

# OPUNTIA

## #42.5



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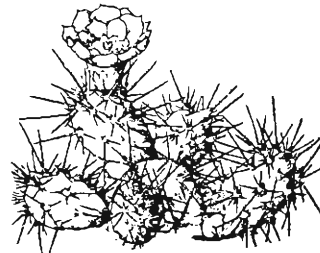
Whole-numbered OPUNTIAs are sercon, x.1 issues are reviewzines, x.2 issues are indexes, and x.5 issues are perzines.

**ART CREDIT:** Cover art by unknown artist (initials R.D.) from PUNCH, 1848, volume 15, page 181. A Victorian squire has just made personal acquaintance with an opuntia at Kew Gardens.

**I ALSO HEARD FROM:** Ken Faig Jr, Phlox Icona, Harry Andruschak, John Held Jr, Teddy Harvia, Lloyd Penney, Chester Cuthbert, Ned Brooks, Murray Moore, Sheryl Birkhead, Henry Welch

**TO THE EDITOR**

[Editor's  
remarks  
in square  
brackets]



FROM: Carolyn Clowes  
5911 West Pay Drive NW  
Depauw, Indiana 47115

1999-06-15

Calgary sounds like a great city to walk in, especially your +15 walkways. But all that walking in cowboy boots? Don't they do bad things to your feet? Cowboy boots sound as painful as women's high heels.

[I was surprised to have several of my readers ask the same question. No, I have no trouble. Cowboy boots were, after all, originally work boots worn out on the range, and had to be comfortable. I think the difference is that I wear the work boot style with medium heels and square toes, as opposed to dude cowboy boots with pointy toes and high heels. Most people who buy cowboy boots get the dude style. Pointy toes pinch the toes and prevent the foot from spreading out to absorb body weight.

I buy my cowboy boots at a family boot store in Calgary that specializes in work boots. I haven't worn lace-up shoes in 25 years.]

FROM: Rodney Leighton 1999-07-02  
R.R. 3  
Tatamagouche, Nova Scotia B0K 1V0

I didn't think there were white-tailed deer in Alberta. Thought they were all mule deer.

[Both species are very common here. The textbooks say they share the same habitats, but my personal observations over the years are that mule deers tend to stay in the prairie coulees while the white-tailed deers I've only ever seen in poplar bluffs and riverbank cottonwoods.]

Maritimers have been going to Alberta to try to make money for years. I spent some time out there years ago; first stop was in 1969. That farm I worked on was about 14 miles from downtown Calgary, towards the Rockies. I forget the name of the town. Kenora? I suppose it's part of the suburbs now.

[No such place here but almost certainly it would have been Cochrane, which matches your description. Not yet annexed by

Calgary, but the city has sprawled within a few kilometres of it and will probably swallow it by the time I retire in 2011.]

## RE-DRAWING THE MAP

1999-04-01

Fifty years ago, Canada's map changed when Newfoundland joined the Confederation. Today the map is again re-drawn, as the eastern half of Northwest Territories is split away to form Nunavut ("our land", pronounced 'noo-na-voot'). The new territory is the de facto tribal homeland of the Inuit, who form 85% of the population. Nunavut comprises 1/5 of Canada, bigger than Alberta and Saskatchewan combined. 25,000 people live in the 2,000,000 square kilometre territory, of whom 4,000 are in the capital city of Iqaluit ("place of many fish").

The remainder of Northwest Territories, not as homogenous as Nunavut, is riven by internal dispute between the multiplicity of tribes. The dominant tribe, the Dene, wanted it to become Denedeh ("our land"), but understandably the other tribes objected. The white population, or People From The South, had a un-serious referendum to re-name the remnant territory as "Bob", but this idea was lost amidst all the land claims disputes.

The first premier of Nunavut is 34-year-old Paul Okalik, who likes to bill himself as the only Canadian premier still paying off student loans. He graduated from the University of Ottawa law school two years ago. He is the first Inuk lawyer in Canadian history, and his young age is reflective of the fact that Nunavut has the youngest population of any province or territory.

The Inuit have been the most technologically advanced aboriginal group in Canada, being early adopters of snowmobiles and airplanes. They are currently building their own Internet to help with home schooling. Some problems exist with technical terms. The Inuktitut word for a computer was relatively easy; 'karetaruaq', which means 'the other brain'. Their Internet service providers are called 'igalaaq', or 'window', for they view the Internet as a window to the world. (Nothing to do with Microsoft.) More difficult to translate are terms such as CPU, hard drive, and CD-ROM. Never having had numbers to count higher than 100 creates problems in dealing with megabytes or gigabytes. But they are adapting the technology to suit themselves, rather than being swamped or left behind.

**Meanwhile, Back At The Post Office ...**

Postal codes will not change as a result of the creation of Nunavut, but there has been some discussion about the two-letter abbreviation for the new territory. Canada and the USA use a

uniform system of province or state abbreviations, such as AB for Alberta or ON for Ontario. Canada Post had announced that Nunavut would continue to use NT, which previously was and still is the abbreviation for Northwest Territories. The populations of the two territories are small enough that there will be no difficulty in sorting, especially since the postal codes are the actual separators in the mail streams.

However, the Ministry of Finance objected, because they sort out taxpayer statistics by province or territory based on postal abbreviations, which makes sense to them because Nunavut will have a different tax regime than Northwest Territories. Without waiting for official direction, Canadian business firms began using NU, but Quebec objected since 'nu' is the French word for naked. Canada Post then wavered with the change in wind direction and announced that NN would be the designator. A more logical abbreviation, NV, is already used by Nevada.

**Solidarity For Two Years.**

1999-04-14

To the CUPE Union Hall tonight, where Local 709 (Foremen) is voting on a new two year contract. Local 37 (Outside Workers) is also voting tonight on a similar contract, but since they are a large local with thousands of members, they have booked premises elsewhere to handle the bigger crowd. There are only

about a couple of hundred foreman, of whom 30 of us showed tonight for the vote. Most of us were from Parks, although a few Streets foremen were present. There was little change in the contracts, and small increases that kept pace with inflation but little else.

I only go to contract ratification meetings. Every union meeting has at least two people in the audience who want to discuss at great length subsection 4(a)ii, while everyone else is bored and wants to get to the vote so they can go home in time for the third period of the hockey game on television. For SF fans who do not belong to unions, an exact analogy is an SF convention business meeting where the main item on the agenda is a revision of the convention society constitution. Or any staff meeting at any company where the new stationery supply contract is being discussed.

Tonight's nitpickers fixated on graveyard shift hours on the two nights each year when Alberta changes back and forth on Daylight Saving Time. Actually I found that quite interesting when the discussion drifted to shift scheduling, partly because this week my shift changed for the summer from four 10-hour days Monday to Thursday to three 13-hour days Friday to Sunday, plus statutory holidays.

Management couldn't understand why workers grumbled so much

about graveyard shifts. The union negotiating committee therefore tricked management into agreeing to a meeting where management would set the day and the union would set the hour of the meeting. The union said "4:30". Management wondered why so late in the day. They were a bit startled when told that 4:30 a.m. was meant. And they were held to it. Our negotiator told us it was quite amusing to see management discovering what it was like for staff to be out and about that early, and it gave them a better appreciation of what it was like on the other side.

The contract was voted in, as expected, with only one dissension, from a Streets worker, as expected. And so it goes for two years.

#### **New Places.**

1999-04-18

This first weekend of my new shift I ended up in Parks North Area where I had been until 1991. Since then there have been some tremendous changes due to the growth of the city, and I have been exploring some of the new neighbourhoods. I was previously in charge of the Bowness district, whose main park is Bowness Park, an island in the Bow River.

