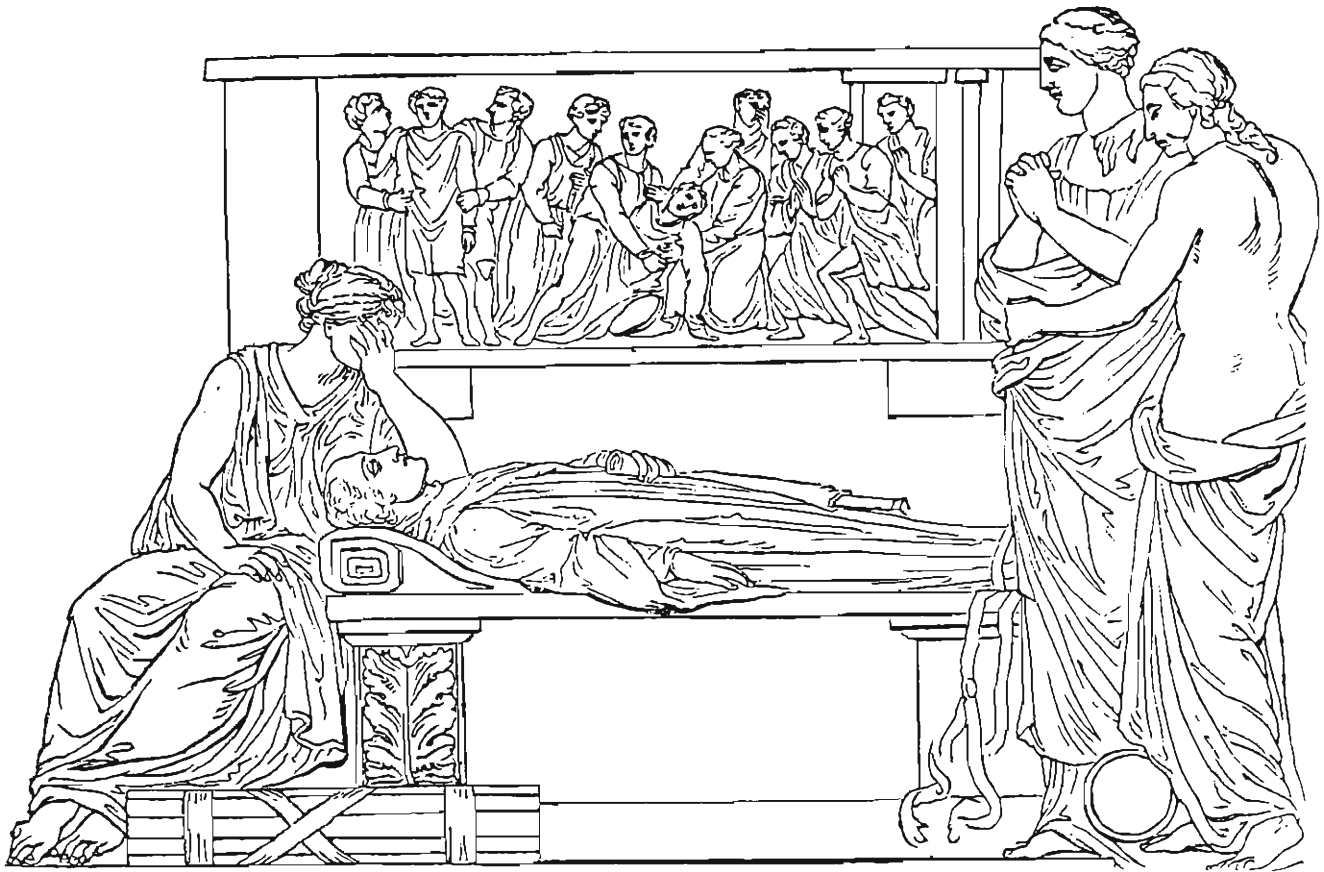


# Dpuntia 7.5



OPUNTIA #7.5

April 1992

ISSN 1183- 2703

OPUNTIA is published irregularly by Dale Speirs, Box 6830, Calgary, Alberta, Canada, T2P 2E7. It can be had for \$1 per copy, letter of comment, or trade for your zine. Whole-numbered issues are sercon, .1 issues are reviewzines, and .5 issues are perzines. Back issues are available at \$1 each. Only the following issues are available, #1,2,3,4, and 7.1. All other issues sold out.

ART CREDIT: I don't know why, but everytime I look at the cover art, it reminds me of a Parks Department staff meeting when the latest re-organization is announced. I picked up this sketch from the February 22, 1823, issue of THE MIRROR, so I assume that it is copyright-free. It depicts, according to the original caption, the monument to Mr. Perceval in Westminster Abbey. I don't know who he was, but the Greeks seem pretty cut up about his departure from this vale of tears, this mortal coil, etc..

EDITORIAL: While everybody in Canfandom looks at everyone else with an expectant look on their face, we await the definitive Canadian newszine. I've heard rumours of a newszine that might come out of Victoria. And don't look at me! If LOCUS is the American, then it stands to reason that DIFFUSUS would be the Canadian. Black holes do exist; just write a letter to a Maritime SFer and see if you get a reply. I've been trying to get an exchange going with them, but no one answers.

But elsewhere, there are a few things happening. The big event is Conadian in 1994. Supporting memberships are

US\$25/C\$30, and attending memberships are US\$75/C\$85. Write to Conadian, Box 2430, Winnipeg, Manitoba, R3C 4A7. Progress Report #1 is out.

On the national scene, there is Wilfcon 8/Convention, going June 27-28, 1992. C\$5 supporting, C\$16 attending, via Wilfcon 8, 6-69 Donald Street, Kitchener, Ontario, N2B 3G6.

