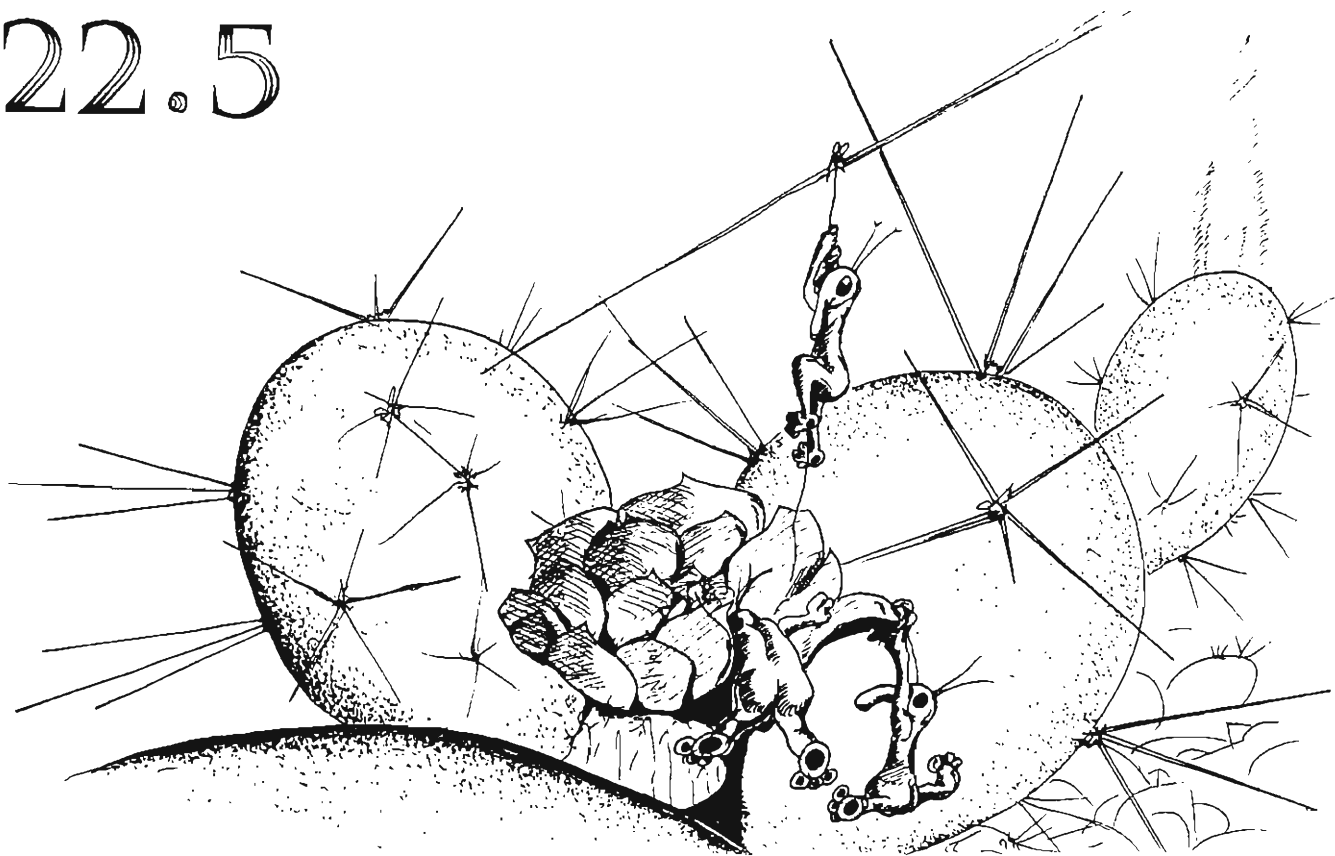


OPUNTIA

22.5



ISSN 1183-2703

OPUNTIA is published by Dale Speirs, Box 6830, Calgary, Alberta, Canada, T2P 2E7. It is available for \$3 cash for a one-time sample copy, trade for your zine, or letter of comment. Whole-numbered issues are sercon, .1 issues are reviewzines, and .5 issues are perzines.

ART CREDIT: The Wuzis carry on their exploration of the Opuntia world, this time poking into an Opuntia flower. A series drawn by Franz Miklis, A-5151, Nussdorf 64, Austria.

A hot and sunny spring; the wet summers of the last few years have been depressing but perhaps the weather cycle has changed. The Gravely walk-behind mower is cutting on the Bow River pathway, one swath on each side of the path to keep the vegetation from overgrowing the path. Fresh green growth is starting to flop over onto the path. The noise of the Gravely mower flushes a doe out of the river-bank bushes and out onto the knee-high grass on the floodplain. She trots down into an oxbow slough and is lost to sight, hidden by the slope and the grass. The silver skeletons of dead cottonwoods tower into the clear blue sky. There is no wind, and we swelter in the 25°C heat.

The Bow River is running high with meltwater from the Rocky Mountains upstream. A rubber raft whips by on the river, with two teens casting fishing lines as they go. Near the north edge of the park, the pathway swerves suddenly and takes a suspension bridge over the river to the other side. This pedestrian bridge is quite high, and a favourite of teens for diving. They cluster in a group on the bridge, giggling and daring each other to plunge off the railing. About once every five minutes, one of them works up enough courage to do so, cheered on by friends. There is the cannonball plunge on the upstream side of the bridge, then everyone on the bridge rushes to the other side to see if the diver made it.

Downstream of both the bridge and the roaring Gravely is a spot where the pathways edges along a quiet backwater of the river. The banks are lined with wild roses and purple vetch in full bloom. The backwater has its share of ducks and Canada geese, but what catches my eye is a blue heron wading through the shallows. When it goes around a bend out of view, only then do I notice a pair of muskrats swimming back and forth across the backwater from the bank out to a certain spot. I don't know what they are finding there, but they dive, then reappear as if they got what they came for, paddling back to the bank.

[continued next page]

I ALSO HEARD FROM: Buck Coulson, Harry Warner, Brian Earl Brown, John Thiel, Henry Welch, Joseph Major, Murray Moore, Franz Miklis

The backwater is a veritable traffic jam of birds and aquatic mammals; no sign of nature red in tooth and claw. Pedestrians can stop and admire such sights, but I wonder at the bicycle riders who zip along the path too fast to notice much more than a quick glimpse of a wayside rose.

