

Dpuntia 4.5



OPUNTIA is published irregularly by Dale Speirs, Box 6830, Calgary, Alberta, Canada, T2P 2E7. It can be had for \$1 cash, a letter of comment, or trade for zine. All back issues are available at \$1 each. Whole numbered issues are sercon, [.]5 issues are perzines.

ART CREDITS: An unknown City of Calgary staff artist did the cover, which is from a poster explaining to the general public about the Parks Dept. leaf recycling. We either turn the leaves into compost or use them as mulch in the Parks tree nursery. The chart on page 4 comes from T.C. Brayshaw's "Native Poplars of Southern Alberta and Their Hybrids" (1965, Canada Dept. of Forestry), and is used by gardeners to settle arguments about identifying a given tree.

EDITORIAL: Q. How many Royal Commissions on Constitutional Reform does it take to change a lightbulb? The answer: One, but it will take eighteen months, fifteen million dollars, and replace the bulb with another burned out lightbulb. And that, ladies and gentlemen, sums up the constitutional debate in Canada. I suspect that Canada will eventually wind up with a looser confederation than currently exists, perhaps something like the new USSR.

Q. How many Ottawa mandarins ... A. One, but the bulb must come in a bilingual package. Q. How many Reform Party members ... A. One, as long as the bulb is not a distinct one. Q. How many Bloc Quebecois ... A. One, but only if Quebec has exclusive jurisdiction will the bulb be actually changed. Q. How many NDPers ... A. One, but the new bulb will be red.

One nice thing about working at Bowness Park is that we have the most advanced telephones of anyone in the North Area. Even management over at the head office doesn't have such phones. Our telephones are programmable, with speed-dialing (the most heavily used feature), intercom (not used since our offices are immediately adjacent to each other), and all sorts of other features.

I have a university education and pride myself on being a quick learner, but after hours of trying to program the telephones, I had to admit defeat and call in the Communications department. The Section Chief himself came out to the park, and we spent a couple of hours of reading instruction manuals before finally figuring out how to program the telephones. These phones are like VCRs; you really need an eleven-year old kid to set them up properly.

There are three phones in our building, one for my office, one for the assistant foreman, and one in the lunchroom. Since all three are clustered together, it is easier to shout out the door "HEY, FRED!" than to try to remember which buttons to push to work the intercom.

Unfortunately, one frequent problem is that people using the lunchroom phone don't know how to work it. They get frustrated when their call doesn't go through, and start pushing buttons at random. As a result, all three telephones end up blinking weird symbols on the display, and I have to go through the instruction manual and see how to restore the status quo.

While the telephones are state-of-the-art, the actual transmission lines are about ten or twenty years old. Both telephone numbers for the park are subject to scratching noises when being used, and it is sometimes impossible to carry on a conversation over the noise. The repairman has been out several times and replaced parts of the line, which is riddled with splices and patches.

When the Mounties arrived in 1875 at the junction of the Bow River and Elbow River, the land was treeless except along the water. Today, the city of Calgary has a large urban forest, kept going only by lots of water and tender loving care. Trees have a hard time of it because chinook winds strip away snow cover and soil moisture. In Alberta, it is actually easier to grow trees the farther north you go, even though temperatures are colder. This is because there is more snow in the central and northern parts of the province to insulate the roots, on which winter survival of a tree depends. Calgary does not have much snow on the ground in winter. Polar storms dump a thick blanket of snow during a blizzard, but this is soon removed by the chinooks, and a normal winter's view in Calgary is brown. [Interpolate here a vision of Bing Crosby singing "I'm dreaming of a brown Christmas"]

Most trees in Calgary are poplars, spruce, or elms. Because Alberta does not have native elms to act as a reservoir for Dutch Elm Disease, no one worries too much about it, and it may be that we will be the last place where one can find streets lined with large mature elms.

A few Parks foremen, myself included, keep lists of rare trees in Calgary. The oak Quercus macrocarpa is found in several places; on 17 Avenue NW there is a row almost ten metres tall. I know of one large silver maple on a boulevard; it is shaded and protected by elms. There are at least two Ohio buckeyes in the city. I've never seen it, but there are rumours of someone in northwest Calgary who successfully grows a Ginkgo biloba in his backyard.

Most introduced ornamental trees and shrubs in Calgary are proven performers such as Russian olive or caragana, both from Siberia. The older parts of the city are most likely to have the unusual species. In Bowness Park, a number of rare species grow, relicts from earlier exper-

iments. Twining honeysuckle, for example, has seeded itself amongst the dogwood shrubs. Coming down into the park one passes what appears to be an ordinary hedge, but which is actually Korean barberry. There are other plants of this species elsewhere in Calgary but only as specimen shrubs, not a long hedge. These rare species were planted over the years by gardeners long gone and forgotten. I suspect most of the rare species tried vanished from neglect, leaving only the ones that could fend for themselves. Today, because foremen are so frequently transferred, no one bothers too much in experimenting if they will never have a chance to see how things work out.

There is some hope. We have a foreman at the Parks Tree Nursery who is not afraid to experiment. Confederation Park was built in 1967 and planted along its edges with poplars. One poplar began producing variegated leaves about ten or twenty years ago, leaves with a mosaic pattern of yellow and green. I thought this might be a virus infection similar to tulip breaking (you've seen them; their flowers look as if they were tie-dyed.). Lab results said the leaves were a natural somatic mutation, not a virus. Some twig cuttings were taken, and hopefully the Nursery can produce variegated poplars from them. I can only hope that John isn't transferred and his replacement digs up the trees under the impression there is something wrong.

