WON'T BLOW THE MONEY

Calgary's economy is roaring right along, although a number of politicians refuse to use the 'boom' word for fear of attracting the attention of the Evil Eye. Those who suffered through the collapse of the last oil boom in 1982 are fervently swearing that this time they won't blow the money on riotous living. Traffic jams are becoming more frequent, construction trucks are everywhere, and the unemployment rate is 5% and still falling.

One traditional method of telling the status of the Calgary economy is the number of cars in town with licence plates from Saskatchewan. The farm boys flock in when things are booming and vanish when the economy declines. Saskatchewan is the butt of jokes from Albertans; only Newfoundland and Cape Breton get more ridicule. (A Cape Bretoner is a Newfie who went broke on the way to Toronto and was stranded in Nova Scotia.) Saskatchewan car drivers are the ones pattering along a freeway at 45 km/hr, and rubbernecking at all those buildings more than three stories tall.

My father's family is from southern Saskatchewan, so I can tell all the jokes about that province. This is treeless, flat, endless prairie. If you fall asleep at the wheel and your car veers off the road, then no big deal, you just keep driving until you come to another road. If your car runs out of gas, it may be fifteen minutes before you realize you aren't moving. The province recently announced a contest to select a publicity slogan. My favourite entry is "Saskatchewan: But it's a dry cold". Another is "Saskatchewan: Where nobody ever fell to their death".

BY YON BONNY CARPARK

1997-8-30

I stepped out of the house to mail a few letters, and as I was walking back from the letterbox, I heard the sound of a snare drum in the distance towards the Museum of the Regiments, which is a couple of blocks from my house. I veered off in that direction and walked over to see what was going on. The Museum carpark was full, vehicles had spilled over to the adjacent hockey arena parking lot, and there was heavy pedestrian traffic converging on the fields beside the Museum. Seeing the kilts and hearing a distant drone of bagpipes, I first thought it was yet another tribute to the regular regiments of CFB Calgary, who withdrew from the city this summer when the base was closed down. But then I saw green kilts, which none of the military units wear, and realized it must be a Highland Gathering.

Scattered around the fields and through the carpark, and a few on the berms surrounding the arena, were pipers playing for judges. One could walk a kilometre and never be out of the sound and sight of some red-faced lad puffing away at "Magersfontein" or "The Campbells Are Coming". At the far end of the Museum field, there was a stage with dancers leaping about in semi-synchronized fashion. The Scottish saltire flag was everywhere. A helicopter gunship squatted in one corner, and next to it a group of SCAers bashed away at each other with wooden swords and rubber-tipped staffs. In the centre was a tethered balloon, offering free aerial views of the event, courtesy of the realtor agency whose colours it bore.

The comparison to an SF convention was, of course, an irresistible thing. People dressed in funny clothes, celebrating a fictional culture, and having a good time being with others of their own kind. I should perhaps mention for the record that Speirs is a Lowlander name; my father's ancestors came from Houston, Renfrewshire, just west of Glasgow.

That evening about supertime, I was in the front of my house when the helicopter lifted off and headed back to whence it came. It first flew south at a fair altitude, then looped back around the neighbourhood back to the Museum. This time it came in low at tree-top height directly above my house. Had I been on the roof, I could have touched its landing skids. It made a final pass over the Museum, then dwindled off into the distance.

BEAVER PATROL

1997-9-9

Back down to the Douglasdale riverbank park, having received a citizen complaint about beavers gnawing on the cottonwoods and threatening to drop them on the riverbank pathway. I stopped off at the citizen's house to get the exact location. He went with me to

show the spot, and I was not surprised to learn that it was downstream of the culvert they had previously blocked. And on our side of the boundary line. The trees had since been toppled, and some of the tip branches gnawed off. The backwater below the culvert now had two dams, assembled out of leafy branches and mud scraped off the bottom. One could hear the waterfalls from five paces away, almost loud enough to cover the noise of the jet planes overhead taking off from Calgary International. I told the citizen that trapping was useless but I would check with our Adopt-a-Park Volunteer Co-ordinator to see if a group could be got together to wrap the remaining trees with chickenwire to stop the beavers. As I've learned from working in other riverbank parks, trapping does not work because new beavers come floating down the river to replace the eliminated ones.