I wonder also that many people prefer desk jobs, cooped up all day in an office. Granted that outdoor work can be miserable in the cold or rain, but days like today are nice for an Official Inspection Tour.

AND ALL THE BOARDS DID SHRINK

1994-7-7

I was transferred to my present Maintenance District in autumn 1991. The summers of 1992 and 1993 were so wet we never used the irrigation systems in the parks. What with personnel transfers and bumping, we are now in the position of not knowing where to turn on the water as the hot dry weather continues. Nobody is left who knows the irrigation systems, and maps are mostly hand-drawn material from years ago. A familiar sight is a labourer pacing the park looking for the water service. Two weeks of dry weather has slowed grass growth and turned it yellow in non-irrigated places.

LAST OF THE BIG-TIME GAMBLERS

1994-7-9

And so to the Calgary Stampede, the world's largest rodeo as any loyal Cowtownner will immediately add. I started off at the casino, where I changed a \$2 banknote into quarters and went to play the roulette wheel. Video slot machines were introduced a few years ago and are gradually displacing all non-card game types of gambling. It used to be that there were rows and rows of roulette wheels doing good business; today there were six left and for most of the time I was the only person at the wheel. Video slots are highly addictive and, to me, highly impersonal. One sits at the machine pumping in money, staring fixedly at it and oblivious to anyone else. I don't gamble to win;

I don't know how to play card games, and all the others are stacked in favour of the house. I play the 25¢ minimum bet on the roulette wheel, always playing exactly the same bet, since the odds don't change if you shift around. My motive in playing is socializing, talking to other players or the dealer, listening to interesting stories and studying the human condition. I can do that just as easily with 25¢ bets as with \$5 bets and still have as much fun. I play until I go bust, which with \$2 worth of quarters usually keeps me a while.

The wheel I was playing today used symbols such as an anchor, heart, crown, club, spade, or diamond. Each spin of the wheel I put a quarter on the crown. Sometimes I was down to one quarter left, then would win triples in sequence, putting me back up to where I started. Other times I steadily lost one quarter with each bet. The perky young woman spinning the wheel would chant "crown, crown, crown" while the wheel was spinning if I was the only bettor at the table. On the rare occasion when someone else was betting, she chanted "something nice, something to win". After spinning the wheel, she would do her chant and a two-step shuffle. I asked her if she had ever worked at Disneyland. She understood what my meaning was and said no, but she enjoyed working the casino. It was her fourth year there. It's nice to see people who enjoy their jobs though. I played the \$2 for a while, winning and losing, and finally busted. As it was getting lonely being the only player there, I gave up and went outside to the midway. I suspect that when I return next year or so, the wheels will be extinct and anyone not playing cards will be sitting silently at a video slot.

And so I exited out into the blazing heat of the midway. The concessions were crowded, except the seafood franchise. An optimist, or a big-time gambler, is someone who thinks he can make money on seafood in Calgary. Actually there are a few stores here that survive because

[continued next page]

of our population of expatriate Maritimers and British. But in the midst of cattle country, steak is king, with strong sales of chicken. For fast food, westerners think of hamburgers and pizza, not fish and chips.

CARDS

I wandered over to the agricultural exhibits, that is, the ones that moo and whinny. There was a display from Canadian Herefords with the slogan "Never a bum steer". They were giving out trading cards depicting various Herefords posing. I don't collect them but I picked up a few cards to throw in a kitchen drawer on the off-chance that years from now I'll meet a collector who wants them.

Bought some postcards to send to my mother, who has her family well trained to send her cards from wherever we go. I wandered around trying to find a place to sit, and finally got a back seat at a home economics demonstration on preserving fresh fruits. I paid little attention to the lady giving the talk, and started addressing my postcards. I soon discovered that she was passing out samples of her food. Every few minutes I was interrupted by her husband giving out samples. Good stuff too. Wild currant jam, chocolate-covered strawberries, and horseradish jelly. I never knew you could make (or want to) jelly out of horseradish but it tasted quite nice. Even better, when she ended her program, she handed out postcards with an aerial view of her farm, so I'll add those to Mom's collection.

BLACK SHEEP IN THE CATTLE BUSINESS

My father's cattle herd was mostly Charolais, Hereford, and Charcross (a hybrid of the other two breeds) in that order. Charolais are white or cream-coloured, but some have a reddish tinge. As the Charolais World Technical Conference convenes at the Stampede, the cattlemen are in an uproar because an Alberta rancher has produced a black

Charolais, using a recessive gene in two reddish parents. DNA tests have shown that the heifer is otherwise still a distinct Charolais. Colour of a cow might be considered unimportant to city slickers, but it does help define a breed, not to mention the dead hand of tradition. The first black Charolais is controversial to the point where cattlemen are settling their arguments out in the parking lot.

Myself I prefer that Charolais remain white. If you want black beef cattle, then buy an Angus. My preference is based on experiences in rounding up cattle on Dad's farm. Like most farms in the Red Deer area, the land was a mixture of grain fields, pasture, and poplar bluffs. The bluffs are clumps of trees growing in areas too rough to farm. Cattle seek shade in them, or water, as many of the bluffs surround sloughs or ravines. At dusk, I had little trouble spotting Charolais in the darkened bluff, but Herefords were much harder to spot unless the animal was facing a white patch or blaze toward me. Charolais stand out quite well in the gloom; dark-coloured cattle could easily give me the slip as I crashed about in the undergrowth. Now if that Alberta rancher had developed a phosphorescent Charolais instead of a black one, I'd be heartily in favour of it. As it is not likely that there are any recessive genes for that trait, one would have to use genetic engineering to introduce it from some marine algae or whatever. Just think of it! No need to install electricity in the barn for lights; let Bessie and her herdsmates do the job.

DOWNTOWN IN COWTOWN

1994-7-15

There is almost as much Stampede activity going on downtown as out at the fairgrounds, so today I took the bus into the city centre. The hot dry weather continues. As farmers say, "If it ain't drought, then it's flooding". I started off on 9th Avenue, heading east. There was a pickup truck on the sidewalk, towing a chuckwagon on a

[continued next page]

Flatdeck trailer. They were obviously setting it up as a display for a shopping centre in front of the Calgary Tower. As the truck moved along the sidewalk, the driver found out the hard way that there was insufficient clearance for the chuckwagon to go underneath a protrusion from the building. With a bang, the metal hoops that hold the canvas on a chuckwagon collapsed. Three chagrined cowboys gathered round and looked at the damage. After some discussion, they decided that the damage was done, so the truck might as well keep going instead of backing up. Two of the cowboys stood on the trailer so their weight would depress the tires enough to allow further passage, while the driver pulled the truck ahead. As I wandered on, they had cleared the obstruction and were unloading the chuckwagon. It shouldn't be too hard to pull the hoops back into place for the canvas.