One informal project that is going on is the search for a pure-blooded plains cottonwood male. Female poplars are unwanted because they produce cottony fluff. At the height of the fluff release, parts of Calgary look as if a blizzard had struck in July. I brought in a street sweeper this summer to clear off the fluff and dehiscent catkins on the road system in Bowness Park. Because poplars in southern Alberta are still evolving, they hybridize very easily. The pure cottonwood Populus deltoides occidentalis is

almost impossible to find. We know of a few, but will have to wait until next spring to determine the gender of the trees. Male catkins are different than female catkins, but both are only on the tree for a few short weeks before dropping off.

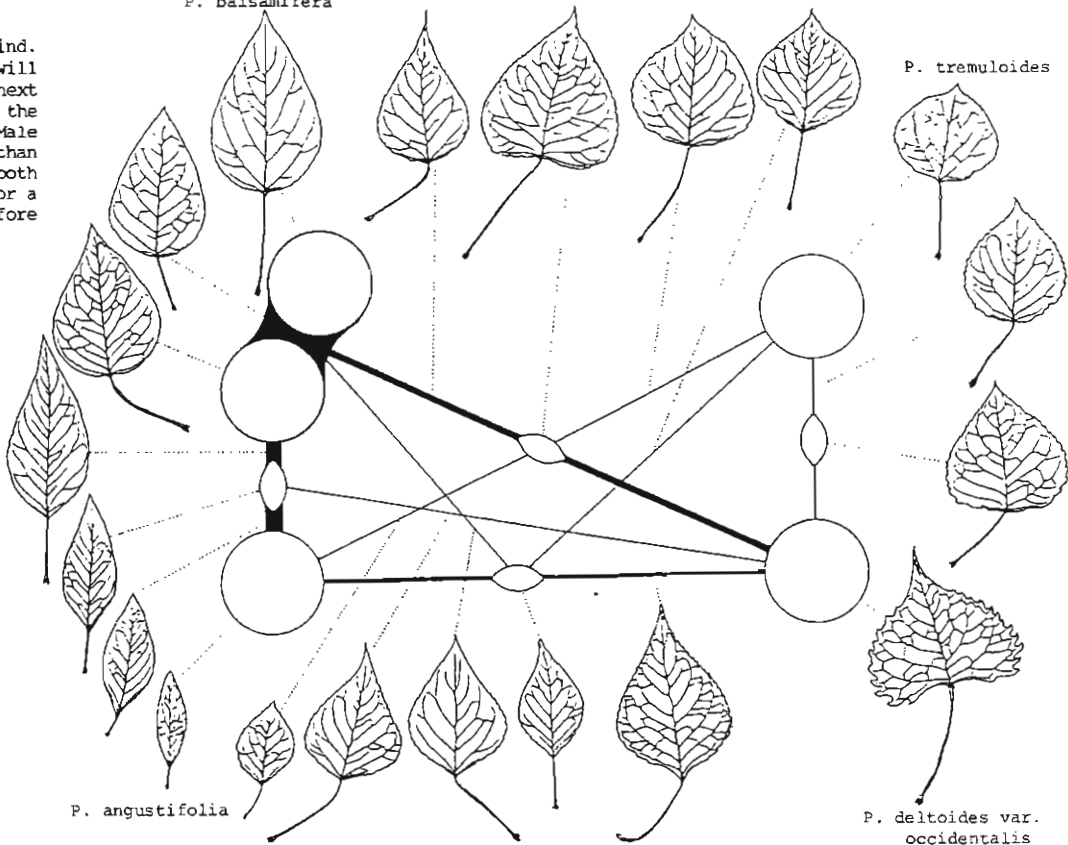
There are several 'pure' species of poplars, but most trees growing in the riverbank parks such as Bowness are hybrids, with intermediate leaf shapes. The diagram shown here demonstrates the continuum from one species to the next. The kind we are looking for is at lower right.

Poplars have the same lifespan as humans. A poplar in native habitat will live about a century. In urban areas, their lives are shortened by road salt and smog. Since a fifty-year-old cottonwood hybrid can have a trunk one metre in diameter, many Calgarians are under

P. balsamifera

4

P. tremuloides



P. angustifolia

P. deltoides var. occidentalis

the mistaken impression that these trees are centuries old.

KEEPS ON TICKING!

1991-10-8

I had some spare time today, so I took a canoe out and went for a paddle upstream the Bowness Park lagoon channel. A great way to relieve stress and still be on official City business. There was no wind, and the current in the channel is very slow; you have to stand and watch for several minutes to see any motion in the water. The clarity of the water varies depending on river flow. If the Bow River is turbulent, then the channel water is murky. If the river is flowing swiftly and smoothly, then the lagoon and channel are clear. Such was the way the water was today, and I could see the bottom perfectly. The minnows, the branches left by beavers, the pop cans, the leaves, and all the other garbage that accumulates on the bottom over the summer.

One thing I did see lying on the bottom was a watch with a broken strap, obviously fallen off the wrist of someone who rented a canoe or paddleboat this summer. The watch had a thin layer of silt on it, so it had been in the water for at least a month, maybe more. I hooked it out to see if it was still useable. It was! In point of fact it was a Timex watch, and as soon as I wound it up, it began ticking.

