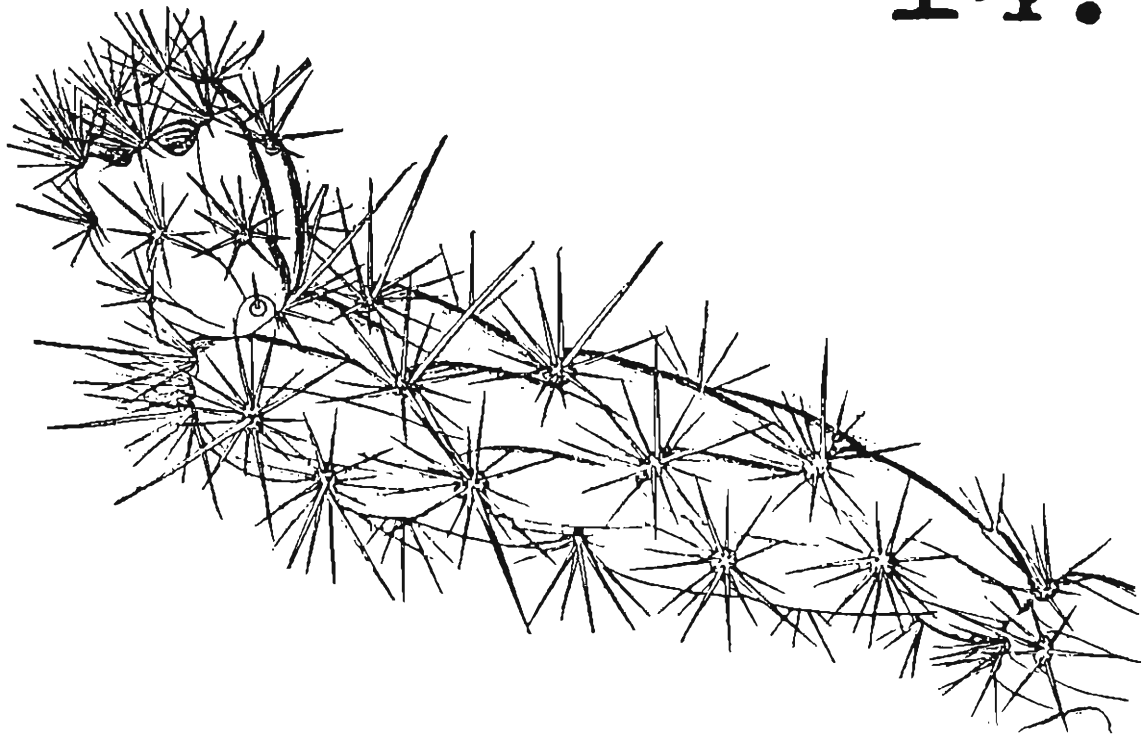


OPUNTIA

14.5



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STAMPING AROUND COWTOWN

1993-5-12

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ART CREDIT: The cover depicts Opuntia acanthocarpa, by an unknown artist from L.H. Bailey's 1929 book STANDARD CYCLOPEDIA OF HORTICULTURE.

EDITORIAL: Sorry I had to wahf everyone for this issue. I do appreciate your locs but don't have the room to put them in uncut or even put them in with brutal cuts. My philosophy in publishing OPUNTIA is that it will be a maximum of sixteen pages, partly to avoid going over into the next higher postage rate and partly because it enables me to publish frequently. A larger issue would not appear as often. Small but frequent is the aim of this zine. But do keep sending those locs; they are read with great interest and most certainly appreciated.

I HEARD FROM: Buck Coulson, Ben Schilling, Robert Sabella, Ned Brooks, Joseph Major, Harry Warner Jr., Karl Johanson, Harry Andruschak

There are two major stamp clubs in Calgary. The senior club is the Calgary Philatelic Society, founded 1922 and a general club for all collectors, with about 225 members. The second group is (take a deep breath) the Calgary Regional Group of the British North America Philatelic Society, more commonly known as the Calgary BNAPSers. They specialize in the philately of Canada and pre-Confederation Dominions and territories. I belong to both groups and it was as a member of the latter that I went on a tour of the Calgary Mail Processing Plant tonight. The CMPP handles 1.5 million letters and parcels per day.

The tour started off with a wander up and down a hallway decorated with mailbags from around the world. A postie started the collection years ago by saving a bag from each country that had mail go through Calgary and there were now about fifty, some from defunct countries. Nowadays mailbags are being phased out in favour of trays, which are lighter, stronger, and keep the letters neatly sorted instead of jumbled in a bag. Mailbags are seldom if ever washed; we saw one that hadn't been washed since it was made in 1962.

The CMPP is six football fields in area and packed with automated cancellers and sorters. It has a huge air-conditioning plant to cool the building, but even so it was quite warm. There is no dress code for posties in the CMPP; many were in shorts and T-shirts because of the heat generated by the machines.

The tour was a real eye-opener as far as seeing the misfortunes that can befall a letter or parcel. The Culler-Facer-Canceller machine rejected quite a few letters that were crumpled or had bent corners. Everywhere one looked there were letters lying on the floor or in a crevice of the machine; they were picked up a few times during the shift. And pack your parcels

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strongly, because they will be dropped several metres down a chute. Your parcel may survive the fall but there will be other parcels continually landing on top.

Most of the mail is sorted by machines, such as Optical Character Readers and Group Desk Suites, but some must still be done the old-fashioned way by hand. Racks of mailbags are still used for small towns. We saw a young woman in the midst of these racks, an area 5 or 6 m in radius from where she was standing. She received mail that had been sorted into bundles, and threw each bundle into the appropriate mailbag. She had to throw up to 6 m to reach some bags but her skill was impressive. Each bundle was thrown (not lobbed) into a bag with pinpoint accuracy; no rimshots or bounces. Several of us remarked between ourselves that she could have been a pro basketball player. Certainly none of us could aim so fast and accurately.

The tour wound up with coffee and doughnuts. Our guides were two retired posties, and we finished up the evening exchanging dirty jokes about Jean Chrétien and why he talks out of the side of his mouth. (Chrétien is Opposition Leader in the House of Commons.)