In the time after my departure, a new freeway was built; Stoney Trail now swings around the west side of Calgary. The road crosses Bow River and goes overtop of Bowness Park at a height

of 100 metres, high above the trees. On the south bank of the Bow River is a cliff blanketed by 400-year-old Douglas firs. These firs are the farthest east naturally-occurring firs, and have been declared a heritage site. Bridge construction normally lays waste everything in its path, but the contractors were required to build the support towers with a minimum footprint. The result is a new bridge surrounded by mature trees, making it look as if the bridge had been there ever since Bowness Park was established in 1911. A pedestrian bridge is slung underneath the road deck, part of the city-wide pathway system along the rivers.

I had to go into Bowness Park to deliver firewood to a pavilion that had been booked by a picnic group. The park was crowded this warm Sunday afternoon, and families were everywhere. I took a stroll through the park to see what had changed in the last eight years. The Stoney Trail bridge carried heavy traffic of campers returning from the weekend in the Rocky Mountains nearby. Strangely, the closer I got to the bridge, the less the traffic noise. The deck is so high and broad that traffic noise is deflected sideways, not down.

The railroad siding on the opposite shore of the river was, however, quite audible. Trains were busy shunting hopper cars of wheat bound for the grain terminals at Vancouver and Prince Rupert on the British Columbia coast.

## **On The Bonny, Bonny Banks Of Bowness.**

The lagoon and channel that separate Bowness Park island from the shore were still frozen over, although the Bow River is wide open. The channel runs along the bottom of the Douglas fir slope and is in perpetual shade. Trees lean out over the channel from both sides, reminding me of a cathedral. I have always wondered if this was where the European cathedral builders got their inspiration from, the Gothic arches a copy of the trees arching overhead in a forest.

Unfortunately the vista looking down the channel now frames a support tower at the far end. In turn, the deck of the bridge frames the view of the forest to the west. Once it was possible to imagine one was still in a wilderness at the west end of the park. The trees are still there, the river still flows, the birds still flutter about, and the fish still swim. But look up to the deep blue sky and you will see a gleaming white concrete span, arching overhead above the forest.

Along the shore of the lagoon are large flocks of Canada geese and mallard ducks, drawn by the knowledge that they will find lots of bread crumbs and popcorn from park visitors. While not entirely tame (they've been rushed by too many small children and large dogs), the birds will approach very close if they think there is a chance of food.

I stood and watched a flock of geese panhandling from a family. Like all Parks workers, I always carry a handheld two-way radio to be in contact (packet radios are cheaper than cellphones). One holds a handheld by the bottom end, with the antenna sticking out of the top end of the radio. When not talking into it, raised to the mouth, one holds it pointing downwards with the arms by the side. A goose tentatively approached me, its eye on the antenna, and obviously thinking it might be some kind of novel food. I moved a bit to startle it away. Explaining how the radio came to have its antenna chomped off would involve too much paperwork. Not that the accountants wouldn't believe me, mind you. They are long since used to the bizarre damage reports that come from Parks field workers. Office workers might report items lost, stolen, or damaged by dropping on the floor. We report tools dropped into the lagoon, items stolen by ravens, trees dropped by beavers onto Parks structures or vehicles, things carried away by coyotes, or accidentally buried in irrigation trenches.

### **Tempus Fugit.**

The change from a Monday to Thursday shift to a Friday to Sunday shift has messed up my sense of time. Instead of looking at my watch to see what time it is, I check to see what day it is. It certainly relieves stress from not having to run a maintenance district but it leaves me feeling disconnected. I am used to stopping at the post office after work to pick up my mail from my

box number, but now I can only do that on Fridays. (Canada Post does not deliver weekends.) Because my shift now runs 06h30 to 19h15, the bakeries where I normally stop on my way home to buy next day's lunch are closed. Because I now work in the opposite corner of the city, I have to consciously watch myself when I drive out in the morning, otherwise I'll instinctively turn in the wrong direction at the first set of traffic lights.

