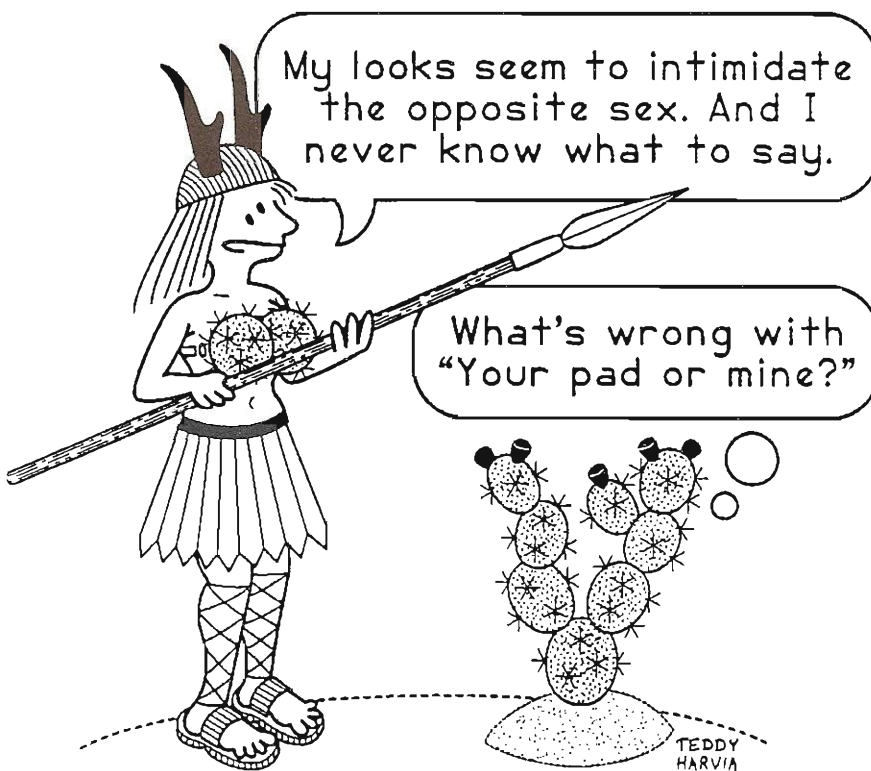


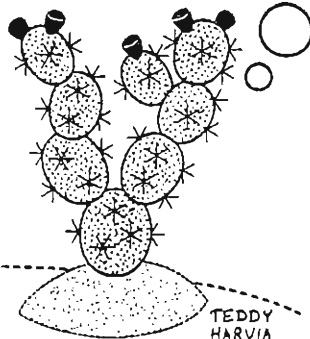
# OPUNTIA

40.5



My looks seem to intimidate  
the opposite sex. And I  
never know what to say.

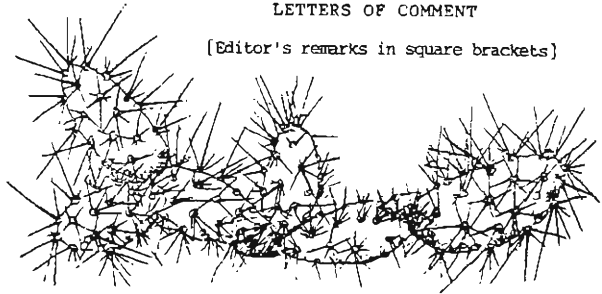
What's wrong with  
"Your pad or mine?"



TEDDY  
HARVIA

[Editor's remarks in square brackets]

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ART CREDIT: The goddess Opuntia is the delightful creation of Teddy Harvia, 701 Regency Drive, Hurst, Texas 76054-2307.

FROM: Tom Feller  
Box 68203  
Nashville, Tennessee 37206  
1998-08-14

WORLD WIDE PARTY #5: The WWP was invented by Benoit Girard of Québec and boosted by Franz Miklis of Austria. The idea is to raise a glass at exactly 21h00 on June 21, and get a wave circling the planet of fan friendship and general all-around connection between the nodes of the Papernet. This year was WWP #5, and elsewhere are reports of how it was celebrated.

Regarding the World Wide Party, that afternoon [my wife] Anita and I joined a group of people to see the movie version of THE X-FILES. We generally liked it, although it did not seem to advance the overall story line that much. Then we had dinner at a Denny's restaurant, where I reminded the others about the party. Anita and I drank Tennessee-made peach wine on our porch and toasted the other fans around the world. Later a friend came over and watched the season finale of DEEP SPACE NINE.

I didn't raise a glass this year, but I was doing a project with a WWP link. I am indexing all my Canadian zines, foolhardy drudge that I am, and at 21h00 I was busy indexing none other than Girard's own zine THE FROZEN FROG. He is out of zinedom now because of his divorce, but we can still honour him for a new fannish tradition. So pencil in your calendar for WWP #6 on June 21, 1999. Raise a glass at 21h00, do a zine project, have a party, or celebrate in whatever manner you can think of.

FROM: Lloyd Penney  
1706 - 24 Eva Road  
Etobicoke, Ontario M9C 2B2  
1998-06-21

[My wife] Yvonne and I were spending a quiet evening at home, getting ready for work in the morning, and we paused to raise a glass of iced tea to absent friends, friends who have gone, friends we'll make, fandom, and good times to come. We also munched on extremely decadent blueberry cheesecake cookies.

FROM: Karen Johnson 1998-09-19  
35 Mariana Avenue  
South Croydon, Victoria 3136, Australia

Your account of [a Star Trek club dissolving at] Con-Version ... It's a shame that Trekdom is deceased in your part of the world, but it's really on the downswing everywhere. The official ST club in Australia just went belly-up because Paramount Studios pulled their licence. There is no ST activity in Sydney, but Melbourne still has two clubs slugging it out for members.

Boy, those [Babylon 5] fans must have been dedicated if they were willing to pay the kind of appearance fees J. Michael Straczynski demands. The writing competition [Writers At The Improv] sounds like it would have been great fun to witness and even more fun to participate.

[Why not consider an Improv writing event for your cons? The Calgary event is sponsored by a writers' workshop group, and I'm sure every city has at least one that might be willing to consider it. Programme chairmen are always looking for ideas for panels, and this one has proven a long-time winner here.]

FROM: Carolyn Clowes 1998-07-20  
5911 West Pay Drive NW  
Depauw, Indiana 47115

June 21: World Wide Party Day began at dawn. The grass needed mowing again, after only a week. Mowing was done by 5 p.m., and thunder was rumbling in the distance. Then the storm hit and I had to close windows. So I stayed on the porch until dark, watching the rain come down and the grass grow. By 10 o'clock I was fading fast, but the stars were out. I put on some good music, set my alarm clock, and took a

blanket outside to watch the sky. The alarm went off at 11. I removed the bugs from my lemonade and raised my glass to all four points of the compass, then to the four in-betweens, and again to the northwest, where you and Alberta are from here. Then I fell asleep and woke at sunrise with lots of mosquito bites.

1998-08-11

Seems I was late to the World Wide Party. This was pointed out to me, and a large gathering, by friends who had raised their glasses at the proper time. So 21h00 would be when the little hand is on the 9. I knew that. I can only plead weeks of being zoned on pain pills, but 11 o'clock was so fixed in my mind that now I wonder if I was supposed to be somewhere else. A party in spirit has advantages over showing up in person, and next year I shall be on time.

1998-09-16

The Tony Danza story was a quintessential actor tirade. Poplar fluff, for pity's sake! If it's anything like milkweed, it would photograph beautifully if the cameramen could keep it off their lenses. I've told Tony's tiff to all my theatre friends, and we all saw ourselves and/or someone we know. The lead in one film I worked on had such a fit one day. She was unhappy with her lines (although she hadn't learned them), her wardrobe, the way she was being photographed, the heat, the bugs, her leading man's bad breath, and she would NOT emerge from her trailer until somebody got that big light out of her eyes. She was referring to the sun.

FROM: Rodney Leighton 1998-09-08  
R.R. 3  
Tatamagouche, Nova Scotia B0K 1V0

I totally forgot the World Wide Party. Easy to report what I did: nothing. Thought about it in early June and again about July 3.

FROM: Robert Lichtman  
 Box 30  
 Glen Ellen, California 95442

1998-10-28

"Boomtown Blues" describes an unfortunate situation in many cities: increased housing costs, worsening commutes, etc. However, from a northern California perspective, the prices you quote sound tantalizingly inexpensive. I pay less than \$750 for a two-bedroom apartment but my unit is below market-value and also somewhat below par quality-wise. I live with the latter feature as a trade-off for cheap rent. A more typical two-bedroom apartment rents for \$800 to \$1000 depending on location, size, and quality. Housing prices are even higher in relation to Calgary, with starter homes around \$175,000 except for the worst fixer-uppers/dumps, and the typical three-bedroom house on a small lot in an average neighbourhood going for over \$250,000.

[Calgary rents are getting close to Glen Ellen levels because no one wants to build new rental units for fear of the boom collapsing just as the new ones come on the market. Houses are staying steady because the supply of cheap land goes on forever (or at least as far as Winnipeg, 1400 km to the east) out onto the prairies. The singlemost popular prayer of religious Calgarians is not Hail Mary or The Lord Is My Shepherd but "Please Lord, let the boom last until the mortgage is paid off."]

Propellor baseball caps aren't too uncommon around California. They are manufactured by a number of companies, including counterculture Wavy Gravy's Hog Farm. It's too bad the creator of the propellor beanie, Ray Nelson, didn't think to patent his invention back in the 1940s, as he'd have collected a lot of royalties over the years.

FROM: Harry Warner Jr  
 423 Summit Avenue  
 Hagerstown, Maryland 21740

1998-08-25

I hope you're right about Star Trek suffering a gradual exit from our midst. However, the Sci Fi Channel in the United States has just announced the start of re-runs of the original first series of ST. That may cause a temporary flaring up of ST fandom again.

I'd forgotten about the meteorite hitting a Hagerstown home when I was a small boy, but I seem to remember running across the news item while looking in the files for something else during my newspaper years. In view of the recent epidemic of excitement over big and little meteors hitting this planet, I wonder if THE WALTONS could have been the first television series to use the concept. One episode involved a meteorite hitting the Baldwin sisters' home and damaging their still, and the excitement the event caused among the residents of Walton's Mountain. I seem to remember this meteorite as a small one, maybe the size of a paperback.

I didn't celebrate the World Wide Party at all because of my teetotal principles. I know it was permissible to take part with non-alcoholic beverages, but I don't want to participate in any activity which links me with consumers of alcoholic beverages.

[So in other words, you don't watch baseball on television because of the beer ads and the knowledge that most of the viewing audience has a six-pack opened by the couch. You don't listen to classical music because of all the romantic lovers who listen to it while sipping wine. You never loc fanzines because of all the fans who drink booze. I am a teetotaler myself but my puritanism doesn't extend quite that far. You aren't required to drink anything; do a one-shot zine or some other activity to celebrate.]

FROM: Robert Sabella  
24 Cedar Manor Court  
Budd Lake, New Jersey 07828-1023

1998-08-08

CONVERSION 16

The Bird In Hand tale brought back memories of about 14 years ago when we lived deep in the woods of Hopatcong. Jean was teaching one night while Andy (age 2) and I were downstairs in the basement watching television. When I brought him up for bed, we immediately saw some creature flying around the living room. I assumed it was a bird until I looked closer and realized it was a bat.

I put Andy in bed and closed his door, then began the task of trying to get the bat out of the house. When Jean arrived home a short while later, she saw me chasing around the living room trying to shush the bat out of the house with a broomstick. Fortunately, my neighbour across the street saw my macabre dance and realized what I was doing, so he came over with a huge net. He and I draped it over the bat, enabling us to simply carry it outside. We never determined how the bat got inside, but none of its family ever returned.

I ALSO HEARD FROM: Chester Cuthbert, Michael Waite, Henry Welch, Teddy Harvia, Bruce Pelz, Bill Bridget, Buck Coulson

At hand is Progress Report #1 for ConVersion 16, to be held in Calgary from July 23 to 25 at the Carriage House Inn. The con is rotating back to this hotel again; as with other hobby shows such as stamp collecting, there are only about three hotels in Cowtown that have suitable facilities at an affordable price. The Carriage House is smaller than the other hotels which actually works better in my opinion. The ballrooms are the same size but the lobby and main corridor are smaller. This puts more con-goers together and makes the event seem friendlier and more populated. The food is much better too. The hotel is run by a family firm, and has a kosher kitchen. The patriarch of the family likes to circulate among the customers and can be seen pouring coffee for the restaurant patrons. The all-you-can-eat brunch on Sundays is excellent, and the tavern has the best steaks in the city. I always have to diet for a week after to lose those extra kilos I put on at a Carriage House con.

Guest of Honour will be Ben Bova, who needs no introduction to SF fans. Canadian GoH is Tanya Huff. Bova is a hard-SF novelist, while Huff writes fantasy, so they provide a nice balance. Science GoH is Gregory Bennett of the Artemis Project, which wants to establish a private colony on the Moon. The logic is that they will go not for scientific or military purposes but to set up a tourist attraction. The blurb in the PR didn't say if there would be a casino or roller-coaster rides.

Membership rates are \$30 until January 31, \$35 thereafter until April 30, and \$45 at the door. Children are half-price, free for under-7s. Mailing address is ConVersion 16, Box 43006, Calgary, Alberta T2J 7A7.

I've always enjoyed ConVersions. They tend to emphasize writing and hard science, two things that modern SFdom seems to have drifted away from.

[I came across this while doing some research in old newspaper files regarding the Avro Arrow fighter jet plane cancellation in 1959. Two other editorials on the same page urged that the feds get busy on celebrating Canada's centennial in 1967, and suggested that radioactive wastes be disposed of by loading them into missiles and shooting them into space. As the editorial below took priority over these two, one can guess where the editor's real venom was directed.]

For years the stapler, a business gadget used to fasten documents together, has been gaining ground. It has almost completely displaced the old-fashioned paper clip and the idea of using the common pin for this purpose is laughed to scorn. When discreetly used at the upper left hand corner of a page, the stapler is effective. When carelessly used, it can and does defeat its ends with a vengeance.

Rather than risk the breaking of nails or the piercing of fingers in opening an improperly stapled document, the recipient will cheerfully hurl it into the wastebasket unread. Folded documents, heavily stapled to avoid the use of envelopes are likely to meet the same fate.

By far the worst example of bad stapling that has come to this desk is a small tabloid which we believe, but are not altogether certain, came from HMCS Shearwater. Its stapling was so abundant that it was quite impossible to open it save at the risk of complete destruction of the material and of one's hands. Even a naval veteran in The Journal's editorial room would have nothing to do with it. To send mail in this manner comes close to being a criminal offence. It could come under the head of sending dangerous material through Her Majesty's mails or perhaps "mailing with intent to wound".

That extract is one of the reasons I enjoy going through files of old periodicals rather than just a quick skim of the index or table of contents. One finds all sorts of strange things never suspected, ranging from snail telegraphs to the history of blotting paper. That last item is one of my sidelines in researching, and appears to be more interesting than it sounds. Any kind of paper was expensive until a couple of centuries ago, but blotting paper is known back to the 1500s. Its alternative was pounce, a fine powder one sprinkled over wet ink to dry it in a hurry or soak up a blot to be scraped off. Pounce and blotting paper co-existed side by side for centuries, just as, for example, hectographs and mimeographs co-existed.

This inadvertent sideline in history (expect a full-blown essay on it in OPUNTIA a couple of years from now) also triggered a forgotten memory in my mind. Ink wells. In the rural Alberta schools I attended, every desk had an ink well, and we were taught how to hold a pen nib just so to shape the letters, and learned from experience the results of dipping the nib too far into the ink well. I am talking as late as 1963. Ballpoint pens were known and certainly used by even the most rednecked farmer, but in school we used nibs. The argument was much the same as what happened a decade later when pocket calculators were introduced. Schools banned them since they made for intellectual laziness and deficient math skill. No doubt the same argument was raised against slide rules when they were first introduced.

One thing is very evident in the history of office technology. Every introduction, from carbon paper to the typewriter to the mimeograph, was soon co-opted by employees for personal use. Countless letters to Aunt Susan back on the farm were typed up when the boss was under the impression that the quarterly report was being typed. There was no end of club newsletters printed on the company mimeograph, no matter how many angry memos were issued by executives.

Calgary is quite the town now for new-book buyers. In past years, we had a choice between mall stores run by Coles, W.H. Smith, and Classics, or few independents getting by on art book sales to yuppies. The three aforementioned mall chains were gobbled up by a conglomerate, which is now shutting them down (the malls are dying anyway) and opening Chapters superstores. Some people rant against superbookstores but I have no complaint. Chapters is carrying oddball stuff I would not have noticed before, and I'm buying more new books than I used to. The staff are friendly and I've also made use of their special-orders desk. In the past few weeks I have found books in Chapters by Blaster Al Ackerman, Alfred Jarry, and Stanley Morison. Ackerman is an hilarious short-story man who writes like Stephen Leacock on drugs. The Alfred Jarry book was on his invented philosophy pataphysics, akin to surrealism and dada, only less comprehensible. I was surprised to see either of these books on the shelves; neither are mass-market. Morison (with one 'r') is the major figure of modern typography. He designed Times Roman, studied the history of typefaces from first principles and original documents, and wrote on the subject in a clear Asimovian style.

Chapters has five superstores in Calgary now. Their competitor Indigo just opened its first superstore in the city, although strangely they put it directly across the street from a Chapters. This may be foolish as the two stores could be bleeding each other to death, whereas if they were evenly spaced around the city there would be natural markets for both.

All this is for new books. Secondhand bookstores are a distinct market and are doing well. Two second-hands are setting up branch stores, and one of them has gone to a warehouse, so business must be good.

There are no rats in Alberta, but we have just as many mice as anywhere else, and lots of Richardson ground squirrels. The latter, commonly but incorrectly called gophers, are abundant on the Canadian prairies. The Parks Dept. maintenance depot I supervise has lots of them scurrying about the compound, they living in the adjacent green areas.

This morning started like any other. Staff began arriving at 06h30, the big overhead doors of the garage bays opened up, and the mowing machines and crew trucks rolled out for the day's work in neighbourhood parks. During the rollout, a gopher, no doubt for valid reasons of its own, decided to cross the compound. Partway across, it was confronted by a mower roaring through the yard. The gopher turned to scurry back to the safety of the green-sward it had just left, but found its escape blocked by a passing crew truck. It turned and twisted but found every route obstructed. Seeing the cool dark cave of the garage, it scrambled for safety inside, ducking under a workbench. We spotted the gopher but the day's work was awaiting and we had no time to pursue. One of the overhead doors was left open in the hopes that the gopher would eventually make its way back outside after the yard was deserted.

A few hours later, I came back into the depot, walking through the garage, through the lunchroom, and into my office. As I turned into the lunchroom, the gopher jumped down from the top of a couch where it had been looking out the picture window, much as one sees cats sitting on windowsills looking out at the world. The gopher ducked under a chair, came out the other side, and preceded me into my office. It hustled under my desk and crouched behind the wastebasket. My telephone rang, and as the gopher was doing no harm where it was, I let it be. I shuffled some paper and then went back out into the field, once more leaving the gopher to find its way out.

By morning coffee break, the gopher had worked its way back out into the garage. It was getting up enough nerve to cross the vast open concrete plain of the garage floor when the crews pulled into the yard. The gopher dashed back to the safety of my office. This trip back and forth was to be repeated several times. Each time the gopher would cover in a recess under the furniture until all was silent, then cautiously make its tentative way back to the garage, only to be startled back by the arrival of a truck or mower.

The day shift ends at 16h45. We determined to chase it out. With a corn broom, it was flushed out of my office into the lunchroom, and from there to the garage. It dashed about, claws scrabbling for purchase on the smooth floors, its rear end fishtailing on the turns like a car in a Hollywood movie chase scene. Back and forth, back and forth, we chased it. Under workbenches, behind recycle bins, past cabinets, into my office and out again, under trucks. High-pitched squeaks of alarm from the gopher were ear-piercing. Finally it went behind a row of lockers. Part of the crew poked it along from one end of the lockers. We found a brand-new air filter, still shrink-wrapped in plastic, that had fallen in behind the lockers from the top where the mechanic had placed it last year, so the roundup was not a total waste of time and energy.

By now the gopher was slowing down. Instead of zipping about faster than the eye could follow, it was slow enough that we could make attempts to grab it with leather-gloved hands. Its final moment came when it tried to go between my feet. I got it by the tail and lifted it up. Squeaking in alarm, she (as I now could see) twisted and turned as she dangled upside-down. I carried her out the back door, across the compound to the grass, and gently tossed her to salvation. She scurried under a spruce tree. We in our turn went home, satisfied at having done a day's work.

I received a visit from an Adopt-A-Park volunteer who helps out at Southland Natural Park, just down from my depot on the right bank of the Bow River. A dead beaver had stranded in some shallows between the riverbank and an island. Normally we wouldn't worry about it, as this is all part of nature, but the area is popular with dog walkers and pedestrians. As we are in the midst of a long, hot drought, with temperatures soaring daily to 25°C, I promised to give a try and push the carcass out into the mid-current of the river. From there it could float downstream into someone else's jurisdiction. If it did re-strand itself in Southland Park, the next portion of the riverbank was 2 or 3 metres high, overhanging, and densely overgrown with river birch and willows. There are no pedestrians along that area, so the rotting carcass wouldn't be a bother.

Taking a garden rake with me, I drove down, parked my truck in the lot, and walked about a half kilometre over the grassy floodplain to where the dead beaver had been reported. Lots of dog walkers around. Evading soaking wet dogs trying to make friends with me, I walked down the riverbank until I saw the carcass. It was stranded in shallow boulder-strewn rapids. There was no doubt I was going to get my feet wet. I had hoped it might have washed up against the bank where I could just push it back out into the water with the rake.

Balancing myself with the rake, I waded into the water, about shin-high. The riffles in between the boulders were alive with countless trout fry. I reached the dead beaver and pushed it with the rake. It began floating downstream, but snagged a moment later on another boulder after travelling only a few metres. I repeated the process again and again, working my way down the shallows slowly. The water around me was clouded with fish fry, the sun's reflection off the surface was dazzling, and the dogs splashing out to see what I was doing were annoying.



## CIVIC DUTIES

Eventually the carcass and I came out of the shallows in the lee of the island to where the main current of the Bow River swirled along. Wading out into knee-deep water, I pushed the carcass into the main flow but eddies kept swinging it back towards the shore. I accompanied it downstream to where a pedestrian bridge crosses the river. By now, it looked like the carcass might stay out in mid-stream. Bicyclists and dog walkers crossing the bridge stopped to see what was going on and why a Parks worker was wading in the water with a garden rake.

I had a bit of trouble selecting a place to return to the riverbank, as the lee was mostly mudflats. But I cautiously picked my way along a gravel bar towards a point just underneath the bridge landing. The dogs cavorting in this area were fortunately distracted from me by the sight of the carcass floating by. Dog owners were kept busy shouting for their pets to leave it alone and get back here this instant. Not that the dogs could have dragged a full-grown beaver up onto the shore anymore than I could have.

I waded up onto the steep bank and walked back the long distance to my truck. Squish, squish, squish. I never realized before how great the distance was when one feels every step of the way. Back at the truck, I pulled my boots off and poured out the water, then wrung out my socks. I let the boots and socks steam themselves a bit drier in the overhead sun, while doing a bit of paperwork, waiting for my feet to dry.

Re-booted and back on the road again, I drove down to another riverbank park where one of my crews was pulling weeds from the shoreline. We traded a few jokes about keeping an eye out for the carcass coming by in fifteen minutes, but it never did come by, and I'm sure it hung up under a steep bank where it can rot in peace.

My 1987 Nissan Micra, bought new, has been showing its age. While it has been a good car, after 210,000 km it can no longer be trusted for highway driving, or even a commute to work. I drive 11 km one way to work, and in an average week go 500 km just in Calgary. This city is a textbook example of urban sprawl, and while the train and bus services of Calgary Transit are excellent, they are not suitable for people like me who live in one suburb and commute to another suburb outside the 08h30 to 16h30 standard business hours. So I need a reliable car notwithstanding the City's traffic planners who want to boost CT and pedestrian useage.

First I selected for quality when shopping for a new car. (I had enough of used cars when I was a university student.) The guide books and Consumer Reports magazine listed Honda in the top five, and as some of my fellow workers drive Civics, I decided to go with that car. I only need a two-door hatchback. Nissan doesn't seem to be selling Micras anymore; their big profits are in Pathfinder, a sport utility vehicle (SUV). In fact, I do not exaggerate by much when I say that half the vehicles on Calgary roads are either minivans or SUVs. Pickup trucks, once the emblem of prairie rednecks, are still about but no longer the great proportion they once were. Even Reform party members seem to prefer SUVs.

The second factor I considered was accessibility of the dealership for when the car goes in for repairs. Most car dealers seem to be out on the freeways, so I needed one that was on a bus route or had courtesy buses. That narrowed it down to one Honda dealer, not far from my workplace. In fact, on the test drive I told the sales agent, "That's where I work." as we went past my depot.

The Micra I kept for around-town driving, but commuting is now in a shiny red Civic CX. Good for fifteen years.

## YOU CAN NEVER STEP IN THE SAME RIVER TWICE

It is the Labour Day weekend, and I drove up to Red Deer (100 km north of Calgary) on Saturday. It was my mother's birthday earlier in the week, so we had a family reunion. My brother and his family went north a few days prior to stay with her. Neil and Pam have two children, Calandra (age 8) and Ross (age 5). My new Civic easily cruised along at 110 km/hr. There was a solid line of traffic all the way along, as it was the final long weekend of the camping season. The highway looked like the assembly line at the Winnebago factory, an endless procession of motorhomes and light trucks towing gooseneck trailers. I watched the road with half-attention, the view being more interesting to the side. The harvest is mostly in. Huge round bales of hay dot the fields, and on each bale sat a hawk. In the treeless country, this was the only practical place to sit and watch for prey, with the added advantage that mice live in the bales and venture out into the stubble, exposing themselves as targets.

After arriving in Red Deer and the usual family catch up, we all went out on a picnic to Burbank Provincial Park, at the junction of the Red Deer and Blindman rivers. As a younger man 25 years ago, I spent quite a bit of time here collecting fossils; there is an excellent deposit of Palaeocene strata yielding large quantities of leaves. Since then the rivers have undercut the cliffs, burying the fossiliferous layers under talus. My mother, still an active collector in her late sixties (she has four species named after her), moved to other diggings south and east of Red Deer. Calandra wanted a selection of rocks for her school class project, and we thought that with a palaeontologist for a grandmother she shouldn't have much trouble upstaging her classmates.

My mother had previously mentioned to me that Burbank park had been developed as a campground. I was not therefore too surprised to see most of the bush replaced by tent sites. The muddy ruts where I charged through at full speed in my Volkswagen Beetle lest it got stuck is now a good gravel road suitable for any Cadillac land yacht. When I dug fossils along the shoreline, I would only see the occasional fisherman; now it was as busy as a suburban street.

And so to the rock collecting. The kids scampered about selecting rocks, and bringing them to me to crack open with a rock hammer I borrowed from Mom. Back when, I thought nothing of wading through the crystal-clear water exploring shoreline strata. But I was dismayed today at the manure-brown, albeit semi-clear water. Feedlots are big business now in central Alberta, and the runoff into smaller streams has turned them the colour of tea.

The full realization of what had happened didn't sink in until near the end of our stay. Calandra had found a small piece of Palaeocene rock that I cracked open to reveal some snails. I explained to her that the fossil snails were very similar to the ones living today. Only then did I realize what I had subconsciously missed.

Back when, part of the difficulty in wading was all the slippery freshwater clams. I looked about the water now and failed to see a single clam. Nor were there snails or filamentous algae. Not even slime algae. The water undoubtedly had lots of microbes; I wouldn't drink it on a bet, but there was no visible sign of macroscopic life.

The Blindman River was lifeless. The larger Red Deer River, into which it flowed, was its usual mud colour. I had to wonder how many sins were hidden in that river.

To the Bridgeland Community Association tonight for a public meeting about the impending implosion of the old Calgary General Hospital, directly across from the community hall. The hospital was closed recently and its operations transferred to a new building in northeast Calgary. The CGH looks like a single building from a distance, but is actually seven buildings from three stories high on up. They were built to last, but no one foresaw decades ago that they would survive everything but a Tory government. To be fair to the provincial government though, the CGH needed a major rehabilitation of its utilities, and it was just as cheap to build a new structure and demolish the old one. For months now, the contractors have been gutting the buildings, salvaging materials and removing the asbestos insulation. They determined it would be faster to level the superstructure with a controlled implosion. The job will be done by Engineered Demolition, an American firm that holds the world record for the largest building ever imploded, the Sears Warehouse in Philadelphia. The CGH is not particularly tall, like the Sands Hotel imploded in Las Vegas, but the complex of buildings stretches over several city blocks.

This will be the biggest event in Calgary since we had the Winter Olympics in 1988. The Bridgeland area is on the north bank of the Bow River, on a floodplain overlooked by the escarpment of the valley. Houses surrounding the CGH will be evacuated, then draped in huge protective blankets, with empty steel roll-off garbage bins on the streets as further protection. The exclusion zone covers most of the floodplain. The escarpment will, on the day, be lined with spectators and news media. Even the Discovery Channel is sending a team to cover the implosion. The annual Stampede parade gets 300,000 spectators, so it seems probable that the implosion would get 400,000 or more watching it in person and many others doing so on television.

The implosion will take place at 09h00 on Sunday, October 4. I'm not even going to try to get near the site. If the weather is good, I will go over to Scotsman Hill, on the other side of the Bow River about 2 km south of the CGH. Scotsman Hill is so called because it overlooks the Calgary Stampede grounds to the west; cheapskates sit on the escarpment with a pair of binoculars and a portable radio, rather than pay admission to watch the rodeo. The Hill is a dissected fragment of an escarpment that used to run along the Elbow River (just below it) to the nearby junction with the Bow River. A cliff angles slightly SW-NE, so even if there is a large crowd there I should be able to find a spot somewhere. I will no doubt have to park a considerable distance away and walk to the site. If it is a nice day, I may just leave the car at home and walk from my place down the Elbow River pathway system, about 8 km.

The emergency services in Calgary will be full out for the implosion. Calgarians are being advised that police response to non-emergency situations will be delayed. A huge dust cloud is expected to billow up, and spectators along the Bridgeland escarpment are warned to bring dust masks. The commuter trains will be shut down, the main drag east-west through Calgary will be closed.

Nearly 3000 charges will be detonated over a 20-second period at 09h00 to collapse the buildings in on themselves. After a brief pause to let the dust settle, the contractors will race through the streets of Bridgeland with front-end loaders and street cleaners, and haul down the protective blankets. The all-clear signal is to be given at 11h00, and with that, life will return to normal in Cowtown.

As I left the meeting, I got a handout which consisted of a flyer about the implosion and a packet of Forget-Me-Not seeds. Bridgelanders are inviting Calgarians to plant them next spring in memory of the place where tens of thousands of Calgarians were born or died.

## STALKING THE WILD TROUT

An advantage of being a Parks District Maintenance Foreman is that one can go for a stroll along the riverbank and still be on official business. I was meandering along a path on the right bank of the Bow river, checking for weeds, when I paused to watch a mixed flock of seagulls, Canada geese, and mandarin ducks feeding or preening on a gravel bar. At this location, a main power transmission line crosses the river. I saw an osprey sitting on the top of a pylon. As I watched, it suddenly launched itself down to the river, a distance of about 100 metres. It splashed into the river, soundlessly at my distance, then struggled up into the air again. In its claws was a trout, feebly flopping as its life force ebbed away. The osprey circled under the sagging power lines and then an Immelmann turn that brought it back up to the pylon top where it had been sitting. I was most impressed. Granted the Bow River is shallow and clear but to see and then successfully target a fish from such a distance is quite a feat.

## COUNTING DOWN

There are two countdowns underway in Calgary, one for the CGH implosion and the other for the municipal elections. Unlike federal and provincial elections, which are called at the pleasure of the government party leader, municipal elections are held on a fixed schedule every third year. This year is an election year for all Alberta municipalities, with the vote on October 19. Besides the mayoralty and aldermanic races, Calgarians will have local plebisites on the perennial topic of fluoridating our water, and a new one on banning video lottery terminals (VLTs). In my riding, alas, the alderman, public school, and Catholic school trustees were returned by acclamation.

Other than the plebisites, the only thing I get to vote on is for Mayor. The incumbent Al Duerr has been brought back into office by 90+% of the vote in the last three elections he contested. This time he has a strong challenger in the person of Alderman Ray Scott, who has 20% of the vote so far. He'll lose, as Al hasn't gone wrong during his time in office. Calgary's problems are the problems of growth, which don't upset voters to the point of doing anything about the incumbents. Too many of us remember the decade-long depression that hit Calgary in 1982 when the last oil boom collapsed.

Although campaign signs are proliferating on city boulevards, annoying both Parks Dept. workers and citizens, the election has been overshadowed by the gossip about the implosion. Bridgeland churches are being forced to hold their forthcoming services October 4 at other churches or on the previous Saturday. The CGH buildings are under tight security that makes the Olympics look like a minor event. And there is always someone who doesn't get the word; a bank robber who held up a bank in an adjacent neighbourhood tried to flee through the Bridgeland area past the CGH. A good analogy would be a gopher scurrying into a depot lunchroom. He had no place to hide once he realized his mistake, and was taken into custody by about half of Calgary's police and security guards, who found it a refreshing change from standing picket duty or munching on doughnuts.

There is to be an election for a senator-in-waiting, the winning candidate to be nominated by the provincial government for the federal Senate. The Senate should not be confused with the American-style Senate. Ours is an appointed body of old warhorses, party bagmen, and incompetents moved out of harm's way from the House of Commons. Alberta has no legal authority to elect a senator but several years ago we did, and the then-Tory federal government named the choice since Alberta is a strong Tory base, even though the winner was from the Reform party.

This time around the feds are Liberal, and the Prime Minister has said he will ignore the results when it comes time to fill the next Alberta Senate vacancy. The provincial Tory government has waxed indignant at such snubbing of the popular will. However, the Tory party itself is not running any candidates, which rather undercuts any moral high ground they may have stood on. Two of the candidates are Reform and two are independent. For the first time in my life I may deliberately spoil a ballot in protest. The senatorial race has already imploded, and the news media are giving far greater coverage to the more important municipal races and plebisites.

A minor hoorah developed when Engineered Demolition had trouble getting their explosives experts through Canada Customs. Phone calls were made, strings were pulled, and temporary work permits were issued. The engineers are now in town for the implosion.

DER TAG

1998-10-04

Awake earlier than I usually am on a Sunday, I left the house at 08h00 for Scotsman Hill. It was clear and brisk, just slightly above 0°C and a stiff breeze blowing out of the west. I got out my winter parka, loaded my camera gear into the car, and drove off as the sun rose in the east. I had planned some extra time in case I couldn't park near the Hill and had to walk from further in, but as it turned out I was able to park at the south end of the Hill and had only a few blocks to walk. The spot I had originally chosen was solid with people, but I found a good location at the middle of the escarpment with just as good a view. Setting up the tripod and telephoto camera, chatting with other people about their camera systems (nothing brings out community spirit like an implosion), and taking a few crowd shots filled the time until the blast.

By about 08h45, Scotsman Hill was completely lined with spectators, and many had clambered partway down the escarpment to set up their cameras. By 08h55 we were all silent. My watch said 09h00 but still no blast. I was not wearing gloves, the better to operate the cable release on my camera, and my fingers were freezing.

Suddenly I saw a flicker of light running through the ground floors of the buildings. It wasn't until a roof on one of the buildings began tilting that I was sure the implosion was underway and not just imagination. The buildings began caving in, and I wondered to myself why there was no dust cloud. I wondered too soon. A split second later the entire Bridgeland neighbourhood vanished under a dust cloud that looked like Mt. St. Helens. A few seconds later the shock wave reached us, a loud bang that sounded like thunder at point-blank range. Two or three more shock waves hit us, but I was too busy clicking the camera to count. I got about twenty shots, of which two or three may be the actual collapse, and the rest the dust cloud.

As the dust cloud stood up above the height of the escarpment of the Bow River valley, the wind caught it and blew it horizontally to the east. It took several minutes to dissipate. On the Bridgeland escarpment behind the hospital, the northern and western sides, the slopes were black with spectators. I hadn't realized it when I chose Scotsman Hill, but it had the advantage that the rising sun was behind us, shining full face on the CGH buildings, whereas those on the Bridgeland escarpment were looking into the sun and seeing only the shadowed side of the buildings.

And so to home, with minor traffic jams as the spectators dispersed. While waiting for the implosion, I had talked with people who told me about their children being born or treated there, a father dying there, and such. Now those memories are rubble, and the rubble will soon be gone.

Home from work, then immediately out the door to the polling station to vote. Poll #1103 was at Altadore Elementary School, about six blocks from where I live but on a street I never have any reason to travel. At the entrance to the school, the sidewalk was lined by towering sunflowers, evidently planted as a project by the children last spring. The hot summer and the automatic irrigation system combined to produce tall plants that leaned out over us as we trod into the polling station. Must be ominous at night, those things reaching out at you.

There was a lengthy lineup at the voter registration tables, unusual in my experience, but I finally got through in about ten minutes. Taking my four ballots from the silver-haired lady, I went into the booth.

For mayor: not the incumbent Al Duerr. Not challenger Floyd Allen of the Reform Church of the Druids, who hasn't been heard from since he filed his nomination papers. Not newspaper columnist Rick Bell, who raised his campaign funds by panhandling on the streets with a plastic bucket. Not Doug Service, who says he should be mayor because God has "inscribed" him. Not Ron Wise, who campaigned for a bridge over the Bering Strait. A commendable project to be sure, but not legally within the jurisdiction of the Corporation of the City of Calgary. So I voted for Ray Clark, the only serious challenger for mayor.

The plebisites: I voted to ban VLTs. They have only been around for a few years and I don't see why we need them to ruin compulsive gamblers' lives. Those who are bankrupted by gambling then go on welfare, or try to raise a grubstake by embezzlement or theft. If someone points out how prohibition failed, I would reply why stop at VLTs. Legalize drugs and child pornography; the difference is only in degree, not in kind. I voted in favour of fluoridation.

For senator-in-waiting: I wrote "None of these" across the ballot. It was the most satisfying vote I've made, even if only a couple of scrutineers will see it.

AND THE WINNERS ARE ...

Al Duerr back in with 73% of the vote, quite a comedown from his usual 90+%. Ray Clark got 17%, and the lunatic fringe the rest. 58% of Calgarians voted to keep VLTs. All of the incumbent aldermen and school trustees were returned, a blow to the right-wing group Progressive Group for Independent Business, which had hoped to sweep its candidates in. Two Reformers elected as senators-in-waiting. When hell freezes over, which will be a long wait. A dismal 45% of eligible voters turned out, not too surprising for such a dull election.

WILDLIFE IS WHERE YOU FIND IT

1998-10-23

The trees have mostly all dropped their leaves, although every park seems to have one stubborn tree still green. The cotoneaster hedge along the front sidewalk of my house dropped its leaves, revealing, much to my surprise, a paper wasp nest about the size of a grapefruit. During the summer, the cotoneasters were dense green with no hint of the nest, which is not more than a few centimetres from the public sidewalk. I've never been too bothered by wasps or bees, what with dealing with them frequently at work. They will leave you alone if you leave them alone; one year there was a nest directly above my front door and I had no problem. Now that the nest in the hedge is exposed, I've seen passersby stop and poke at it with an experimental finger to see if anything happens. Given the frosts have begun and the insects are gone and hibernating, this is risk-free. One cannot help but wonder if people who poke a wasp nest are the same ones who check fuel tank levels by holding a lit match to the nozzle intake so they can see into it.

Mountain Daylight Time ended today; everyone set the clocks back one hour and enjoyed an extra hour of repose. For residents in east and north Calgary who did not use windup clocks, they had an unexpected 30 minute fallback in addition to the MST. The power was off due to a sudden load shedding by the electrical pool that supplies Alberta's energy needs. The Tory provincial government, in a fit of privatisation, had deregulated the electrical generation industry a few years ago. Now instead of regulated monopolies which build capacity ahead of demand to ensure stable electrical supplies, there is a free-for-all of private companies out to maximize profits at the expense of infrastructure maintenance. At the time deregulation came into effect, Alberta had a surplus capacity of 100 megawatts, and generating companies were quick to sell at any reasonable price they could get. The Tory government was able to point with pride, etcetera.

Since the price of electricity is now set by the free market, and companies will not build new capacity until after the demand is created, supplies now lag behind demand. The result is increasing prices. New capacity is slow to come on stream because it costs roughly \$1 per watt to build a new generating plant. We've mostly run out of valleys to dam for hydroelectricity, wind generation is favoured by Greenpeace townies who don't have to look at the visual blight of the windmills and opposed by rural dwellers who do, and nuclear power is a non-starter even for the most rabid Tory. That leaves coal-fired plants, but then brings the environmentalists in. Adding to the misery is the booming Alberta economy; 29,000 people moved to Calgary alone last year.

Earlier this year, the power companies began to warn that rotating power blackouts would be needed this winter when the plug-in season began. Everyone has been warned not to plug in their cars until after the

peak evening hours after supper. Cars are plugged in usually when the temperature gets down to  $-20^{\circ}\text{C}$  or so, depending on the condition of one's car. Plug-ins are electrical heaters attached to the engine block and keep the engine from freezing.

We've had a very mild autumn, with no cold weather yet. This made it all the more annoying when the power cut out. I wasn't affected, but those who were have been on the telephone to their local Tories. Premier Ralph and various ministers responsible have been saying blithely all summer that there is nothing to be concerned about, even though they were constantly contradicted by power companies. Now the Premier has vowed an enquiry as to why nine generators went down at the same time and caused the load shedding. The Tories are nervous; this could haunt them at the next election and implode their chances of re-election. They are even saying publicly that perhaps the industry should be re-regulated.

Back during the oil boom of 1981, when the federal government introduced the National Energy Policy that let Ontario and Québec loot \$50 billion dollars of oil from western Canada, a very popular bumper sticker on cars was "Let the Eastern bastards freeze in the dark". Since all buildings in Alberta are heated by natural gas furnaces which require electricity to run the forced-air fan, this bumper sticker is coming back to remind us of the thing called hubris.

The Kondratieff long-wave is an economic cycle of 50 to 60 years, sometimes called the two-generation cycle. It takes two generations to forget what happened in the last economic disaster. The businessmen who call for deregulation of everything had the benefit of growing up in a regulated society. They never knew the Great Depression except as boring stories told by elderly relatives. Now they are starting to get an inkling that the government, as inefficient as it might be, is not always in the wrong.

This royal throne of SMOFs, this sceptred city,  
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This precious stone set on the Great Lake shore,  
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Or as a background welcoming a host,  
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