HIGH RIVER HIJINKS

1993-5-24

A beautiful Victoria Day holiday today, with a bright sky of blue and just enough of an occasional breeze to keep one cool. I drove down to High River this morning for the official opening of a railway post office. The town of High River is a brief drive south of Calgary, only 55 km on divided highways. I took the scenic route on the old highway but even so arrived 10h30; the postal ceremony was at noon. Not to worry as they were having a parade for their Little Britches rodeo this afternoon. You know you're in a small town when you can arrive half an hour after the parade has started and still park only a block away from the parade route. I ambled over across the railroad tracks and found a seat on the parade route. (An

additional sign of a small town: cars were parked on the railroad tracks. Train? What train?) Many of those in the parade greeted the spectators by name. A provincial election is underway, so every other horse rider was a candidate. Premier Ralph Klein was there in a chuckwagon.

The pipe band had exactly six pipers (I counted) and a drummer, none of whom wore the same tartan. The drummer was in fact Chinese. The entire detachment of the High River Mounties were on patrol, both of them. The chuckwagons were often sponsored by churches such as the Full Gospel Tabernacle. On the other hand, the Good Shepard Lutherans float was a manure spreader, with a large banner "Spreading the Good Word". There was a float from the Joe Clark School. Clark, former Prime Minister and latterly Minister of Unity, was born and raised in High River. Square dancers are a common enough sight in Alberta, but the batch I saw were a bit unusual, as they were dancing to a Disney theme. The caller was a young boy who sang "M-I-C-K-E-Y M-O-U-S-E All ladies change about."

Every other float had someone throwing out candy to spectators. I am too old to be scrambling for candy, besides which the kids got it all before I could move. There were sweet young things handing out posters advertising the High River chuckwagon races, so I got a nice one of those. The parade ended at 11h30. Going back to my car, I put away the poster and got out the envelopes and postcards I wanted to mail with the commemorative postmark. I walked across the downtown core of High River (two blocks) to the railway museum where a mail car from the 1940s had been restored and was to be officially opened today. Saw many Calgary stamp collectors there from the club. We sat through a barbershop quartet (they worked across the street in a barbershop) and the usual speeches and ribbon-cutting. The postmaster and his assistant were perhaps taken aback at how many items we wanted postmarked. They had figured on a few townies coming out, not a horde from Calgary.

Rain since 02h00 this morning, a heavy drizzle with a bit of wind. A wet tree, by rough rule of thumb, weighs twice as much as when dry.

There is a bus stop in front of 264 Lake Bonavista Drive. The street is lined with large poplars, three stories tall. As the 09h30 bus went by, the driver noticed a tree leaning, its roots slowly pulling out of the ground. Down it gradually came, settling across the street, filling it completely and obstructing traffic. The driver called the bus inspector, who called the Parks office, whose receptionist called me on the two-way radio. From Louise's description I figured I would need help, so I called one of my crew foremen to meet me out at the site. On arrival, I saw two bus inspectors there; they left once we pulled in. One look at the tree and I was on the radio requesting backup crews; it was a big one alright.

The tree was, I soon learned, sitting on a parked car. As more workers showed up, we went at it. The first job was to prune off the lighter branches, especially on the upper side of the fallen tree, so as to prevent it from rolling on the ground. Several of us burrowed into the branches with handsaws, while others pulled the cut branches over to the curb and stacked them in piles on the boulevards. We were in raingear but were soon soaked to the skin. Not just from the drizzle, but from water dripping off the tree.

The homeowner (and car owner) showed up just after we had started clearing away branches, his wife having phoned him at work. He was driving a 4WD, and was not happy to learn that his shiny new car was underneath the tree. He took a chainsaw out of his 4WD, all set to start hacking and slashing to get his pride and joy out. I managed to dissuade him by explaining that if he started cutting indiscriminately he would make things worse. The tree might

roll or kick, causing worse damage to his car and threatening our safety.

There is a standard technique we use in clearing up fallen trees. The dangers are many but are easily alleviated by proper technique. Simply bearing down on a branch with a saw will cause it to crack and swing wildly, possibly injuring the pruner. Instead, we cut the branch in small pieces, with a helper holding the cut part to control it. The worst danger is in the fact that a fallen tree has its trunk and most of its branches under stress, perpendicular to the normal stress load. If the stress is suddenly relieved by cutting off a heavy weight, the tree springs back or kicks out at the base of the trunk. Hundreds of people are killed or injured each year because of this. So the uppermost branches sticking up into the air are taken off in small doses to relieve the weight gradually. Lowermost branches are left pressing against the ground since they hold the tree in position. They also prevent the tree from rolling sideways and crushing someone or something. (Another rule of thumb we use: one cubic metre of wet wood weighs roughly one tonne.)

Having taken off the branches sticking up into the air and doing so in a pattern so that the tree's weight does not become lopsided and it rolls, we next start at the tip of the tree and cut off all the branches back to the base of the trunk. Again in small pieces and a symmetrical pattern. After every few branches, a section of the trunk is cut off. Stubs are left when cutting the branches so that the sections are easier to carry; there is something to grab onto and control with. In this manner the tree is nibbled away and the weight and stress are relieved in a gradual controlled method.

At this point, our homeowner was glad to see the now uncovered car had only minor damage, a small 5 cm dent

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and a few paint scratches. The tree was actually on private property, not the City boulevard, so we were not obligated to do anything other than clear the street. However we did haul away the branches in our 1-ton and 4-ton trucks. The homeowner will have to remove the stump on his own though.

A photographer for the CALGARY SUN tabloid showed up midway through the operation and as a result we appeared on the front page the following day. A full-page cover, so it must have been a slow newsday. Several of my crew can be easily identified in the photo. I was burrowed inside the tangle of branches so my face is not visible, although I can be seen cutting away with a handsaw. The CALGARY HERALD photographer didn't show until the tree removal was done, so nothing there. Altogether it was 1.5 hours to cut up the tree and another hour to dispose of the branches.

1885 AND ALL THAT

The Second Riel Rebellion of 1885 threw all of western Canada into a tizzy that was matched only by Floridians in the Cuban missile crisis or the Brits during the Phoney War. The actual rebellion was confined to what is now Saskatchewan, and Calgary was nowhere near the fighting. But the populace of Calgary was convinced that Riel would come marching in sooner or later, so the 1885 equivalent of the Calgary Target Area Civil Defence rushed into business. In those days the Mounties (then called the North West Mounted Police, today the Royal Canadian Mounted Police) were still a paramilitary force. Their main duty was to keep the peace as a civilian constabulary but they also operated as a military regiment of reservists. When the Second Riel Rebellion broke out, the NWMP were called up for duty and shipped out to the field. This created a problem. Calgary had about 1000 people in 1885 and needed a proper police force. To alleviate this difficulty, the federal government sent in a Québec military regiment,

the 9th Battalion Rifles, normally based in Québec City. It might seem more logical to keep the NWMP in Calgary and send the 9th out to the fighting, but I suspect the reason was that the NWMP were adapted to the prairies. The 9th would have been useless in such unfamiliar terrain, whereas one town is pretty well the same as any other. The 232 Québécois arrived in April 1885 and were split up amongst settlements in central and southern Alberta, taking over over police duties and doing a good job by all accounts. The 9th was mostly young lads, 19 or 20 years old, who were unused to the vast empty spaces of the prairies. There was the odd bit of culture shock. June 24 is St. Jean Baptiste Day, a major holiday in Québec but not celebrated elsewhere in Canada. Particularly Alberta. As June 24 dawned in Calgary, the 9th celebrated by firing their guns into the air and whooping it up in general. Calgarians were already jittery from the war, and when the shooting started thought they were under attack by Riel's troops. But it was all sorted out, and a few days later, on July 1, the 9th celebrated Dominion Day (now called Canada Day) by performing for the first time in Calgary a tune called "O Canada". This song had been written in Québec and many years later was adapted as the national anthem. Unfortunately there are several versions of "O Canada" today, which is why you hear a confused mumble when people sing it before a hockey game; not everyone is singing the same version.

On July 2nd, a patrol of the 9th was south of Calgary, riding the open range near Pine Creek. They got caught out in the bald-headed prairie during an afternoon thunderstorm, which quickly turned to hail. Alberta is always bad for hail, the way Kansas is for tornadoes, and the 9th soon had personal experience. Hailstones were 8 cm in diameter, the size of baseballs. Two horses and one soldier were rendered unconscious.

I TOLD YOU THAT SO I COULD TELL YOU THIS

1993-8-2

Volunteers of the 9th Battalion Rifles have come out from Québec this holiday weekend to publicize their connection with Calgary. I meandered over to Fort Calgary this morn to see what was transpiring. Not an awful lot, but the place has changed since I last visted a few years ago.

In 1875, the Mounties established Fort Calgary at the Bow River junction with the Elbow River. Twenty years later, Calgary was a thriving city. The fort had been abandoned by the NWMP, who had moved into regular police buildings as any city might have. It was torn down, buried under landfill, and developed as a warehouse district and rail-head. A century later, Calgarians began to take an interest in their past. The rails were removed, warehouses demolished, and the site turned into a grassy park. Some of the foundations were excavated and turned into a display, and a museum built nearby.

For the next fifteen years or so, Fort Calgary Park remained stagnant, but in the last little while some new projects have been started. Archaeological digs are all over the park, recovering foundations of the fort, which had grown like Topsy into a sprawling complex. Since the present site is as much as two metres above the original fort, there is a deep pit and much regrading of the park.

As I strolled about, I saw volunteers reconstructing the palisade of the original fort. They were in field dress of the NWMP (who wore pillbox hats, not Stetsons as do the RCMP) and were trimming and sawing logs with tools of 1885. The palisade has been mostly completed and the volunteers are just starting on the roof. Elsewhere, two young women deep in a pit were excavating a sandstone foundation of what used to be a barracks. A tedious job; Indiana Jones notwithstanding, archaeology is hard on the knees and rather boring slowly scraping away thin layers of soil.

NO NEWS IS FIRE NEWS

1993-8-11

Every workday morning my alarm clock goes off at 05h55. I use a windup clock, as my neighbourhood is subjected to too many power outages to trust an electric clock. Never anything serious, usually an hour or so with no power because of lightning during an overnight thunderstorm. As I perform my morning ablutions, feed the fish (the fishroom is next to my bedroom), and dress, I listen to the six a.m. news on the radio. A long time ago I noticed that the morning news was always the same as last night's news, and fresh stories are not reported until the 07h00 news at the earliest. Out the door at 06h15, start the car and let it warm up while I walk down the block to buy the morning newspaper from a street box. Another thing I've noticed; when the radio stations change their news reports, they always have exactly the same stories as the morning paper. Some of their reports are almost verbatim from the paper. I am prepared to believe that they get international and national news from the same wire service as the newspaper, but it is hard to believe that the radio station had a reporter on the catby-law story but held off on the news for 24 hours. Quite obviously for all their puffery about "News First With Us!", the station only knows what they read in the paper.

As I left the house this morning, I noticed a pillar of smoke rising in the southeast quadrant of Calgary, on the far side of the city from where I live. As I drove, it was evident that the fire was in the same general area as my depot. Arriving at work at 06h30, the flames were clearly visible from the depot. They were only a short distance away, about 5 km across the Bow River valley. We stood in the depot compound and watched the blaze, speculating as to what it might be. It looked like a warehouse or factory burning in the industrial district.

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The radio stations had nothing about the fire until 08h00 when it suddenly made the news. I suspect that commuters on the southeast freeways were phoning in asking "What about the fire?", thereby tipping off the stations to look out the window and see the huge pillar of smoke. Initial reports said the fire was burning in the Shepard Sanitary Landfill. That didn't sound right, as the landfill is far to the east of the depot, out of sight behind berms, and we could see the flames clearly. Later that morning I drove down Deerfoot Trail to a park in McKenzie suburb, passing closer to the fire. Still couldn't spot its location precisely, but it was nowhere near Shepard. If you were looking out a radio station window from downtown Calgary, across 20 km of suburbs, it might appear as if it were Shepard.

By 11h00, radio reports switched the location of the fire to Ogden Sanitary Landfill (Calgary has four landfills), a more plausible location several kilometres away from Shepard. They then informed us that the fire had burned since 23h00 last night. One presumes that their ace reporters were home sleeping in bed, and a good thing at their ages. The fire apparently started in some scrap lumber and shingles. Firefighters had to haul water in with tanker trucks because there was no supply at the landfill. It wasn't until midday that the blaze was finally put out.

ONLY IN AMERICA, AS HARRY GOLDEN WAS FOND OF SAYING

On Wednesday, August 11th, the New Democratic Party ran an hour-long paid political announcement on Ontario television. Life has not been easy for the socialists lately in Canada. Earlier this year the NDP were wiped out in the Alberta election, falling from Official Opposition to no seats at all. In Ontario and British Columbia, the NDP governments have been feuding heavily with their supposed allies, the labour unions. The provincial disasters have reduced the popularity of the federal NDP, and Audrey McLaughlin, the party leader, is at the bottom of the

polls. So it was that she appeared on the broadcast, which was devoted to the subject of free trade. The NDP oppose it, and blasted the North American Free Trade Agreement. The basic complaint is that jobs are supposedly being lost because of free trade. But whatever the merits of the NDP broadcast, they were completely lost the next morning when the news media gleefully reported that a video used in the program to criticize the federal government for jobs lost to the States was in fact a video produced in the States. The NDP had paid a Washington, D.C., company \$40,000 to make the video. That gurgling sound you hear in the distance is the NDP's credibility being flushed down the toilet. As NDP officials said in a understatement, the decision to produce the video Stateside "could have been avoided". They swore an oath to do what they should have done in the first place, and said that in the future all campaign materials will be Canadian.

A federal election must be called before the end of the year. Brian Mulroney waited too long to resign and left Prime Minister Kim Campbell with only a few months to try and revive the Tories before she has to go to the country.

THE NUMBER YOU HAVE REACHED IS IN SERVICE

A few years ago I bought an answering machine, not so much to record telephone messages but rather to screen out telemarketers. My family and friends all know to leave a message and I'll call them right back if I'm home. No more mad dashes to the phone only to find it is some realtor or charity (and they always seem to call at the most inconvenient moment, usually just as I drop my pants in the bathroom). Sometimes an improperly programmed computer wastes its time leaving a spiel on my machine because it confuses the "You have reached the Dale Speirs residence ..." message with a human response. I've been collecting some of the odd messages left behind; someday I'll put out a cassette

version of OPUNTIA and run those calls. Such as the lady who complained "I don't know why I always get you as a wrong number, but it seems you're never home anyway." And I never knew there were so many Speirs' in town unrelated to me, not listed in the phonebook, and for whom I get urgent messages such as "Meet me at the wedding". There are the occasional kids making prank calls and giggling into the tape for two minutes. My favourite, which I kept for future use, is from a drunken lady who identified herself as Ms. Ted Bundy, telephone number 555-555 (short one digit there, lady), and a completely incomprehensible message. Prank calls are pretty much extinct since Alberta Government Telephones introduced call tracing and caller ID, but the wrong-number messages can still be entertaining.

FISHY BUSINESS

1993-8-17

Home from work, quick bath and change of clothes, stopped at a fast-food outlet, and so to the executive meeting of the Calgary Aquarium Society. It was held tonight over at Ernie's house, or more correctly in his backyard. His house was built at the turn of the century, laughably modern by European standards or even those of eastern North America, but old enough to be declared an historical site by Calgary standards. Growing close up against the house is an apple tree about 10 m tall and probably about 75 years old by Ernie's guess. It appears to have grown via seed of somebody's discarded apple core, as the fruit is tasteless fresh or cooked, not what a nursery would have sold. Ernie has a pond in his backyard which he added to over the years and which is now quite impressive, with a footbridge and Japanese lanterns. We admired the koi in the pond, discussed the identification of an aquatic plant that was in bloom, and played with two friendly cats.

But finally everyone showed up, and we began the meeting sitting in the yard around the pond. Various items that had accumulated over the summer were discussed, reports

were read, motions made, and so forth. You already know what it was like if you've ever attended any meeting of any Club, be it SF, Toastmasters, or the Ladies' Aid Society of a church. One item of business was the display aquarium set up by the CAS for the summer at the Alberta Science Centre. We set up and maintained a tank as part of a summer-long exhibit by the Centre on aquatic life. The University of Calgary set up a tank as well, but it crashed the ecosystem and all the inhabitants died. Much joking amongst ourselves about theory (U of C) versus practice (CAS). Our aquarium is still fine but their tank is a mass of black slime.

The Show Committee took up most of the meeting, as the 22nd annual show is almost here, on the Labour weekend. Planning takes a year, and in these last two weeks the final details are smoothed out. Entries are about to start coming in, manufacturer's donations are being received. (One donation, of fake plastic coral, will be used as a door prize, although one wit suggested it be given to the U of C for their tank.)

The cats wandered in and out of our group as we talked, ceaselessly patrolling the yard or nesting down in the grass for a few moments. One cat went to get a drink in the fish pond. The water level was about a foot below, and the cat had quite a stretch down to lap it up.

MORE FISHY BUSINESS

1993-8-22

Filled out my entry form today for the aquarium show. Only one entry this year, a Lake Tanganyikan cichlid called Julidochromis marlieri. This is a small torpedo or cigar shaped fish with black horizontal stripes on a cream coloured body, about 10 cm long. I have other fish but none worth showing.

John, who looks after mail-in entries (actually couriered since no aquarist in right mind would send live fish via the mails), came by my house to pick up some

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small show tanks to keep the mail-in entries in until the show. The CAS has two sheds in my backyard in which they keep the show equipment such as tank stands, air pumps or other mechanical debris. I don't mind the sheds taking up one-third of the backyard as this reduces the amount of mowing I have to do. Like the barber who has the worst haircut in town, my yard is not a horticultural showpiece. The last thing I want to think about when I get home from work is yet more mowing. I mow the front yard just often enough to keep the neighbours from phoning the weed inspector. The backyard is screened off by a high solid board fence, so I only do it three times a year. A few years ago I only mowed it once, and when the CAS volunteers came to get the show equipment they were making jokes about my hayfield, jokes that have persisted since. So today I mowed both front and back yards to give them a pleasant surprise when they come next week.