Paul Valcour sent me a flyer about CanCon, a professional conference on Canadian content in speculative literature. It goes May 22 to 24, 1992 in Ottawa, with Guy Gavriel Kay, Donald Kingsbury, and Jeff Green as guests. Memberships are \$30 c/o James Botte, 2-45 Somerset St. West, Ottawa, Ontario, K2P 0H3. The flyer says "CanCon is a conference aimed at the professional side of speculative literature in Canada, with a focus on the process of producing works for public consumption, including the areas of writing (or production), publishing, and distribution. It will also examine the profound effects such art has on our technology and culture. The conference will be invaluable to any persons or companies who are involved or are interested in the writing, editing, criticism, publishing, or the promotion of speculative literature in the amateur or professional markets. It also promises to be enjoyable and informative to anyone who likes speculative fiction and who would like to find out more about the 'behind the scenes' of this fascinating field."

ConVersion 9 goes in Calgary July 17 to 19, 1992. This is a reliable con, year after year providing something for everyone. Their zine, XenoFile, has departed this vale of tears, this mortal coil, etc., but the rest of the ConVersion Society ticks along. Memberships are \$35 from ConVersion, Box 1088, Calgary, Alberta, T2P 2K9.

We've been doing corrective pruning in the parks for the last while. This is done on small trees to shape them into proper growth. If we don't do it now with handsaws and pole pruners, then we'll have to do it five or ten years from now with chainsaws and aerial bucket trucks. Twigs growing into the centre of the tree are removed, dead branches taken out, and the top is inspected to be certain that there is only one strong central leader. A leader is the main trunk; trees with several leaders are more likely to split in a windstorm, so they are pruned such that only one leader exists. This applies only to species such as poplars or oaks which have one trunk. An elm grows naturally into a vase shape, so this procedure wouldn't apply. Green ash are supposed to have central leaders, but since they are susceptible to dying back or windthrow they quite often end up as open-centred because the main trunk is gone. Green ash is the worst tree species to prune because it has very hard wood and because it branches at right angles, making it difficult to shape the tree.

The last park we did today was Carl Nickle School, named after a wealthy oilman, long since deceased. Calgary has a Nickle Arts Museum, the Nickle Foundation, etcetera. I told my crew that by coincidence I would be attending a stamp club meeting tonight with Sam Nickle, son of Carl. I'm not sure they believed me. I've been in Sam's house many times. He and Rosemary call it "Bel Aire Shack", a much too modest name for a ranchhouse whose basement den covers more area than my entire house; the house is bigger than my lot. They have a polar bear rug in the den, but it is a bit of a nuisance as everyone keeps tripping over its head.

There are several philatelic groups in Calgary. Largest is the Calgary Philatelic Society, with about 200 people belonging. It has subsidiary study groups such as the Australasian Study Group and the British Commonwealth S.

G.. Another club is the Calgary Regional Group of the British North America Philatelic Society, known more simply as the Calgary BNAPSers. BNAPS is an international organization devoted to the study of BNA philately. British North America comprises the various different Canadas that have existed (our present Confederation is only one of several that existed between the provinces) and the pre-Confederation Dominions that had post offices or issued stamps. Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia, Newfoundland, New Brunswick, British Columbia, Vancouver's Island (now just Vancouver Island and merged into B.C.), and the Province of Canada all issued stamps. The Province of Canada consisted of two halves; Canada West is now Ontario, and Canada East is now Quebec.

Stamp collecting, contrary to popular belief, is not just for rich folk. Sam Nickle spends thousands of dollars a week; I've spent maybe a thousand in ten years, or \$100 a year. Although many philatelists still collect stamps only, most are into postal history, which is the study of post offices, routes, and postal markings on envelopes such as postmarks. It is not considered philatelic just to collect one of every stamp. It is far harder and much more challenging to collect stamps on cover (the philatelic name for envelopes) showing the history of the post office. I collect, for example, damaged covers showing all the different ways in which a letter can come to grief in the mail system, such as plane crashes, berserk post-marking machines, floods, or truck fires. I also was an Olympic volunteer during the 1988 Calgary Games; I have a fairly complete collection of Calgary Olympic postmarks and covers. One of Sam's specialties is the Pig War of 1861, when Britain and the USA almost fought a war after an American settler on San Juan Island found a pig rooting in his vegetable garden. He shot the pig, which turned out to belong to the Hudson's Bay Company. The island was disputed territory at the time. Troops from both sides were moved

onto the island, but none of the soldiers were about to get themselves killed over some damn pig. No shots were ever fired, and the whole thing went to the diplomats. A number of letters written by the British soldiers have survived and are now in the Nickle collection. On the surface of it, they can be studied to see how mail was sent from Vancouver's Island to England in 1861, but the background behind them is much more interesting. Those who complain about today's postal service should be aware that in the 1800s it was common practice to write three copies of a letter and send them via three different routes in the hope that one would get through to its destination. Soldiers stationed at San Juan Island had reason to be happy if the mail got through, period. And while a letter could be sent around the world for a quarter or so, that was a day's wage for many people. If we still had some of the 1800s postal rates, we would pay \$200 to get a letter to Britain instead of 84¢.

The Calgary BNAPSers comprise twenty or so members and meet in homes. Tonight's meeting was at the house of a friend of mine who is a mortgage broker, and handles my mortgage. He was asking about some trees in his yard so while I was there I went out back and gave him some advice, namely cut the trees down (they were large poplars overhanging his garage). Each BNAPS meeting has a brief business session, and then is turned over to the host, who has the privilege to decide on the topic of discussion. Mike choose "mail routings". Each of us therefore brought along a cover with unusual route markings. We sit in a circle of chairs, and the host starts off with his item, passing it around the circle. Each member does the same in turn. My item was two covers from South Africa. Normally my mail from RSA goes through Montreal; I know this because every once in a while letters will be backstamped Montreal by Canada Post or Canada Customs. But recently I got a cover marked with an OCR coding from Queens, indicating that the mail route has shifted from Montreal to New York City. These two items didn't cost me a penny; I got them in my mail. This is

one reason why stamp collecting is fun. No budget to spend? You still can collect off your incoming mail.