BUSY AS A, UH, ER ...

1997-9-10

The A-a-P Co-ordinator advised me that a Scout group would volunteer for this coming Saturday to wrap the trees. I went down to see how our aquatic friends have been doing. Most of the leafy branches were stripped off the fallen cottonwoods overnight. The dams were that much leafier and higher, and the impounded water was beginning to spread sideways. The long green grass and sagebrush were now standing in ankle-high water.

CASTOR AND CO.

1997-9-11

Down to the river again to look at how they were getting on. The fallen trees were now completely stripped of branches. The trunks were being cut up, or gnawed down rather, into sections about 2 m long and rolled into the water. One cut was about 3/4 of the way through before the beaver finished for the night. Upstream from the culvert, it looks like the water is rising again. The culvert ends look clear but maybe the beavers got inside and plugged it there. I'll check after the weekend.

The Royal 97 Royale national stamp convention has had me running about getting the final copy for the programme book ready. Just got the first samples back from the printers today; it is a 60-page book in card covers and looks good. Meanwhile, the club President has been successful in getting publicity, but perhaps a bit too successful. Because this is a national, the exhibits are better than average, since they need a vermeil medal or higher here in order to compete in a international show. Exhibit frames hold sixteen 8½ x 11 pages; a lot of the high-powered exhibits coming in are worth \$1,000,000 per page. Tim, our President, has been boosting the exhibits to the local media. In the same manner that an SF con is always reported in the papers with a picture of a Klingon eating a hot dog, so it is that the articles on Royal 97 Royale are blaring out about \$8,000,000 exhibits. We do have security procedures in place of course, but knowing what show setups are like, I cringed at each headline. In our normal annual show, we have about 100 frames to set up; this show will need 250. One week to go, but my back muscles are already protesting.

THE RIVER IS DEEP, AND THE RIVER IS WIDE 1997-9-15

Down to the beaver park this Monday morning. On the weekend the Scouts had wired up about half of the trees. Meanwhile the beavers finished plugging the culvert, and water is now running across the pathway again. Only about sole-deep on a work boot, but a good flow of water. The two dams downstream are up a small bit but the beavers seem to have shifted their efforts upstream. The fallen trees are now half gone and only little piles of woodchips remain, and they are rapidly disappearing under the rising water. I phoned the man who clears culverts; it's his job now.

The Parks Dept. had leased out one of its arenas to a local promoter. He recently defaulted on his rent, and the arena was taken back. Just prior to this, he had booked the shock rock singer Marilyn Manson, then had a change of heart and cancelled the booking, claiming that he didn't know what M.M.'s act was like. The latter is now suing him for damages, and the whole affair is keeping the local newspapers in fresh copy.

But I couldn't help but think that ten years from now Marilyn Manson will be played on easy-listening Lite FM.

TORONTO IN 2003, OR, DETERMINED BEAVER

1997-9-16

As I drove into the riverbank this morning, the passage of my pickup truck startled a coyote from the tall grass by the road. It ran out onto a baseball diamond, then paused on the pitcher's mound to look back at me. (This is said to be a fatal flaw in coyote behaviour when dealing with hunters, as the lookback gives time for a rifle shot.) Perhaps the coyote will clear out a beaver or two, although I suspect it prefers neighbourhood poodles as easier and drier prey.

Beer bottles in the parking lot; kids must have been partying there last night. As I picked the bottles up, there was continuous noise from low-flying Canada geese. Their honking drowned out the sound of passenger jets.

Beaver trails are everywhere now in the wet grass, and a shrub bed on the far side of the backwater is dwindling daily even as the two dams and the plugged culvert raise the water more yet.

The wild roses and snowberries have a full crop of fruit in the undergrowth beneath the cottonwoods. Clusters of red or white berries sparkle in the green glow.

To the final committee meeting tonight of the Royal 97 Royale stamp show. The main details are in place, and tonight was just clearing up last-minute changes and snags. The convention is \$100 membership for the weekend, with no advance discounts as with SF cons. On the other hand, the dealer bourse and exhibits are free.

Lots of worrying over the publicity about the \$8 million exhibit, so it was decided to double the security guards. Police have been notified and will prowl the hotel parking lot and check in with the show guards at random intervals. The Exhibits Chairman advises the show will top \$20 million in exhibits, not that it makes much difference after the first million dollars.

One good stroke of luck though. While the CALGARY SUN tabloid blared the money angle, the CALGARY HERALD (a broadsheet newspaper with twice the circulation) played up the Lady Di angle. Stamps depicting Diana are considered junk by philatelists and will be junk ten years from now, but the HERALD reporter chose to make their immediate value the main story. This will divert some attention from the money value of the exhibits and help the dealers unload their royal wallpaper.

The goodie bag that goes to convention delegates will contain a free copy of the HISTORY OF THE C.P.S. book, leaving about twenty copies left over to sell at the show. With any luck, this book will be out of print by Sunday night. That frees up storage space in my house. At the meeting tonight, we got sample copies of a commemorative envelope issued by Canada Post to honour Dr. E.G. Mason as our founder. It will be a limited edition of 1000 #10 size and 1000 #8 size and will go nicely with the special show postmarks.

The details of a bus tour to the Elkana dude ranch at Bragg Creek, west of Calgary, were finalized. There'll be two busloads but I won't be there. Fancy the day when I pay money to visit a ranch.

Ribbons are a part of stamp conventions as much as any other convention. We committee members got a white one saying "Host". There had been a minor delay in getting them because the salesman wrote down the wrong delivery date on the order form. When the mistake was discovered the company expedited the order, and told us, to our astonishment, that the manufacturer had just been bought by one of our club members. He was not on the show committee, had no idea we were buying ribbons, and the surprise was mutual.

NO REST FOR THE WICKED

1997-9-17

Stopped off at the Registration Chairman's house on my way to work at 05h30 and dropped off the box of books for the goodie bags. I'm running about five hours of sleep a night and the convention hasn't even started yet.

SETTING THE FRAMEWORK

1997-9-18

Home from work this Thursday night, a ten-minute snooze, load the car, and off to the Coast Plaza Hotel for the show setup. Arrived 19h15 and was surprised to find the setup of the 250 display frames already half-done. Many hands do indeed make light work. My assigned task upon walking into the room was to put blue-dot stickers on the Edmonton frames, so as not to get them mixed up with the Calgary frames. The Calgary Philatelic Society does not have sufficient frames for a national show, so we borrow frames from the Edmonton Stamp Club (200 km north of us). They do the same from us when they host a Royal Royale. Most, if not all stamp clubs in Canada buy their frames from Security Displays International of Hibbing, Minnesota, or indirectly from international shows which sell theirs after the event. Frame manufacture is a rather specialized market, and in addition to discounts for bulk buying, the clubs all order SDI frames because it ensures standardization of frames so they can help each other for shows.

At one time, angle-iron zigzag display frames with glass covers were used, but today clubs use aluminium A-frames, each side holding sixteen pages under plexiglass. About a hundred times lighter as well, an important factor given that most stamp show committee members are 50+ years, overweight, and obvious candidates for cardiac arrest.

We ranked the exhibit frames in rows in the centre of the ballroom, with 27 dealer tables around the outside wall. Eventually the signal was given that we could mount our exhibits in the frames. In my capacity as C.P.S. Archivist, I had a non-competitive entry on the history of the club. It included the page showing the minutes of the first meeting in April 1922, photos and memorabilia of the last 75 years, and letters of congratulation on our 75th from notables such as Premier Ralph Klein. Also a photo of founder Dr. Edward George Mason, the only photo we've located of him. In it, taken in 1915, he is wearing the uniform of the 50th Battalion, in which he served as a medic and C.O..