Gliding silently through the water, the sounds of the city are gone. One feels like being out in the middle of the forest, not in a suburban park. As I coast along soundlessly, I see a man on the bank of the channel. He is carefully hand-digging something. I glide up to him so quietly that I am upon him before he sees me. What are you doing?, I ask. He is digging for worms. I advise that this is not permitted in a park, and ask him to restore the sod. He'll be back at it later, I have

no doubt. It does however, clear up one mystery that had me baffled all summer. I kept finding spots on the channel bank that had been dug up and turned over for no reason I could see. Now I know.

About halfway along the channel, between the lagoon and the river inlet, there is a storm sewer that cuts across the channel. The upper half of the pipe is exposed, above the channel bottom but below the water level. A canoe will go over it with a couple of centimetres to spare. The concrete of the pipe has been broken at a joint, and the water flooded into the pipe. As I glide over the pipe, I notice a school of minnows sheltering inside the hole. I'm not really sure if they are minnows or juvenile game fish such as trout. Earlier this summer, at the opposite end of the park, there were huge schools of these fish, easily thousands of them. Now they are dispersed and many have probably gone out into the Bow River. But a few remain up and down the channel, and as I paddle along, I can see them on the silty bottom.

Continuing westward, I am now in an area of spruce-lined banks. Many of the trees are leaning far over the channel. One was blown down this summer in windy weather and is partially blocking the channel. We'll take it out this autumn when the lagoon is drained for its annual cleanup. No sense trying to cut up a tree while splashing around in the water with a chain saw. Other trees are leaning over because water lapping at the shore has undercut the banks, and beavers have cut some as well. Is this where cathedrals get their inspiration from? I don't know anything about Gothic cathedrals but I wonder if the builders were trying to recreate a forest in the high arches of the churches.

Back at the maintenance compound, I put away the canoe. I get in my truck, and immediately hear my boss calling on the two-way radio about a problem in now-

[continued next page]

ing the Trans-Canada Highway. People show up asking for solutions to problems. The workday hassles return with a vengeance. But at least I had an hour or so to unwind a bit.

A WALK TO THE WILD SIDE

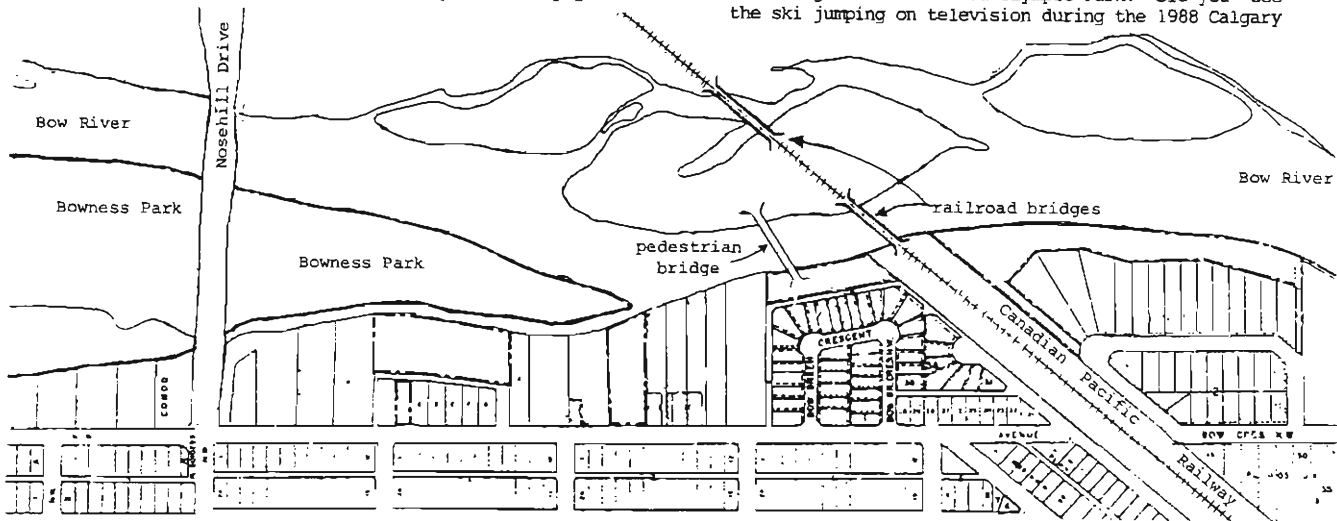
1991-10-9

I don't know why, but this morning I woke up with a very severe headache, something I suffer rarely. By the middle of the day, I had consumed eight aspirin to no avail and could hardly concentrate on the job. I would have gone home sick but I have a reputation to uphold; in eleven years on the job I have only had two sick days.

In the hopes that fresh air might do the job, I left my office and went out for a stroll to the east end of Bowness Park, in the opposite direction to my canoe voyage

yesterday. I walked through the dense stand of mature poplars, shaded and gloomy all summer but now suffused with an ethereal golden glow, as the sunlight can now penetrate to the ground whereupon it is immediately reflected back up by the yellow leaves that have fallen.