The meetings tend to wander a bit, as every item will remind somebody of a story. I've been trying to convince one of our oldtimers, Ed Harris, to write down his stories before it is too late. He has a million memories about the hobby and has held a number of important positions internationally. Tonight he told us about a first-day cover that had no markings other than the first-day-of-issue commemorative cancel on it. But oh what memories! In 1955, Alberta and Saskatchewan celebrated their 50th anniversaries as provinces. A stamp was issued, and some Calgary collectors (including Ed) thought it would be nice to get a cover postmarked on the day of issue of the stamp in Alsask, a town on the border. Alex Stewart, a commercial traveller, agreed to look after it. Everyone chipped in money, and Alex printed off some envelopes with a commemorative cachet honouring the stamp. He sent off the covers to the Alsask postmaster, along with a cheque to pay the cost of the stamps. Alex was travelling when he got a frantic phone call from his wife. She had phoned long-distance to several towns where he had said he would be, before finally tracking him down. The postmaster had called her and said the stamps hadn't shown up, nor had he been able to get supplies from nearby post offices. Alex cancelled all his afternoon client appointments, bought some of the stamps in Regina, and spent several hours driving out to Alsask. The covers were prepared in a great rush and mailed off. On his way back, the car broke down and Alex had to spend the night in a motel before parts arrived. Later, he figured that the expense of the long-distance phone calls, car repairs, motel, and lost business made these covers the most expensive in the world. It wasn't funny at the time, but ...

I booked the month of February for my vacation, but just after I started it, I got a phone call from my boss, who wanted to know if I was willing to attend a course on Natural Areas Planning, February 18 and 19. I went in to see him the following day because I had to pick up my paycheque anyway, and we agreed that I would attend the course and have my vacation extended two days into March to compensate. And so to the course ...

But before that, this. Since the Albertville Olympics are on, the volunteers for the 1988 Calgary Olympics had been invited out to a free breakfast at Canada Olympic Park. Although COP is at the extreme west end of town, I live in central southwest Calgary, and the course was in central east Calgary (at the Stampede grounds), I decided to fit it all in. The breakfast was 06h00 to 09h00; I zipped down the Trans-Canada Highway and made it by 06h30. I was hoping for bacon and eggs, but alas, it was the pastries and apple juice kind of breakfast. I am never too proud to overlook free food however, so helped myself to a couple of pastries and strawberries. I sat down in the small auditorium with a few other people (more came in as the morning progressed) and watched the CBC morning radio show EYEOPENER, which was in progress. This show was doing a live-on-location at COP. Rather fascinating watching the split-second timing as the program switched back and forth between local announcers Bob Nicholson and Donna Cummin and the national feed from network headquarters. And yes, the technicians and announcers do point at each other when it is time to switch over to a different segment of the program. During the CBC national news, the announcers took a meal break, and came back with a third person. I thought she was a technician, but it turned out she was a reporter. In radio, as in newspapers, looks don't matter; everyone was dressed casually in jeans.

I finished my breakfast, picked up a free poster on my way out, and made a brief pit stop at my house en route

to the course.

The course was held at the Kinsmen Centre at the south end of the Stampede grounds where, each July, \*\*PLUG ALERT\*\* the world's largest rodeo is held with more than 1,000,000 visitors through the gates \*\*END PLUG ALERT\*\*. Quite a sizeable turnout at the place, not only Parks employees, but landscape contractors, lobbyists, and concerned citizens. Natural areas are a contentious item in municipal politics. I was interested to meet directly with citizens and get their views unfiltered by surveys, community associations, Parks management, or the news media. At my table I chatted with a couple of activists who had spent some years campaigning to leave Nose Hill as a wilderness preserve. Nose Hill is the westernmost foothill of the Rockies in the Calgary area, rising about 300 m above the plateau and dominating the city. Developers have unfortunately destroyed the western half of the hill with housing developments, but the eastern half has been preserved as native grassland. Now there is a plan to install washrooms throughout the park, pave the pathways, plant trees, etc. Compulsive management, I call it; they can't leave well enough alone.

A year ago, or two transfers, I had been in charge of the Thornhill district, which included the eastern edge of Nose Hill. We looked after several parking lots there, including a viewpoint we referred to as Condom Viewpoint. Once a week, a labourer would be dropped off for an hour or so to clean up the used condoms all over the parking lot. I told this to one of the Nose Hill activists, a dear old lady who got quite a laugh out of it. In turn, she told me of one of her neighbours who was fond of saying that if all the Calgarians who had been conceived on Nose Hill went up there with flashlights one night, the blinding light would be seen all the way out as far as Gleichen (60 km to the east).

The typical maintained park with trees and mowed grass is an ongoing conflict ecologically speaking. Is it prairie or is it woodland? If, as is usually the case, we want to maintain it as savanna, then there will be higher costs trying to keep the park shaded by trees and yet sunny enough for turf. Natural areas are left to solve this problem by themselves. Natural grasslands such as Nose Hill have frequent grass fires to keep the shrubs and trees down. Forested areas such as Bowness Park are dense enough to shade out the grass in unmanaged areas.

Natural areas need to be publicized to encourage public support, but if they are publicized then the greater use will degrade and erode the area. In the afternoon, we all split up into workshop groups and discussed such questions. My group dealt with Bowmont Park, across the river from Bowness Park and in my charge until my latest transfer. This grassland area has several large coulees and a riverbottom flats. It is overlooked by the Silver Springs suburb, and at my table were several residents thereof. One of them made the point that many people who live there are under the impression that the park is unclaimed or waste land; they are surprised when told it is a public park. This illustrates a problem with natural areas; much of the public is conditioned to perceive them as a mess, a useless piece of land that must be developed into a park by grading and seeding.

THE VERY NEXT DAY ...

1992-2-19

... was more of the same, only more so. Breakfast at a fast food outlet however, then back to the Stampede grounds. The first talk of the morning was a botanist with the appropriate name of Bush. She spoke on the use of native plants in landscaping. Preservation of natural areas is important because we do not have the ability to reconstruct them from scratch. Damage to natural areas in urban lands fails to follow the proper succession of

pioneer species to climax species. Instead, weeds usurp the normal succession and crowd out or prevent entirely native plants that want to grow back. Things are made worse by fertilizing and watering, as weeds thrive on this, while native plants are adapted to drier conditions.

In trying to remedy damage to natural areas by replanting natives, it is important to use local species. Local means species found in the same ecosystem, not within a certain geographical distance. Importing a species from elsewhere, even though it is the same as found locally, is not suitable because of the different ecotypes within a species. As an example, there is a grass called big bluestem which reaches 1 m tall in Manitoba, about 2 m in Wisconsin, and up to 3 m in Nebraska. The Nebraska ecotype of big bluestem will still grow 3 m tall in Wisconsin but won't set seed in time before winter. Natural areas must therefore be seeded with local ecotypes, not a misfit import. Importing seeds may also bring in imported weeds.

The next speaker up was Jim Robinson, from Red Deer, about 100 km north of Calgary. He was speaking on a Red Deer natural area called the Gaetz Lake Bird Sanctuary. I grew up a few blocks away from there, so I had more than passing interest in the matter. The Sanctuary is part of a parks system that extends along the Red Deer River and Waskasoo Creek their full lengths inside the city. As a young lad, I played in the parks system, riding my bike through the brush or tramping through the woods collecting specimens. But the small town of my youth is gone, replaced by 60000 people crowding into what was farmland or woods. It is no longer permissible to ride bikes off the path, and motorbikes are banned completely. Citizens take direct action when they see their parks abused. Robinson told of how the Red Deer Parks Dept. used to patrol the system with a man on a moped. One day, as he puttered along the pathway, he swung out onto the

[continued next page]

bank of the creek in order to pass a dear old lady toddling down the pathway. As he passed, she stuck her arm out and clotheslined him, knocking him off the moped. As he lay stunned on the ground, she roundly berated him for riding a moped in a park.

Red Deer is fortunate. Because it was a small town until the oil boom, the river valley was never developed save for a few gravel pits here and there (which are now converted into ponds). The parks system could assemble the land with relative ease. Edmonton and Calgary have had great difficulty in building a river parks system as chunks of the land are developed and must be expropriated at higher cost.

Robinson mentioned an interesting perception that people had; they avoided the natural areas at dark, fearing an attack. Yet the rare assaults in Red Deer parks occur only in well-lit, developed parks. I've noticed a similar situation in Calgary; the fights and assaults occur in Central Memorial Park downtown, not in the wild area of Bowness Park.

Natural areas, or lack thereof, identify a city. While out-of-towners might think that Calgary is identified by the Rocky Mountains, the single major view from most locations in the city is Nose Hill, looming over all. But only the east half provides the identity, with its native grassland conspicuous in the city by the absence of buildings, trees, or other clutter. The west half is an unremarkable collection of suburban houses. If you live in a city with a house-covered hill or two, then you've seen west Nose Hill.

The Natural Areas course was summed up by the organizer as follows. We have to educate the public to see natural areas as a valid land use in itself. Not as a type of low-maintenance park, not as scrap land useless for any other purpose, and not as land waiting to be developed.

While I was at the course, my boss (who was also attending) handed me my T4 slip for 1991. I had held off doing my 1991 tax return until it arrived, so I sat down at home after the course and prepared to spend a few hours crunching numbers and grinding my teeth. My blank tax return had come in the mail at the beginning of the year, but I put it unopened into the desk drawer since I couldn't do anything without a T4 slip. (For benefit of my non-Canadian readers, the T4 slip is issued by one's employer and states all income earned and deductions taken during the previous year.) On opening the envelope, I was pleasantly surprised to find I had a choice under the new system of either 1) doing the tax return the usual way, or, 2) using a shortened form onto which I transferred T4 data, added a few types of deductions such as charitable donations, and let them calculate my taxes. Now in all the years I've done tax returns or had an accountant do them, National Revenue Taxation has always changed my return. If I put in for a refund of \$44.67, they would change it and give me \$42.59. I could never get one back the same way I sent it. Now I'll let them do all the work; since they're going to calculate their way anyhow, I might as well save my time.

The last few days have had record-breaking temperatures up to 22°C. Room temperature in February! We are all out strolling in shirtsleeves. If it weren't for the leafless trees, it could have been a summer's day, not the heart of winter. Not good for farmers though, but as the saying goes, if it ain't drought, then it's floods.

Two years ago, Canadian Forces Base Calgary opened its Museum of the Regiments a couple of blocks from my home. It is in a school no longer required; the building was completely gutted and redone on the outside as well, and is now surrounded by berms. I've been meaning to visit it ever since the Queen opened it, so today was the day, walking over in shirtsleeves in the hot chinook winds.

The museum is not quite completed. There is a section for each Calgary regiment, but two of the regiments have not yet built their exhibits. The museum is being run on a cash basis, and as money is accumulated new things are brought onstream. No public debt. The emphasis is on dioramas and simulations, rather than objects in glass cases. Dioramas have overhead sensors that trigger audio tapes as one walks up to the exhibit. The dioramas suddenly come alive with the sounds of battle; one hears the rattle of machine guns and is blinded by flashes of light from shells. The emphasis is not on the glory of war, as many of the dioramas portray Canadian defeats in battle, battles which were, however, important turning points in the history of the regiment.

The first room I went into was the one devoted to the Calgary Highlanders, a militia (reserve) unit. I was rather surprised to see Sam Nickle there. I knew this was his unit but was unaware that he volunteered as a docent for the museum. We had a brief chat; he grumbled about the low light levels in the display. The militia units are headquartered at the Mewata Armoury in the west end of downtown Calgary. This is a beautiful sandstone and brick castle, the only decent-looking building in that part of town. It is a few blocks away from the Tomb of the Unknown Developer, that unfinished skyscraper whose concrete skeleton has loomed for eleven years now and still no closer to completion. The militia units parade Wednesday evenings at Mewata. The Calgary Philatelic Society also meets Wednesdays, directly across the road from Mewata. We start earlier than they do, however, so the competition for parking spaces is in our favour.

There is another militia unit, HMCS Tecumseh, a stone frigate on the hill overlooking Crowchild Trail. This is a naval cadet school. They train in small craft in Glenmore Reservoir and go on summer trips to the British Columbia coast for training in naval vessels. A stone frigate is a land base of the Navy. The old stone frigate at HMCS Tecumseh was a hanger-type building made out of dry rot held together by forty coats of paint. Personnel used to joke that the fire drill was: 1) Pull fire alarm, 2) Dive headfirst out the nearest window. That joke came true a few years ago when the building caught fire and burned like a Roman candle. The pillar of smoke could be seen far out to the countryside. It has since been rebuilt in presumably less flammable materials. The Navy has a strong presence in the Prairies. I was told by one officer that they prefer flatlanders as recruits because they have nothing to unlearn about sailing, and can be taught proper methods from the start. Maritime recruits from fishing families, conversely, must be convinced to forget what Dad told them about the sea, and please believe the CWO might know a bit more than you do.

But I am digressing. After touring the Highlander room, I went to another room which has changing exhibits. The highlight here was a diorama of Iraq equipment captured in the recent unpleasantness. The troops working out of Canada Dry One and Canada Dry Two brought back more than souvenir bags of sand. A 20 mm antiaircraft gun, a handheld rocket launcher, an ammo box with Jordanian Army markings. Interesting. I suspect that such modern exhibits would be the most popular with visitors, since they can relate to them from personal experience (via CNN), whereas the World War stuff is mostly something that Grandpa used to be on about.

The two major regular regiments at CFB Calgary are the Princess Patricia Canadian Light Infantry and the



Lord Strathcona's Horse (armoured). The PPCLI exhibit is not yet constructed. When I was there, a lot of banging and hammering was going on in the room where the King's Own Calgary regiment (militia) will have their exhibit. But the Strathcona's exhibit was in full bloom.

Lord Strathcona was originally Donald Smith, this being back in the days when Canadians were allowed to accept titles. Smith was a Hudson's Bay Company man who later built the Canadian Pacific Railroad. He founded the regiment named after him, and the first exhibit one sees is the old boy hammering in the golden spike at the completion of the first transcontinental railroad. Strathcona's first served in the Boer War. Many of its personnel were from the North West Mounted Police (the original name of the Mounties), and after the war stayed on to help in the South African Constabulary. The regiment was dismantled in World War Two and converted to an armoured unit. CFB Calgary is a training base for the Army of the West, and it is not unusual to see convoys of heavy vehicles going down Crowchild Trail. The sight of a self-propelled cannon or an armoured personnel carrier with a "CAUTION: STUDENT DRIVER" sign doesn't intimidate Calgary drivers though. One of these days, someone will cut in front of an APC too closely and be flattened by a flustered young recruit who couldn't remember fast enough which one was the brake pedal.

The PPCLI use our neighbourhood for full-kit hikes, and it is not unusual to see recruits huffing and puffing, a heavy backpack on them, as they run past the houses. The city arena, between my house and the Museum, is occasionally used by their hockey teams; their buses park across the street from my house. I once saw a general chauffeured by; at least I assume it was one, as the only licence plate on the car had a red background with one gold star. The regiments have an open house once a year. I like to watch them practice from my front yard. What they do is have a couple of helicopter gunships hover over the parade ground while the personnel rappel down to the ground.

I estimate the height of the choppers is about six or seven stories high. The fun of this occurs when some poor soldier goes out the chopper the wrong way and gets hung up on the rope high above the ground. What usually happens is that he winds up dangling upside down for several minutes until he can get free and finish the slide down the rope. They don't give him any help; he has to untangle himself. Safety lines are used, of course, and the actual open house goes off without a hitch. It wouldn't do to embarrass the regiment by getting hung up on the ropes in front of local television crews.

The Museum has another diorama, not for a specific regiment but to tell how infantry and armour coevolved in WW2. As one enters the Museum, there is a walkway arching over the diorama, which depicts a European street shot up in the war. There is a tank, and one can understand why the diorama is in the basement as the thing is obviously too heavy for the ground floor joists. I can see how they got the tank inside during construction of the museum, but to get it out again they'll have to demolish the entrance and dig a ramp. The diorama shows PPCLI grunts working with the Strathcona's tank to clear out a street of German soldiers in house-by-house combat.

Outside the Museum are two more tanks. It is startling how tall the old Shermans are compared with the modern tanks.

There used to be an airport at CFB Calgary. A few years ago, a neighbour down the street told me about the time a passenger plane landed at the base because the pilot was under the impression that it was Calgary International Airport, which is on the opposite side of the city. The plane was too big for the runway and overshot; they had a heck of a time flying it out because the runway was too short.