LET THE SHOW BEGIN

1997-9-19

The official opening of Royal 97 Royale took place on this Friday morning. His Excellency Lt.-Governor Bud Olson officially declared the event underway. He had a long career in federal politics, finishing as Minister of Agriculture in the early 1970s before being appointed to the Senate (the Canadian equivalent of the House of Lords, not an elected body like the American Senate) and thence named as Lt.-Governor of Alberta in 1996. The L-G is the Queen's Representative in Right of the Province of Alberta. This would explain why Olson was accompanied by Canadian Armed Forces aide at the ceremony. Twenty years ago, I did some fossil collecting on Olson's ranch at Iddesleigh, not far from Jenner's Ferry. When I stopped at his house to ask permission to cross his land (always given), I would have to push

my way through an over-friendly pack of Australian blue-hounds, arriving at the doorstep covered in slobber and pawprints. I didn't bother to introduce myself at the stamp show; it would be unlikely that Olson would remember who I was.

More speeches from the Show Chairman, the Deputy Mayor of Calgary Ray Clark, and a stamp designer, not to forget Bill Robinson of Vancouver, the President of the Royal Philatelic Society of Canada. Clark did the usual presentation of a white cowboy hat to Robinson, and as usual, Robinson was required to take an oath to be the proper type of Calgarian, yeehaw and all. Clark asked Robinson if he had ever received a white hat before. This is a long-standing joke in Calgary, and dates back to the days when Calgary politicians lost track of how many times Prince Phillip had been presented with a white hat. On getting his fourth hat, he testily (and publicly) put in a remark to the press about how he hated coming to Calgary because he was always getting stuck with those bloody hats. Since then he has been persona non grata in Calgary, and local politicians have been a bit more careful who they give the hats to.

The next part of the opening ceremony was an announcement that the 1997 Christmas stamps will be stained glass of church windows from across Canada. The 90¢ value, which pays the international letter rate, will depict a stained glass window from St. Stephens Byzantine Ukrainian Catholic Church in southwest Calgary, not far from where I live. A presentation was made to the church priest. I had thought that the opening crowd for the stamp show was unusually large, and now realized that the majority of them were his congregation come out to see him.

And so the show began. I hadn't much to do but act as official photographer, which gave me the right to blind people with the camera flash and order them to stand over there so I could get a group shot. It is an interesting bit of human psychology that if you walk up to them and tell them to shuffle three steps to the right, they will refuse. But hold a camera and they submit quietly.

In talking to those who went on the Elkana tour, a good time was had by all. There was a quarter-horse demonstration showing how cattle are cut in and out of the herd, a western barbeque, and an evening show. The MC at the show was Miss Molly, whose fame reaches from Banff to Strathmore and as far south as Okotoks. You never heard of her but she is a country singer who is to the Calgary area what Rita MacNeil is to Nova Scotia, only not as fat. She got one of the more staid dignitaries of the Royal Philatelic Society of Canada up on the stage and had him helping out in her act. He is a Toronto man whose idea of The West is Sarnia, Ontario. I was told he did very well as a pretend cowboy wearing a hot-pink cowboy hat with a two-metre diameter brim and riding a hobbyhorse.

At the dealer bourse it was easy to tell the eastern dealers. They were the ones constantly sipping water for their dry throats, not being used to the lack of humidity out here.

The club's 3¢ table has been popular with young and old alike. It's actually two tables heaped high with wheelbarrow loads of packet-grade stamps, price 3¢ each. Today being Saturday, there is a good turnout of kids.

Canada Post had three commemorative postmarks for the show, one for each day, and also issued a prestamped envelope which everyone, myself included, is getting cancelled with the postmarks. Finished that up, then walked about talking to people. The show seems to be going very well as we start this final day. Since admission to the exhibits and bourse is free, we do not keep track of attendance but estimate several

thousand came in. The dealer tables are constantly busy and even the chronic complainers are quiet. It is a time-honoured tradition that no dealer will ever admit to making a profit at a show. The loudest complainer is nonetheless the first to sign up for next year's bourse.

The banquet last night had 88 people at \$45 a head. At that price, I hope it was a good meal. I didn't go, not just because of the cost but because I don't like banquets period. This banquet broke even as was intended. The entire show appears to be somewhere around break-even point. Unlike SF WorldCons, the nationals have no tradition of forwarding funds to the next national. The RPSC gives each show committee \$1000 seed money and the show is on its own after that. Calgary planned its show to break even or perhaps lose a small amount of money. The club has \$30,000 in the bank, so we are not worried about making a profit. Hosting a Royal Royale is done for prestige, not profit. Calgary bid for the 1997 show for the additional reason that it was a good method of celebrating our 75th anniversary.

Royal 98 Royale will be in Hamilton, Ontario. Their representative came out to see what he could learn from us for their show. I was surprised to discover that he had driven out instead of flying; it is a 3-day drive twixt Calgary and southern Ontario. Hamilton, with its larger population base, hosts a Royal Royale about once every 8 years, whereas Calgary philatelists need 17 years between nationals in order to forget the workload involved.

At the bourse, the keeners came and went Friday, and the general public and kids were here yesterday. Sunday is normally "tire-kicker" day, as dealers refer to idlers who have already bought what they wanted earlier and those just killing time with no intention to buy at all. But instead the dealers were kept busy with retail customers rather than the dealer-to-dealer trades they do in quiet times. Since the bourse includes dealers from

across Canada, they like to refresh their stocks from each other. The Toronto dealers unload their Calgary postcards on Alberta dealers, who in turn pass on the unsalable Ontario postmarks. A dealer who has a good customer for Australian stamps will vacuum the stuff up from someone who uses it as wallpaper, and likewise for the German or British specialist.

As I walked through the hotel parking lot, I noticed a pickup truck with a Texas licence plate and a Fort Worth bumper sticker. Correctly surmising that it was my philatelic correspondent Jeff, I met him almost as soon as I walked in the door. He was on his way out to join a group tour of Heritage Park, a reconstruction of a composite Prairie pioneer village. Jeff is a Texan through and through, except that he is a city slicker who runs an advertising agency. Consequently he was not as blasé about cows as I am, and was looking forward to seeing one on the hoof. I don't know that he had to drive all the way up from cattle country to see one. On the other hand, I went to Winnipeg in 1994 and saw a riverboat, but have yet to ride the riverboat here in Heritage Park, which is on the shores of the Glenmore Reservoir not five minutes from my house.

Royal 97 Royale closed at 17h00. The exhibits and dealers cleared the room by 18h00, and by 19h00, the 250 frames were down, packed, and being loaded on the trucks. I went home and wrote out press releases for CANADIAN STAMP NEWS (newspaper), CANADIAN PHILATELIST (the Royal's bimonthly) and a couple of other philatelic magazines. Didn't sell all the HISTORY OF THE C.P.S. books. Still in print, alas.

KAFKA'S BEAVERS

1997-9-22

Riverbank path still flooded. Phoned the man in charge who turned out to be on vacation. Phoned the relief man; he will phone developer's agent. Did not phone developer's agent. Have just finished reading Franz Kafka's THE CASTLE.

Pathway dry this morning. Much muck, mess, and ruts in the area where developer was clearing culvert. They breached both dams downstream of the culvert, and entire area is half-drained.

1997-9-24

Pathway flooded this morning, with fresh beaver trails through grass. Developer said they will rip out entire section of path and replace with arched footbridge by the end of October. It'll take a busy beaver indeed to build a dam to the height of a bridge.

THEY ONLY COME OUT AT NIGHT?

1997-9-25

When I bought my house, I hadn't known that the corner of the lot is the benchmark for the entire neighbourhood and that everytime someone sells a house their surveyor comes round to triangulate from my house to the one that is being sold. (All property must be surveyed when sold to verify that the house is inside the lot and not on someone else's land.) They usually come by during the day when I am at work, and I only know they were there by footprints in the snow or a survey pin by my fence. With Calgary's boom, land surveyors are working long hours. I came home tonight and in the dark I saw the red glint of the laser they use for surveying. I went over to talk to the chap and found he was verifying an infill house being built around the corner and down the block. I forgot to ask him if he had read THE CASTLE. If you don't understand why, read the book.

Picked up a weekly shopper tabloid thrown on my doorstep and couldn't help but notice the headline that vacancy rates for rentals are down to 0.65%. It's nice to own a house free and clear and not have to worry about that sort of thing.