### **Long Ago And Far Away.**

1999-04-24

This weekend I am looking after four contractor crews running turf sweepers. They are cleaning up fallen leaves, a winter's accumulation of dog droppings, and litter. I had a note to divert one machine down to Memorial Drive and Edmonton Trail, on the bank of the Bow River. Memorial Drive is so named because each tree along it represents one Calgarian killed in World War One. The area the machine is cleaning up is for a ceremony tomorrow to establish another memorial, a monument to the 7 to 11 million Ukrainians who died in Stalin's engineered famine of 1932-33. The location is just down the hill from the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, and the cost of the monument was paid for by Calgarians of Ukrainian descent.

In other news, hockey players from the Calgary Flames team fretted because they might have to be traded to an American team

capable of paying them a 7 to 11 million dollar long-term contract. If they stayed in Cowtown, the team owner wouldn't be able to match the American offers, and the players would have to get by on short-term contracts for a million or so. It's a hard life these days, not like the Good Old Days.

**Rat-a-tat-tooie.**

1999-05-01

I was over at Riley Park talking to a couple of the attendants inside the service building. I heard a thrumming sound from the ceiling, which I supposed was a heating vent vibrating when the furnace started up. Kim, one of the attendants, saw me look up at the ceiling and guessed why. No, it wasn't the furnace. It was a woodpecker, which makes a regular habit of drumming on the sheetmetal chimney that caps the vent. I went outside and looked at the roof. It was exactly as described. The woodpecker stopped its drumming, looked at me, then flew up into the overhanging cottonwoods. I assume it must be some sort of territorial call, as even a bird brain would quickly realize it can't puncture metal.

**More Urban Birds.**

1999-05-07

The Area Office relayed a passerby concern to me about a mother mallard duck and 23 ducklings in an empty outdoor swimming pool at Bridgeland Community. I didn't know what I was supposed to do about it, but I drove over to have a look because

we must make at least an initial inspection on all citizen concerns.

The pool was not our facility, so there wasn't much I could do, but I learned that the Community staff had been feeding the family.

The ducks had gotten in via a small gap in the chain link fence, having somehow crossed the Memorial Drive freeway adjacent, the Bow River being on the other side. Mama duck could fly in and out at will but the ducklings had not yet fledged, and were trapped in the bottom of the 3 metre deep pool. There was a bit of meltwater in the bottom, so they could swim about, and it was about as safe as any place in Calgary to escape predators. What impressed me the most about the incident was that someone had apparently taken the time to count the ducklings in the milling mass of down and stubby feathers.

Bridgeland Community Association is directly across the street from what used to be the Calgary General Hospital, before the seven buildings of that complex were imploded last October in the biggest event to hit Calgary since the 1988 Winter Olympics. Today all the rubble is gone, 7000 truckloads hauled away, leaving only a giant gravel pit. Politicians are still bickering about what to use the vacant land for. The huge parcel is in the heart of the city, is worth tens of millions, and is being lusted after by every developer and special interest group in the city.



The punch-up will go on for years. For now, it is only used by passing magpies needing some grit for their gizzards.

## **Water Everywhere.**

1999-05-15

A citizen concern was relayed to me about water running in Highwood Place park. It is easy enough to spot the locations of leaks by following the running water in the curb gutter back into the park and upstream to its source. The park double-check valve, which is a type of backflow preventer, is then shut off.

A backflow preventer is connected to every water line, residential, commercial, or park, at the connection with the watermain in the street, and prevents water flowing back into the water supply system in the event of a pressure drop. This stops contamination of the city water supply and also allows repairs to the systems on either side of the valve by shutting off any flow. If the break is on the user side, say a homeowner with a leaky basement pipe or a park with a broken irrigation line, then shutting off the double-check valve must be done to cut off the pressure of the mains. If the break is on the Waterworks Dept. side, the shut-off prevents all the water in the user system from draining out into the mains. This would not only flood out the repair crew but put air in the user lines and cause hammering when the system is restarted. Hammering can and does blow up toilets or sink faucets, or break irrigation lines. The back pressure on the user side can be

considerable, since even in a house or small park there will be hundreds of litres of water in the lines. A skyscraper or large park measured in hectares can have tens of thousands of litres of water sitting in the lines.

The grass around an irrigation leak is marked with spray paint so the repair crew can find it on Monday, since there will be no sign of water by then. We don't call them out on weekends since the line has to drain for a day anyway before they can dig it up and repair it. The grass isn't going to die over the weekend either.

One can tell what went wrong by looking at the leak. A popped valve will be a 5-metre high gusher. A slipped saddle joint, where the vertical valve connects with the horizontal supply line, will have water quietly bubbling up beside the valve. A broken supply line will pump large volumes of water out underneath the turf, which will stretch up into a boil, held together by the knitted grass roots.

The last is what I saw. A mound had suddenly grown a metre high and as wide in the centre of the park. This was a small park, so I found the double-check valve quickly and shut it off. The mound subsided quietly. I walked over with a can of red spray paint and wrote "LINE —>" at the spot.

It was then that I was startled by something I had never noticed before. The label on the spray can, as with all products sold in Canada, was bilingual. The French side of the label informed me that this was enamel paint. I didn't think our wired world had moved that far on, so I turned the can over to the English label and was relieved to see that it was enamel paint. Now you can impress your techie friends by telling them that enamel ain't nothing but enamel in Quebec.

**Belgian Elm Disease.** 1999-05-15

Dutch Elm Disease (DED) originated in Belgium circa 1910 but was not noticed until after World War One. By then its major focus was in the Netherlands, as a result of which the Dutch have ever since been blamed for it. DED arrived in North America in 1930, and today only British Columbia and Alberta are free of the disease. The disease is caused by the fungus *Ophiostoma nova-ulmi*, which can only be spread by bark beetles burrowing into the trees.

Albertans have always been optimistic about DED control in this province. There are no native elms to act as a reservoir for the disease, and the towns are far enough apart that DED cannot spread quickly. DED reached the neighbouring province of Saskatchewan in the 1980s, where the last outliers of native elms are. The only way that DED could reach into Alberta would be by

contaminated firewood brought back by tourists.

Alas, that appears to have happened last year, for it was announced today by STOPDED, the provincial agency responsible for preventing the spread of the disease in Alberta, that an infected tree had been found in Wainwright. This is a border town that straddles the Alberta-Saskatchewan border. (The businesses are on the Alberta side because of lower taxes, and the inhabitants live on the Saskatchewan side because of better health care and social services.) The infected elm was identified on June 25, 1998, and removed and burned July 28. Samples of the bark were analyzed by Prof. Clive Brasier at the Forestry Authority Research Station in England, who confirmed the presence of a new strain of the fungus.

No other infected trees have been located, and Alberta therefore remains DED-free. Inspection and deadwood pruning has been stepped up, and publicity campaigns renewed. Alberta does have one advantage that no other jurisdiction in the world had. Several years ago, the federal government funded an inventory of all elms in this province. We are thus the only place that knows where every elm is, inspects them regularly, and can immediately identify trouble. This would not be possible if there were millions of native elms as elsewhere.

## Down By The River.

1999-05-24

Today is Victoria Day, once the official celebration of the Queen's Birthday but long since transmuted into an excuse for a bank holiday weekend. The spring weather is beautiful today, with sunny, blue skies, the dry weather continuing, temperatures up in the 25°C mark, and the parks jammed with citizenry.

I am working today as part of my weekend shift, but the park attendants have things under control in the two busiest parks, Riley and Bowness. I decided to re-familiarize myself with Bowmont Natural Park, which is on the north bank of the Bow River opposite Bowness Park. Buffalobeans are in full bloom, their lemon yellow flowers lining the pathway and speckling the prairie along the riverbank.

The park pathway cuts across an un-named island in the river via two pedestrian bridges, upstream from the railway mainline bridge to Vancouver. The railway bridge is fenced off, but of course you can never stop the determined graffiti tagger, so the top girder of the bridge is lined with various slogans. The slogans, all in different handwriting (or perhaps I should say paintwriting), are a bit incongruous when considered in sequence. "*I LOVE YOU. CHARITY M. DECONSTRUCT CAPITALISM GRAD '85 BOWNESS HIGH SCHOOL JESUS IS LORD*" reads like modern poetry from some university press chapbook. The

beauteous Charity, it seems, is being instructed to stand in the vanguard against the oppressive economic system, while a concerned Christian warns students entering the outside world where their priorities should be.

Underneath the bridge abutment, a fisherman is casting for trout, but I can't see him having much luck. Up- and down-stream of him I count at least eight dogs splashing through the water after sticks cast by their owners. A father and his two-year-old son are netting minnows in a backwater of the island. A kingfisher sits on a telephone wire crossing the river, scanning the water for prey. Beachcombers skip rocks across the water. A veritable traffic jam on this stretch of shoreline, and that doesn't include the ubiquitous Canada geese and mallard ducks. The fisherman finally takes the hint and wades back to shore.

## And The Winner Is ...

1999-06-15

I drove up to Red Deer today, 100 km north of Calgary, to visit my mother, who is to accept an award tonight for her work in palaeontology. Normally the drive is about 1.5 hours city centre to city centre, but it stretched much longer today. It took me a half hour just to get out of the city, as everywhere I went there were roadworks in progress. I had to double back on my tracks

twice due to road closures. Even where the roads were open, the chain reaction effect of the roadworks triggered traffic jams elsewhere as everyone had the same idea for alternative routes as I did.

Once onto Highway 2 northbound, I cranked the car up to 140 km/hr, confident that I would quickly make up the lost time. Hubris it was, for halfway between the two cities, I ran into more roadworks. The Ministry of Highways contractors were chipsealing a 10 km stretch of the highway in the northbound lanes. The rock chips, used to prevent icing in winter, had not yet packed down into the fresh-laid asphalt underneath, and were still as loose as a gravel road. As a consequence, traffic speed was reduced to 50 km/hr, an endless crawl on the open prairies.

But finally into Red Deer, which my late father was fond of referring to as Red Light, due to either the refusal or the incompetence of the Streets Dept. in synchronizing the traffic lights so one could hit at least two intersections on the green.

Today being a Tuesday, my brother and his family could not make it up for the ceremony, but me being on the weekend shift I had no trouble. Mom's sister Darlene had come out from Eckville, the village 50 km west of Red Deer where all three of us were born.

The Mayor's Recognition Awards are a programme of the Red

Deer City Council to honour its citizens for contributions to the city and surrounding rural district. There are four categories: Athletic (which everyone at the ceremony pronounced 'ath-ah-let-ick', the way some people say 'fill-um' for 'film'), the Fine and Performing Arts, Citizenship (for volunteer work), and the Mayor's Special Award. The first three categories have numerous recipients, but only one person each year is given the Mayor's Special Award, the highest honour that can be bestowed by City Council. This is the one that Mom is getting, just the tenth person to receive it. It awarded for exceptional things such as heroism or international achievement.

### **As Reported In The Press.**

Yesterday the local news media had been coming by all day to interview her. She missed the subsequent television broadcast of her interview, not having known when it would appear, but everyone we met kept saying they saw it. Today's newspaper, the RED DEER ADVOCATE, had a full write-up about her. The other award winners were only listed quickly in a sidebar, which must have miffed a few of them looking for ego boost.

Whenever anyone in our family gets their name in the paper, we always immediately check to see if the name was correctly spelled, as Speirs is often mis-spelt with 'ie' instead of 'ei'.

When my father was actively involved in politics back in the 1970s, standing as a Social Credit candidate in numerous elections, his name was often mis-spelt. This time they got it right, but they garbled the account of Mom's work in palaeontology.

My mother has been digging for three decades at two main sites along the Red Deer River. Recent heart trouble has put an end to that, but over the past years she has taken out an estimated 50,000 fossils from the Palaeocene strata that underlie the Red Deer district. These fossils are about 58,000,000 years old, just after the dinosaurs died out, and come from lacustrine deposits of the long-vanished Lake Speirs. She has four species named after her. *Pseudolimmophila speirsae* was an aquatic insect. *Speirsaenigma lindoei* was a smelt-like fish. The other two species are trees, *Joffrea speirsii* and *Platananthus speirsae*.

### **I'd Like To Welcome You All Here Tonight ...**

And so to the ceremonies at the Capri Convention Centre. Red Deer is almost exactly halfway between Calgary and Edmonton, each city of which has one-third of Alberta's population. Red Deer is therefore popular for province-wide organizations and companies to have their meetings. Red Deer's history as neutral territory goes back to the 1880s, when rival hockey teams from the two big cities would meet there to avoid riots and biased

referees. The city thus has more hotels and convention facilities that would otherwise be the case for its size, now up to population 63,500.

The ceremonies were MC'ed by Mayor Gail Surkan, and the actual presentations by Councillor Jason Volk. One unusual thing about Red Deer Council is its youth. Surkan is only in her late 30s, and Volk is still 20-something; he was first elected at age 18. We all hummed the national anthem. "O Canada" has several different versions, and different Canadians learned different ones, but all of us have trouble remembering what comes after "We stand on guard for thee". At any public gathering where the anthem is sung, the first few lines, which are the same in all the English versions, are boomed out loud and clear. There follows a sudden drop in the decibel level, as half the audience are contradicting each other and singing different lines. The other half are desperately trying to remember what the next line is, failing, and either copying their neighbour, as a result of which they are singing a couple of beats behind everyone else, or, more commonly, "Hmmm, hmmm, hmmm, hmmm, and stand on guard for thee".

There were seven ath-ah-let-ick awards, quickly disposed of. I had a sense of foreboding when I noticed in the programme leaflet that two bands receiving Arts awards had all the band members names' listed.

One was a marching band with 85 members and the other was a 25-piece jazz orchestra. Aunt Darlene pointed out to me the huge pile of citations and medals sitting on a side table.

My worst fears came true. Each band member received an individual award, suitably engraved with name, which required Councillor Volk to be careful that he pronounced the names correctly, and Mayor Surkan to make sure she put the correct ribbon around the proper neck. It was like driving slowly on fresh chipseal. Former Prime Minister John Diefenbaker once remarked that he never truly understood the meaning of Eternity until he sat in the House Of Commons listening to the Minister of Agriculture debating the price of wheat with the shadow critics of the opposition parties. My version of Eternity is listening to Councillor Volk mispronounce 110 names.

Mom's award, like the Hugo for Best Novel, was last on the ceremony. Councillor Volk attempted to pronounce the scientific names of the fossils named after her, but came to grief with *Pseudolimnophila speirsae* and didn't even attempt any of the others. I had urged Mom to write out her speech of acceptance, but she said she would just ad-lib, and did so very well. She even threw in a plug to keep the Tourist and Convention Bureau happy, mentioning that the scientists who came from around the world to see her fossil digs all commented on the beauty of Red Deer's river parks.

I stayed overnight in Red Deer and headed back to Calgary the next morning. The chipseal operation had now switched to the southbound lanes in my direction. As I crawled along, I viewed the treeless horizons of the prairie and thought of marching bands and the price of wheat.

### **On The Bonny, Bonny Banks Of Elbow**

1999-07-12

A beautiful sunny day today, and I decided to walk down to the Stampede grounds where the world's largest rodeo is once again under way (more than 1.1 million paid visitors over ten days). As I was in no rush, I took the Elbow River pathway system along the riverbank from near my house to the Stampede grounds, which are situated on its shores about 8 km downstream.

I stopped and sat at a park bench en route and sat idly watching the floodwaters go by. Alberta rivers rise into flood in late June or early July depending on the snowmelt at their sources in the Rocky Mountains. This has been a mild year for floods, and while the rivers are up, they are not outside the middle range of the annual spring melt.