## CONSTITUTIONAL DEBATES AND THE BARRITOS TOWN BAND

The Canadian constitutional debates basically consist of everyone ganging up on one government, then rotating positions. Everyone gangs up on Quebec for wanting some exclusive power. When that becomes boring, they all turn around and condemn Ontario because some redneck stomped on a Quebec flag. Then all change, and Alberta is criticized because the Premier mused about ending compulsory bilingualism.

I came across the following extract in Jack Douglas' book "Going Nuts in Brazil". It is an excellent description of provincial-federal relations.

" ... the Barritos Town band ... consisted of sixty-three bass horns and one fife. The reason for the overabundance of bass horns was a simple one. They were big and brassy and made horrendous noises, which appealed very much to the citizens of Barritos. The lone fife player was an introvert and lived in a closet in the house of his sister. ... The effect created by the sixty-three bass horns playing along with the fife was that of a herd of elephants trying to stomp a mouse ..."

## A GHOST FROM OUT OF THE PAST

1992-3-4

Today was my first day back at work after vacation. Nineteen years to retirement. (Business of sighing heavily.) And I still can't win the damn lottery.

The day was routine, a quick catchup in the morning of all the accumulated mail, then pruning in shirtsleeve weather.

Tonight I went down to the monthly meeting of the Calgary Philatelic Society. I took the latest issue of the club bulletin 'Calgary STAMPede' and distributed about half at

the meeting, then passed the rest on to the person who will mail them. About 100 members come out to meetings. I also met with Steve, who will convert the second draft of my book into camera-ready copy via his computer. The book, 'History of the Calgary Philatelic Society', will hopefully be ready in time for the April meeting, which is the 70th anniversary of the founding of the club. The book will also be on electronic disk; it is in fact a whole lot easier to put out on a floppy than the hassle of printing.

Our club treasurer was out for the meeting with her newborn daughter. There was the obligatory joke about the 'new issue'. She sat at the back row and occasionally nursed her baby. She did cover up while doing so, but the elderly gent sitting next to her was visibly embarrassed. I didn't know where to look either.

About three meetings ago, a ghost from my past showed up. I wasn't sure the first time it was Henry, but the second time we talked and he remembered me. Henry and I went to school together in Red Deer, and we took our first year of college together. He was a brilliant student, always in the top five of class. He was on the executive of the Red Deer Social Credit riding association (as was my father), back when the Socreds were still a power in the land.

His first summer job while in university was on an oil rig. He fell. From the top of the rig, he fell onto a concrete platform, leaving about 1/4 of his brain splattered on the ground. I saw him in the hospital not long after the accident, before they put in the metal plate. Every couple of minutes he introduced himself to me; he had no short-term memory. The top left half of his skull was gone. The skin was temporarily patched over the gap until further surgery.

I didn't see him again for twenty years, until he came

[continued next page]

to the CPS meetings. I had heard that his parents looked after him for a while, but they were elderly, and now he is in an institution in Airdrie, a town just north of Calgary. I sometimes wonder if it might have been better if he had died in the accident. If so, the sorrow would have been over after a while for his family and friends. We could be remembering him as the brilliant young man studying engineering and sure to have his own corporation someday. Instead he shambles through life with a deformed face, a severe limp that requires use of a cane, and a mind that requires he be accompanied by a caseworker if he goes out in public. His potential is zero.

I spoke to his caseworker at one of the meetings. He was interested to hear that I knew Henry. When I mentioned that Henry was once an excellent student, he told me that occasionally Henry would suddenly show a flash of intellect, all too briefly before reverting to a personality that fluctuates between timidity and belligerence. (Henry must take pills constantly to control his behaviour; he is very tall and strong, and in a sudden rage could do a lot of damage.) Henry lives in the past; he constantly talked about his being on the Sacred executive, though the party has been dead in Alberta for more than a decade. The caseworker told me that Henry likes to shows staff and fellow inmates a newspaper clipping from 1972 in which Henry was mentioned. Henry is aware to some extent of current events, and his short-term memory has recovered, but he will be institutionalized the remainder of his life.

I don't know what kind of stamps he collects. He examines stamps in the club auctions with intense care. The Auction Chairman is understanding of Henry's behaviour, but Henry sometimes can be troublesome. At tonight's meeting I gave him his copy of the club bulletin; he examined it with exaggerated care. Someone moved a table and put it next to a pillar, blocking the way. Henry came around the pillar and stood there, unable to figure out where to go. A look of panic on his face, then he took the long

way around the room instead of simply walking around the table. As the meeting proceeded, he talked loudly to the club Secretary, under the impression that her reading of the last minutes was a conversation directed at him. Finally he made his way down the aisle and sat down next to his caseworker.

I hope I never end up like him. All it takes is a split-second in an accident, maybe not an oil rig, but perhaps a car accident, or a tree branch falls, or a trip on the stairs.

ANOTHER DAY, ANOTHER COURSE

1992-3-17

Most Parks training and courses occur in winter during slack times. This helps break up the monotony of pruning, more so for others who work all winter long rather than take their vacation in winter as I do. These last few days have been miserable pruning, as the weather turned from shirtsleeves to wet snow. We had been doing boulevard trees on Canyon Meadows Drive, a four-lane divided road with a narrow median which required that we block off a traffic lane while working. The job here was to leg up poplars and remove dead wood. The cut branches were loaded onto a 4-ton truck as we worked, which is why the lane had to be closed, so the truck could park on the road and take the branches as they came off the trees. Hot dry weather, much dust and road salt. The salt is why there were so many branches dead; the trees are mostly dying and gradually being removed. When the weather turned to wet snow, we moved to parks for pruning, rather than be soaked by splashing and spraying from passing cars. It being unusual to have wet snow, none of us had waterproof gloves, only our regular leather gloves. We improvised by using surgical rubber gloves (normally found in our first-aid kits) stretched over the leather gloves. It kept us dry, although the rubbers had to be replaced

every few hours. Pruning in wet snow is miserable work. Ladders and branches are slippery, and every cut of the saw vibrates the tree and brings down a shower of water from up there.

