

OPUNTIA

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

[Editor's remarks in square brackets]

FROM: Lloyd Penney
1706 - 24 Eva Road
Etobicoke, Ontario M9C 2B2

2004-08-11

It's just past the anniversary of the Great Blackout of 2003, and given that Ontario is a lot cooler this year than last, there isn't much chance it will happen again. The government has said it had put in a few unspecified efforts to make sure it doesn't happen again.

[That's what I like about you, Lloyd; you're an optimist. I'm rather cynical about the reliability of power systems, whether in Ontario or Alberta, because of the simple fact that powerlines are exposed to the weather instead of being buried. Big business has decreed that big systems are more cost efficient, and that tying everybody's electrical grids together is more efficient than a network of independent systems that can disconnect before overloads hit them.]

FROM: John Hertz
236 South Coronado Street, #409
Los Angeles, California 90057

Since Calgary has the 2005 Westercon, will you run the Fanzine Lounge?

[No. Firstly because I don't involve myself in SF convention running since I do so much work for the local philatelic society. Secondly, because I don't believe zine displays or rooms bring in new converts to justify the work. After all, how many SF fans take up stamp collecting just because they saw an exhibit at a philatelic show? As George Carlin used to say, "You have to wanna".]

FROM: Chester Cuthbert
Winnipeg, Manitoba

2004-07-30

[Chester mentions a friend who came to visit him from Ontario after many years absence.] He said that the weather in Ontario has caused deterioration in the condition of his books, and was amazed at how mine have stayed in good condition. Even my pulp magazines are in good condition.

[Ditto here in the dry climate of Alberta, where humidity is never mentioned in radio weather forecasts. I keep reading alarums and excursions about how the pulps are crumbling to dust, but the only paper deterioration I have noticed in my library is on pulps bought from eastern dealers.] -2-

I Also Heard From: Ficus, Ken Miller, Henry Welch, Kris Mininger, Sheryl Birkhead, Terry Jeeves, E.B. Frohvet

THE ROCKY MOUNTAIN WAY

by Dale Speirs

Gap Lake High.

2004-06-23

On my way out of the mountains after some hiking, I did what I often do, and bought some sandwiches and picnic supplies at a supermarket in Canmore just outside the park gates, and then stopped to eat at Gap Lake further out towards Calgary. Gap Lake is not a mountain lake but is an oversized pond sitting on the floor of the Bow River valley. I suspect that at one time it was nothing

more than a slough, but the water was impounded by the trans-continental railroad along the south side and the old Trans-Canada Highway along the north. The view is nice though, as this is still within the mountainous part of the valley.

There is a day-use picnic site off the highway, and here I stop to eat. I'm not certain who maintains the park. The area between Banff National Park and the Nakoda tribal Reserve is a mishmash of political boundary lines, the very kind of map for which the word 'gerrymander' was invented. Exiting the east gates of Banff, there is the town of Canmore, which was founded on an island in the Bow River but now slopes over to both sides of the valley and is climbing up the flanks of Three Sisters Mountain and toward the hanging valley of Spray Lakes Provincial Park. Although I and most Albertans refer to the adjacent Kananaskis as a Provincial Park, it is officially called Kananaskis Country. It is not a single park but a dog's breakfast of parks, wilderness areas, tribal land, and private property. The Gap Lake area is a confused mixture of Bow Valley Provincial Park, Canmore town limits, Kananaskis, two limestone quarries, the Nakoda Reserve, and a couple of ranches. The Bow Valley Park includes some islands inside Canmore, and Canmore includes some shoreline that would be more properly in the park. Trans-Alta Utilities, whose hydroelectric dams are inside Kananaskis Country, owns a company town called Seebe, next to Gap Lake. It is like visiting Europe, with all those postage-stamp size countries.

Thus, here I am at a picnic table on the north shore of Gap Lake, gazing up at the mountains on the far side as I munch a sandwich. The wind was whipping up the waves from time to time, but the picnic table was sheltered by spruces. I heard a loud plop, but thought it was just a wave breaking on the shore. A few seconds later, an osprey flying at treetop level went past me, with a trout struggling in its claws. I could see the doomed fish whipping its body back and forth in futile efforts at freedom. I was in no position to offer sympathy since I was eating a salmon sandwich. "You and me both", I muttered to the osprey. I don't think it heard me. It flapped out of sight into the forest.