Swerving one block over onto the 8th Avenue pedestrian mall, I slowed down considerably in my walking. The mall was jammed with people, and every half block was a band or demonstration display. I watched a blacksmith making horseshoes in a sidewalk display. Modern smiths like him use a truck with a propane-fired hearth mounted on the tailgate. I've always had a sentimental spot for blacksmiths since my maternal grandfather was one of the last ones west of Red Deer before mechanization of farming replaced them with mechanics in the 1930s. The onlookers watching him had to put up with the sound of a nearby country singer. She was singing with a very mediocre voice at best. There seems to be many like her who only get work during the Stampede, when there is a shortage of singers to work all the taverns and shopping malls. Fortunately she was soon drowned out by a Highlander pipe and drum band from a Calgary militia, who chose to set up next to the blacksmith. As the pipers wailed away, the pipemajor formed them in a circle. She then walked around listening closely to each bagpipe for anything off-tune, and adjusting chanters and drones as required. I was reminded of a comment by an elderly friend of mine who served in WW2. He remarked that Highland bands were excellent for

keeping the infantry in step as they marched, saying "You could march forever", swinging along in step with the pipes and drums.

Continuing eastward, I passed a country band called "Riel and the Country Rebels", performing at Speaker's Corner on the 8th Avenue mall. A typical Canuck thing; Louis Riel was a separatist, the band was doing a Johnny Cash song, and the lead singer's guitar was painted with the Canadian maple leaf flag. They wound up "Ring of Fire", and got the usual round of applause. The singer thanked the audience, saying "Like the cow said to the farmer, it's nice to get a warm hand".

I finished up at the Olympic Plaza, which terminates the eastern end of the mall in front of City Hall. The Plaza was the scene of an aboriginal pow-wow. The tribes danced in their finery as the pow-wow drummers pounded and chanted in the centre. The horsemen and dancers looked reasonably authentic, but the drummers were sitting in lawnchairs around the drum and were dressed in baseball caps and blue jeans. The Plaza is surrounded by skyscrapers, and the drums echoed off the glass-curtain walls, forcing the drummers to adjust their beat to stay in tempo with the echos. Standing just behind the main platform (where the medals were handed out during the 1988 Olympics), I heard a rather nifty double beat bouncing off a skyscraper across the street.

Walking back westward, I switched over to the Plus 15 network, a system of pedestrian overhead walkways that links the downtown buildings together at the second floor level. More Stampeding there as well. One store had a cow building contest, where contestants raced to assemble a cow made of plywood sheets. Elsewhere there was the inevitable country line dancing, with a singer convincing tourists to come on stage and try their hand at it. They weren't too bad; everyone watched the singer and followed in step.

TROLLING FOR BREAKFAST

1994-7-16

A popular tradition during the Calgary Stampede is free breakfasts out on the sidewalks. The menu is always the same everywhere: flapjack pancakes, sausages, coffee or orange juice (and occasionally scrambled eggs). The large chains such as Co-op put on their own breakfasts and move them to a different store each morning. Merchants in a shopping mall or plaza club together and put on a single breakfast on one morning. This is a seventy-year tradition in Calgary, dating back to when chuckwagons were still in use out on the range. A chuckwagon is a cook's wagon, to feed the cowboys. Until mechanization overtook the ranches, the chuckwagons that raced each night at the Stampede were actual working wagons driven into town each night. The cooks developed the habit of stopping downtown and setting up the stove, giving free food to any passerby. When the chuckwagon disappeared from ranches, and became exclusively racing machines at rodeos, local merchants carried on the free breakfasts.

Most Stampede breakfasts are on weekday mornings when I can't get to them because I'm at work. Today is Saturday and I spent the morning driving around looking for free food. I prefer the ones put on by small shopping plazas, as one seldom has to wait long in the lineup. And it doesn't take much to attract a crowd, especially if free food is involved. The big shopping malls have as many as 50,000 people served, with a two hour wait. Since they only serve the same menu as the smaller ones, I can be at several others in the meantime. Few breakfasts are advertised; one finds them by looking for a lineup of people in a parking lot. My first stop was a small plaza a short distance from my house. I got there fifteen minutes before the breakfast started and was only a dozen people back in line. The lineup quickly formed up as others drove by and pulled over to park. Behind me was a family group, with a Scotswoman explaining to her friend or relative apparently visiting Calgary just how the system worked. The lineup snaked out of the parking lot on-

to the sidewalk. Adjacent to the plaza parking lot is a low-rise apartment building. A man came out of one of the apartment units and stood on the balcony howling like a dog for a moment. I don't know if he was calling his dog or making fun of us but it did afford us brief amusement.

After feeding on two sausages, flapjack, and glass of orange juice, I drove off to another one I'd read about in the newspaper. It was far too large, with thousands of people in line, so I kept driving and tried up and down some other commercial streets. Found another one at a Husky service station and had another breakfast of exactly the same thing I'd eaten earlier.

If you had the time and proper schedule, it should be possible to eat free for the ten days of the Stampede. Stuff yourself all morning and no need to eat the rest of the day.

THEY ARE ALL EQUAL NOW

The Calgary Parks Dept. offers regular tours of older cemeteries in the central part of the city, where the pioneers are buried. Known as Graveyard Gossip tours, each is devoted to a specific topic. On Victoria Day, there is a tour of Union Cemetery (overlooking the Stampede grounds) which has most of the graves up to the Boer War. On a different weekend you can see where famous politicians are buried. Stampede time has tours showing the graves of cowboys and ranchers. Labour Day tours are given over to labour leaders and others associated with the union movement. Union Cemetery (nothing to do with labour; it is a merger of adjacent Protestant, Jewish, and Chinese cemeteries) is next to the Reader Rock Gardens, so many visitors to the one end up wandering over to the other. Graveyards are popular as parks, not just for mourners, and one sees numerous walkers and joggers.

But first some business errands. To the printer to pick up the latest issue of OPUNTIA. To the autobody shop to pick up my car, which had been rearended a fortnight ago. Yes, this is the same car that was in the shop last November when it was frontended by a chap turning into my lane. In both cases, it cost me nothing since the other drivers were to blame and their insurance companies paid. The car has also been hailed on a few years ago, so this is its third paint job. This car will never have rust, I feel safe in saying. People compliment me on how I keep it looking as new even though it is a 1987 model. I don't tell them that it is as new. I had a rusted-out Volkswagen Beetle that I drove for fifteen years without so much as a parking-lot door ding on the side panel. But I buy a new car and six months later it is hailed on, then the two accidents. This observation fits in with a basic law of nature: You always pick up the nail in new tires, never the bald tire that was due to be replaced anyway.

The Opening Ceremonies were brief, over in ten minutes. Conchair Al Brown introduced the guests and made a few announcements. Such as: "Last year we had a wedding party sharing the hotel with us on Saturday night. This year there is another wedding party here, so be forewarned!".

Guest of Honour Frederik Pohl had a panel that evening on "The Founding of Cons", he being the entire panel. A good audience turned out to hear him reminisce about the early Worldcons. He discussed various cons he had attended around the world, saying the Japanese were the best organized. Fred's wife Betty walked into the room halfway through the time period and asked him where was the rest of the panel? "I'm the panel", he replied, so she joined him on the dais. I was surprised at the number of basic questions being asked from the audience, which indicated there were a lot of neos there. The ones asking were in their twenties or so, which leads me to believe that perhaps the SF hobby isn't as geriatric as doomsayers would

lead us to think. And there wasn't a Trekkie uniform in sight either. ConVersion seems to have a good mix of age in its membership. It may have been different years ago, but today I don't consider the demographics of Calgary fandom to be wildly out of line with the general population. Palaeofans make cutting remarks about overweight, acned, boomer, or other types of fans, but the days when SFdom was a ghetto for freaks is long gone.

The other Friday panel I went to was on "The Future of Art", hosted by Eric Cameron (University of Calgary arts professor) and Jon Gustafson (art appraiser). Cameron had a slide show on the use of new technology in art, going from computers and CD-ROMs to plastic surgery. One artist uses plastic surgery as performance art, taping her operations and redoing her image at intervals. Gustafson mentioned nanotechnology to create art.

Saturday morning I had a good breakfast buffet in the hotel café. While waiting about the doors to meet other congoers, I got to talking with a bootblack who had his little cubbyhole there. My boots were already polished, so I had no need of his services. He looked rather lonely reading his paper and waiting for customers. I asked him if he made a living at it; he said some days are good and some are bad. A couple of hours later I went past him again and asked him how business was. "Nothing so far", was the reply.

The "Canadian Fiction/Aurora/Convention" panel was the usual gang of suspects in Canfandom but with a few neos in the mix. A bit of stuff about the Auroras and Convention from Cath Jackel, but that will be over by the time you read this, so I'll omit the details. Panel and audience sat in a circle of chairs and agonized over what is Canuck SF before veering into a sustained lament on our post-literate age.

I never seemed to meet anyone I know in the consuite but did get into a conversation with a fellow City worker who

was tending bar. I never met him before (he works with Electric System, I'm in Parks Dept.) but we chatted about pending layoffs in the City while watching with half an eye the CNN channel which, remarkably, had nothing going at the moment about O.J. Simpson. (Loccers need not respond to this comment hook; all comments about O.J. should be directed to FOSFAX.) He, the Electric worker not O.J., started going on about oil company conspiracies and how they control the media, so I made my excuses and went across the hallway to the computer room. I wasted time playing some computer games but soon grew tired of them. I find click-and-blast games rather boring no matter what the format, since there is no variation in plot.

From there to "Writers at the Improv", a popular trash-sport in Calgary. This one was hosted by the Imaginative Fiction Writers Association, a Calgary group. The basic idea is that the panel of IFWA writers gets a word from the audience, then has one minute to write a sentence. Each writer's sentence is then read out loud and the audience votes for the favourite one. In this manner, a collaborative story is built up. At the end of the panel the writers choose a title. This is not a serious contest to say the least. The first three words suggested by the audience were 'weasel', 'watermelon', and 'sewage'. By the time the third word was suggested, one panel member said; "We know where this story is going!". Next door to the Improv was a panel on Babylon 5. Someone was running clips of the show, and the sound kept travelling through the partition. This provided an occasional bit of merriment when the Improv moderator asked the audience for the next word and was greeted by something from Babylon floating into the room. This was disallowed however. I suppose we annoyed them just as much with our racket.

The complete text of the Improv is as follows. Underlined words are the ones suggested by the audience. So as not to spoil the plot, I put the title at the end, which is when it was thought up anyway.

"The weasel hurtled across the spaceship, propelled by Captain Stern's mighty throw. The weasel hit the bulkhead and exploded like a ripe watermelon, not an instant too soon. But the critter had already tampered with the sewage valves, and Ottawa was right below! "Put that in a bathtub and ride it over Niagara Falls, you penny-pinching political hacks", Stern laughed. Meanwhile, the damage was spreading through the system and the disembodied heads were beginning to thaw. "Damn", said Stern (among other things), "now we'll never get them back together in time for the Rapture"."

"Put the wrong heads on the wrong bodies and you'll have psychic overload, I mean, holy excrement!", said the ship's pseudoscience officer. "But it's serendipity that we're over Ottawa now; I say open the cargo holds and let 'em walk home!", Stern said. Appropriately, a disgruntled backbencher in the gothic darkness of a secret chamber in the nation's capital was declaring that "heads will roll". The clandestine meeting in the basement of Pasties Bar drew to a close, the cargo hold was opened as per Stern's instructions, and body parts rained down. Looking incredulously at the sky, the M.P. remarked "You won't have dis member of Parliament to kick around anymore". The revolution began."

[title of story] "How To Get Ahead in Ottawa"

The next panel I went to was "The Great Comet Crash". If you can't guess what this was about, you probably didn't hear about O.J. Simpson either. Alan Dyer, a Calgary astronomer at the Alberta Science Centre planetarium, had the latest photos of the comet collisions with Jupiter, and spoke to a packed room.

Went by the bootblack about 16h00 and asked him how business was. It wasn't; he hadn't had a single customer all day. He really should look out for another line of work.

[continued next page]

Saturday night was a culture clash between the wedding guests and those wending their way to the costume event. Guests kept taking friends down the hallway and saying, "See, I told you there was a Klingon that went by the door". Some of the more bored guests went over to the video room adjacent to the wedding banquet and watched a monster flick.

The bootblack didn't show on Sunday. The Guest of Honour speeches were toastmastered by David Gerrold, who knew how to keep the audience laughing. Sean Russell, Canadian GoH, reported a few con experiences. He was at an American con, where he rode down an elevator with an elderly couple and followed them off as a Trekkie in full Starfleet uniform got on. The lady said to her husband, "Look dear, a Mountie". Science GoH was Dr. Phil Currie of the Royal Tyrrell Museum of Palaeontology. The Museum is in Drumheller, about 1½ hours drive east of Calgary. Every guest at ConVersion can expect to be taken out to see it. (For that matter, same as with stamp shows or an aquarium show.) Gerrold said he had seen fossil museums around the world in his travels, mainly because of his young son, who adores anything dinosaurian, and considered the Tyrrell as the best museum in the world. Currie, in his speech, mentioned his early days in small-town Ontario. I was surprised to learn he had been an actifan. His first WorldCon was Cleveland, and he published a fanzine ERBIVORE, being a Burroughs fan.

The main Guest of Honour was Frederik Pohl. In introducing him, Gerrold mentioned that Pohl had remarked at a WorldCon that SFers were a family. Gerrold originally thought that Pohl was talking about the Partridge Family, and only later realized it was the Manson Family. Gerrold displayed a photo of Pohl taken at a WorldCon, and announced that it would be auctioned off at a benefit auction later in the day. It was a rather unflattering photo, showing him with a wide open mouth. Part of it was out of focus and, said Gerrold, so was Pohl. (All said in good fun though.)

At the benefit auction, Gerrold remarked during the selling of the photo that it could be used to discipline your kids. "If you don't behave, Pohl will get you." Most of the items sold were Gerrold scripts and books which he donated for charity. Whenever bidding slowed down, he threatened to start reading from his works if he didn't get another bid. This seemed to have its intended effect.

There was the Robot Sumo contest, put on by electrical engineering students at the Southern Alberta Institute of Technology, Calgary. Rules specified robots of a certain size, which tried to push their opponents out of the ring, exactly as in sumo. There were two classes of robots: remote-controlled, and autonomous. The robots were of one shape, basically boxes with a blade on one side to push opponents. The trick was to get around to the enemy flanks and push it sideways, preventing the enemy from getting traction with its wheels.

Closing Ceremonies were mostly awards and raffle drawing. About the only business was announcing next year's executive. Final attendance figures were not yet in, but were expected to be in the 550-600 range, about average.

ConVersion seems to be following Caltapex, our local stamp show. Caltapex went from downtown hotels to Marlborough Hotel (NE Calgary) to Glenmore Inn (SE Calgary) to a cultural centre. ConVersion was this year at Marlborough and goes to Glenmore next year and, I suspect, to a cultural centre sometime in the future. It is becoming increasingly difficult to find hotels in Calgary willing to host hobby club functions on weekends. SFers and stamp collectors don't drink enough or spend big. The money makers for hotels are wedding banquets and Shriners.

ConVersion 12 is July 21 to 23, 1995. Data from P.O. Box 1088, Calgary, Alberta, Canada T2P 2K9.

ON THE COUNT OF THREE ... SOLIDARITY FOREVER 1994-8-2

When last we left the Alberta judiciary, they were still rather miffed at taking a 5% pay cut like all the other civil servants. Matters were not helped by Premier Ralph Klein declaring he had the right to fire go-slowers. This was then followed by a mass of adjourned cases as people claimed they would not get a fair trial due to government interference. Klein then grovelled and apologized for his remarks, thereby allowing justice to prevail again.

Today the Alberta Provincial Judges' ~~Brotherhood~~ *Total #1* Association filed suit in Court of Queen's Bench, demanding back pay. Shop Steward, pardon me, Judge Brian Stevenson said judicial independence, not money, was the reason for the provincial judges suing the provincial government. The principle of the thing, and all that. A few of the more militant judges are suggesting a work-to-rule campaign. One trusts we will be spared the sight of august justices parading in front of the Legislature with picket signs. One refuses to even wonder how the case will be tried by a judge. The Alberta Union of Public Employees remains silent. For now, so does Klein, who learned his lesson well. He refused comment on the traditional grounds that the matter was before the courts. Indeed.

WATER EVERYWHERE 1994-8-8

The long drought in Calgary has been broken. It began to drizzle yesterday and the forecast is for a week of rain. We had shut down half of our mowing machines, while the hired water tankers were working overtime keeping trees watered in non-irrigated areas. A change from last year when it was the mowers who worked long hours and water truck drivers were laid off for six weeks. Last week the contractor put a new driver on one of the water trucks. He has a B.A. in English and is happy to be getting \$8 an

hour driving a tanker; he told me his previous job was a clerk at a video store for \$5.50/hour. The provincial Tories were yelled at a few months ago because they suggested that universities should stop cranking out so many graduates in useless studies such as English. It puts me in mind of a mowing machine operator I had about ten years ago; he had a Ph.D. in English and a book published on some minor poet.

I've noticed one trend in the last five years or so. At one time, seasonal Parks Dept. work was just a summer job to pay one's way through university. Once they graduated, we never saw them again. Now it is the only job many can get after graduation; they keep coming back as seasonal years after they got their degree. I used to be exceptional in having a university degree (B.Sc. in horticulture); now there are M.A.s and M.B.A.s happy to get union wages instead of a tenure position. I had one worker with a B.Comm. who I allowed to use my name as a character reference. I know he was diligent in applying for jobs, as I kept getting phone messages from my secretary to phone so-and-so collect in Montreal or Toronto. The Montreal calls were always interesting exercises in bilingual etiquette, as we would end up alternating languages until we got it straightened out. Shane, the fellow with the B.Comm., eventually was transferred to some other work unit in the Parks Dept., but I could follow his progress for the next two years via my telephone slips.

WASP SEASON 1994-8-11

Well that was a short week of rain; back to watering. A common hazard of using irrigation systems in parks each year comes to light about August, when wasp nests become large enough to be noticeable. Irrigation control valves are in underground boxes, the lids of which are set flush with the surface. The interiors of the boxes are cool and moist, and the underside of the lids a perfect place

[continued next page]

for wasps to hang their nests from. In spring they begin building, and by late July have good sized nests. Since half of Alberta's annual precipitation comes between Victoria Day and early July, the irrigation systems are seldom used until July. The wasps can therefore grow unmolested, with no one whipping open the lid.

When dry weather sets in, along comes a Parks worker to open the box and turn on the valve. It is always great fun for others to watch a rookie worker yank open a lid, then do a 100-metre sprint in competitive time. The more experienced workers will first watch the box to see if any wasps are buzzing about. If so, a long-handled shovel is used to slowly pry open the lid. If the nest is on the underside of the lid, it can be scraped off gently and tossed into some shrubbery. If the wasps have burrowed into the ground, then they must be sprayed, as digging up the nest would damage the turf. They can also be flooded out with water, but if they are sitting on the control valve this is a moot point.

One can approach quite closely to a wasp or bee nest as long as one moves slowly and quietly. It is casual procedure to pick up a nest on the end of the shovel to move it and still not be stung, since wasps do not associate slow-moving humans with the cause of the nest's trouble. People who get stung are the ones who panic and start waving their arms shoo-fly style. When I was a Pest Control foreman I learned from practical experience that I would not be stung in a maelstrom of wasps or bees if I froze in position or slowly backed away. This is difficult for some to appreciate if the beasties are crawling on your shirt, but as long as they don't get trapped, they will fly off in a moment without stinging.

Bee swarms are easier to handle as we can summon a local beekeeper who will smoke them into a hive box and take them away. I rather like wasps and bees, and enjoy watching them in my flowerbed by the front steps of my house. I have had nests directly above the front door, but as

long as I closed the door quietly instead of slamming it they paid me no attention, nor did any of my visitors even notice it. Based on my observation over the years, I would say that every homeowner has at least one nest on their property but never notice it because it was in a crawlspace or hidden in a shrub. My house is covered on the south wall by Virginia creeper, which has small inconspicuous flowers in late June/early July. Inconspicuous to humans but very interesting to wasps. The vines are covered with wasps and bees, who pay no mind to pedestrians. Wasps are also good predators of insect pests.

Wasps and bees can be a problem in natural areas where they nest in abandoned ground squirrel burrows. One discovers this usually after stepping on the nest and walking a few more steps unhurried and unaware of what is about to happen in a few seconds. Such as a 100-metre sprint. I've only ever been stung once, by a bee. It got me on a finger joint, and after the initial sting wore away, I discovered the joint was more flexible and felt better than it ever had. I recall reading somewhere that bee venom was/is used for arthritic pain; I am prepared to believe there may be something to it.

THE REAL 'F' TROOP

1994-8-28

Calgary was founded in 1875 when 'F' Troop of the North West Mounted Police forded the Bow River and built a fort at the junction of the Bow with the Elbow River. Calgary was incorporated as a city in 1894, so that centenary was a good excuse to have a party today. The original Fort Calgary was dismantled and for most of this century the land was a railroad yard. But the area was converted back to parkland in 1975, and archaeological digging has been going on since. The anniversary of 1894 was a good excuse to stage a re-enactment of the original river crossing, using a local colour guard called Steele's Scouts.

Steele was a Mountie more associated with British Columbia (there is a fort there named after him), but he did go about the prairies quite a bit.

The outlines of the original fort having been exposed by digging, the entire fort is now being reconstructed with the help of volunteer labour. At present they have rebuilt the north and west palisades of the fort and two buildings. Flat-topped walls, not the pointy-ends that one sees in Hollywood films; no one would build a western fort with convenient hooks for lassos to allow Injuns to clamber up the ropes.

The activities started a.m. and went all day but I only arrived in the afternoon a couple of hours before the river crossing re-enactment. Blazing sun, 20°C, and little shade, since Fort Calgary Park has been returned to the natural vegetation of Calgary. Today the city has an urban forest thanks to irrigation and the garden hose, but under natural conditions trees only grow along the river banks. The original Fort Calgary was set in grass, and so is the park replicating it. We crowded under tents or stood against the north side of the palisade in our search for shade. There were quite a number of activities going on, not all of it related to Calgary history. The local chapter of the Society for Creative Anachronism had been invited to stage a demonstration. There was a petting zoo, line dancers, square dancers, Highland bands (most of the Mounties who founded Calgary in 1875 were Scots), and colour guards all over the place. The colour guards were mounted and roamed the entire park, providing quite a spectacle and incidentally fertilizing the grass with good rich fresh manure. If you heard someone behind you suddenly curse, you didn't have to turn around and look to know they had just stepped in something.

There were modern-day Mounties strolling about in ceremonial scarlet, posing for tourists. (On the beat, RCMP constables look like any other police force; scarlet is worn only for dress occasions.) Fort Calgary Park volun-

teers wore the uniform of the NWMP, basically the same scarlet coat but a pillbox hat instead of a Stetson. The first Mounties out west in the 1870s wore British army uniforms, with pillbox hats or those spiked helmets that one associates with WWI Germans. Eventually the whining of the field staff got back to Mountie headquarters, and the more practical Stetson was authorized. Pillbox hats offered no protection against the sun, cold, or rain. It is interesting to note that photos of the early settlers show they were the same way, wearing bowler hats. The cowboy hat did not evolve until the settling of the West had been underway for quite some time.

I wandered around and looked at some of the displays. A group of square dancers weren't very interesting, nor the line dancers who followed them. Going behind the stage I discovered the Clan Maxwell Calgary pipers tuning the bagpipes. The pipe major was walking around checking the chanters and drones. What surprised me was that he was not listening to them by ear. Instead he held up a small palmized electronic gadget next to each pipe and watched the LCD readout, then tuned the pipe from that. Next up, no doubt, is an electric fan in the bag to save the piper from all that puffing. Clan Maxwell has a blue and green tartan, a nice change from all the other Calgary Highland bands, who favour red tartans.

Clan Maxwell Calgary formed up, having tuned their pipes, and marched off to displace the line dancers. They played a variety of tunes, including the inevitable "Amazing Grace", then yielded to the speechmaking by dignitaries. The speeches were the last part of the program before the river crossing. By now the crowd was in the tens of thousands, few of whom wanted to hear Alderman So-And-So or the Chairman of the Committee For Busybodies. Most of us had the same idea; beat the rush to the riverbank to get a good view of the crossing. As the speakers droned on, it must have been disconcerting for them to see the audience sidling off en masse to the river.

[continued next page]

I found a good spot, most people thinking the colour guard would cross further upstream. The Bow River has a boulder gravel riverbed, quite awkward to walk over. Trans-Alta Utilities, which owns the Bearspaw Dam upstream of Calgary, lowered the river level to make the re-enactment easier. This also made it easier for bystanders to wade out into the middle of the river to get a really, really good view for the camcorder. Three City of Calgary constables on horseback rode out into the river to keep order. It seemed that there were as many people out in the river or on gravel bars as there were on the riverbank.

The colour guard started off from the other side farther upstream than I thought they would, and for a moment our little cluster of watchers thought we would miss the whole event. Interposed between us and the horsemen was a gravel bar overgrown by scrub willow. But through the vegetation we could see the occasional flash of scarlet or a quick glimpse of the Union Jack (the flag under which the Mounties rode back in 1875). Then the buckskin scouts of the colour guard rode into view. We thought they would keep going past the gravel bar and come round the end of it, but they took us by surprise and cut straight across the bar towards us. We ended up having the best spot on the river, as they splashed up onto the riverbank a few metres from where we were standing. The flow of scarlet riders went past us for quite some time. There were 50 or so riders in dress scarlet, plus scouts. Some of the riders were women, not historically accurate, but since it was a free show we could hardly complain.

Once the riders were up on Fort Calgary Park, a massive traffic jam ensued as the crowd cleared the river and followed behind the horses. Matters were not helped by a lineup for a hotdog stand sticking out at right angles to the approaching rush. The riders had no difficulty getting through the lineup; no one wants a horse tail flicked in his face. But the lineup immediately reformed behind the riders, and held its own against the oncoming pedestrians. The passage through the constricted area was

exactly one person wide, coming or going. Somehow I got through without elbowing aside too many dear old ladies, although if the gentleman on crutches is reading this he has my deepest apologies.

I worked my way around the far end of the crowd and watched the colour guard doing formation maneuvers. But if you've seen one bunch of horses galloping around in circles, you've seen them all. As it looked some speeches were about to be read again, I decided to call it a day. On my way out of the park I stopped twice, firstly to listen to an informal concert Clan Maxwell was giving. But if you've heard one piper's march, you've heard them all, so I moved on. I then bumped into a friend I know from the aquarium club. I was surprised to learn that he had been part of the SCA demonstration earlier in the day, before I arrived. Nyle said the SCAs had been asked by the Fort Calgary Society to put on a demonstration of armoured fighting. Nothing to do with Calgary history, chivalry long dead by 1875, but, I suppose, one way to keep the crowd amused in a long day. Nyle and I talked briefly about ConAdian in Winnipeg. I've known him for years from the aquarium club but neither of us knew the other was interested in SF&F. This has happened before. One of my coworkers worked with me for fifteen years; we bumped into each other at ConVersion, the Calgary con, and discovered our mutual like of SF. We had been going to ConVersions for ten years before our paths crossed. We both kept quiet at work because both of us feared the same reaction from our coworkers: "So you really like that Star Trek stuff, eh?". (I've had to confess my sordid secret when booking time off for ConAdian, and got from my boss: "So what do you do at these conventions, dress up with Spock ears?")

Calgary celebrates centennials about once a decade. 1875 is the date that really counts, but any excuse for party time, so there have been celebrations in 1984 (100 years since incorporation as a town) and 1994 (100 years as a city). Next up: 125 years old in the year 2000.

Doing some paperwork in my office, I could hear the mechanical fiddling about with the microwave oven in the lunchroom. At first I thought he was just reheating his coffee, but the microwave kept running and running. Curious, I investigated and found that Barry was microwaving a tire. This was a small tire, of course, 15 cm diameter, from a caster wheel of a mowing deck. The tire had come off the rim, and being solid rubber was impossible to get back on. Heating it in the microwave made it softer and more pliable, easier to slip back on the rim.

Leaf mulching season has begun. We no longer sweep up fallen leaves. Instead the mowing machines are adapted to grind up the leaves into small fragments, leaving them behind as topdressing for the turf. Newer machines have special mowing decks that mulch as they go, known as chop and drop decks. Older machines with side-discharge decks in the cut and spit style have the discharge chutes blocked off with a piece of metal. Both types of mowers then go over the fallen leaves. Dry leaves are pulverized into dust, leaving behind green turf. Wet leaves tend to produce larger fragments, but these soon work their way into the soil. In either case, the leaves vanish and one sees clean turf. The old method of sweeping up leaves was slow and labour-intensive, and we never got done before final freezeup. Leaf mulching gets the whole district done in the autumn; we don't have to come back in spring to finish the parks that got missed, and there are no citizen complaints about drifts of leaves killing the grass or blowing into people's yards. Leaf mulching also returns organic matter to the soil, reducing the cost of fertilizing.

Leaves turn colour as the days grow shorter, not because of frost. Some tree species drop their leaves earlier than other species. Green ash is the first to go, turning a beautiful pure lemon yellow in middle September.

Elms are next, followed by poplars and larch. Willows are last, but every park seems to have one tree that refuses to change colour or drop its leaves until after first snowfall in October.

My district was heavily overplanted by the developer in cottonwood poplars. Leaves pile up in knee-high drifts everywhere. Driving down Maple Creek Drive today was a surrealistic experience. A chinook was blowing, and the pavement was covered with yellow poplar leaves dancing up and down ankle-height. My truck seemed to float on the leaves, which sparkled as they caught the sunlight penetrating through the branches. Flickering yellow reflections covered the roadway as I drove along. It seemed more like gliding through the water of a lake. I could see each eddy and dustdevil of the wind outlined by the leaves. A stream of leaves flowed along the pavement, here in an S-shape as the wind was deflected off a parked car or building, there in a whirlpool as a dustdevil rotated down the road. The whole road seemed to be a living organism, sparkling yellow protoplasm flowing down the road, extending pseudopods and withdrawing them as it travelled.

SPARE THE ROD

1994-10-10

While the rest of us were eating our Thanksgiving dinner today, about 500 politicians were gathered in Banff for the 40th Commonwealth Parliamentary Association conference. Representing sixty countries, they discussed how to make legislatures more representative and responsible. In past years, these meetings were front page news as prime ministers and presidents showed up to argue about South Africa, the Suez Canal crisis, or Rhodesian UDI. This year the news report was buried in the classifieds. No news is indeed good news. The big item, as far as the CALGARY HERALD was concerned, was that Alberta would finally be getting a proper Black Rod for its legislature.