Eye protection is a must, and we all have visors on our hard hats. Everyone else uses a faceshield of black plastic mesh, but I am unique in the department in that I use a faceshield which is a sheet of clear plastic. It does fog up occasionally, but in weather like today it keeps the snow off my glasses.

But today I am not out there with the rest. I was downtown attending a course on the Corporation of the City of Calgary's Equal Employment Opportunity program. There were a few Parks people there, but many from other departments such as Electric System, Social Services, and Police. From the police was one face I knew, my cousin's husband. Bill is a Staff Sergeant; normally I only see him at family reunions, so during the coffee break we had a good chat catching up on who is doing what. (Uncle Art totalled his truck in an accident.)

Employment Equity (EE) is the City policy to encourage a better mix of employees, with about the same percentage of women, aboriginals, visible minorities, and disabled in the 13000 City workers as in the Calgary population at large. It is not an affirmative action program; no quotas exist and promotions and hirings must be based on merit. The emphasis is to remove unnecessary barriers and to encourage the four groups mentioned above to try out with the City. Interestingly, the EE offices are located in a building inaccessible to handicapped because of stairs. A program to remove unnecessary barriers is well underway throughout the Corporation. Some problems are easily solved, such as putting wood blocks under desk legs to raise them so a wheelchair can fit in. Others require renovations or special equipment. Under Canadian law, business firms must make an effort commiserate with their size. A small corner grocery store is not expected to install a

wheelchair ramp, as the cost and narrow aisles make it improvident. A multibillion-dollar outfit such as the City, however, has the resources and is obligated to make reasonable effort. Sikhs have the right to wear turbans in the RCMP, where the headgear is not based on practical value, but a Fire Dept. can refuse turbans and beards because they interfere with self-contained breathing apparatus.

The City's major effort is in recruiting qualified candidates. The Engineering Dept., for example, is visiting high schools to try to persuade girls to study math and science, then take engineering in university. The Police Dept. visits aboriginal reserves and holds Open Houses to try to persuade school-leavers to take up a career in the constabulary. EE is given a boost by the fact that Canada's population is declining, and only immigration can make up the difference. Most visible minorities are Asian, and from here and the other three groups will future City employees come. In Parks there are more women as gardeners and foremen, and a few visibles. Disabled people may appear in the office staff, but obviously not in the field. Canadians born in this country tend to be less well-educated compared to immigrants, and it is educated people who are needed. Certain jobs in the City have gone vacant for some time because no qualified candidates can be found. The City is advertising worldwide for some jobs such as Geographical Information Systems computer programmers. (GIS is the computer map that plots all the underground utilities, land titles, easements, roads, and buildings. Incredibly complex, it must be perfect, since crews use it to dig with backhoes, etc.)

Some cases are not easy to resolve. We did a study on a case where a vacancy was to be filled. The applicants were narrowed down to a Pakistani and a woman, for a job that traditionally had neither. This also brought up the case of reverse discrimination; how do you deal with a white male who is well qualified?

I was making my regular rounds of the secondhand bookstores today, and my first stop as always was Off The Wall (1503 - 15 Avenue SW, Calgary, T3C 0Y1), which carries a lot of SF, mystery, small press, and other unusual stuff. The proprietor is Dave Hall, who is involved with ConVersion.

I noticed he had a large painting for sale, about 1 m by 2.5 m, by an artist signing him/herself as Jamr. I don't know how long the painting was there, as it was in a section of the store I don't normally look at, hanging over the porno mags, next to the mainstream hardcovers and romance paperbacks. It caught my eye as I went down an adjacent aisle (mysteries). I bought it for \$10, and it is now sitting in front of my fireplace; everytime I look up from my typewriter, I am looking directly at it. I didn't hang it because anyplace in my house not already covered by posters and paintings is covered by bookshelves. I'll use it to screen the fireplace because I never have fires going anyway. It is a bit of a nuisance having a fireplace. The wood supply is no problem, I get all I want at work, but cleaning out the ashes afterwards is a pain. No matter how careful, the dust billows out into the living room. So I haven't used it for several years, and now, instead of looking at an ash-covered grate, I look at the painting.

The view in the panorama of the painting is that of a flooded city; one is looking down what once was a street. The city has been flooded for quite some time; the skyscrapers are skeletal. Most of the cladding has fallen away from the buildings, and only the naked girders are left. Much like the Tomb of the Unknown Developer here in Calgary. The water is quite deep, and only the upper levels are visible. It reminds me of J.G. Ballard's THE DROWNED WORLD, one of those doomsday novels that Brits do so well (someone attributed this ability to the poor food they eat).

The painting is done entirely in shades of brown, orange, yellow, and black. The skies are terminally polluted, and glow orange, with yellow clouds. The water reflects the sky and takes on its colour. Going away from the viewer, off into the distance on either side, are the ranks of crumbling skyscrapers, lining what once was a street but is now far below in the deeps. There is no sign of life. In the foreground, a few patches of orange and brown scum float on the water. The painting glows from within, orange and umber.

## MANY HAPPY RETURNS

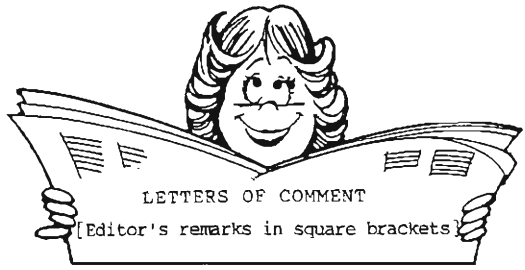
1992-3-23

Picked up my mail at the post office on my way home from work. National Revenue sent me a tax refund cheque for \$11.26, based on their calculation of my return. I'll splurge the money on something foolish, like my phone bill or new typewriter ribbons.