HOW MUCH DO I HEAR FOR THIS LEAKY TANK? (SOLD FOR \$20)

That actually happened at the CAS auction, but even funnier was that the next item, a tank that did not leak, sold for \$5. People get carried away.

Filled in my auction registration form. The aquarium show has a 600+ lot auction on the Sunday of the show, starting at noon and going to about 18h00 or so. Aquarists can sell their unwanted tanks, equipment, fish, and aquatic plants. Some entries in the show are also put up for auction, as I did with my Julidochromis. Auctioned entries can't be picked up until the close of the show Monday afternoon but they are auctioned on Sunday to get a better price. At one time, they weren't actually auctioned until show teardown. This resulted in fish selling at ridiculous prices, and the auction committee forced to do more paperwork at the height of the chaos. One set of prizewinning fish sold for 50¢; the exhibitor never bothered to cash the cheque.

Each consignor is allowed a maximum of fifty lots, but I'll only have a half dozen or so. A couple of bags of Vallisneria spiralis, an aquatic plant which grows profusely in my indoor goldfish pond. I'll also sell some bundles of old aquarium magazines. Unlike past years, I firmly intend to avoid buying anything in the auction; can't afford it. That depends, of course, on whether or not anything of interest to me is put into the auction. In previous years, I've tried to buy and sell on a break-even basis. Sell \$70 and buy \$100, that sort of thing.

FORE!

1993-8-26

The Parks Dept. has an Adopt-A-Park program, whereby citizens of a neighbourhood can look after a local park. They do the watering, litter pickup, and a few other tasks; we do the mowing, pruning, and spraying. But it can be difficult to restrain volunteers sometimes. We discovered that a large traffic island on a residential street had been converted into a miniature golf course. Small table-sized greens and fairways had been mowed with a close-cut mower, and tin cans sunk into the turf for the holes. Altogether about four holes in an area about 10 m by 15 m. Fortunately no little Dutch windmills or tiny red barns to putt through. I suppose the main reason why they did this was because they wanted to play golf without having to book a tee-off time.

Just outside my office window, on the opposite side of a sidewalk leading to the front door, is a post-and-cable fence, keeping the front lawn safe from errant drivers veering out of the intersection in front of the depot. I can look up from my desk and watch the traffic; the desk is pushed up against a picture window. Along the fence we throw leftover food from our lunches for the birds to scavenge. Today, it was some leftover popcorn (how did we manage before microwave popcorn was invented?).

A magpie floated down from the sky and sat on a post directly in front of me. It crouched down on the post and stared at me through the window, fluffing itself up to look bigger and glaring malevolently. I was rather glad to have the protection of the window. Just as my nerves were about to crack, the magpie straightened up and hopped sideways onto the cable of the fence. I thought it was going to jump down and eat the popcorn. Instead, it launched itself directly towards me. I instinctively went for cover behind the desk, throwing up my arm to protect myself. Just before hitting the window, the magpie swerved and hit the wall feet first. Bouncing off the stucco, it flapped back to a post. The magpie had a moth in its beak and had not been aiming for me after all. The poor moth, which had been sheltering on the windowframe, was quickly gulped down by the bird, which then flew off without bothering about the popcorn.

I resumed my paperwork. Perhaps after all there is something to be said for working in a windowless cubicle.

HOW DOES YOUR GARDEN GROW?

1993-8-30

Out on patrol this afternoon, checking how the shrub beds are doing. Almost all of them in my district are heavily mulched with wood chips. The chips are supplied by pruning crews from Electric System. They clear power lines, then run the branches through a chipper. The shrub beds are remulched every two or three years by my crews, using a thick 30 cm layer of chips to suppress weeds. The mulch also conserves moisture, not essential this summer but valuable in our dry cold winters and if there is a hot summer. During hot weather I've seen wood chip mulch that on the surface appears dry as dust. Scrape the surficial layer aside and the interior is soaking moist. Gardeners often make the mistake of putting on a thin layer of mulch only a handsbreadth deep, but this doesn't stop weeds or hold much moisture. A thick layer of mulch requires a few minutes of weeding once or twice a year, since the weeds that do struggle to the surface are rooted in the mulch,

not the soil, and pop right out with a quick tug of the hand.

This year, an incredible crop of berries on shrubs, because of all the rain. The rose bushes look reddish from a distance, they have so many hips on them. Buckthorns (*Hippophae rhamnoides*) are bending over from the weight of red berries. Russian olives, dogwoods, cranberries, Maydays, and bush cherries are burdened with fruit. Ginnala maples are loaded with red samaras (winged seeds) and caraganas with brown pods.

SHOW SETUP BEGINS

1993-8-30

The first part of setting up the CAS show began tonight (Monday). I arrived home from work to find an answering machine message from Dan, the club president, that he would be over at 18h30 with the hired truck, a one-ton. I unlocked the club sheds and had a hasty supper. Dan arrived, followed shortly by several others, including Jerry in his van. We started loading the heavy stuff into the one-ton, the light stuff into the van, interrupted every five minutes by ten-minute discussions as to how to load the trucks. Three coffin-sized heavy boxes went into the one-ton first, containing fluorescent light tubes, PVC pipe for air supply, and a third one of miscellany. Then came the shelving, galvanized sheets to take the weight of the tanks, and plywood to keep water and electricity off the former. Half a dozen men, most out of shape from sedentary jobs (myself included), trundled back and forth, back and forth, between truck and shed. After the shelving, it was fluorescent light fixtures, then the vertical supports for the shelves. It took about an hour and a half to load up.

Then a convoy formed and off we went to the Pumphouse Theatre, so named because it used to be a Waterworks Dept. water intake from the adjacent Bow River. The CAS show takes over the entire building. The seats are

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removed from the main theatre (by their staff, fortunately) and we set up the displays therein. The other theatre is used for the auction and seminars. Dressing rooms are used for backroom operations, that is, by the concomm. The backstage is used for storage of all the junk necessary to run a show.

Speaking of junk, when we finished loading the trucks, we spent a few minutes sorting out old stuff that had been kicking around for years. Or I should say, tripping around for years, as its main function was to send sprawling any inattentive volunteers who momentarily forgot that bucket of non-metric bolts was there. The bolts were from the old stands but did not fit the current stands. An ancient fish food display went into my garbage bin; half the manufacturers mentioned in the display are no longer in business. Other junk included leftover bits from a parade float the CAS used to enter in the Calgary Stampede parade. The float was given up because it didn't bring in any new members. It was also too much work to find svelte female members who were willing to wear skimpy mermaid costumes before 100,000 spectators and 600,000 television viewers.

The convoy arrived at the Pumphouse Theatre, a five-minute drive down Crowchild Trail from my house. After much backing and forwarding ("To the left! To the left!") the one-ton squeezed into a loading dock, as if it were the Queen Mary docking in New York harbour. We put the shelf pieces around the outside walls and the rest of the stuff on the floor in the middle of the theatre. Tomorrow night we start assembling everything.

The procedure for show setup is well established and is passed on from one generation of aquarists to the next. Mistakes are learned from, and the show gradually evolves over the years. Over five years we have an almost complete turnover on the Show Committee. Novices are willing to learn from veterans, who in turn are willing to accept

new ideas. The worst that has ever happened was that the show broke even; none of this business (sic) of losing thousands of dollars and taking it for granted that these things happen. Perhaps Garth Spencer should take up aquarium keeping.

SECOND NIGHT OF SHOW SETUP (TUESDAY) 1993-8-31

I got down to the theatre about 19h30. Four others had preceded me and were starting to assemble the shelves. They were mostly new people, one of whom I never did catch her name. I'm considered an old-timer, a grizzled veteran since 1979, having joined the CAS a year after moving to Calgary.

The shelves are self-evident as to how to assemble them, so the crew had started without waiting for instructions. Each free-standing shelf unit has two tiers for tanks; we'll need enough for 250+ entries. Unfortunately, in their enthusiasm the crew began using the bucket of bolts intended for auction because they were from the old wooden stands we used to have. The old stands were built in the days of Imperial measure, so all the bolts are calibrated in inches. When the stands became uneconomical to repair, we purchased heavy-duty metal shelving at a bargain price from a warehouse going out of business. The new stands were fitted with metric bolts. The first year we had them, we still used some of the old stands, and it wasn't until the next year that the conversion was completed. This allowed thorough mixing of the two kinds of bolts, adding an hour to setup and takedown because everyone had to keep switching back and forth between Imperial and metric wrenches. The following year, a completely new supply of bolts was purchased, it being easier to spend the money than hand-sort thousands of bolts. The old bolts were set aside in a bucket "in case we need them" but have not been used for years, so we'll sell them

at auction for a couple of bucks before they rust into a solid mass.

I stopped the crew before they had gone too far and got them the metric bolts. Only one shelf unit had to be re-bolted. We soon had a dozen people, as they trickled in after having had their suppers. Breaking into teams of three (one to hold the shelf or stand, one on each side bolting), we worked along different walls of the theatre, putting up a continuous row around the room (with breaks for doors). The centre will have tables for displays and club activities such as raffles and memberships. On top of the metal shelves we lay plywood sheets, then install fluorescent lights and airline PVC along the back. At most aquarium shows, tables are used upon which entrants plunk down their tanks and must supply their own lights and air. The CAS is one of very few clubs, perhaps the only club, to supply everything but the tank. And we even supply the tank for mail-in entries. This provides a much neater display, better looking than a bunch of tanks with various canopies and wires everywhere.

INDIANA (HI BUCK!)

1993-9-2

While driving about at work today, I came up behind an expensive sedan with two brand-new mattresses tied on the roof, still wrapped in plastic. Someone furnishing their house, I thought with no further interest. Then I glanced at the licence plate and was surprised to see the car was from Indiana. They couldn't be tourists taking back home a bargain. I doubted they were students attending the University of Calgary since the car was expensive and brand new, not the type that students drive.

A rather nice looking licence plate though, certainly more colourful than Alberta's blue and red letters on white. The Indiana plate shaded from top to bottom from a lovely rose pink to yellow, with a black city skyline along the bottom. Shows a bit more thought went into it than just

saying red letters on white. At the bottom of the licence plate was the slogan "Amber Waves Of Grain". I don't know how much wheat Indiana grows but that does not seem to fit. Technically corn is a grain since it is a member of the grass family, so the slogan might apply there. But most people think of wheat or barley when they think of grain, and think of Kansas or Montana as covered in amber waves of grain.

Alberta's licence plate slogan is "Wild Rose Country", after its provincial emblem, Rosa acicularis. But not a slogan to inspire soldiers as they march off to war.

Tonight I went down to the Pumphouse Theatre to set up my show tank and fill it with water. With only one entry this year, a rather easy task, compared with other aquarists bringing down dozens of tanks. The water will equilibrate overnight. Tomorrow I bring the Julidochromis over.

WHAT I DID ON FRIDAY

1993-9-3

Slept in late, paid a gas bill, picked up OPUNTIA 14.1 from the printers and mailed it out. Exciting stuff if you happen to excite easily.

Took my Julidochromis down to the show. First the tank in my fishroom was drained down to a water level of 5 cm. The fish is a cavedweller, normally resident in an inverted flowerpot with a hole knocked in the side of it for a door. It was easy enough to catch the fish. It withdrew inside the flowerpot when I began to fiddle about with the tank. Next I slid an ice cream pail into the tank and slowly scooped up the flowerpot and its hidden occupant. Remove the flowerpot, and there is the fish trapped in the pail, within which it rode down to the show. Netting is not used for show specimens as it damages fins or scrapes off scales. A pail or plastic bag is used to scoop up the fish in the

[continued next page]

aquarium, water and all, so that nothing touches or grabs the fish. This also reduces trauma, as in many cases the fish simply swims into the pail or bag.

Arrived at the theatre, a hive of activity as aquarists set up their show tanks. I poured the Julidochromis into the show tank. I taped a piece of scrap paper over the front of the tank so that all the motion and activity in the room won't frighten it to exhaustion. The paper is removed during the final stage of setup. At 21h00, all tanks must be in place, lined up neatly along the edges of the shelves. Rolls of plastic are then stapled over the front of the shelves and tanks. The plastic is razored out where it covers the tanks, thus creating a seamless wall of black with windows looking into the tanks. All the clutter is hidden; the show visitor peeks into each tank to see the fish.

LET THE SHOW BEGIN

1993-9-4

The show doesn't actually open until noon, to allow the judges time to go through all the entries. An irritating question that aquarists have to put up with is "Biggest fish wins, does it?". Fish (and aquatic plants) are first judged on quality: colour, finnage, body conformation. If all else is equal, only then will size be considered, and only compared to the species known size. A bloated fish twice the size of the normal range for that species may actually lose points, just as a fat dog may lose points at a dog show. A fish in spawning colouration will beat one that is duller. Colour in fish is directly related to health; a good diet is needed to produce pigments, a reason why female fish prefer colourful males. Fins must be perfect; tears indicate rough handling with a net or fighting with a tankmate.

I went down to the theatre at 11h00 to register my auction lots. Dry goods are brought in today, but livestock are not brought in until just before the start of the auction tomorrow. Registration was quick and easy, it all

being done with computers. Labels were printed off for my lots, my name entered on disk, and away I went.

The Awards Banquet is tonight, but for the first time in years I will not attend. In fact, I've quit going to any banquets anywhere. For the same price as a banquet ticket I could have anything I want in a restaurant, as opposed to a fixed menu. Invariably in Calgary this means roast beef (thin slice of leather), sauce (HP), soggy French fries, onion soup (apparently rinse water from the tureen), and Black-Forest cake (usually the only good thing on the menu).

Miserable rain this afternoon, the wettest year already on record. I worked on preparing copy for CALGARY PHILATELIST, which goes to the printer next week. This is the bulletin of the Calgary Philatelic Society, for which I am the editor. The last issue had an article on post-Soviet Ukraine, so I illustrated it with the cover from CHERNOBYLIZATION, a nice piece of cross-fertilization between SF and philately.

AND THE WINNER IS ...

1993-9-5

... my fish, which took first place in the Tanganyika Cichlids category. Ribbons are posted next to winning entries so visitors can see what is a good fish and what isn't. Out of the 35 classes in the show, a Best In Show is selected, this year a Central American cichlid. I was impressed by the overall quality of the show this year; the best fish I've seen in years.

Dropped off my livestock for the auction, or rather my live plants. Won't stay around for the auction. Looks like a good turnout of visitors to the show. Scattered showers in the weather forecast have made people stay in town instead of going out to the mountains, so they go to our show or the football game.

ALL THINGS MUST COME TO AN END ...

1993-9-6

... and so it is with the show. Today is Labour Monday. My brother and his family came out to look at the show and I gave them the tour. Teardown began at 16h00, with the black plastic sheets stripped off the stands. My fish had sold for a good price at the auction to the fellow who had the second-place entry. I bagged the fish for him, then emptied out my tank, and took it home. It takes a while for everyone to clear out their tanks from the stands, so rather than sit around bored silly, I zipped up Crowchild Trail, put everything away, had a quick bite to eat, and back again.

Show attendance was about 2100 paid admissions, the auction had 826 lots (sold in six hours), and it looks as if the CAS will earn an excellent profit to carry the club through the forthcoming year.

Arrived back at the theatre 17h15 but was too early; some exhibitors were still clearing up their tanks. Swept out the auction room, and by that time teardown had begun. It went quite well, and the trucks were loaded by 20h00, at which time we all sat down to a supper of veggies and KFC chicken. The bucket of non-metric bolts had been overlooked and had not been auctioned. I put them in my car, and will personally take them to the next club meeting to be auctioned there come hell or high water. By 20h30 the trucks were at my house and the loading was completed by 21h15. This time of year it starts to get dark by about 20h45, so we put everything back into the sheds by the light of my trouble light and the Show Chairman's Coleman lamp.

OMINOUS FORESHADOWING

1993-9-8

Prime Minister Kim Campbell called an election today for October 25, the last possible date before existing voter lists expire and a new enumeration would have to be taken

at a cost of \$15 million. The existing list is from the October 26, 1992, constitutional referendum and is valid only for one year.

GHOST TOWER REBORN

In a previous issue of OPUNTIA, I had mentioned The Tomb of the Unknown Developer, also known as the Ghost Tower. This was a skyscraper begun in 1981 at the top of the oil boom. In 1982, oil prices collapsed, and so did the developer building the tower, leaving it at six stories of unfinished concrete slab and steel girders. This skeleton loomed over two of the busiest streets in the west end of downtown Calgary, a constant reminder to drivers in rush hour traffic of what might have been. The skeletal skyscraper was repossessed by a bank, sold at scrap value for cash, and then drifted into legal limbo when the buyer went out of business, not by bankruptcy but just quietly closing its doors without leaving any debts. Property taxes were unpaid but the City of Calgary did not attempt to seize it for back taxes since the City would then become liable for it.

But finally a few years ago, after a decade of limbo, the tower was purchased by the Calgary Separate School Board (Catholic). Despite a decade of exposure to the climate, the framework was still good, so the Board completed it to a height of twelve stories.

Before construction began, there was an exorcism. In the decade that the structure was abandoned, transient ne'er-do-wells had scaled up into the open floors and covered the concrete with graffiti, much of it Satanic. I doubt there were any real Satanists, just kids fooling around. But the School Board played it safe and had a priest come in to exorcise the building before construction started.

In OPUNTIA #11.5, a loocer asked me about why people went Yeeee Haw!, and I replied with a paragraph about cowboys and cattle drives. That set off a train of memories that I'd like to expand further upon.