And so to home. In life, some people are ospreys and others are trout. Which are you?

Off To See A Wizard Of A Time.

2004-08-11

A sunny day forecast for today, so I headed out to the mountains again. This time there were no roadworks, but at the top of Scott Lake Hill, the last foothill before the Trans-Canada Highway drops into the Bow River valley, traffic was down to one lane. A semi-trailer truck had been blown into the ditch, apparently the day before, because the tractor unit was gone and the salvage operation well under way. A 10-metre roll-off garbage bin had been brought in and was mostly filled with wreckage.

A crane was reaching down into the muskeg where the trailer had stopped rolling, and labourers were shoveling cargo and debris into its maw.

This section of the Trans-Canada Highway, where the Bow River exits the Rockies and cuts through the foothills, is extremely windy. My Honda Civic coupe is low slung but still rolls and yaws going into the mountain pass. Coming out, it cruises at 180 km/hr with the tailwind, hardly burning more than a few drops of gasoline. On one occasion, the wind was blowing so hard that it was lifting small pea-sized gravel out of the ditches and spraying the traffic. We had to slow down to 50 km/hr, and I crept the the distance in fear that the windshield would end up a mass of rock chips (but fortunately not). It has to be a nightmare for semi-trailer drivers anytime.

Just west of the windy section, near the Kananaskis turnoff, was a 1970s blue van sitting in the ditch. What caught my eye and made me remember it was that someone had written "kidney" with their finger on the dust of the rear window. One would normally expect the traditional "wash me".

Papers Please, Sir.

When I set out from Calgary, I had no particular destination in mind within the park but waffled at random and finally chose

Johnson Lake, just northeast of the Banff townsite about ten kilometres. I turned off the Trans-Canada Highway onto the Lake Minnewanka loop highway and immediately ran into a Parks Canada roadblock. The Trans-Canada cuts through several national parks as it goes through the mountains. For travelers heading straight through, there is no fee, but if one wishes to visit the sights or go off on side roads, then your vehicle must have a pass. I buy a season pass each spring for \$38 for unlimited access to all the national parks. Since cheapskates have been known to evade the daily fee, the Parks Canada staff set up random checkstops on the side roads. They also ticket parked vehicles with no passes at tourist sites and in the towns such as Banff and Lake Louise. It's cheaper to be honest. As I drove up to the roadblock, I pointed to my season pass dangling from the inside rearview mirror. The warden waved me through. Continuing on, I saw his partner ticketing someone who gambled and lost.

The narrow two-lane loop highway is very scenic, with three lakes (Minnewanka, Two Jack, and Johnson), plus all the towering mountains you would ever need. There were continual traffic jams as herds of Rocky Mountain sheep sauntered along the centre line of the road. The sheep stopped at intervals to pose for passing tourists leaning out the window with one hand on the steering wheel and the other wrapped around a camcorder. Don't tell me Rocky Mountain sheep don't know about stage presence.

Johnson Lake.

This lake is between the Fairholme and Palliser ranges of the Rocky Mountains. The Rockies are not a single range, but a series of parallel north-south ranges with intermittent passes between the ranges. This is why the Trans-Canada Highway zigzags on the map, finding its way hither and yon, up and down.

Johnson Lake has a nice hiking trail around its perimeter, and I decided to walk its circumference. The lake angles from northeast to southwest on its long axis. With the hot sun beaming down, I chose to walk widdershins around the lake. This meant that I would be walking around the southeast side of the lake into the sun while in the shade of a spruce forest. When I came round the far end to the northwest side where the banks were exposed prairie, I would have the sun behind me.

The south end of the lake was busy with sunbathers and swimmers. Walking along the forested path, I saw a swimmer crawling down the long axis of the lake, a swim of at least one kilometre. Must be training for the Olympics.

The path rose up along the cliff of the east shore. I saw a gathering of teenagers and stopped to watch them. They were diving off the cliff into the deep waters below. It usually took each diver about five minutes to work up enough courage to go

soaring off over the water. Not that I blame them. If I were young and stupid again, I might do it, but now that I am older and stupider, I wouldn't do it.