## ANOTHER MAN DONE GONE

1992-4-6

Asimov died today of heart and kidney failure. Age 72, books 500. I'll have a further tribute to him in OPUNTIA #8.5, but that issue will be a while yet. He was one of the few authors I reread on a regular basis. Heinlein and Clarke I've read once and shelved. But Asimov had an engaging style. In particular, I've reread his autobiography a number of times; for a man who claimed to have had a boring life, he certainly managed to make it interesting. That, I think, is a test of a good writer, as anyone can write exciting prose if they have fought in wars, been a part of national politics, played pro sports, or otherwise have lived unusual events. Growing up in a candy store is a bit harder to write about.



[I came across an article in the November 2, 1991, issue of THE ECONOMIST which mentioned that the Los Alamos laboratory, where nuclear bombs are made, has an MSDS for distilled water which cautions "Do Not Inhale". One of these days I'm going to have some fun by sneaking an MSDS for dihydrogen oxide into the master book of MSDSSs used by the Parks Dept.]

FROM: Ned Brooks 1992-2-18  
 713 Paul Street  
 Newport News, Virginia 23605

FROM: Chester Cuthbert 1992-2-21  
 1104 Mulvey Avenue  
 Winnipeg, Manitoba R3M 1J5

Thanks for OPUNTIA #6.5. I don't agree with you about seeds on buns. These are usually sesame seeds here, and they have a definite taste to me, and improve the texture of the bun as well. I don't eat hamburgers but I sometimes eat at Arby's, and they use sesame-seed buns. They used to have a bun that had a golden saffron-like colour but apparently the colouring agent was frowned upon by the FDA and they dropped it.

My book collection occupies so much time that I have leisure for nothing else. I do not travel or attend conventions; my family gatherings and occasional talks with local fans and writers are my sole social activity, yet I am always facing an accumulation of books requiring immediate attention.

[Will you be at Conadian? Since the world of SF is coming to your city in 1994, perhaps we might see you there.]

Odd that I should learn from OPUNTIA that Mark Manning works at Boeing. They seemed to have carried the Material Safety Data Sheet thing a bit farther than NASA. I don't think we have one for water. Perhaps we should; the water that we get out of the spigots is notoriously bad-tasting, though we are assured it is okay. The only other water about the building is de-ionized water for an ancient compressor whose internal cooling system is supposed to have distilled water. The de-ionized water seems to serve the purpose well enough, but I don't know if it is safe for human consumption. It is made by the steam plant for their boilers, using some voodoo method that I forget the details of. Not distillation. Their interest is to demineralize the water to reduce accretions.

Your mention of the rarity of pedestrians makes me realize that there may be many of my neighbours in our block whom I have never seen because they drive cars. I seldom walk near home, so do not see them in their own yards, and am equally a stranger to them.

FROM: Henry Welch 1992-2-23  
 5538 N. Shasta Drive  
 Glendale, Wisconsin 53209

Thanks for OPUNTIA #6.5. Your family certainly seems to be well celebrated in scientific names. I gather from what you've written that most of this is due to

[continued next page]

the palaeontological studies of your mother.

[The species names do not honour our family, they honour my mother only; nothing to do with the rest of us. After that issue of OPUNTIA went to press, yet another species was named after her, a fossil tree described in the REVIEW OF PALAEOBOTANY AND PALYNOLOGY under the name Platananthus speirsae. It is a type of plane tree, and is found in the same rocks as the other tree Joffrea speirsii.]

I thought I'd throw in my 2¢ worth in the discussion regarding the friendliness of chain/local book stores. It is my understanding that the large chain stores have a general corporate policy against allowing outside advertising in their stores. The rationale is that if they let one group advertise, then they must let everyone advertise. We find that really annoying here in Milwaukee but we agree that it does have a certain merit.

FROM: Brian Earl Brown 1992-2-25  
11675 Beaconsfield  
Detroit, Michigan 48224

Without really trying, I seem to have developed quite a backlog of OPUNTIA. You're publishing faster than I can keep up. I'd beg you to slow down, except that if history is anything to go by, you'll be slowing down pretty soon anyway.

[Which is why the masthead of OPUNTIA specifies that it is an irregular zine. That way, I'm not morally obliged to maintain a schedule.]

[Brian's loc consisted of two postcards with incredibly small computer type that would do FOSFAX proud. Harry Warner Jr. would need a powerful magnifying glass to read them. One postcard dealt with a whole-numbered OP-

UNTIA, so it will be printed in issue #8. The other one is this loc.]

I know that two postcards are more expensive than one letter, but I'm playing around with this publishing program, seeing what it can do with the postcard format. At 8 points, it packs in a surprising amount of text (300 or so words), almost a full page of typewriting.

Nothing like working with a map that bears no resemblance to reality. I have trouble relating the correct 1988 map you reprinted to the false 1984 map. There don't appear to be any pre-existing streets with which to orient myself.

[Which is why we were going crazy trying to locate a park on a street that didn't exist. They've made yet another minor adjustment to the street names, but we caught that one ahead of time. Incidentally, a lot goes for \$650,000 plus the buyer is obligated to build a house worth at least \$1,000,000.]

This reminds me of some friends who just bought a house only to find that their lot had been redrawn since the house had been built. One corner of their porch is only a foot from the boundary, so that any effort to repair or remodel the porch would require a zoning variance from the city.

The business card vending machine is something new. It must be great for scam artists since for a mere \$8 they can get cards for all occasions. Recently I saw a vending machine selling trading cards for all sorts of sports. Apparently trading cards are getting to be pretty big business.

I ALSO HEARD FROM: Lloyd Penney, Harry Andruschak  
Buck Coulson, Benoit Girard, and Paul Valcour.

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: