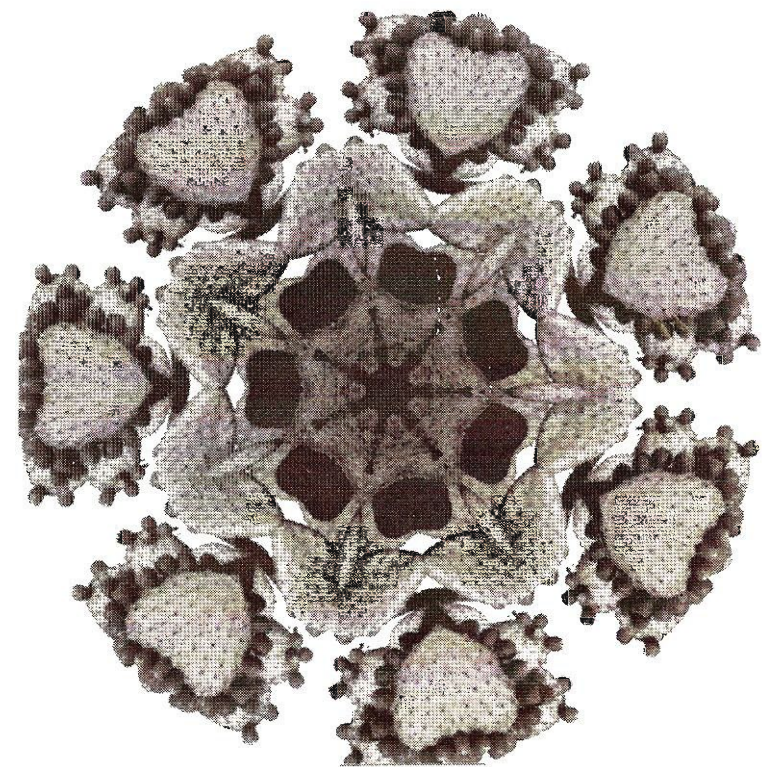


# OPUNTIA

54.5



by Dale Speirs

ISSN 1183-2703

**COVER ART:** The opuntia mandala on the cover was supplied by Alison Scott, 24 St. Mary Road, Walthamstow, London E17 9RG, England.

**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. Americans: please don't send cheques for small amounts to Canada as the bank fee to cash them is usually more than the amount. US\$ banknotes are acceptable in Canada at par value; what we gain on the exchange rate we lose on the higher postage rate to USA. Do not send mint USA stamps as they are not valid for postage outside USA and I don't collect them.

Whole-numbered OPUNTIA's are sercon, x.1 issues are reviewzines, x.2 issues are indexes, x.3 issues are apazines, and x.5 issues are perzines.

It's been a lot longer than I thought since I've done a perzine issue of OPUNTIA, so not only are some of the events chronicled herewith more than a year old, so are the letters of comment. My life has settled into a routine that I find difficult to shake myself out of. It pains me to think of all the time I have wasted on useless things like work, running errands, fixing up house problems, and taking the car in for service. Instead, I could be doing better things like publishing a zine, hiking in the Rockies, sleeping in until noon, or reading a good book.

### LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

[Editorial remarks in square brackets]

FROM: Henry Welch

2003-11-08

1525 - 16 Avenue

Grafton, Wisconsin 53024

[Re: mountain hiking] So, was the purpose of your mountain hike exercise, just to get out, or to conquer the hill? I've always found that hiking downhill to be harder work than most people expect. Sure, you aren't expending the energy to lift your mass, but the



and then get some free carrot cake and orange juice doesn't appeal to me. The Lieutenant-Governor is a Canadian province's representative of the Queen of Canada, and the only duties are giving Royal Assent to legislation and cutting ribbons. (There is no Governor of a province; the Lieutenants-Governor report directly to the Governor-General in Ottawa, who is the Queen's representative to the federal government.) I'm sure the Mounties discreetly screen the public, but assassinating a Lieutenant-Governor would be pointless, since he has no political power. The majority of Canadians, myself included, would not be able to name their Lieutenant-Governor, anymore than we could name the Assistant Deputy Minister for Agriculture.]