The trail was marred by someone having tossed an empty Starbucks coffee cup on the ground. It was the only piece of litter I was to see. It is a sad commentary on our society that no matter where you go in the wilderness, you will come across an empty pop can, Slushie cup, or chocolate bar wrapper. I picked up the coffee cup and carried it with me around the lake, to eventually deposit it in a garbage can at the parking lot.

Dragonfly Nerds And Loons.

The trail then dropped down to the shoreline. Ripples constantly agitated the surface, as trout fingerlings snapped up any aquatic insect foolish enough to alight on the water. The water was clear, and I could see huge schools of trout fry. Try as I might, I can't find anything exciting in watching trout fry, so onward I went.

Giant blue dragonflies were continually buzzing along the shoreline. About half of them were in pairs, copulating on the wing as they zoomed along at high speed, doing loop-the-loops and rollover turns as the uppermost dragonfly frantically pumped into the lowermost one. Humans have such boring sex lives.

I watched one singleton dragonfly defend a patch of shoreline water about the size of a desk against other comers. It chased away other males (I presume they were males) but didn't seem successful in getting a female. Must be a dragonfly nerd. What impressed me about the dragonflies was the amount of energy they must have been using, even to hover in one spot. Their wings were a constant blur, barely visible.

A loon paddled by, a few metres off shore. It looked quite sane. It dived into the water at intervals and popped up again about ten metres away, but never in a direction I could guess. It was silent, so I didn't hear the quavering cry it is famous for.

Canada's currency is called the loonie because the \$1 coin depicts a loon. The \$2 coin is by extension popularly known as the toonie or doubloon, even though it actually depicts a polar bear. There are no \$1 or \$2 banknotes in circulation. When the banknotes were withdrawn from circulation a couple of decades ago, the new \$1 coin was to have depicted voyageurs paddling a canoe. The master dies for the coin were engraved in Ottawa and sent to the Royal Canadian Mint by private courier because the Mint didn't trust Canada Post. The dies were stolen in transit, and the loon was hastily substituted. The posties are still laughing at the Mint on that one.

The Finish.

I came around the far end of the lake, where pink pondweed flowers dotted the water, and followed the narrow footpath on the prairie slope. Eventually the forest resumed. What I hadn't seen from the other side was that this shore had numerous false inlets. If I stayed on the shoreline path, I kept getting caught in dead-end peninsulas, and had to re-trace my steps and take the fork that went inland. The last section of the trail forked several times in the midst of the forest. I chose one at random, and by good luck emerged into the parking lot directly in front of my car.

Finis.

One of my hobbies is photographing and documenting roadside memorials, the crosses that next-of-kin erect along the road where their loved one died in a traffic accident. Most are gone within a year, but some are solid crosses built to last and maintained regularly by the family. At any given moment there are about twenty to thirty inside Calgary city limits that I am aware of, and I have photographs of dozens along the rural and mountain highways.

Heading back home on the Trans-Canada Highway, I zoomed past Heart Creek as I have done a hundred times before. Just beyond it was a pond with a guardrail. In the corner of my eye, I spotted

a metal-rod cross next to a traffic sign behind the guard rail. I slammed on the brakes and slewed into the shoulder. The sturdy cross was welded out of thin iron rods and painted black. The death date was 1996, so I can't imagine how I missed it all these years. I took a photo and will add it to my scrapbook.

After 25 years with the Calgary Parks Dept., I have long since developed the habit of automatically scanning boulevard trees as I drive, searching for disease and broken branches. I also instinctively check the grass for mowing or vehicle ruts. In the few years that I have been photographing roadside memorials, I have, I thought, developed an ability to spot a cross at 100 km/hr in the ditch, no matter how grown over with grass or branches. But I am still surprised from time to time with unexpected crosses where I thought none were.

There is a lot of heartache in those crosses. Officially they are illegal, but maintenance workers will not disturb them as long as they are cared for. Alcohol or speeding are the main producers of roadside memorials. Where a name or newspaper clipping is on the cross, almost without exception it is someone in their teens or twenties. Forever young because of a careless moment.

Two-Lane Travels.