[continued next page]

In most Commonwealth parliaments, the Gentleman Usher of the Black Rod is an official who carries the aforementioned ceremonial mace for events such as the Speech From the Throne, Royal Assent, and whatever else brings everyone out in full dress kit. In most countries that follow the British parliamentary tradition the Black Rod is about 65 cm long, 2 cm diameter, decorated in brass or gold, and tipped with a British gold sovereign. The Black Rod is made from ebony wood.

Except in Alberta, where the Rod is a piece of hardwood dowling spray-painted black and with a brass cap on the tip. "It looks not unlike a section of broom handle", the HERALD quotes the provincial Sergeant-At-Arms as saying. To make up that embarrassing deficiency, Britain has donated a 1905 gold sovereign (the year Alberta became a province) and Sri Lanka a 2 m piece of finest ebony wood. At the Governor-General's office in Ottawa, design work is underway for the carving of the new Black Rod. It will include wild roses (Alberta's floral emblem), maple leaves, and royal coronet. Henceforth the Alberta Lieutenant Governor can knock on the door of the legislature in style.

The Lieutenant Governor is the Queen's representative to a province or territory. As in the Mother Parliament, the lower house is jealous of its authority, and the Crown cannot enter unbidden. At a Speech From the Throne, the Gentleman Usher of the Black Rod knocks on the door with the Rod (the gold sovereign is said to make a distinctive sound). After much ceremony, the legislature allows the Usher, Lt. Governor, and friends inside. Once there, the Lt. Governor sits on the throne and reads a speech detailing all the wonderful things the government proposes to do in the forthcoming session. He doesn't write it; the Premier's Office does. The Leader of the Opposition then denounces the speech as twaddle, calls for a vote of non-confidence which the government wins, and everybody makes a rush for the buffet table. The Premier goes out for a beer, and the next day the legislature gets down to serious business. Our tax dollars in action.

POLITICAL JOKE

Ontario's government is controlled by socialists, in the usual tax-and-spend, balloon-the-deficit style. Alberta is controlled by libertarians, the budget-slashing privatising Tories. This has led to the following joke.

- Q. What is the difference between Ontario and Alberta?
A. In Ontario, the people hate the government.
In Alberta, the government hates the people.

SURPRISE DECISION

1994-11-17

Court of Queen's Bench today handed down a 227-page decision on the provincial judges' pay dispute. No one was surprised that the Tory pay cuts were overturned. Justice David McDonald said that judges are not employees like others: "In Canada it is inaccurate to refer to a judge as a public employee because an employee (or, to use legal terminology, a 'servant') is subject to the control of his or her employer or 'master'. A judge is not subject to the control of the Crown."

Needless to say, many of us are shivering at that one.

NECROTIZING FASCIITIS

1994-12-2

A few days ago, on Tuesday, I was glancing through the newspaper. Buried in the back pages was a one-paragraph report that Lucien Bouchard, Opposition Leader in the House of Commons, had been admitted to hospital for a problem in his leg with phlebitis. Today I turned on the radio news and was shocked to hear that he had his leg amputated because of the flesh-eating disease. The news of the disease is sensational enough when it happens to ordinary people. The streptococcal bacteria rot out the muscles and spread so fast, in a matter of hours, that

often there is no time for treatment. This incident is made the more sensational because of Bouchard's position as leader of the Bloc Québécois, the federal wing of the separatists. More worrying yet is the fact that a referendum is scheduled for next year on Québec independence, and Bouchard was to have played a prominent part in the campaign. There may be still time for him; the vote is in the later part of 1995 and if the disease spreads no further, he may have finished rehabilitation before then. At a press conference carried live this morning on every radio station (and, I presume, the television stations) a doctor said that Bouchard would need three or four months to heal and learn how to get around minus his left leg.

The indications are that the referendum would fail, but one never knows. Recent history has demonstrated that events can move rapidly, witness the sudden collapse of the USSR.

THERE'S SNOW BUSINESS LIKE TREE BUSINESS 1994-12-28

The usual brown Christmas for Calgary; very little snow until today. This makes life easier as we do our winter pruning. As freezing sleet fell during the night and the streets are now coated with ice, much boulevard pruning is being done by commuters. We attended one poplar too dumb to pick up its roots and jump out of the way of a car obeying all those Newtonian laws about inertia on curves. The driver, of course, was shocked that such a thing can happen. After all, he was only doing the speed limit. If Canadians are supposedly adapted to a cold climate, it is as much myth as it is reality. Usually the only way to make the average driver stop driving in December as if it were August is to have at least one good heart-stopping near hit. Say, for example, sliding at 50 km/hr through an intersection and just missing a semi-trailer. The police have been making very nasty remarks about Calgary drivers to the news media. The first snow of next winter will repeat this again; there is truly no new thing.

DEFICIT CUTTING WITH AN ICEPICK

No one can accuse the federal government of laxity in its quest to reduce the \$40 billion deficit and the endlessly increasing cumulative debt. Marcel Masse, who is Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, has deleted 51 boards and tribunals, eliminating 314 patronage positions and saving \$3 million dollars. At least it is a start.

Few people were surprised to learn that the staff of the Fisheries Prices Support Board will now have to shift for themselves. Since there have not been any fisheries prices support programs for a decade, one wonders how they managed to fill in the time.

The one that really caught my eye (I grew up on a cattle ranch) was the abolition of the Hog, Beef, Lamb, Onion, and Bean National Tripartite Stabilization Program Committee. I had never even suspected the existence of the HBLONTSPC. Put that in a story and no fiction editor would let it pass, but truth is indeed stranger. I had heard of the Meat Import Advisory Committee and the Western Grain Stabilization Advisory Committee, both of which also got the chop because they duplicated services in the Ministry of Agriculture. What baffles me about the Hog etc. Committee was the reference to onions. All the other crops are reasonably major crops, but I had no idea that onion farmers were a power to be reckoned with. Not that much of a power though, if they had to share in the title. I presume they only had one representative. Did he sit mutely, bored as debate raged between sheep farmers and cattle ranchers (traditional enemies in western Canada) over bean stabilization? One hopes the committee had good meals catered, tactfully rotating each time from smoked ham to liver and onions to leg of lamb, with bean sprout salad as the appetizer. Or did they go to neutral territory and order in seafood?