**I Also Heard From:** Ficus, Joseph Major, Chester Cuthbert, Ned Brooks

**LIFE ON THE JOB**

**Urban Sprawl.** 2003-01-04

After taking the month of December off, for settling my mother's estate up north in Red Deer, rather than Christmas festivities, I am back to work as the Parks Dept. Weekend Trouble Call Supervisor (and crew; 90% of trouble calls I handle myself without having to borrow a park attendant or phone a contractor).

I have mentioned in previous articles about Calgary's urban sprawl, and that the city was 40 km north/south by 30 km east/west in size. I now revise that figure to 50 km north/south. It is rare to get two trouble calls in a row in the same suburb, so I do quite a bit of driving, but today I set a record. This morning I drove to the extreme south of the city to check a fallen poplar by the roadside. The poplar was within a stone's throw of the city limit sign, or should I say it was within a broken branch's throw. My next call was to Coventry Hills, a new suburb on the north city limit, and the park I visited backed on to undeveloped rangeland. I took a reasonably direct route between the two sites, and clicked off 50 km on the truck odometer. Even via freeway, it now takes twenty minutes to drive from one end of the city to the other. And there is no end in sight to the sprawl. I live 5 km from the downtown core and my neighbourhood is considered inner city.

Calgary, being Canada's petroleum capital, is booming. It is not because of current high oil and gas prices per se, but because of massive tar sands development in northeastern Alberta, where we have more oil than the Arabs. 20,000 people a year are moving to Calgary. It used to be said that an old-timer in Calgary was someone who could remember when it was possible to park on a downtown street without plugging a parking meter. Now it is someone who can remember when it was possible to drive to the city limit in five minutes.

In my capacity as a Weekend Supervisor, I usually don't deal with the details of bookings for picnic sites or wedding photos. That is for the park attendants. But Confederation Park had a rather interesting booking for today, a Saturday, in which a wedding was going to be held in the park. The groom and his brother were to arrive by parachute.

Normally the booking forms we receive are two pages. This one was about fifteen pages. In addition to the usual rental form, there was a contract between the groom and his brother, who were the Party of the First Part, and Her Majesty The Queen In Right of the Corporation of the City of Calgary, being the Party of the Second Part, whereby the Party of the First Part accepted all liability for death or injury caused to them or innocent bystanders who happened to be walking their dog in the wrong place at the wrong time (not in those exact words). There was a \$2,000,000 insurance certificate holding the Party of the Second Part harmless should the Party of the First Part take out a canine and/or its owner. There was a permit from the Ministry of Transport for the flight and jump. There was a map and aerial photo of Confederation Park showing the landing area. I skim ordinary bookings at five seconds per booking, but it took me fifteen minutes to read through all the verbiage. Much of that was due to the paperwork having been faxed by a machine that apparently

scanned at the rate of 9 pixels per square centimetre. I could barely make out the headings on some pages, much less the 8-point text.

At the appointed hour, myself and all the park attendants were on the road at the top of the park. (Confederation Park is actually a long coulee with a creek flowing down its length.) The wedding party was clustered underneath the diamondbark willows down on the creek bank. Out on the open turf, a blue tarpaulin marked the landing site. Above, droning around and around the park in circles, was a single-engine plane. We waited. And waited.

Finally two dots separated from the plane, and two multicoloured parawings blossomed. The first man out did a loop-the-loop, which brought cheering from the wedding party. After that, they settled into a long slow sweep around the park and drifted in. One of the parachutists ignored the marked landing site and swooped down along the length of the pathway. He collapsed his parawing just as he reached the willows, and made a pinpoint landing in front of the wedding party. Loud cheers heard up and down the coulee. The second parachutist was not quite the showoff, and contented himself with hitting the blue target on the turf, but his cheers were just as loud. It was the first wedding I've seen where the photographer was using a giant telephoto lens. And where it was the groom who did the procession, not the bride.

