

OPUNTIA

58.5

ISSN 1183-2703

October 2005

OPUNTIA is published by Dale Speirs, Box 6830, Calgary, Alberta, Canada, T2P 2E7. It is available for \$3 cash for a one-time sample copy, trade for your zine, or letter of comment. Americans: please don't send cheques for small amounts to Canada as the bank fee to cash them is usually more than the amount. US\$ banknotes are acceptable in Canada at par value; what we gain on the exchange rate we lose on the higher postage rate to USA. Do not send mint USA stamps as they are not valid for postage outside USA and I don't collect them.

Whole-numbered OPUNTIAs are sercon, x.1 issues are reviewzines, x.2 issues are indexes, x.3 issues are apazines, and x.5 issues are perzines.

COWTOWN DOINGS

The Mouse That Scurried.

2004-11-23

I was standing on the platform of the University LRT station, waiting for the next train downtown. A well-dressed woman in her 40s stood a few metres in front of me, and several coeds were scattered about. I was gazing absentmindedly up the tracks, watching for the train and thinking about nothing in particular.

Suddenly the woman shrieked (that is the correct word) and scampered behind me, clutching my shoulders. This startled me for two reasons. Firstly, she had obviously seen something terrible that I hadn't, and I was in a panic that I was about to become an innocent bystander. Secondly, I didn't know her from Eve. While I do not object to attractive women clutching at me, I'm not good at the social graces with strange, overly-familiar women on an LRT platform. A coed gasped and backed up. She pointed at the platform wall baseboard and quavered "A mouse!".

It was indeed the common field mouse, a frightened individual that had somehow gotten onto the platform and couldn't find its way out. It turned this way and that, seeking safety, but its movements brought it directly toward the woman, who emitted another shriek, albeit at a lower volume, and hastily backed up several steps on the stairs.

The mouse zigzagged about and finally found a gap under the platform door, thence to freedom.

“I can’t believe I did that!”, said the woman, not a little embarrassed at what happened. I smiled at her but couldn’t think of anything to say. The train arrived and we departed. I glanced out the train window and saw the mouse scurrying along track wall, undoubtedly happy to be quit of the station.

As the train rumbled towards the downtown core, I got to thinking about how disconnected city dwellers are from animal life beyond cats and dogs. Working a 12-hour weekend shift for the Parks Dept., I often see coyotes in the dawn and dusk hours, dashing across roads or trotting down park pathways. They hide by day, so most people never see them, or if they do, think they are a stray German shepherd. Some people phone in to Trouble Calls about a stray dog in their park, and my first question is always “Does it have a pointy face like a fox and a body like a shaggy German shepherd?”. The answer being yes, as it always is, I explain that it is a coyote and we do no control on them. Leave them alone, ma’am; they are part of nature.

I handle wasp and bee complaints from panicky citizens, terrified that they will die from a sting (allergic reactions to hymenopteran stings are extremely rare, much like peanut butter allergies). There are no rats in Alberta, but we have millions of Richardson

ground squirrels, incorrectly called gophers, which some citizens expect us to exterminate to the last squirrel because they dig up lawns. Cougars, bears, and moose commonly enter the city from the adjacent mountains via the river park systems, touching off police responses that would not be out of place for a hostage taking incident. -2-

The Parks Dept. Mosquito Control suddenly had its budget increased a few years ago when West Nile virus arrived in Alberta, even though the annual mortality rate is the same as one day’s mortality from influenza or meningitis, about which nobody worries. Corvids (crows, magpies, ravens, jays) are an alternate host for West Nile virus, so people were phoning the Fire Dept. asking for a hazmat crew to remove some road-killed magpie. As Parks Trouble Calls Supervisor, I was called out to parks for dead birds described over the phone as a crow but which turned out to be a pigeon, or a squashed raven on the road that obviously died from vehicle impact, not the virus.

There Is Hope Yet.

As the train rumbled downtown, I noticed a young boy sitting a few seats ahead across the aisle. He was deeply engrossed in an Isaac Asimov paperback. Not an overweight nerd with glasses, he was a typical-looking middle-class suburban boy with his hockey clobber tucked in underneath his feet. I couldn’t make out the title

of the book but it was an older edition of Asimov, not the recent re-issue of I, ROBOT put out for movie fans who think they're buying a book with Will Smith in it.