I had that day assigned a labourer to remove a beaver dam from the east end of the channel, where it flows back into the Bow River. The beavers had been trapped by the Fish & Wildlife officer. The east end of Bowness Park is natural woodlands, east of Nosehill Drive (85 Street NW) bridge/causeway, which cuts over the island. There are several beaver dams but only the one at the outlet was to be removed, because it was on the exact spot where a pathway is to be built in the next few years. The other dams flood an area of putrid silt washed out from a storm sewer drain that originates at Canada Olympic Park. Did you see the ski jumping on television during the 1988 Calgary



Olympic Winter Games? Well, immediately below the ski jumps, they had to regrade the slope the summer of 1989. They seeded the new slope back to grass, after which the seed and soil went into the sewer system due to a severe thunderstorm. Calgary is a city afflicted with these storms every summer. The Olympic Park basically filled in the entire east end of the channel with eroded soil. Last winter, a crew of several tandem-axle trucks and a giant backhoe spent a month or so digging out most, but not all, the silt in order to get the channel flowing.

There are still large areas of sandflats in the east end of the channel, but two of the beaver dams have covered most of the mess. This end of the island being natural, we don't bother protecting the trees with chicken wire wrapped around the base of the trunks. The beavers keep the trees in a constant state of regrowth.

My labourer had just finished the job when I arrived at the outlet, so after a brief chat with him, I continued eastward. Although the pathway system does not exist here yet, the channel outlet has stepping stones that I used to skip across to the other side. On the far side, there is only a narrow footpath that winds up and down the steep riverbank. I was surprised to see a few flowers still in bloom this late in the year, particularly a species of Campanula that was obviously an escape from nearby gardens.

The footpath eventually connects with the established pathway system at Twin Bridges. These are two railroad bridges, one after the other, that cross the Bow River over a group of small islands. The local children like to get on the railroad bridge in the summer and dive into the water. Unfortunately, a few of them were killed by fast-moving grain trains that caught them on the bridge. This rail line is the main C.P.R. line to Vancouver, over which much of our grain is exported. The line was there a century ago, and is not to be moved. As a result of the deaths, the City of Calgary and C.P.R.

got together and made plans. The bridge was fenced off with chainlink, and a new pedestrian bridge built just upstream. The kids still jump off the railroad bridge; remember the stupid and dangerous things you did when you were young? The new pedestrian bridge is tied into the riverbank pathway system and is very popular with joggers and dog walkers.

I turned about before reaching the bridge, and walked back to the office. My headache was still with me, although not as bad, whether due to the aspirin or the fresh air, I couldn't say.

THE TRUE MARK OF BUREAUCRACY

The City of Calgary Data Processing Dept. employs six people to design forms and other types of paperwork. The Forms Services Unit is headed by a Forms Controller, who has four Forms Analysts and a Forms Information Assistant.

A few years ago, I went on vacation during the summer for a week (normally I go in February). My relief was a gardener who took all the incoming paperwork and put it in a desk drawer to await my return. Unfortunately, he forgot to tell me about them, and I didn't discover them until about six months later. No one seemed to have missed anything.

I heard a story about a World War 2 army unit in the Pacific. A young officer, fed up with ridiculous paperwork, made up his own form that detailed monthly use of toilet paper in his unit. He listed the rolls on hand at the start of the month, quantity shipped in, and amount left over. He sent in his form with all the other required forms; just slipped it in quietly to see if anyone back at HQ would notice. Several months later, all the other units got a memo asking why they hadn't sent in their toilet paper reports.

SUGAR-COATING REALITY

1991-10-6

I was at the University of Calgary Library this morning, and while waiting for an elevator, idly glanced at a map of the building. Some of the washrooms have been converted to handicapped access, which is all very well. I was rather disgusted to note that they were labelled as "washrooms for the differently abled". Political Correctness strikes again.

I well remember when I first noticed this business of euphemisms, about twenty years ago in Red Deer, where I grew up. Red Deer is about 100 km north of Calgary, at the halfway mark on Highway 2 between Calgary and Edmonton. The Mitchener Centre, named after a local hero who grew up to become a Canadian Governor-General, is near my parent's house, and is an institution for the mentally retarded. Back in the early 1970s, they suddenly stopped referring to their charges as retarded, and began calling them 'exceptional'. While it is true that exceptional people can be below average as well as above average, the modern usage is generally someone who is above average. Nowadays they are called mentally challenged, or Down Syndrome patients.

I can understand why wheelchair-bound people do not want to be called handicapped, but is physically challenged a better synonym? I think not. I seen a few jokes on the Politically Correct that play on this nonsense. A short person is someone who is vertically challenged, A fat person is someone who is horizontally challenged. If you are deathly allergic to cats, then you are, of course, feline challenged. I'm certain you loccers can come up with many other examples.

An economic collapse used to be called a panic; then a depression. A brief downturn in the economy was a recession; now it is a soft landing. I wonder what the next great depression will be called? Perhaps a Kondratieff cycle nadir.

THAT TIME OF YEAR

1991-10-15

With Thanksgiving turkey still wending its way down our digestive systems, we began the work this morning of preparing Bowness Park for the winter. Last night, just before he went home, the evening shift worker opened the outlet drain of the lagoon. He also closed up the outlying washrooms in the park and put "CLOSED FOR THE SEASON" signs on them. The main public washroom near the entrance to the park is open year round since it is on a water main. The other washrooms in the park are run off the irrigation system, which is was drained and blown out today. They are unheated as well, another reason why they are shut down for the winter.