We had a late spring ice storm today, with lots of freezing drizzle intermixed with wet snow. Normally I prefer to drive a pickup at work, but in winter I take a 1-ton crewcab with high-side box. It rides like a buckboard, but its weight provides good traction and its size outranks any SUV or Hummer.

Occasionally I have to disillusion an American correspondent who marvels at how Canadian drivers handle all that snow and ice. (Every Canadian town jokes about about how they have eight months winter and four months bad skating.) The fact is, Canucks handle winter by denial. If we can drive 80 klicks on a road during a hot August drought, then it must be so for winter conditions. Police get tired of hearing "But Constable, the road was icy!" after the accident. It's gotten worse over the past decade because so many people now drive SUVs. People don't understand that SUVs not only won't stop faster on ice because they're four-wheel-drive, but they'll slide farther and hit harder on impact because of the extra weight. Only speed and tire tread determine stopping distance on ice.

This weekend, with its freezing drizzle, was typical of the trouble calls I get in this weather. Five calls for trees run over, one for a park bollard, and the usual array of fences hit. A bollard is a steel or concrete post set in a sidewalk to block vehicles from going

into the park. This particular call was an SUV which slid through a T-intersection, took out a 30-cm diameter concrete bollard and bounced it 10 metres into the park. The SUV left its front bumper 5 metres into the park, and had it been going a little faster the entire vehicle would have tipped over the edge and into a stormwater retention pond.

Horticulturists measure trees not by height but by diameter at breast height (dbh). Usually when I get a call for a tree run over, the wreckage has been towed away by the time I get there, but I can guess what type of vehicle did the damage. If a two-door hatchback hits a 30-cm dbh tree, the tree will be damaged but still standing. If the tree was torn out at the roots, then it was an SUV that hit it. For overnight hits, if the tree is halfway down the block from its root system, it was a drunk driver traveling at high speed. These are almost always a serious injury and frequently a fatal. At high speed the type of vehicle doesn't matter; SUVs are no safer than a hatchback. Strangely enough, I almost never get a tree call-out on a curve; it is invariably on a straight stretch of road that vehicles swerve off.

If a chainlink fence is hit and the post is bent over but the fabric is still okay, then it was a car. SUVs tear completely through chainlink. Quite often I can even tell the make of vehicle because a piece of grille or hubcap is left at the scene. I had thought of collecting these bits as trophies, but I don't have enough office

wall space. SUV front bumpers are filled with black foam. Pieces of foam are often scattered up and down the street. Tow-truck drivers are required under law to clean up the small bits of a wreck, but this is often overlooked in snowy weather or if the driver has several calls on backlog.

The record for an out-of-control vehicle on my shift is a trouble call I had earlier in the winter down in the Mackenzie Lake suburb of southeast Calgary. An SUV roaring down the main drag at 02h00 (in other words, coming home from the tavern) swerved off the road. First it took out a 25-cm spruce, then knocked down a streetlight. Next it crossed a park, snapped through a post-and-cable fence, crossed a back alley, and drove through a homeowner's solid-board backyard fence.

Changing course slightly as it went across the backyard, it took out the side fence as it went into the next house's yard. Demolishing a sun room of the second house en passant, the SUV sailed out onto the front street, then plunged into a golf course on the far side, before finally coming to a rest after embedding itself in a building wall. The driver was listed as critical but stable. The story faded away in the news media after the second day, so I don't know if he ever recovered or died.

## **DOWNTOWN COWTOWN**

### **Deck Us All With Boston Charlie; Walla Walla, Wash. And Kalamazoo.**

I was short-cutting through the downtown Bay department store, thinking to myself about whatever and not really noticing my surroundings. The ground floor is given over to cosmetics and women's wear, and the displays constantly change in the never-ending effort to puff the latest fashions and perfumes. It was October 22, only eight more days to Halloween. But in modern retail, tomorrow is so yesterday. With a start, I noticed that the decorations were for Christmas, not Halloween. I would ask "Is this a record?", but I know that some stores elsewhere start far sooner.