My father, a veterinarian, kept a couple hundred head of cattle on the side. Beef cattle, mostly Charolais, Hereford, and Charcross. They were summered at Old Mrs. Pomerleau's place, where she rented out pasture to Dad. Her farm was several kilometres east of Dad's farm and clinic and overlooked the Red Deer River. When we checked the cattle, we had to drive through her barnyard to get to the pasture. This meant that one of us had to get out of the pickup truck to open and close gates on both sides of the barnyard. It also meant that we had to face her attack geese, and none too friendly they were. Even if we were wearing cowboy boots they could still get in a vicious nip or two on our shins. If she had them in their pen, all was well, but they quite often free-ranged through the farm.

Charolais are white, mild mannered beef cattle originating in France. In the 1960s, all livestock imported into Canada from Europe had to be quarantined on the island of St. Pierre and Miquelon, a French territorial enclave off the coast of Newfoundland. Facilities were limited, so the federal government had a lottery. If your ticket was drawn, you got to import one animal. This drove up the price of imported animals and made them very valuable for breeding stock. Charolais had an extra level of pedigree above purebred, known as Full French. The prices for a Full French cow were in the tens of thousands in the 1960s. Today the quarantine can be carried out on special farms so there is no backlog, and in any event so many animals have been bred that there is no longer the critical shortage. Charolais are preferred because they produce lean beef and are hardy on the prairies. Their peaceful behaviour makes them easy to handle; I never worried about

being charged by a bull. Slaughter cattle were often Charcross, simply a hybrid of Charolais and Hereford.

To improve the odds of winning the lottery to import a cow, farmers entered everybody in their family. You were only allowed to put in one entry each year, but there was nothing against putting in application forms for all the kids, right down to newborns. I'm sure a few farmers entered the cat as well. Even farmers who had no intention to spend their own money on importing cattle would still enter, as they could, if a winner, get someone else to put up the money for a commission. And so it was that Dad entered myself and my brother.

I won. This meant going to France and buying a cow. I didn't go, of course, just Mom and Dad, who combined a vacation through Europe with the cow buying and were thus able to deduct the expense as a business trip. I didn't mind as it meant we had the house to ourselves, although there was a day help to do the cleaning, etc. The trip to France went in July 1969 during the first moon landing. I remember watching it at some early hour in the morning. Mom bought every newspaper and magazine in France that mentioned it, and to this very day I still have French newsmagazines that trumpeted the landings. L'EXPRESS for 14-20 Juillet bannered the cover "LE SAUT" (the newspapers became brittle and eventually were discarded).

Having a cow in my name meant that I needed a cattle brand, so an application was sent to the Ministry of Agriculture. My first choice of 'DCS' was already in use, so I settled for 'SPE'. My animals were mixed in with Dad's herd, since he was the one who put up all the money.

Few range cows were used to horses, since modern cowboys drive pickup trucks. When the pasture began to become overgrazed, we started to haul in hay bales and buckets of grain to the herd. This made them associate

pickup trucks with food. They were thus inclined to follow a pickup truck, which made it easier to lead them on the roundup and drive back to winter quarters. At the rear of the herd, some local cowgirls, friends of Dad, brought up the stragglers with their horses. I am not being sexist when I call them cowgirls, for they were in their teens, and pleased to have an opportunity to exercise their horses. The hired hand had a horse and rode at the side of the herd. We ran the herd along the ditch of the highway, and my brother and I guarded any gaps in the fences or at road crossings.

Some parents make a great deal of fuss about teenage sons getting driver licences at 16, but Neil and I had no difficulty. Years later, I can look back and see why Dad let us drive as soon as we were able to. It meant we had to help do the chores and haul feed to the cattle.

But even before I was of legal age to drive a vehicle on the road, I had learned to drive a tractor. This was much appreciated, as it freed one from standing on the flat-deck trailer towed by the tractor and lifting bales of hay. It wasn't so bad if we were feeding the cattle, as the bales were rolled off onto the ground for the herd. Baling the hay was another matter entirely. The tractor towed the baler, which in turn had the flatdeck attached to it. As the swathed hay was picked off the ground by the baler and packed into bales, the bales were ejected onto the flatdeck where they were stacked in layers. The first few layers were no problem, but as the load got higher, one had to lift the bales further and further up. Exhausting work by the fourth layer of bales.

My favourite tractor work was cultivating summerfallow in outlying grain fields. I was by myself on the big new tractor (we used a cabless antique for the baling). It was impressive watching the massive duckfoot cultivators lift out of the ground when turning about at the end of the field, then dropping back in for the new strip. Best of all was working in irregularly shaped fields. In a

rectangular or square field, I had to cultivate in strips up and down the length of the field. Irregular fields allowed me to cultivate swirls and curves in all kinds of patterns.

Any farm tractor working on a field soon attracts a flock of birds, mostly seagulls and ravens. They were in search of insects and grubs turned up by the tines and would follow along behind, madly stuffing themselves. I was always puzzled where the seagulls came from when I was cultivating one particular field, as it was a considerable distance from any lake, too far for a seagull circling above water to spot me from a distance. But they came. First one seagull would float by on its way somewhere else, see the tractor, and make a sudden braking drop down. Other birds see the first one pecking away at the freshly-turned soil and dive in to get the goodies. Soon a huge flock was strung out behind my tractor. Often I had turned around at the end of the field and met the flock on my way back. The birds flapped overtop each other, leapfrogging to get the best insects, but often many would be left behind as they mined a particular good lode of grubs. Seeing the tractor chugging slowly towards them again, they would casually step out of the way, sometimes not until the wheel was almost on top of them. More than once I thought for sure I had run over a bird, but looking behind me revealed no corpse, so it must have got out of the way in time. I noticed one aspect of seagull behaviour. Aggressive birds intent on establishing their rights spent so much time trying to chase off other birds that they never got any feeding in, and while they were chasing away one bird, ten more came in behind and ate the insects.

One disadvantage of modern farming is the noise of the machinery. I always wore earmuffs, and could see the seagulls cawing but not hear their caws. One sees the sights of nature but not the sounds.