I was pleased to see this. Lots of people read on the train, but they are commuters with newspapers, secretaries and shopgirls with Harlequin romances, or students with textbooks. This is the first time I've seen a kid with a good book, instead of blasting away on a Gameboy handheld or listening to a Sony Walkman. The future may not be as illiterate as thought.

Hospital Blues.

2005-01-24 and 25

I came down with the flu over the past weekend, and thought I had recovered by yesterday, when I began suffering severe stabbing pains in my temples and ears. I tried to tough it out with extra-strength Tylenol but by 23h30 the pains were so bad I feared I might actually be having a stroke. I called a taxi and went to the Foothills Hospital emergency ward.

It was midnight when I got there and registered at the triage desk, then took a chair in the waiting room. In emergency wards, cases are taken in order of medical priority, not first come, first served. I was a bit blurry with pain and sat down without noticing the people around me. I glanced at the fellow sitting beside me, he looked back, and I suddenly realized he was one of my co-

workers from Parks. His name is also Dale (there are three of us Dales in Parks, all about the same age; for some reason the name must have been popular in the middle 1950s).

Dale the Other had brought in his wife, who was suffering severe back pains and was hunched over in a wheelchair. I asked him how long they had been there. He said three hours. I looked at the wall clock; since her pain was as bad as mine and she would probably go in ahead of me, I would be there until 03h00. About once every fifteen minutes someone would be called in. I tried to sleep sitting up in the wire-frame chair, actually succeeding in dozing off from sheer tiredness. I discovered that if I kept my head absolutely motionless, the pain would dwindle away, but even a slight movement brought renewed stabbing pains.

At about 01h30, the triage nurse came out and said that the hospital had run out of empty beds because of a series of traffic accidents. No major crashes; just a flurry of the usual SUV idiots who thought they were invincible on icy roads because they had 4-wheel-drive. "We ask for your patience", she said, not noticing the pun. We were too wrapped up in our pain to do more than settle back for a renewed sleep.

Dale the Other's wife was called in at 03h00. I dozed off again. I awoke fifteen minutes later because the sound of the room had changed.

There were about ten police constables escorting four young punks who had been in a knife fight. One kid had his hand wrapped in a bloody towel, two held gauzes to their heads, and another was clutching a towel to his side. The constables lined them up in a row at the triage desk as the nurse did a quick scan.

The gang members affected a devil-may-care attitude which may have been a pose to cover their fright or more probably was real. "Look at me, a cool urban fighter!" One of them started to clown around with a hip-hop dance routine but when he turned and saw a dozen angry patients glaring at him from the waiting room, he suddenly stopped and shamefacedly turned back around. What made the rest of us angry was that they bumped us back down the line, those of us with legitimate medical problems. The only consolation we got was that their wounds were quickly stitched up. I saw them come out again nicely bandaged but in handcuffs for a stay in a police cell.

I finally got called in at 04h00. A series of tests over the next few hours showed I had a sinus/ear infection. I was given industrial-strength painkillers and a prescription for antibiotics, and sent on my way. My medical treatment was no cost to me, of course, since Canada has universal medicare, but prescriptions are not paid for by medicare. Most Canadians, myself included, have Blue Cross, which covers 80% of prescription drug costs. I stopped at the hospital pharmacy on my way out and had the

prescription filled. In my buzzed-out condition, I handed the pharmacist my credit card to pay the 20% balance. Not until she was ringing it up on the cash register did I notice that the amount I owed was only \$2.61. I apologized to her and offered to pay cash but she said it had already gone through the credit card machine. This surprised me because I thought businesses didn't like charges for amounts under \$5. This is the smallest amount I've ever charged since I got my first credit card thirty years ago. In my blurry condition, I took a taxi home, and as the rest of the city was rising for work I retired to slumber. Fortunately it was my day off and I could sleep it away. And so to bed.

You Know You're Getting Old When ... 2005-03-07

I was buying some items in a department store when the cashier asked me if I had a 55+ Discount Card. As I was only 49, this was a bit of a shock. Almost as bad as the time a clerk asked me if I knew I resembled Rip Torn.

ON THE JOB

On A Lovely Winter's Day. 2005-03-04

Calgary had a very mild winter. It seems to be a good correlation that every time eastern North America gets hit by a blizzard, we

get a chinook. And now, as March begins, we are in the home stretch. March is the snowiest month of the year in Calgary but the cold temperatures are gone and it never cools off more than down to -15°C.

And so to the first day of my regular weekend shift (Friday to Sunday, 12 hours) as a Parks Dept. Trouble Call Supervisor. The first call of the day was a sad one, an order from City Hall to lower all Parks flags to half-mast in honour of four Mounties slain yesterday during a raid on a marijuana grow-op in rural northwest Alberta near the village of Mayerthorpe. The last time that many police constables died in one incident was 120 years ago during the Second Riel Rebellion of 1885 in northern Saskatchewan. All of Canada grieves. The Prime Minister has declared a national day of mourning for next Thursday.

Most of the parks that have flags are average parks with only one or two flags. The travel time is longer than lowering the flags. Two parks that take a while are Confederation Park and Battalion Hill. Confederation Park has fifteen flags, one for each of the ten provinces, three territories, the maple leaf, and the 1967 centennial flag. Trundle, trundle, trundle. The Battalion Hill park has two sets of flags, one at the top of the hill and the other at the bottom. The only vehicle access is from the top, and I must go down and back up endless stairs. Puff, puff, puff. I know cardiac exercise is good and I certainly could lose a few kilos of weight, but even

so. On my way back up the stairs, I stopped a couple of times, ostensibly to admire the view, but truth be told to catch my breath.

On Ice.

I was driving down a street and stopped at a long red light, enough time to watch a tow truck driver trying to free a parked car embedded in ice. We haven't had much snow this winter but this street is shaded by trees and houses which slow its melt. The car had obviously not been driven all winter, and the accumulated snow around it had partially melted and re-froze, locking the wheels into a 30-cm deep block of ice.

The tow truck driver had lifted the back end of the vehicle straight up but the front wheels were still encased in ice. He couldn't repeat the procedure at the front end because there was another homeowner's car parked in front of it, also embedded in ice. As I watched while waiting for the light to change, the tow truck driver lifted the back end high, then put tall blocks just behind the front wheel wells. He then lowered the back end to ground level, which caused the car to act as a lever and pivot on the blocks. This levered the front end up out of the ice, albeit with a tearing noise as the sidewalls pulled loose from the rims. The light turned green and I had to move on, so I didn't see if the tires just needed re-inflating or if the tires were torn. It was a nice application of basic physics.

Green Ash And Truck.

My next trouble call was a report of a boulevard tree having dropped a branch into the road. What I found was a green ash across from Foothills Hospital. A large branch that had obviously been taken off by a passing delivery truck with insufficient clearance was slumped onto the boulevard. I pruned off the damage and loaded the branches in the back of my truck. No further action required.

Green Ash And Cat.

2005-03-06

It was near the end of my weekend shift and I was unloading my tools from the truck and putting them away. The building door was propped open so I could carry in the equipment. Walter the cat made a sudden appearance and scurried into the building like a mouse in an LRT station. He is a grey shorthair who lives directly across the street in one of the houses and often comes to visit when the weather is nice. This was the first time I had seen him all winter; he hates snow. The warm weather we have had over the last few days has melted off all the snow, so now he can resume his self-appointed rounds.

Sometime during the winter, a pruner on the weekday shift had brought in a chunk of green ash wood for whatever reason, and it had been lying on the lunchroom table ever since. The log was

about 15 cm in diameter and 40 cm long.

-6-

I was busy unloading tools. Walter was smart enough to realize he wasn't going to get a back scratch for a few minutes yet, so he began exploring the room. After poking about for food scraps on the floor, he hopped onto the table and discovered the wood. He began rubbing the bark, then licking the cut end of the log. I've never seen a cat react like that before except to catnip.

At quitting time, he was still chewing on the log. Normally I clear him out of the building by holding open the door as if to exit, and he gets the idea. This time I had to pull him off the log and carry him yowling out the door, as he scabbled to get back to the wood. Walter is a fat cat. Like most neutered males, he is fat to begin with, and he has spent years making the rounds of us neighbours mooching food on top of what he gets at home. Carrying him out under protest was not an easy task. Once outside, I gave him a back scratch but this time he was not mollified, and meowed at me indignantly. Quitting time is sacrosanct, and I wasn't about to put in unpaid overtime so a cat could get wasted on green ash. We went our separate ways; he to his rounds, in search of more green ash logs no doubt, and I to my car and thence to home.

Everybody Famous Dies On My Shift.

2005-04-02

I was hoping the ailing Pope John Paul II would hold out a couple more days until the weekday shift, but alas, he died today, a

Saturday. Once more I had to make the rounds of all the parks with flags and lower them. Endless flags at Confederation Park, up and down the big hill at Battalion Park, and driving through shopping mall traffic everywhere. His funeral will be on Friday, which means I will have to raise the flags on my shift, not stick the weekday shift with it. The Queen Mother, Alberta's Lieutenant Governor, the four Mounties, and now the Pope.

Speirs's Law: Everyone famous enough that flags are lowered for them will die sometime between Thursday night and Sunday morning.

Someone Not Famous.

2005-05-08

Sunday morning of another shift. A routine drive through various parks, including Bowness Park, which is one of Calgary's most heavily used parks. Bowness Park is an island along the south shore of the Bow River. The park has four main sections: a lagoon with a concession stand, the east end accessible by a cul-de-sac, the west end loop, and a natural area west of the loop. Security guards open the gates about 05h00 and lock up again about 23h00. During the summer there are full-time staff on duty 12 hours every day, but this time of year the shifts haven't started up yet. The only people working in the park are the concession stand operators, who are not City workers but lease the facilities. They are an English couple who came to Canada several years ago

and invested their life savings into a new start in life.

I drove around the west loop about 09h00 or so and went out again. No problems visible. About noon I received a telephone call from a police constable. He told me that a woman's body had been discovered by hikers in the natural area. Was there anyone who could have seen anything? I told him my details and suggested he contact the security people to get the exact time the gates were opened and closed. We were both talking on cellphones. Every so often, he had to interrupt our conversation to tell hikers that no, you can't cross the yellow police-line ribbon, and sorry, the west end of the park will be closed for the rest of the day.

Late in the afternoon, I drove out to see how the situation was going. The west end of the park was festooned by what must have been at least a kilometre of police-line ribbon winding through the trees, with cruisers parked at intervals to keep the rubberneckers out. I talked to a constable, who told me, between mouthfuls of his hamburger, that the Violent Crimes Squad would probably be done by nightfall.

It was a warm spring day, and the park was relatively full with people barbequing or strolling along the Bow River. Children played in the tot lot not far from the police lines. On my way out of the park,

I stopped and chatted with the concession owners. Julie told me they had done good business, not with rubberneckerers, but with the police, who appreciated the convenience of a hamburger stand adjacent to their murder investigation. The corpse wasn't yet on the radio news, so the rubberneckerers were ordinary park users and locals taking their daily walk or exercising their dog.

Back at the depot, I checked City Beat, the on-line police report system. When the initial report was posted, it was inconclusive, only saying that a suspicious death had been discovered.

Known To Police.

2005-05-09

Today's City Beat said that the death was not considered foul play, the dead woman was known to police (she had a prior record for theft), and that the body had been dumped in the park. She was a transient who had been drifting through life on the streets. It is believed that she was a diabetic who went into a coma and died. Her "friends" apparently panicked and dumped the body away from her place of death. Undoubtedly they had other things on their conscience for which they would prefer avoiding the attention of the constabulary.

Known To Cause Aggravation.

2005-05-27

Friday morning of another weekend shift. I came in to find that

yesterday the techies had come by and "upgraded" the computer. The old beige CPU was replaced by a black IBM box, which now runs Windows XP Professional. It took me an hour to find my e-mail because all my personal settings were gone and I had to drill down past all the large icons, animated cartoons, set-up wizards, and the other detritus of Microsoft. My data files were all on my H drive, and were unaffected by the change since they reside on a server downtown. Unfortunately, it turned out that my e-mail distribution lists were not carried over from the old version of Outlook, and I will have to reconstruct them from scratch.

I use WordPerfect 8 at home on a Toshiba laptop, that is not and will not be connected to the Internet. I use the University of Calgary Library computers to get my e-mail via Yahoo and Hotmail. Call me a semi-Luddite.

Fluffy's Fate.

2005-08-06

I was attending a wasp nest call in a far northern suburb of Calgary called Hidden Valley. The original name was Symons Valley after the first homesteader, but the developer decided that name wouldn't sell houses. I ripped out the wasp nest from the shrubbery with a pole saw, and then squashed it flat with a scoop shovel. I never spray unless absolutely necessary.

Having made Hidden Valley park safe for dog walkers and soccer moms, I began driving out on the pathway. I was stopped by a young mom who had a wad of posters for her lost cat. She asked if Parks Dept. might have caught any cats in gopher traps. I explained that we never used snap traps; ground squirrels are controlled by treated grain down into their burrows. She said that as she had been distributing the posters, several of her neighbours mentioned their cats were missing as well. I told her my first thought would be coyotes. "In the city?!", she wondered in astonishment. Yes, ma'am. Coyotes were here 8,000 years before us and will be 8,000 years after we are gone.

MORE COWTOWN DOINGS

Rain, Rain, Go Away.

2005-06-07

May was very dry, but June started off with a bang. Originally Environment Canada predicted scattered showers, which was later upgraded like my computer, first to "periods of rain", then "rain", then "flood watch", and finally "those living in low-lying areas are asked to make preparations". I live up on the plateau, so the worst I got was a bit of minor seepage into the undeveloped part of my basement. The last two days have been a steady drizzle all along the eastern slopes of the Rocky Mountains in southwestern Alberta. Some towns in the foothills have been getting half their

annual precipitation in two days, and are watching the rivers rise.

This morning I was doing some odd jobs around the house and had the radio playing in the background. Suddenly it began beeping loudly. The station was CJSW student radio from the university, commercial free but also sometimes competence free as well, so I assumed the student jockey had hit the wrong button. I changed stations but the beeping was everywhere, so now it seemed the radio had failed. Just as I was about to shut off the radio, the beeping stopped and a computer-generated female voice began speaking. It or she announced that this was the voice of Alberta Disaster Services and please listen carefully to the following message. That message proved to be a male voice generated by someone who was not a computer, and probably not upgraded either. He advised that flooding was underway throughout southwestern Alberta and began reciting a list of rivers and creeks that had overflowed. This included the Elbow River which flows through a deep canyon (about 50 metres down) ten blocks east of my house.

People were being evacuated throughout various small towns, but I had no sympathy for them. Anyone who buys a house on a valley bottom cannot claim to be surprised when they find out that it's called a floodplain for a good reason. It was the first time I had ever heard Alberta Disaster Services pre-empt all the radio stations. Shades of CONELRAD!

The Water Is Wide.

2005-06-08

The aforementioned Elbow River canyon is choked off by the Glenmore Dam, built during the Great Depression when it was far into the countryside from Calgary. Nowadays our neighbourhood is considered inner city. The dam mainly serves as a water reservoir although it does have a small electrical generation system.

Today the dam overflowed for the first time in its history. Because of the dry spring, its level had been kept up high, so the sudden two-day record rainfall caught the Waterworks Dept. off guard. The spillways were opened wide as the flood crest advanced toward Calgary from the mountains. The dam was designed to handle an overflow of 100 cubic metres per second but now twice that was flowing over the spillways. The police blocked off the valley floor below the dam, but the escarpments were lined with spectators, one of whom was me. This was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to photograph. The dam reminded me of Niagara Falls.

Once More Into The Breach.

2005-06-17

We had a few days of respite, and I managed to get my front lawn mowed. As it turned out, the By-Laws Dept. announced a moratorium on issuing weed notices for long grass. But today, a

Friday and a new shift for me, the rains returned, this time onto saturated soil. Calgary has now received 75% of its annual precipitation in the last two weeks. The sump pump in my house has been running almost continuously; the past ten years it never ran at all. -10-

Five minutes before quitting time I got a trouble call about a tree down across the road. This turned out to be a full-size poplar that failed at the root plate and was stretched across the avenue, just missing a parked car. I couldn't get the chainsaw started because the weekday shift didn't properly service it when they put it away. I said the hell with it and set up barricades to block the road for the night. I'll get the Urban Forestry crew to clear it up tomorrow morning.

Waterworks had lowered the Glenmore Reservoir three metres below the lip of the dam, hoping to prevent any overflow the second time around.

2005-06-18

The record rainfall continued. Numerous trouble calls all day for mature trees flopping over as their roots lost their grip on the wet soil. I was also called out to Bowness Park by the park attendants. The Bow River had risen up and was spilling into the park. I've been in Parks Dept. for 25 years and this is the first time I have seen Bowness Park flooded. The island is about 2 metres above

normal river level. I ordered the park to be closed. The main gates were shut and the staff began moving Parks vehicles and equipment to higher ground.

The Glenmore Dam overflowed a second time, and by late afternoon the Mayor issued a compulsory evacuation order for people living downstream. It was the first time in Calgary's history (founded 1875) that a compulsory emergency order was issued by the City government. The dam was now spilling 400 cubic metres per second, and the Elbow River at nine times its regular volume. I wonder what the third thing will be.

I got a call about a footbridge at the bottom end of Bowness Park being flooded. I went down there and found the police had already run yellow ribbon across the pathway. Water was washing across the deck of the bridge and the approaches were gone. The bridge was marked for death.

There are always some slow thinkers in any society. Out in the Sheep River district of the Kananaskis mountains (on the west side of Calgary), a group of campers decided that they weren't going to let the rain stop them. Not a lot later, the park wardens had to evacuate them by helicopter, as the river surged through their campground. As much as it would have been tempting to apply the law of natural selection, it would have been politically incorrect to let them drown.

Abruptly the rain stopped, and we had sunny skies and 20°C. I kept Bowness Park closed all day today because there was standing water throughout, even though the Bow River was slowly dropping down. The island is covered with railway ties, washed in from the Keith railroad yards opposite and upstream about 2 kilometres. Flocks of ducks are paddling around the playfields. The Canada geese have concentrated at the east end where there is a dry area and are nibbling on the lush grass. I estimated about 100 geese.

I checked the Bowness Park footbridge and it was gone. Probably halfway to the Saskatchewan border by now. Parks Dept. has a number of island parks, and various footbridges and causeways have been swept away. Prince's Island, a major part of the downtown core, is missing both its upstream and downstream ends. The main causeway to it is gone. As the island normally hosts the Canada Day festivities, this will require everything to be moved elsewhere. Further downriver, a private two-lane bridge owned by Lafarge, who had gravel pits on one side of the Bow River and their crushing plant on the other, was also swept away.

At quitting time, I met Walter the cat as I locked the depot door and gave him a quick scratch. I checked my personal cellphone and discovered my uncle had been

evacuated from his 6th floor apartment down in the Mission district. The building is across the street from the Elbow River, which came up three metres and slopped over onto the street. The skyscrapers there were relatively safe, but there was danger of water blocking the streets, so a mandatory evacuation order was issued. Uncle Norman had been roused out by a police constable late Saturday night. The building owner had another skyscraper further inland, and he took his tenants over there and put them into a banquet hall until they could get settled with family or friends. My brother Neil took Norman in at his house.

Instead of going straight home from work, I veered over to Neil's house and visited a while. As we were talking, Norman got a phone call from his building superintendent telling him that people were being allowed back in. I drove Norman back home. En route, we crossed two police roadblocks and discovered no one had told them about it. But the constables were level-headed enough to see that a middle-aged Rip Torn look-alike and his elderly uncle weren't potential looters, and waved us through. The streets had been scrubbed clean by the flood but were dry. I saw Uncle Norman to his door, and thence myself to my door high up on the plateau. Thus endeth another weekend shift.

The Third Thing.

2005-06-28

We had a week of relatively dry weather, and the seepage in my

basement was almost gone. I managed to mow my entire yard, a half-day job because the grass needed a hay-baler more than a lawnmower. The sump pump continued to run though, as there was still groundwater flowing. I suspect that I am actually pumping out the entire block, as I noticed several of my neighbours had furniture and carpet drying on the front lawn, and disaster service janitorial firms have vans parked everywhere.

But today, yet another bout with heavy rainfall. Calgary got 50 mm in one day but we were fortunate in that the weather system did not come quite as far north as the last two, and we only caught the leading edge. It was enough, however, to send water across my basement floor again. The good news is that I am taking the weekend as vacation so as to attend the Westercon science fiction convention July 1 to 4 here in Calgary. It will therefore be my relief who has to deal with any flooding in the parks.

The Hurricane.

2005-09-04

Over the last week, New Orleans was hammered by Hurricane Katrina, with hundreds dead and the parishes flooded by broken levees. Calgary's flooding is trivial by comparison. What astonishes me is that people would live in a city that is two metres below sea level, sandwiched between a huge lake and a seafront known for its hurricanes, protected only by levees built to withstand an average storm, not a Category 5 one such as Katrina.

What saddens me is that billions of dollars will be wasted rebuilding a city that has no business being there, never mind the jazz musicians and creole food. It would be cheaper just to buy out all the New Orleans homeowners and turn the city into a natural park. What annoys me is that because the oil refineries and deep water port were located in the wrong place, even Canadians are paying more for gasoline. Alberta has the cheapest gas in Canada, but today it went up to \$1.10 per litre because the Louisiana refineries are underwater.

Granted that Alberta will profit from the high oil prices, the sad fact remains that every Canadian city at rush hour still looks like an SUV assembly line. I drive Honda Civics, so the boost in price is of no consequence to me, since the cars get 600 km on a 40 litre tank. It was amusing to see the long lineups of SUVs at service stations three days ago when word of the impending price hike got out. One interesting thing is that the service stations had Y2K problems. The fuel pumps are all electronic and can handle four digit prices, but the big roadside advertising signs do not have the extra digit. Most service stations in Calgary solved the problem by taping a '1' in front of the number. Some have left them blank, and you won't discover the price until you get out of the car at the pump. Canadians are whining about high gasoline prices and demanding the government Do Something. My suggestion is to quadruple the price of gas to drive the SUVs into the junkyards but that of course is pure fantasy.

FESTIVALS.

Stampede.

2005-07-12

The world's largest rodeo, the Calgary Stampede, is on, and I went down to the grounds today. Lovely weather we're having; a nice toasty 28°C today. I've written about the Stampede in previous years, but it doesn't change much from year to year and I don't care to repeat what I've previously published. I wandered around looking at the livestock exhibits and took in the various displays, as well as stuffing myself with fairground food.

I was sitting in the arena waiting for one event to begin when I overheard a conversation behind me.

She: "I lost my necklace!"

He: "It's on your neck."

She: "I'll forget my head next."

He: (tactful silence)

The Calgary Co-op, which is the largest retail co-op in North America, had been selling cowboy hat lapel pins with flashing LEDs. Science fiction fans are familiar with these as they have been a fixture at SF conventions for years, but they are relatively new to Calgary mundanes. When the arena lights were dimmed for the event, there were more flashing lights in the audience than on the stage.

The Mountains.

2005-07-26

Today I went into the townsite of Banff, albeit the eastern edge, not the overcrowded tourist trap that is its downtown core. The townsite runs up against Tunnel Mountain on the east, a small spur of the adjacent Mount Rundle that is only about one-quarter of its parent's height. The Bow River cut between the two of them during the end times of the Ice Ages about 8,000 years ago.

There is no tunnel in Tunnel Mountain, which often confuses tourists. The mountain got its name back in the 1800s from the white folk when the first railroad was being surveyed through the area. (The nearby Nakoda tribe call it Bison Mountain because of its profile.) The Bow River abuts it so closely on the south end that the railroad surveyors couldn't find a route for the rails there, and proposed instead that a tunnel be drilled through the mountain. The management took one look at the map and asked the surveyors why they didn't just plot the railroad around the north end of the mountain across the level valley floor. I'm sure there must have been an embarrassed silence among the surveyors at overlooking the obvious. Charlie Shaw, the railroad supervisor at the time, said that the proposed tunnel was "*the most extraordinary blunder I have ever known in the way of engineering*".

Tunnel Mountain has a footpath to its top and is very popular with townsite residents as a jogging path that really gives you cardiovascular exercise. The rest of us prefer to amble up to the top more slowly and admire the view up and down the Bow River valley. -14-

Ambling was indeed what I had been doing, and I had just returned to my car at the trailhead. As I opened up the car, I was accosted by a lady tourist who wanted to know how to get to the mountain. I explained to her that we were standing on it. Her next question was how to get to the top, so I told her that the trailhead was the footpath immediately adjacent to our cars. "But where is the gondola?", she asked. At that, the penny dropped, and I realized she had confused Tunnel Mountain with Sulphur Mountain on the far side of the valley, which is a full-sized mountain equipped with gondolas and a tearoom at its apex. I pointed it out to her and explained the difference. "How do I get there?", she then asked. Since the townsite streets were laid out below us, I pointed out the route, basically "Go up the side valley until you see gondolas."

I began to wonder if she was descended from those railroad surveyors. She departed in search of her mountain, although I would not be surprised to learn that she subsequently ended up in Winnipeg, still looking for the gondolas.

Whenever I go out to the Rocky Mountains for a day trip, I stop off at the town of Canmore, which is just outside the Banff National Park gates. I visit a supermarket and buy some sandwiches from the deli section, then go on into the park and eat them at the Cascade Pond picnic area before beginning my day's hiking.

I parked my car and walked into the picnic grounds, passing a 13-lined ground squirrel squatting on a siltstone boulder and contentedly sunning itself. I sat at a table, munching away, when a young couple pulled into the parking lot and got out for a walk. They had a vigorous Dalmatian dog who whisked past me, running freely. Dogs in national parks have to be leashed at all times, as this one wasn't. The couple walked around the perimeter of the pond, the dog excitedly gamboling about tracking wildlife scents.

A park warden drove in and parked at the far side of the pond, watching the couple and their dog. As they reached him, I saw him talking to them. The wife put a leash on the dog, as the husband pulled out his wallet and handed his identification to the warden. The warden wrote him a ticket. In all the years I've been going to Cascade Pond, I've seen dozens of loose dogs but this is the first time I've seen a warden on duty.

I walked back to my car, and passed the ground squirrel still sunning itself on the boulder. And thence to Bow Lake, at the northern end of the park. The lake, overlooked by Crowfoot Glacier and Bow Glacier, is always cool no matter how hot it is elsewhere, due to the natural air-conditioning. The entrance area is right on the highway and crowded with tourists, but I knew of a shoreline path seldom travelled. The carnivorous butterworts were in full bloom. No sight or sound of other tourists. I could almost convince myself I was deep in the heart of untrammelled wilderness. Almost, but not quite. As I looked up to the mountain tops, I saw above them numerous contrails high in the sky. Bow Lake is apparently directly under the Calgary to Vancouver flight path of passenger jets. There is always some reminder of humans.

And thence to Calgary, taking the old Trans-Canada Highway. This is mostly a two-lane road but at the entrance to Calgary it widens out into a four-lane divided highway. Just as I drove onto the four-lane section, a coyote made a dash across the highway from my side. I didn't see it come out of the ditch but caught a glimpse of it from the corner of my eye as it hit the asphalt running at full speed. I almost hit it, but the coyote swerved in time and managed to gallop between the back of my car and the vehicle following. I watched it in my rearview mirror as it streaked across the median and got past the cars going the other way. Old rural Alberta joke: "Why did the coyote cross the road? To get to the chickens."

No Park Warden in Sight.

2005-08-29

I haven't been getting out to the mountains much. In fact, today was only my third trip. The problem has been that we have been getting hot sunny days on the weekend, when I am at work, and rain during the week when I am at liberty. Today promised to be nice, so off I went.

As usual, I made my pit stop at Cascade Pond. As I was munching my sandwiches, I saw what appeared to be a dog roaming loose on the far shore. Its owners didn't seem to be nearby. Then I noticed all the other tourists turning their cameras on the animal and I suddenly realized that it was a coyote. It trotted along the shoreline, staying clear of the tourists, and then went back into the bush.

My Traveling Box Number.

2005-09-26

After graduating from the University of Alberta in 1978, I immediately moved 250 km south to Calgary because I couldn't bear the thought of spending another winter in Edmonton. I first lived in a rooming house in Calgary and got my box number so that I would have a stable address no matter how often I moved.

Originally Box 6830 was located at 8 Avenue SW and 8 Street at the west end of the downtown core. Easy parking to dash in to get

my mail, and the bus stopped a block away if it was my day off. In August 1990, Canada Post merged that station (Station D) with two other downtown stations, C and M, and put them into the old post office building on 9 Avenue SW and 1 Street. Us box holders had to put up a squawk to get 10-minute parking and to evict the taxis that loitered in front of the post office because of an adjacent hotel. No bus stop though. But eventually everything settled down.

Alas, my box number has moved again. The old post office was sold to a developer and the postal outlet moved to 5 Avenue SW and 6 Street at the end of September. No parking on one side because of a turning lane, nor on the other side because of a bus stop. We are squawking. There is one nice thing for me. At the two previous locations, my box number was at floor level, but in this location it is at chest height. I don't have to stick my hand in and feel around for mail because I can now see it without getting down on my knees. One minor glitch to the new location was that they forgot the garbage cans. Soon to be remedied, said the postie.

I Heard From: Joseph Major, Dewitt Young, John Held Jr, Chuck Stake, Dawn Amato, Randall Fleming, Jerry Kaufman, C.Z. Lovecraft, Billy McKay, Gene Ray George, Karen Gory, Jose Roberto Sechi, Kris Mininger, Ficus, Chester Cuthbert, Sue Jones, Terry Jeeves, Sheryl Birkhead, Henry Welch, Lloyd Penney, Jason Burnett