It is not the first time I have sat and watched the river, of course, but it was the first time I systematically studied an optical illusion I had noted before but never really studied. If I watch the waters

go by for a few minutes, then suddenly turn my gaze on the riverbank, the riverbank appears to be moving upstream for a minute or two. It does not matter if I look at the far bank or the foreground of the bank I am on. Patches of the ground appear to crawl upstream as if they were being moved by an earthquake. This effect lasts more than a few seconds but stops abruptly after a moment of staring at the ground. Perhaps my readers can advise if they see this effect?

### **Yeehaw And So Forth**

Paid my way into the rodeo grounds, and wandered about the agricultural exhibits. The World Blacksmith Competition was underway in the Big Top building. Contestants, almost all from Canada, United States, and Britain, were busy hammering away in the timed horseshoe event. The men and women smiths had 35 minutes in which to fabricate a pair of horseshoes from two iron pieces. I arrived just near the end of the second heat (pardon the pun), when most of the forging was finished and the competitors were pounding the final details into the horseshoes. The constant tin-tin-tin sound reminded me of church bells at a distance, or perhaps a herd of belled cows on the move.

The event was a mixture of old and new. According to the programme book, the horseshoes were to be fabricated by the traditional methods. The coal forges supplied to the contestants

were, however, forced with air pumped by electrical blowers, not bellows. None of the blacksmiths wore traditional aprons or boots. A Scotsman was the only one in western denim, while the Canucks and Americans mostly wore sneakers and jogging suits. Their tools were unchanged from centuries ago.

From there I went off to the pig races, always a popular item. The bleachers filled up a half-hour before the events. The chap running them, Richard, introduced himself. He is from Hot Springs, Arkansas. Every April he comes up to Manitoba where he selects a group of small porkers for the season. He then spends the summer working his way across western Canada, racing the pigs at rodeos and fairs. In September, he crosses back into the USA and works the circuits into the winter. He neglected to say what happens to the pigs after the season is over, no doubt out of sensibility to the feelings of the children in the audience, but I am sure he recovers his feed expenses via the packing plant.

The pigs race around the small track (about 50 metres) and back into the pens where the winner gets first and biggest portion of a bowl of mini-doughnuts. Four pigs race at a time. Richard divides up the audience into numbered groups to match the silks on the pigs, and everyone has fun cheering their favourite on. After the races, I went over to a concession and bought a bag of mini-doughnuts. Just hungry, that's all.

I passed by the pork ribs though.

At both events, attendees dress up in funny costumes. Too many fat or skinny people wear form-fitting spandex.

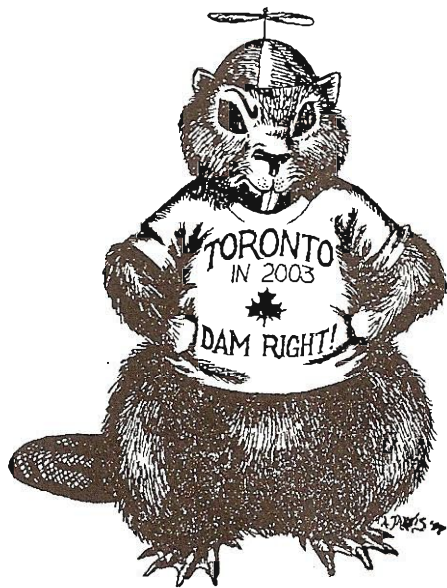
At both events there are people singing badly. SF cons have folk singers who parody folk songs. Rodeos have country & western singers who are dead serious but parody themselves.

At SF cons, panel groups discuss the philosophy of Star Trek with a straight face. At rodeos, cowboys genuinely believe that rural folk are more virtuous than city slickers, solely on the basis of geographics.

Every SF consuite has one loudmouth who won't keep his voice down. Every rodeo has one cow that won't stop mooing at top volume.

Rodeos have trade fairs where you can buy black velvet paintings of Elvis. SF cons have dealer bourses where you can buy black velvet paintings of Mr. Spock.

After the rodeo is over, somebody has to haul away the manure. After the SF con is over, somebody has to clean off the freebie table.



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