2004-08-17

Drove out this morning to escape the heat of Calgary. There are

two places to do this within a short drive, the upper end of Banff National Park at Bow Lake, and the upper end of the Kananaskis valley. The former is cooled by Alberta glaciers, the latter by cool air coming through a gap in the Rockies from British Columbia glaciers. I chose the latter. A minor reason was that Parks Canada staff had walked off the job in the national parks across the county, and the Banff east gate was down to one lane as management tried to deal with it. I haven't made many trips to Kananaskis this year, so it was a good excuse.

I had thought to try and climb Ha Ling Peak (named after the Chinese railroad worker who first climbed it in 1886) above Canmore, in the Spray Valley Provincial Park, but the road was closed due to landslides. Some other time then. The north face of Ha Ling peak overlooking Canmore is a vertical cliff about 1 km high. Way back when, most people didn't know about the easier route on the back side. Ha Ling used to bet newcomers \$5 each that he could leave Canmore town centre at sunrise and be waving from the top of the then-unnamed peak by noon. The greenhorns would look at the sheer cliff and take the bet, not realizing that he would simply jog up the slope behind the mountain on the trail he discovered.

Canmore follows the basic principles of urban design used throughout the world. That is to say, ignore any once-in-a-century threat because by then

the engineers and architects who design a community will be retired or dead. The road switches its way up the flanks of Mount Rundle and cuts through loose gravel and debris falling off the mountain. Canmore built a reservoir directly above the town, and the reservoir in turn is directly below Grassi Lake, which sits at the mouth of the Spray Valley. Both bodies of water are held back by gravel berms that I would hesitate to build a house on if they were out on the prairies. It is not science fiction to predict that some day a really big chunk of Ha Ling Peak will fall into Grassi Lake, which will slop 300 metres down into the reservoir, which will slop 200 metres down into the town core. Canmore will then be washed 100 km downstream to Calgary. Everyone, of course, will be shocked, shocked that such a thing could happen, an unheard-of event like earthquakes in California or hurricanes in Florida.

Upper Kananaskis Lake.

I turned about and drove to the upper Kananaskis valley. En route on the Trans-Canada Highway, I spotted the kidney van again. It occurred to me that the marking was a notice for a tow truck. The Kidney Foundation of Canada takes old vehicles as donations and issues a tax receipt for the junkyard value. They even tow away for free. This was how I got rid of my old car when I bought my Civic, although I left the Micra in my driveway, not the open highway.

The Kananaskis valley was hazy because of British Columbia forest fires but it was only a slight haze, just enough to blur details of strata off the mountains. Up close, everything came into focus. It was sunny up at the headwaters of the Kananaskis valley but gale force winds were blowing down the length of the lakes as the air masses came through the mountain pass from British Columbia. The waves were swelling up to 50 cm high as they crashed into the berm at the south end of the lake. Driftwood and old spruce stumps bobbed along the shoreline. The lake is rimmed by grey limestone mountains, and a hundred metres away from the parking lot there was a silence as giant as the mountains. I stopped for a bite to eat in the lee of the forest on the east shore. I had to keep blowing alpine bees off my pop bottle before I took a sip. Flower bloom is finishing up at this altitude, so the bees are foraging with quiet desperation.

I began walking around the south shore of the lake, camera and tripod slung over my shoulder. I leaned 45° to port as I went across the exposed berm, and kept one hand on my cowboy hat. Once I made it to the far shore, the wind suddenly cut off in the trees. I thought of all those ambitious young petro-executives working 16-hour days in downtown Calgary, hustling and bustling to get rich. If you ask them why, the answer will be the same: "So I can retire and spend my time out in the mountains". I was in the same trap once before I realized, not until my early 40s, that one

does not need the biggest house and the most toys to win. Most of the petro-executives will not enjoy a long retirement even if they live long enough. Heart attacks will carry them off like an osprey carries off a trout.

There was silence for the space of a half hour as I walked along the shore. Then two dear old ladies approached, walking the trail from the opposite direction (I was going widdershins, they were walking into the sun). They saw my camera and remarked conversationally "With so many beautiful sights, how do you choose which to photograph?". "That's the problem", I replied, and we passed by. Photos cannot show the silence, or the sense of calm as two loons drift by, dozing with their heads turned back as they drift on the current. The strata of the mountains were laid down 400 million years ago when this part of North America was under equatorial skies. A photo cannot transmit the sense of awe that a bit of geological knowledge can bring.

LIFE IN OILBERTA

Ominous Foreboding.

2004-09-09

An enumerator rang my doorbell today and verified my eligibility to vote in the upcoming provincial election. Premier Ralph Klein has been publicly musing about when to call an election, and said he has settled on either November 22 or 29. His final decision

depends on whether or not an Alberta team is in the Grey Cup final on November 21. The Calgary Stampeders are in the basement of the Canadian Football League standings, but the Edmonton Eskimos are going strong and have a good chance of making it all the way. The Stampeders are the trouts of the CFL.

Popular jokes circulating in Calgary:

Q. Name three news headlines that will never surprise anyone.
A. The Pope is Catholic, Liberal party in corruption scandal, Stampeders lose game.

Q. Name three signs of the impending Apocalypse.
A. The Pope converts to Islam, Liberal party cleared of scandal charge, Stampeders win game.

Municipal elections are scheduled in advance every third year, unlike federal or provincial elections which are called at the pleasure of the First Minister. Alberta will have municipal elections on October 18. We had the federal election in spring, so this year was a hat trick of political campaigns.

Klein has said this will be his last election. Next year is the centennial of Alberta and Saskatchewan, both of which were carved out of the Northwest Territories in 1905.

The Queen of Canada is coming to visit, Alberta's provincial debt will be paid off because of the oil boom, and the Tories will have so much money coming in from oil royalties that there is talk of abolishing personal income taxes like Alaska did. We already have the lowest cost of living in Canada, with no provincial sales tax, a 10% flat rate personal income tax, and slush funds as far as the human eye can see. Calgary is sprawling out worse than Los Angeles, and the main drags look like an SUV assembly line. But no hurricanes.

Why Bother To Vote?

2004-09-20

We are brainwashed from a young age that "Your vote counts! Do your civic duty!". I believed that until this year's federal election, when I realized that no matter how I voted, Alberta would send only Tories to Ottawa by 90% margins and the Liberals would get back in regardless of how corrupt they are because Toronto voters fear Alberta's increasing strength. So instead I went to the mountains with a clean conscience.

Today was the closing date for candidates to file their papers for the municipal elections. Four aldermen were acclaimed back into office, including the one in my riding, so we won't have a vote here. The school board trustees are powerless because the provincial government controls the budget and sets policy, so being elected a trustee has as much power and influence as being

elected President of the Grade 6 Students' Union.

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The mayor is a good guy and looks to get back in with 90% of the vote. Why should I bother to vote? It's not like a neo-fascist candidate was running in a tie with anyone.

The provincial election is so lopsided that local bookies will not take bets on it, save perhaps for 1000 to 1 longshots that the Liberals might get back in. Alberta is a one-party state; the Social Credit party ruled from 1935 to 1971, and the Tories since then.

Those who urge voters to the poll say one doesn't have a right to complain if one doesn't vote. Nonsense. If you pay taxes, you have a right to complain whether or not you vote.

Calgary Bridge Is Falling Down, ...

2004-10-08

Today is the first day of my weekend shift, which will actually be four days instead of the regular Friday to Sunday 12-hour schedule. I will also work the holiday Monday, which is Thanksgiving. But several Calgarians are going to be sitting down to their turkey dinners on Monday with heavy hearts and thin appetites.

Bowness Park is an island in the Bow River. The east end of the park is bisected by 85 Street NW, which is a high causeway over most of the park and a bridge over the river. The bridge is a

narrow two-lane bridge built in the 1950s when it was a lightly travelled country road, and is woefully inadequate for the modern city commuter route it is today. This summer, the bridge was closed for rebuilding. The deck was stripped off and re-poured with fresh concrete, and the narrow sidewalk torn out and replaced with a new wider pathway structure hung on the side of the deck. The project was to have been completed a month ago but had fallen behind schedule due to some nasty surprises discovered underneath the old asphalt, such as rotten rebars due to road salt. The I-beam superstructure of the new pathway was hung onto the bridge over a fortnight's work in the last part of September, and the contractor was about to pour the new sidewalk on the pathway deck.

Yesterday afternoon, Thursday just after 17h00, the superstructure of the bridge fell 12 metres into the river. Two men rode down with it. One suffered broken legs and a cracked spinal column, and the other went into the ice-cold mountain water, resulting in a mild case of hypothermia. It could have been worse; it was end of shift, and most of the workers had gone for the day.

This morning (Friday) I drove out to the east end of Bowness Park. There was already a security guard posted on duty to keep joggers and dog-walkers from shortcutting through the wreckage that fell into the park. I spoke with him and made arrangements to leave a park gate unlocked so that construction vehicles could

drive in to clear the wreckage. It will take at least a week to cut apart the fallen superstructure and lift it out of the fast-flowing water of the Bow River.

The project engineer will take the blame regardless, even if someone else messed up, for he is supposed to prevent such mistakes. For most Canadians, October 11 will be a routine Thanksgiving, but for the engineering team it will be another 16-hour day trying to find out what went wrong.

Not Having A Wonderful Time Here.

2004-10-17

I took vacation time this weekend to attend the local stamp show CALTAPEX, put on by the Calgary Philatelic Society. I am bulletin editor for the club and also did the show programme booklet. Two tracks of programming, 22 dealers in the bourse, and 65 frames of exhibits. While working my way around the bourse, I bought a couple of postcards not for their postmarks or stamps but for the messages on them. Both were sent from Saskatchewan in the pioneer days when homesteading was still underway.

From Rouleau, a girl named Norah sent a postcard in 1908 to Ylena Scott in Ontario. Written in large, loopy letters, on lines carefully ruled across the postcard, little Norah informs her correspondent (aunt? cousin?)

of the following: "*I had a new pup, a black and white collie but he got sick and had to be shot. Norah.*" Being a veterinarian's son, I will take a guess and bet that the unfortunate dog had canine distemper or, less probably, rabies.

From Spalding, a postcard addressed to Winnipeg and postmarked May 7, 1914, provided this cheerful news from Marie: "*We all arrived safe and sound. The roads are so bad we can't get our furniture out of town so are staying at friends just now. Hope you are enjoying convocation week.*" On the Canadian prairies, half of the annual precipitation comes between May and the middle of August, so the unimproved roads of those days would be gumbo. World War One would begin in a few months, and most of the young men at convocation in Winnipeg would soon be in Europe.

And The Winner Is ...

2004-10-18

And so Calgarians trooped to the polls, or rather, didn't. The turnout was a record low of about only 20%, save in the hotly-contested Ward 3, where 13 candidates were vying to fill a vacant seat whose incumbent had retired. Ward 3 is the immigrant district in northeast Calgary. The fiercest issue was a proposal to build a slaughterhouse in the middle of a residential neighbourhood to process cattle, something that did not go over well with the predominantly Hindu and Sikh populations. The winner was a community activist backed by the unions. Her

campaign signs blatantly announced the
firefighters and police unions supported her.

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More excitement in a Ward 10, where a challenger named Margot Aftergood narrowly edged out the incumbent by about a hundred votes. 850 absentee mail-in ballots were received from one address, a box number which turned out to have been rented by Aftergood's husband, who is also her campaign manager. The electoral officer did not count the votes, so they didn't affect the narrow outcome, but he did call in the police because soliciting votes by distributing ballots is an offense. Science fiction fans will probably wonder what the fuss is about since this is common procedure for the Hugo and Aurora awards.

Mayor Dave Bronconnier got back in with only 75% of the votes, running against six fringe contenders. One osprey and six trouts. Anyplace else this would be a stupendous margin of victory, but Calgarians are wondering about this, since mayors here usually get about 90% of the votes. Bronconnier campaigned on a platform of building more freeways and interchanges, the same thing that got him elected last time.

In an inner-city ward, the Hon. Madeline King (she is an English immigrant, the daughter of a peer) won re-election but only by a narrow margin against a pro-business challenger. She is a Liberal member who had run unsuccessfully for the Grits in previous

federal elections (likewise for Bronconnier). Calgary last elected a Liberal M.P. in 1968. It is interesting to note that although Alberta has been right-wing at the provincial and federal levels since 1935, most *municipal councillors* throughout the province tend to be small-l liberal or labour. I grew up in Red Deer, 140 km north of Calgary, where the M.L.A. and M.P. were always to the right of Ivan the Terrible but the mayor for decades was NDP.

One Day With Heartbeats And Sound Bites. 2004-10-25

Even as the municipal votes were being counted and re-counted, the Tories, Liberals, and NDPers were hoisting up billboard signs for the impending provincial election. No rest for the wicked. The Tories have a picture of Premier Klein looking smug; their campaign slogan is "Proud to be an Albertan". If Klein lost weight, he'd look like an osprey.

This morning I drove downtown to a radiology clinic for my first echocardiogram, which is an ultrasound scan of the heart. From the time I graduated university in 1978 to 2001 when I had an emergency gallbladder removal, I seldom visited a doctor's office. Now I'm at the age when one begins to spend more time in waiting rooms than formerly.

The technician had me lie on my left side while she poked at me with the ultrasound probe. I was facing the computer screen and

could see the scan of my heart. It was somewhat unnerving to watch the real-time video as my heart valves opened and closed. I tried to spot any plugged arteries or valves that didn't close completely but I didn't know what to look for in the blurry image. I'm sure my doctor will let me know. I've been on Lipitor since 2001, a statin drug which clears out cholesterol from the arteries, so it seems to be working. At \$15 a month for the daily pills, it better be working. American ex-President Bill Clinton recently had bypass surgery because he neglected to take his statins, and all us Canadian Baby Boomers about his age followed his progress closely. I'm at the age where if someone tells me about their operation, I listen with genuine interest because I might be next.

Surprise! Listening to the news on the car radio heading back home, I heard that Klein had visited the Lieutenant-Governor for a Writ of Dissolution. The provincial election is set for November 22, so that will be another month of politicking we will suffer.

All Saints Day. 2004-11-01

The election campaigns stumbled out of the gate, as Premier Klein's aged mother died yesterday. She was 80 years old and hadn't been well for a year. A couple of days after Klein called the election, she took a turn for the worse, and he and his family gathered round the deathbed.

On her death, all the political parties suspended campaigning until after the funeral.

Halloween this year was a Sunday night, so it was more subdued than usual. I worked my regular shift and it was a quiet day. It was also the end of Daylight Saving Time, so we all got to sleep in an hour. I have never heard a valid reason for having DST. Since at our latitudes the days are long in the summer, it hardly seems worthwhile for the twice-yearly hassle of changing clocks. Supposedly we live in a 24/7/365 world, and if so, then changing clocks an hour shouldn't make any difference. Alberta didn't go on DST until 1971, and Saskatchewan still doesn't use it. Yet we managed.

This morning to the doctor's office for the results of the echocardiogram. I flunked it; one enlarged artery and one leaky valve with a trace of blowback or blood regurgitation. Not immediately threatening, and surgery is not yet justified but twenty years from now I'll probably be under the knife. No plugged arteries though; that Lipitor is doing a good job.

And The Race Is On! 2004-11-10

Not too many election signs out on the boulevards, relatively speaking compared to other elections. The Tories don't have to bother and the other parties are hopeless. The Calgary aldermanic

scandal has managed to tie itself into the Tories, as Margot Aftergood and clan were heavily involved in provincial politics. The storyline is so convoluted that rather than try to summarize it here, I suggest you enter "Margot Aftergood" and "Calgary" into a search engine and read for yourself.

A fringe party running is the Separation Party of Alberta; no prizes for guessing what their main platform is. They are the first party I've seen that uses handwritten boulevard signs, done in felt-pen on scrap cardboard or plastic sheet. Just like any garage sale sign you ever saw. Their financial condition is indicative of how seriously Albertans take them. No doubt the news oligarchy are giving them some air time in an effort to drum up interest, especially outside Alberta, but I don't have a television set so I need not worry.

**You Can't Make These Things Up,
Or, If It Isn't One Thing, It's Another.**

Each morning when I start work, one of the things I do is to scan the overnight police reports on the City of Calgary computer network, looking for items about cars hitting trees or swerving off the road into a park. If found, I add those addresses to my list of things to do, to check for damage. There are also the other usual suspects of Cowtown's underworld, one of which I transcribe herewith, a concatenation of events too unbelievable to be false.