### **Calgary Eccentrics.**

As I came out of the Bay onto the pedestrian mall, I saw the elderly gentleman whose bicycle is often conspicuously parked on the mall while he does whatever is his business. The bike is gaily decorated with pearl buttons, old Christmas ornaments, horse bells, and strips of bright cloth, all completely covering every available surface. If Morris dancers rode bicycles instead of shuffling hey-nony-nony down the sidewalk, this is what they would use.

It got me thinking how we don't see the real eccentrics anymore. The Whooper has been gone for several years now. He was a middle-aged man respectably dressed in a business suit and greatcoat who wandered about the downtown core, carrying a briefcase. If you saw him, you'd assume he was an executive and forget him an instant later. Every few minutes he would let out a loud whoop, loud enough to be heard at the far end of the block. This confused people who didn't know who he was. They would hear the whoop, turn about to see whence it came, and scout fruitlessly for some shabby transient, while ignoring the business executives on the mall. I fell for it the first time too, and only after I happened to glance directly at him just as he cut loose with another whoop did I realize what was going on.

Dancing Betty hasn't been around either. She was a pudgy middle-aged woman who dyed her hair flaming crimson and wore scarlet clothes covered with red sequins. People had to put on sunglasses to look directly at her on a bright day. Normally one only saw her when the downtown merchants hired a band to play on the pedestrian mall for some festive occasion. She loved to dance and once she heard the music she would plant herself front and centre and start to gyrate. Her dance was a weird cross between a two-step waltz and the twist. In fact, no matter what the band was playing, she would do the twist to the tune of Chubby Checker's old song and shuffle back and forth across the front of the audience to the tune of the Blue Danube Waltz.

This was particularly bizarre during the Stampede Rodeo when every band plays country-and-western. I happened to be talking to one band member I knew. His band normally were a heavy metal band but switched to cowboy hats during Stampede because the money was so good. He said the worst problem with Dancing Betty was that because she was dancing to her own beat so conspicuously, she could actually throw the band off their beat. The drummer would sit sideways so he wouldn't have to look at her but this made it difficult for him to reach all of his kit. The guitarists had a worse time averting their eyes because she kept moving into visual range no matter which way they looked. She did this even for the busker who commonly set up in front of the Royal Bank with a boom box, start a tape of Wagnerian music, and proceed to sing opera from the Ring cycle. He had an easier time of it, as he could just sing with his eyes closed.

Alas, a noticeable change has come over the downtown core since the Tories started budget cutting after Ralph Klein was elected party leader a decade ago. The budget cutting included "community-based mental health care", whose practical application meant closing institutions and dumping the non-violent mentally ill onto the streets. The buskers are still there (nobody has a complaint with street musicians who are work for their supper) but the eccentrics (who never begged for money) have been replaced by panhandlers of no character.



## OUT AND ABOUT

### General Protection Fault.

2004-02-28

McMahon Stadium, the home of the Calgary Stampeders of the Canadian Football League, sits at one of the busiest intersections in Calgary, on the corner of Trans-Canada Highway and Crowchild Trail. This location is an advertising agency's wet dream. All the commuter traffic of northwest Calgary goes by en route to and from downtown, including the LRT train, and the traffic to the adjacent University of Calgary is always heavy.

The Stampeders set up a new billboard along Crowchild Trail and rent it out for more than a few loonies. It is not the old-fashioned billboard but a theatre-sized full-colour plasma screen with video feed. Once or twice, as I drove by, I could see the video display being changed using some sort of Windows-based software; the scroll bars were visible and a mouse pointer would be clicking on the drop-down menus. I figured it would be a matter of time before the system would crash live on screen.

It did indeed display the blue screen of death every so often, but today was a good one. No video running, an error message screen advising "This application has performed an illegal operation and will be shut down.", and the log-in prompt over that, all for the benefit of passersby. It being Saturday, and the administration

offices closed, the screen stayed that way for several hours, letting everyone know that the minion who programmed the videos reveled in the user name 'tuffboy4U'. Mercifully, the password was the usual asterisks. I suspect somebody finally drove by who knew a home phone number of someone in the office, and tuffboy4U was called out on overtime.

## BREAD AND CIRCUSES

### Party Hearty.

2004-06-05

On May 23, Prime Minister Paul Martin called a federal election for June 28. There are political signs out on the lawns, but campaign news is in the back section with the funny animal stories. Hockey news dominates. For the first time since 1989, the Calgary Flames hockey team made it to the Stanley Cup finals.

The sports bars are packed every game night. Even when the Flames are playing away in Tampa, the Saddledome arena is sold out with fans watching the game on large screens. By my rough estimate, every fourth vehicle on the streets has a small red Flames team flag fluttering from it, and many have two or more flags. The place to be is 17 Avenue South (and its side streets), which terminates at its east end in front of the Saddledome. On game nights, the Avenue's hundreds of bars and restaurants are standing room only by 16h00.

Police have the Avenue cordoned off to vehicle traffic from the Saddledome westwards about twelve blocks. When the Flames win, about 50,000 fans swarm the Avenue, which has become known as "the Red Mile". The party goes on until the small hours of the morning. If they lose, a few hundred fans dispiritedly mill around the Avenue for a while, then wander off for lack of anything better to do. Everybody is home in bed by 23h00, including the police and City clean-up crews. The Avenue becomes as quiet as the graveyard.

There are three small parks along or adjacent to the Avenue. Each morning after a game, whether the Flames won or lost, the Roads crews descend on the Avenue to clean up tons of debris from the roadway, and Parks crews do likewise for our territory. One focal point for fan celebration is Tompkins Park, a half-city block of green surrounded by taverns, art galleries, yuppie restaurants, and boutiques. The Parks crews fill two 1-ton trucks full with litter just from that small park.

Tonight is Game 6 of the best-of-seven series, and if the Flames win, they win the Stanley Cup. The Calgary Police Service will be bringing in extra constables from the RCMP and other Albertan cities. Parks will have a busy time of it. The football season opened in the afternoon with a home game by the Calgary Stampeders. Carifest is running all day downtown, the annual festival of Caribbean immigrants. Tomorrow morning, the annual

Gay Pride parade starts from Tompkins Park.

In the past, these scheduling conflicts never materialized since the Flames were always eliminated from the playoffs long before. Now, Parks crews face the possibility of still scrambling to clean up and roust the drunk fans sleeping in the park while simultaneously the Gay Pride parade tries to organize itself.

### Prelude.

At 16h45, massive traffic jams formed throughout the city in both directions of the major roads. The lanes heading to the outer suburbs were clogged with disappointed Stampeders heading home; the Stamps lost the season opener to the Winnipeg Blue Bombers. The inbound lanes to the Saddledome were solid with Flames fans hoping for a better result.

I made one last call out to northeast Calgary, doing an irrigation system inspection in a tot lot park. At 18h30, I was heading back to the depot. The game had begun at 18h00, so I was surprised to see traffic volumes still up. According to the radio news, the sports bars had been packed since opening time, so what appeared to be happening was that those who had no place to celebrate were cruising the streets. Every main drag was a cacophony of honking horns and car radios tuned to the game at maximum volume. The residential streets were quiet as the graveyard. And so to home at the end of my shift at 19h15.

The Flames lost to Tampa, and the series now goes to a seventh, final, and deciding game on Monday night. Fortunately I will be off shift, so other Parks workers will have that mess if the Flames win. But life goes on.

My first duty of the day was to lower all the flags in Confederation Park (ten provinces, three territories, and the Maple Leaf) to half-mast to commemorate the 60th anniversary of D-Day. Elsewhere around the city, other Parks workers were doing the same. There were no ceremonies planned for Confederation Park; Memorial Park downtown is where such ceremonies are held.

I was the only person in the park. In lieu of anything else, after I lowered the flags I stepped back a few paces and saluted for a moment. Stanley Cup or not, we remember those who did far more important things. Canada suffered 946 dead out of 14,000 troops who landed at Juno Beach, and 5,002 further casualties during the subsequent Battle of Normandy. One of the young Canadian soldiers wounded on the beach was James Doohan. Yes; Engineer Scott of the starship Enterprise.

The final game of the Stanley Cup playoff. In the evening, while the game was still in progress, I went out to run a few errands. I mailed a batch of OPUNTIA 54.3 in a street box, then stopped at a Co-op service station to top up the fuel tank for a trip out to Drumheller tomorrow. I was the only customer, and the attendants were watching the game on a small television set. There were a few cars in the adjacent parking lot of the Co-op supermarket, but no hustle and bustle. As quiet as the graveyard, it was.

En route, there were kids on street corners every few blocks waving Flames flags at passing cars. I wondered why they were outside instead of watching the game.

My next stop was the Indigo bookstore. Six cars in the parking lot of this superstore. As I walked through the doors, there was only one clerk on duty, and she was leaning on the counter with both elbows, the very picture of boredom. I browsed about a half hour. The magazine I was hoping would have arrived had not, but I picked up a Best Of Glenn Miller album, the latest issue of FORTEAN TIMES, and a new alternative history anthology WHAT MIGHT HAVE BEEN. I know the store computer tracks customer purchases to calculate new buying trends; it'll have fun figuring out that sale. I normally never

read FORTEAN TIMES but their feature this month was H.P. Lovecraft. I am not a fanatic collector of Lovecraftiana but occasionally pick up items about him.

Alas, the Flames fizzled, and Tampa Bay won the Stanley Cup. And so it was that the lumpenproletariat returned to the real world with a thump. This could cost the Liberals the election.

## DAYS OF MY LIVES.

### World Wide Party #11

2004-06-21-21h00

Benoit Girard (Québec City) proposed a decade ago that zine fans take a moment every June 21st at 21h00 and raise a glass in salute to their fellow zinesters around the world. The idea is to get a wave circling the planet of fans joining together for a common celebration.

I celebrated WWP #11 in my usual manner, excepting that I made the toast to fandom with milk instead of Coke Cola, having forgotten to make a grocery run to the supermarket. First I faced to the east and toasted fans who had already celebrated the WWP. Then I faced north and south and toasted those in my own time zone. Finally I faced west and saluted those who were yet to honour the day. Long live zinedom!

## Vote Day.

2004-06-28

-12-

The federal election today, after a month of screeching and pompous reportage. Mercifully it wasn't as bad in past years because the Stanley Cup finals drowned out the politicians, who were relegated to the back pages. A beautiful day, and I decided to go to the mountains. For the first time since I was eligible to vote in 1973, I did not. Instead of surrendering my registration card at poll #72, I filed it away in my philatelic collection, where it will be worth money someday because so few were preserved. The cards are postcards mailed by Elections Canada, and are thus genuine postal history.

Some would say that I can't complain if I don't vote. Balderdash. I pay taxes, so I have the right to complain about the government whether or not I voted. But consider the options for me here in Calgary. The Tory candidate is a 30ish white male who is universally considered a poster boy for the neo-fascists. Almost every street placard of him, even in the heart of suburbia where Torydom is unquestioned, has a little Hitler moustache scribbled under his nose. The Liberals are corrupt and in power too long, so I won't vote for them. The NDP party policy hasn't changed since the 1960s; they still sing "Solidarity Forever" at fund-raising barbeques and ignore the farmers in favour of Toronto the Good. The Greens run spotty-faced university students as candidates. There is no "None of the above" option on the ballot.

It has become evident in recent decades that to get things done in Ottawa has nothing to do with voting. It is all about parties pandering to the loudest screamers and lobbyists, and representing Ottawa to the ridings, not the other way about. To get things done, one has to know the ins and outs of the bureaucracy, not the local M.P..

Since Alberta will go solidly Tory no matter what, it makes no difference if I do not vote. The election will be decided, as always, in eastern Canada, where Ontario holds the bulk of ridings. Instead, I enjoyed myself in Banff National Park.

The forecast was for a hot day, up to 26°C in Calgary. The southern half of Banff National park is usually about the same temperature on sunny days as Calgary (cloudy days are different), so I drove up into the northern reaches of the park to Bow Lake, which is air-conditioned by glaciers. I walked around the shore a bit, admired the glaciers and the mountains, and before I knew it, it was time to come home.

Home to a minority Liberal government, which will be dependent on the NDP for support in the House of Commons. Toronto voters panicked at the last minute and went solid Liberal, excepting that the NDP leader won his riding. Out west, we are shaking our heads and wondering what is the matter with Torontonians who blindly vote for such a corrupt party. The

Tories are a strong opposition, the Bloc Quebecois took most of the Québec seats, the Greens got 4% of the national vote but no seats, and the sun will come up tomorrow regardless. One encouraging trend is that the population of Canada is slowly shifting westward, and eventually eastern Canada will no longer be able to decide the vote.

**YEEHAW!  
AND OTHER COWTOWNISH  
EXPRESSIONS**

2004-07-12

The world's largest rodeo is the Calgary Stampede, with 1.2 million paid admissions in ten days. Today I went along to see it. Not much change from year to year, but still a good way of wasting time. I walked from my house down along the Elbow River to the Stampede grounds, about an hour's walk. The weather today, and for the rest of the week is forecasted as hot and sunny. Traditionally the Stampede marks the end of the rainy season in Calgary; we get half our annual precipitation from the middle of May to early July. The Elbow River is unusually high. It runs most of the year about ankle-deep most of the way, and perhaps waist level in the deepest spots. As I walked along the riverbank pathway system, it was opaque with blue-grey sediments from its source in the Kananaskis mountains.

On arrival at the Stampede grounds, I did what I always do. I went over to the BBQ section of the food court and for breakfast had myself a marinated charbroiled chicken breast on pita, with lettuce. The booth is there every year, and every year I visit it two or three times during the day. Expensive but delicious.

**Dog Days.**

I don't go on midway rides or see the grandstand events, but prefer to wander about and observe the myriad of free events. The first event of the day was the stock dog trials in the Saddledome hockey arena. Strangely enough, it was the first time I have ever been in the Saddledome. I never had reason before, since I don't go to hockey games or rock concerts, the staple of this arena. In previous years the stock dogs were in a big tent, but for some reason they got moved this year. The trials were supposed to start at 11h00 but were fannishly late.

The rink had been buried under a thick layer of sand. A circle was marked out in lime at one end, and there were barrels, a chute, and a pen scattered about. The stock dogs are all Scottish black-and-white collies, trained to respond to their master's voice by whistle or shouted commands. Shouts were only used when the dog was near the handler, who had to stay inside the white circle and guide the dog by voice alone. When the dog was at the far end, the handler used whistles, which could be heard easier.

There were entries from throughout western Canada and the Rocky Mountain states. Three sheep were released at the far end, at which time the master released his dog from the circle and guided it through the route. The dog first had to herd the sheep through a figure-eight around the barrels, then through the chute, and finally into the pen where time was called. The usual time range was 1 minute 10 seconds to 1 minute 25 seconds, although I saw one dog do it in an incredible 57 seconds. I doubt I could have done it in anything under 5 minutes if I was herding them by myself. The dogs were incredibly fast when circling around the sheep to move them back.

The next event I saw was the Superdogs in the adjacent Corral hockey arena. (Non-Canadians: In case you haven't guessed, hockey is our religion. There is no God but Maurice Richard, and Wayne Gretzky is his prophet.) These were ordinary mutts racing through through hoops and jumps and doing various stunts. All very circus-like but it kept us lumpenproletariat amused..

**Rodeo Days.**

At the Calgary Stampede I have never watched the actual rodeo events in the main racecourse. As a farm boy whose father kept 200 head of Charolais cattle, I find most of the rodeo events too phoney for my tastes. Real cowboys don't bulldog calves, they run them into a chute. Bull-riding has as little to do with genuine

ranching as the Indy 500 does with the daily commute to work. Horse racing and chuckwagon races I'll accept as legitimate. We never had horses on our farm but I saw enough of them on the neighbours' farms instinctively racing each other around the pasture. One of our neighbour's horses was known to all as Road Hog because he couldn't bear the sight of another horse in front of him. He always had to outrun them, if only in circles around the pasture.

Pause for an explanation of chuckwagon races. The wagons start on the infield, where they do a figure-8 around the barrels and then go out on the track for a single lap. Each wagon has four outriders, who must finish alongside the wagon or the team will be penalized one second for each late outrider. At the beginning of the race, the outriders are dismounted. When the starting klaxon blares, they toss a large box from the ground into the back of the chuckwagon and do the figure-8 as well. The box is symbolic of the stove that the rangeland cooks used to carry in their wagons when feeding cowboys out on the range. The term 'chuckwagon' is simply a slang term for 'cook wagon'.

My father was a livestock veterinarian, and for many years was the official vet for the Red Deer Westerner exhibition. He would load up the car with us relatives and get us in free through the officials and contestants gate. Sometimes he made two trips. The commissionaires knew what he was doing but waved his car

through and said nothing, mainly because they were doing the same thing themselves for their relatives. Thinking back on it, I'm amazed the Westerner ever made money on gate admissions, there were so many people going in through the back.

When I say my father got us in, I don't mean just to the grounds. I mean to the chuckwagon track infield and onto the fences at the starting barrels. You can't get any closer to the action unless you're actually driving a chuckwagon. I used to watch the chuckwagons come out of the barrels not two metres from where I was hanging on the fence. The thunder of hooves and wheels was like an earthquake. Red Deer ran pony chuckwagons, not thoroughbreds as does Calgary. The ponies were more exciting because they ran harder.

One memory has stayed with me all these years. In a race, the chuckwagon closest to me lost its front left wheel coming out of the barrels. Any other wheel and it would have crashed, but since the chuckwagons only turn left, all the weight is on the right side wheels. The lost wheel spun off and hit the fence where I was hanging with a loud bang, but the driver kept going. He not only finished the race, he won it. As if it were yesterday I can still see his face after he passed the finish line, whooping and hollering with joy as he went by within a couple metres of me.

## **Stampede Days.**

But back to the Calgary Stampede. I wandered through the western art show but didn't see anything I liked. Just as an SF convention art show is plagued by countless paintings of unicorns or mildly amusing parodies of whatever television show is hot at the moment, so it is that western art is almost entirely landscapes of the Rockies, grizzled old cowboys, galloping horses, and noble savages. There was a full-size bronze sculpture of a moose, but I would have had to knock out a doorway to get it into the house and then where would I put it?

I returned to the Saddledome in the afternoon to watch the mini-chuckwagons. The races were for demonstration only. These are half-size wagons drawn by miniature horses. Two teams raced at a time because of the small size of the rink, sans outriders. They got up some good speed, and spun up high rooster-tails of sand as they cornered.

I meandered around the trade fair in the Roundup Building, and was hailed by an elderly friend I know from the Calgary Philatelic Society. She was volunteering for the Lions charity raffle booth and said she was working a 13-hour shift. Like many retired people, she was working just as hard in retirement as when she had a day job. I told her she would have to re-enter the workforce and get a full-time job just to get some rest.

There were only so many marinated chicken pitas -16-  
I could eat in a day. I departed the rodeo grounds and walked downtown to pick up my mail at the post office. And so to home and bed.

## **Downtown Days.**

2004-07-13

I walked downtown today to do some errands. Another sunny day, and Stampede celebrants were out in full even in the early morning. As I entered the downtown core, there was a parade of aboriginals on horseback going down the 8th Avenue pedestrian mall. They were dressed in traditional buckskin garb and their horses were draped with traditional beaded decorations. Because of the heat they were sipping carbonated water in traditional plastic bottles.

## **PEST CONTROL PROBLEMS**

2004-07-17

At work today, I drove over to one of the maintenance depots. Walking up to the front door, I saw a jackrabbit finishing off the last of the petunias in the flower bed. It was only eating the flowers, not the rest of the plant. The jackrabbit kept a wary eye on me as it swallowed the last flower. There's never a coyote about when you really need one.