The lagoon water level dropped about 5 cm overnight, which is actually slow drainage. The reason is that the inlet from the Bow River, which supplies the lagoon, is still open. This sets up a current which helps flush out some of the debris in the water. A few days from now, we'll close off the intake and let the lagoon drain completely. It takes two or three weeks for the muddy bottom to dry enough for workers to go out and rake up all the leaves, twigs, bottles, and other garbage of the summer.

When I came to work this morning at 06h30, it was quite warm, and the day's high was about 25°C. As I got out of my car in the parking lot, I was impressed with the brilliant stars in the night sky. Living in the big city, usually only the brighter stars can be seen, but this morning's display was excellent.

The park will be in a lull for a week or two, then a giant crew will come in from another district to do the autumn cleanup. After that, another lull before the lagoon is refilled in November and turned into a skating rink, at which time a 24-hour shift will resume.

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I took the golf cart out and drove down to the east end of the lagoon to double-check the outlet. On my return, I was held up by heavy traffic on the pathway, about twenty Canada geese crossing from one side to the other. Throughout the summer, large flocks of Canada geese have been stuffing themselves in the park. When visitors are around, the geese gorge on popcorn and bread crumbs. The rest of the time they nibble on grass along the water's edge. They are not the only moochers; there are lots of mallard ducks, and a sprinkling of seagulls, ravens, and magpies. A couple of years ago, all the garbage cans had to be converted to a special \$200 type with a heavy lid because the magpies and ravens were emptying the cans and scattering the debris as they sifted choice morsels of cold French fries or bits of tomato. Even the squirrels get into the act, climbing inside the cans and rooting around for food.

The leaves have mostly all fallen, although every park has at least a few trees which resolutely cling to their leaves or even refuse to change colour. The Korean barberry hedge in front of my office is only now just turning to red and orange. A lot of people have the misconception that leaves change colour because of frost, but the real reason is the days are becoming shorter. In the summer, the green leaf colour is provided by chlorophyll. There are other photosynthetic pigments as well, but they are in lesser quantity and covered by the chlorophyll. With short days, chlorophyll production is halted, and the other pigments dominate. Xanthophyll is responsible for yellow leaves, carotene for orange, and anthocyanins for red and purple. Carotene is also the cause of orange carrot roots.

THE CALM BEFORE THE STORM

1991-10-16

I closed the lagoon intake this morning. The channel and lagoon level had dropped to the Bow River level and then stopped draining. Now, with no river water coming

in, the lagoon will drain completely, albeit slowly over several days. I had some trouble closing the intake to the channel. This is an earthen dam with a large culvert at the bottom, through which water flows into the park. A guillotine-type gate drops over the culvert and restricts the water flow. If the gate is all the way up, water is unimpeded; all the way down, and the flow is cut off completely. Over the summer, a number of rocks had been tumbled by the river current to a spot directly under the gate. As a result, it couldn't close completely until I got down into the water and fished out the rocks.

A cool, windy day today. Heavy snow began at 16h00, our first snow of the season.

THE STORM

1991-10-17

Crews were sent home today; no work due to the snow. But that is not the storm of which I speak.

I was called into the main office at Confederation Park and told that I am being transferred to South Area, the week after next. I've only been at Bowness for eight months. It isn't just me; about twenty or so people are being shuffled around the city. The anger in the Parks Dept. is widespread. So many shuffles have taken place in the last few years that many people have given up and now just put in their time. There is no interest in planning ahead and thinking how one might improve a park. Why bother when we'll not be around to follow up? My greatest upset is not that I'm being transferred, but rather I am going to a district with no real parks, just windswept playfields, boring tot lots, freeway berms, and cookie-cutter neighbourhoods. Suburbs like Cedarbrae and Oakridge (there are no native cedars or oaks in Calgary) or Woodbine (the first time the developer did was bulldoze out all the trees).

STILL NO NEW THING UNDER THE SUN

Two thousand years ago, Petronius Arbiter wrote the following paragraph.

"We trained hard ... but it seemed that everytime we were beginning to form up into teams, we would be reorganized. I was to learn later in life that we tend to meet any new situation by reorganizing, and a wonderful method it can be for creating the illusion of progress while producing confusion, inefficiency, and demoralization."

YOU LOAD SIXTEEN TONS ... OF LEAVES 1991-10-21

Tennessee Ernie Ford died a few days ago.

Bowness Park lagoon should have drained completely over the weekend but this morning it had only dropped 50 cm. The intake is closed off, the upper reaches of the channel are almost dry, the water seems to be flowing out the other end, so why won't it drain? We had a labourer with a long hook clearing out the grill in front of the outlet that traps the leaves and twigs. Maybe they were plugging up the flow. We'll find out tomorrow if it works.