This report reminds me of too many bad action-comedy movies I've seen, but the truth is indeed stranger than fiction.

"Date: Sun Nov 14 01:57:58 2004

Subject: Injury Accident 9900 Block Macleod Trail SE

From: Duty Inspector"

"Just after midnight, police responded to a disturbance call in the Acadia area. Responding units noticed a vehicle leaving the area and started to follow it. The vehicle left the area and police continued to follow it to 99 Ave and Macleod Trail. There was an attempt made to stop the vehicle but it fled at a high rate of speed into the Superstore parking lot. Police discontinued the attempt to stop the vehicle and the car kept going westbound in the parking lot at a very high rate of speed."

"At the west end of the parking lot the road ends. At this point the driver of the fleeing car attempted to stop but failed to do so. He struck the curb, taking out a large chunk of cement, became airborne and struck a major power pole approx 3 metres off the ground. The pole sheared off, knocking out power to a large area including the Superstore and nearby restaurants. Police attended to the victims who were trapped in their car with live wires lying on top of the car. They suffered minor injuries."

"The power outage caused several hundred patrons at the Black

Swan Restaurant nearby to start fighting. Over fifteen police cars were called to the scene of the disturbance before order could be restored. Two people suffered injuries from either fighting or falling in the parking lot."

"The power outage also caused the traffic lights at several intersections to fail. One of these, at 99 Ave and Macleod Trail, failed, causing the lights to be out for all directions of traffic. Before police could get to the scene and direct traffic, four vehicles collided in the intersection. The occupants of one of the vehicles were on the way to the Black Swan in response to a family friend who was injured in that disturbance."

"Police also attended to numerous alarms in the area as a result of the outage. Charges are pending in the original incident of the car fleeing from police."

And The Winners Are ...

November 21: Toronto Argonauts over the B.C. Lions by 27 to 19 for the Grey Cup.

November 22: When I went to vote, I was startled to be given two ballots, one for the provincial legislature, and the other for the Senate.

The latter race has been so low-key as to be invisible; I had completely forgotten about it. I marked my ballot for the Greens in the provincial election. Since I had little knowledge of the Senate election beyond Link Byfield's name (he was editor of the newsmagazine ALBERTA REPORT), I marked his name and three candidates from the Alberta Alliance party. The Canadian Senate is appointed by the Prime Minister. Alberta currently has four vacant seats and the provincial government is trying to shame the P.M. into making it an elected body. Either way, being a Canadian senator is like being Third Assistant Deputy Minister for Agriculture. Your mother might be proud of you but no one else thinks of you at all.

Byfield was running as an independent. Alberta Alliance should not be confused with the now-defunct federal Alliance party, which merged with the federal Progressive Conservative party to form the federal Conservative party, now the opposition party in the House of Commons. All the provincial Tories remained as the Progressive Conservative party. To sum up, when I have mentioned a Tory at the federal level, I meant the Conservatives, but at the provincial level, I mean the Progressive Conservatives.

Alberta Alliance and the Progressive Conservatives were the only two parties to field candidates for senator; the others were independents. The four winners will have their names forwarded to Ottawa, who will likely ignore them and appoint Liberal

bagmen to the vacancies. Their official title will be Senator-In-Waiting.

November 23: Progressive Conservatives 61, Liberals 17 (up 10 from previous), NDP 4 (up 2), and Alliance 1 (new to the House). Calgary elected three Liberals in inner-city ridings, including mine. This must be a sign of the impending Apocalypse. Voter turnout was a record low of 45%. Byfield and three no-names were elected Senators-In-Waiting.

And so Alberta settles back for another five years of complacency. We're too busy counting the oil royalties as they flow in, and worrying that Ottawa may try to make another cash grab as they did in 1979 during the last oil boom. The National Energy Policy of that year looted \$50 billion from Alberta in favour of Ontario and Québec, which is why Pierre Trudeau was so reviled by westerners.

The Tories are the ospreys, and the people of Alberta are the trout.

Over at Bowness Park, the wreckage of the collapsed 85 Street bridge has been cleaned up. It will be next summer before it is reopened. Everyone is keeping mum about the outcome of the investigation, since lawsuits will be pending. The project engineer knows what it is like to be a trout.