I had eight people on the leaf cleanup crew start today. Twelve more labourers are coming from Riley Park tomorrow. The open areas are swept with tractor-drawn power sweepers, the confined areas in between the trees will be done with self-propelled sweepers, and the shrubs are done by labourers with backpack blowers or fan rakes. It is expected to take about two weeks to clean up Bowness Park. Trucks with a nominal hauling capacity of four tonnes will be used to haul the leaves away, which are loaded with a front-end loader. Although the trucks are loaded fully and packed down, the light density of the leaves means that a full load only weighs one tonne. The

leaves are taken up to Spy Hill Landfill Site, one of three serving Calgary. At each site, Parks Dept. has a compost pile, where all the leaves are dumped. The pile will be turned regularly by a bulldozer, and in a year or so, there should be some good compost. The compost is mixed in with our loam supply to extend it and thereby stretch our budget. Loam becomes more expensive every year as supplies dwindle. Calgary is in Chernozemic soil zones, which is grassland loam, the best there is. Other cities have problems when they are located in Luvisolic areas, which are woodland soils. You may be surprised to know that trees do not nourish the soil; they strip nutrients out and keep them above ground, whereas grasses have most of their biomass belowground and thus keep the nutrients in the soil. If Chernozemic sounds Slavic, it is. It was the Russians who developed modern soil science as it is known today. Canada therefore follows the Russian system, mainly because soils are so similar in the two countries. The USA has a different system of soil classification with different names. When I was in university, the courses I enjoyed the most were the soils courses. Fascinating stuff actually, how they develop and change. Everyone fusses about endangered species, but few people worry over soil conservation, which is a far greater threat to our species. No soil, no crops, no food.

I drove by Shouldice Park this afternoon, past the soccer fields along the Bow River. Hundreds of Canada geese, dare I say thousands?, just covered the place. Most were nibbling grass, as these irrigated fields are one of the few places left with fresh green grass. At Bowness Park, the grass along the lagoon's edge was always well trimmed by the geese. I don't think you really wanted to know, but Canada geese droppings are a nuisance; they are not the white splatters you'd expect from most birds. They are thick, ropery, and green, and near the lagoon one does not walk in bare feet.

Or maybe it has prostate problems. In any event, the last few days have been occupied in trying to get Bowness Park lagoon to drain completely. It should have emptied out completely in two days, but instead it was only dropping about 15 cm a day. We finally had success today.

Everybody was working on it. Waterworks came out with a leak detection crew in case a watermain was leaking into the lagoon. Sewers sent out a crew to power flush the drain. Although the drain is flowing quietly, and some water getting out, it should have been gushing like Niagara Falls. Finally, we brought in a Confined Entry crew. They went down into the drain and cleared out a beaver's nest. Overnight the lagoon emptied.

This now leaves another problem. The lagoon was being drained because we wanted to pick up the garbage that accumulated during the summer. Because the water was still there when -10°C weather hit a few days ago, ice about 1 cm thick covered the lagoon. When the water was finally drained, the ice still covered the lagoon, so we can't clear the bottom. More cold weather is predicted, so I suspect nothing can be done before the ice skating rink begins this winter, in which case the garbage will be there until next spring.

I spent about one hour a few days ago showing my replacement around Bowness. So much for on-the-job training. Today, I went down to South Area to meet with the man I am replacing. Another couple of hours on-the-job training. He is moving to another district as well. I will be in charge of the Mapleridge district, bland and dull as its name. It includes older suburbs about twenty or so years old, and brand-new suburbs. Lots of freeway mowing, more than I ever dealt with in North Area. Lots and lots of twenty-year-old poplars, overplanted by the developer because they were cheap and fast-growing. This means lots of citizen complaints about leaves.

This morning I attended an open-house displaying proposed plans for 50 Avenue SW, which runs a block away from my house. About twenty years ago, City Council established a long-range plan to convert 50 Avenue into a major east-west route and bridge it across the Glenmore Reservoir to Macleod Trail on the other side of the water. This would involve demolishing a half block width of houses, building a biig bridge across the Reservoir without either affecting the dam that holds the Reservoir or disrupting the Water Treatment Plant that supplies half of our drinking water, and rezoning evrything within 500 metres of the road. At the time the plan was approved, people didn't worry about smashing freeways through residential neighbourhoods. Times change of course, and today Calgary community associations can make or break an aldermanic career. There is now community input into these plans, and the open-house was to show the alternative plans. 50 Avenue could become a four-lane divided highway as mentioned above, a major road that is undivided, or a discontinuous road with no through traffic. It'll be years before the final decision.

I went along more to stay informed than out of any real concern. Even the freeway option would leave my house a half-block away, and because the roadbed would be depressed below ground level and screened by berms with sound barriers, I would not have any problem with noise or fumes. I would have to drive an extra four blocks to get home, but that is no bother.

All the freeways (called 'Trail' in Calgary because most were originally cattle drive trails) are being retrofitted with sound barriers. These are concrete walls three metres tall, usually set on top of berms. Parks Dept. mows the freeway boulevards and sound barriers are a nuisance. We call them Berlin walls for obvious reasons.

LETTERS OF COMMENT

[Editor's remarks in square brackets]

FROM: Harry Andruschak 1991-10-18
 Box 5309
 Torrance, California 90510-5309

Thank you for sending OPUNTIA 3.5, which arrived while I was on a short vacation to a Dude Ranch up in Kern County. I will be writing this up for my perzine later on.

I have, like you, bought some life memberships in various groups, when I had enough spare cash. One of my better bargains was a life membership in the U.S. Chess Federation. Another was in the Sierra Club. But some of my life memberships have not worked out so well. For example, I bought a life membership in the Los Angeles Science Fantasy Society. This gives me the right to attend the regular Thursday night meetings without paying dues. Only thing is, since I moved down to Torrance three years ago, I now seem to attend LASFS about once a year!

Then there was my membership in the L-5 Society. I also became a life member in the World Space Foundation. Well the W.S.F. seems to have run out of steam, and the L-5 Society got eaten up by the National Space Institute when the alleged 'merger' of L-5 and NSI produced the current National Space Society. I despise the current N.S.S., and feel my life membership is not worth the money in the NASA arse-kissing outfit. Now that I am 47 and short of money I have not invested in any new life memberships for some time. Maybe later when my cash flow improves.

And now what to say about parks. Here in L.A. it mostly means drug dealers, prostitutes, and muggers at night. I believe the giant shopping malls have taken over the social function that parks used to represent.

[Although Calgary is by no means crime-free, most of police work is done in tavern parking lots, downtown back alleys, and apartment lobbies. In parks, crime is generally confined to vandalism, the occasional car prowling, and drunken parties in the small hours of the morning.]

Your comment on beavers and the anti-fur lobbyists reminds me that I will probably cause a small riot at the next LOSCON. I am active in the Royal Scottish Country Dancing Society. (Life memberships not offered.) Obviously I have a kilt, etc., and I was planning to wear my Highland attire at LOSCON for the Regency Dancing. So what is the problem?

The problem is that I don't wear anything under the kilt. No, seriously, the problem is that my sporran, that pouch hanging on the front of the kilt as a substitute for pockets, is made of animal fur. It is known as a 'Musquash Head Pocket Sporran'. Very traditional. It will be interesting to find out what LOSCON fans think about it. Much of LASFS tends to be Politically Correct, and I think being anti-fur is part of the mind-set. And that sporran cost me \$175, mind you. (Part of the reason why I don't have money to buy more life memberships.)

[I have no trouble dealing with anti-fur people. Ask them why they support genocide of the native tribes who no longer have a source of income. Or ask them what their shoes are made of. Leather? Synthetic polymers made from petroleum? Cotton or linen fabric made from pesticide-drenched plants?]

Winnipeg winning the 1994 Worldcon may stimulate the fanzine community. Or maybe it won't. Speaking of which, I'd like to attend it, but am not sure of getting the time from the U.S. Post Office, or the money.

FROM: Ned Brooks
713 Paul Street
Newport News, Virginia 23605

1991-10-30

my workers that tobacco is far more poisonous than the pesticides they spray.]

Thanks for OPUNTIA 3.5. That guy on the cover has been playing that guitar too long, time to stop and eat something ...

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

1991-10-31

A zoo I went to in Australia had emus and the smaller kangaroos allowed to mingle with the visitors. The kangaroos paid little mind to anyone; if the kids bothered them too much they would just move off. Nothing bothered the emu. It would seize anything you might have in hand and eat it in case it might be good. I did a sort of dance with one, facing it and bobbing my head up and down. Apparently there is no chance they will attack a person, though they are large enough (about four to five feet tall) to do some damage if they tried.

Besides the Metro Toronto Zoo, there are small zoos here and there in the Big Smoke, but the zoo I remember most is the small one in Beacon Hill Park in Victoria. Besides having a series of small pens, home to a few animals including a family of albino peacocks that screamed piercingly every few minutes, there were small protected aviaries in which uncommon species of birds would nest in specially-built homes and drilled holes in the trees. Watching the birds fly around was an engrossing pastime for many people there.

First I had heard of anyone drinking Lysol, but looking at the can I have here I see that it states that it is 79% ethanol, which is grain alcohol, almost 160 proof! The other ingredients, except for the carbon dioxide propellant, sound rather nasty.

The best Toronto parks for squirrel watching are High Park (sometimes tough to find them because of the terrain, but several hundred live there in a fairly large wilderness area) and Queen's Park (I don't mean the politicians either ... in walking past this park I have seen as many as twenty at once, and the park is flat and relatively small.).

I know what you mean about hazardous materials. As Facility Safety Head at the windtunnel, I have to maintain inventories and Material Safety Data Sheets on all sorts of nasty stuff, and watch out for the asbestos still encapsulated in place. Would you believe there is an MSDS for 'Skum-X', a "partially hydrolyzed vegetable protein" that is meant to be sprinkled on engineering drawing originals to prevent smudging? Looks like parmesan cheese but has no odour. They were not able to determine an LD50 for it, which is the grams per kilogram of body weight that will kill half of the test group of rats, ie, 'Lethal Dose 50%'.

Library discards are how I got my personal book collection started. Over the period of a year, Yvonne and I must have travelled to ten or eleven book sales and picked up every SF book we could lay our hands on. This kept me busy reading, and suddenly our collection looked respectable. I didn't tell people that I had discards from nearly every library between Hamilton and Pickering.

[One of these days I expect to see an MSDS for distilled water. I like to use the LD50 tables to demonstrate to

FROM: Buck Coulson 1991-10-18
 2677W-500N
 Hartford City, Indiana 47348

The idea of woodchucks in parks seems a bit strange since I'm trying to eradicate them from our barn, but I suppose for city dwellers they are just another zoo animal. I'm surprised you can keep them in a fenced area; the reason I want them out of the barn is because they are destroying the concrete floor. They can go through four inches of concrete with no trouble at all. How deep does the Zoo fence extend underground?

[That I couldn't tell you. The Zoo is a separate operation of the Parks Dept., run in conjunction with the Calgary Zoological Society, in which I have my life membership. They may use wire mesh. Your woodchucks can punch through concrete? Holy moley!]

Political colours seem odd to a U.S. citizen; our politicians all promote the red, white, and blue, in hopes of being identified with it.

[Here, Progressive Conservatives (Tories) use blue, the Liberals (Grits) use orange, Social Credit (Socreds, and right-wing despite the name) are green, New Democrats (NDP, social democratic) are red, and Reform (right of centre) are also red. Ralph Klein, now a Tory, was Calgary's most successful mayor (97% of the vote in his last civic election before going to provincial politics) used black and white as his colours.]

Your squirrels sound smarter than the ones I know. I was coming home from work one afternoon some years ago and saw three squirrels in the middle of the road ahead of me. One ran to the right side of the road, reversed and ran across and off the road on the left. One ran to the left side, reversed and ran off the road to the right. The third one headed straight down the road in front of the car, and kept it up until I was almost on top of him

before veering off to the side. Then there was the time in town when a squirrel fell out of the sky in front of me. I assumed he'd been crossing the street on an overhead cable and lost his balance, but for a moment I had visions of it raining squirrels.

Your homeless story reminded me of a WASHINGTON MONTHLY article about the homeless. The reporter discovered that a good many of them are out on the streets because they WANT to be there. They refuse to accept any restrictions on their lives, such as washing, and out on the streets they're 'free'. The article said some, mostly women, are homeless because of lack of enough money to rent an apartment, but a lot of the men actually have homes they could go to. They just don't want to go there. By community standards, they are a bit nuts, or disturbed, or whatever the current euphemism is.

[I've haven't seen the transient at Shouldice Park lately; he may be back out on the Trans-Canada Highway or have gone somewhere else. As I type this on October 23rd, the last few days have been about -10°C to -5°C.]

FROM: Harry Warner Jr. 1991-10-18
 423 Summit Avenue
 Hagerstown, Maryland 21740

No doubt your fractional method of numbering OPUNTIA will eventually find its way into library science textbooks and classroom lectures. At least I hope so, because librarians will have enough trouble coping with fanzine cataloging even with such assistance. Of course, you aren't the originator of this method. The Cult has long had a complex method of fractionalizing mailings that come out when they shouldn't, and SFPA uses a fractional number when there's a postmailing accompanied by a special issue of the official organ.

[continued next page]

[I didn't think of it until after I started OPUNTIA, but it could have been numbered 1.0, 1.1, 1.11, 1.111, and so on, thus no matter how long I published I would never pub the second issue #2. I seem to recall some fanzine started out as issue #50 or whatever, and then went 49, 48, 47, 46, etc. Maybe you might know which it was. As far as fractional numbers go, I got the idea from zines such as CAREFULLY SEDATED, RASPBERRY DRINKZINE, and NEO-LOGY.]

Just now, the biggest park problem in Hagerstown involves swans. Our largest park has a lake, with swans on it ever since the park was created out of a swampy area. I only had white swans when I was a boy but eventually civil rights efforts and waning discrimination permitted the city to include black swans. But just recently the swan population, which had stood at 14, has been cut in half. Part of the blame is on people throwing too much bread at them to eat immediately, followed by mould forming on the bread and creating digestive problems when the swans finally get around to dining on it. Vandals killing swans are also a serious problem. The city government has been wrestling with three possible courses of action; let things continue as they have been going in the hope that people will behave better, confine the swans to a fenced-in area and increase police protection or move the swans to some other body of water where they will be safer and put plastic swans on the lake to maintain tradition.. Unfortunately the park is hopeless from the standpoint of security, open without barriers on three sides and protected on the fourth only by a steep bank which a healthy kid can easily scramble up or down. There is a street running through its middle, and the city doesn't have enough funds to keep police on duty after the park theoretically closes at 8 p.m. (and in actuality becomes a meeting place for drug dealers and buyers, adulterers, and various other individuals).

Hagerstown's first coed high school, built in the 1920s, had the same problem with water and sewer lines that

Bowness Park suffers with irrigation lines. The blueprints for the school survived but they didn't include any indication where the pipes ran. Every time there was a leak or severe clogging, workers tried to guess where the trouble might be, and dug up a section of the floor. If they didn't find any pipes at that spot, they dug up another area and so on until they spotted the desired object. That's one reason why the structure was abandoned for school purposes after only about three decades of use and eventually razed.

One of the very few reasons why I might consider someday living in a big city is the greater availability of used printed matter. In Hagerstown, the only establishments worth visiting frequently are the Rescue Mission and Goodwill Industries thrift stores and both places are patrolled so regularly by dealers it takes luck to find really good stuff. Fortunately, there are a few big annual or semi-annual sales by various organizations that sometimes are worth fighting the crowds to patronize. Just yesterday I had incredible luck at the local Catholic church's fall rummage sale. For \$1.50, I got a half-dozen records, including the Beatles' 'White Album', approximately as many books, and a stack of printed music. The only trouble was that they unloosed the entire first grade of the adjoining parochial school in the toy room just before I was ready to pay for my choices. I thought I was going to be crushed into insensibility by the horde of howling little kids trying to beat me to the cashier. I lost.

I ALSO HEARD FROM: Judith Hanna

FROM: Dale Speirs
Box 6830
Calgary, Alberta
CANADA, T2P 2E7

WHY YOU GOT THIS ZINE

- Noblesse oblige.
- You contributed (this ish).
- You contributed (next ish).
- We trade.
- We should trade. Interested?
- You sent money. Thanks.
- How about a letter of comment?
- This is the last issue you'll receive unless you Do Something.

TO: