

# OPUNTIA

## 254

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### A LION IS IN THE STREETS

by Dale Speirs

In 1970, American oil production peaked and has ever since then been declining. Oil imports into the USA began rising slowly but steadily. As that decade began, the bills started coming in for both the Vietnam War and the Great Society. Rather than raise taxes to pay for them, both Democrat and Republican governments arranged for more Federal Reserve notes to be printed to cover the tab. Although I and everyone else refers to the currency as the U.S. dollar for convenience, technically it hasn't existed in decades. Look at the top line of any American banknote. This currency printing caused the US\$ to depreciate, which was soon noticed by other countries.

At that time, US\$ could be presented to the U.S. Treasury and exchanged for physical gold at the rate of \$35 for one Troy ounce. The Arabs and French in particular began redeeming vast amounts for gold, so much so that there developed what amounted to a bank run. On 1971-08-15, President Nixon suspended the conversion of US\$ for gold. This forced other countries to stop converting currency into gold, and for the first time in human history, nowhere in the world was there a currency backed by gold or anything else. All currencies became fiat currencies, meaning that they had no value other than because the government would accept them for payment of taxes and fees. The entire world

began using what is known as elastic money, so called because it could be produced in any amount. With that came endless inflation, which is a hidden tax that depreciates debt and savings. The largest debtor in any nation is the government, so they naturally want to reduce their debts by inflating them away. The largest savers are the middle class and pensioners, but the former were too apathetic to do anything serious about it, and the latter were too powerless to stop the process.

### **Tell It Not In Gath.**

PAPER MONEY COLLAPSE (2011, hardcover) by Detlev Schlichter discusses the long, slow, ongoing decline in fiat currencies and the sudden outburst of debt crisis and sovereign failures that resulted from forty years of fiat currencies. Throughout thousands of years of human history, in countless cultures, the only true forms of money were gold and silver. During periods when they were used as the backing for currency, inflation stayed low in normal societies. During wars or natural disasters, prices might spike, but if political stability existed, so did economic stability. With the advent of elastic money, prices spiked even in stable countries such as the USA and Canada. Those of us who lived through the late 1970s and early 1980s will remember double-digit inflation.

Economists have brainwashed the sheeple into thinking that 2% annual inflation is not only acceptable but desirable, and that money printing is needed to grow the economy. This is not true as a quick glance at history will show. The classical gold standard era coincided with the Industrial Revolution, an era of expansion and improvement in living conditions that is still unmatched by modern times. -2-

So why did elastic money, also known as fiat currency, become so widespread? In a word, war. The classic gold standard failed because the combatants in World War One could not possibly have paid the cost of the war in gold or silver without ruinous taxation. Instead, as they did in previous wars, they went off the gold standard and printed paper. Schlichter points out that never once in history did the general public demand that governments switch to fiat currency. It has always been the case that the powers-that-be made the switch against the wishes of the people, normally to finance wars. The response was always the same. At first, the extra currency gave a boost to the economy and paid for the war or social programmes. Then prices started to rise, slowly at first, then conspicuously. People began hoarding gold and silver as a store of value that could be cashed in later at a higher price for currency to buy food or shelter. In the end game, confidence collapses and there is a rush to bullion, food, and other tangibles that governments can't create out of thin air.

Schlichter makes a point that he emphasizes over and over again, that fiat currency and easy credit encourage misallocation of resources. When you have to pay in the actual gold or silver, or interest rates are high, most investments made will be into useful things that will pay their way. When there is unlimited currency printing and interest rates are low, money is diverted into malformed markets such as single-family homes, SUVs, or large-screen television sets. Investors who would normally buy bonds are forced away due to low interest rates and instead buy stocks, bullion, and commodities and ramp up the prices. Markets become extremely volatile. Since the Panic of 2008, stock markets have fluctuated hundreds of points per day regardless of fundamentals. One day the Toronto or New York exchanges drop 200 points and the next day they are up 400 points. The market isn't just irrational, it is outright insane. It is not because the speculators are insane, it is because in a world of floating fiat currencies every wave washes them up and down.

Another difference that Schlichter mentions is the end of the fractional-reserve banking system. It used to be, within living memory, that all banks had to keep a certain amount of physical gold or gold-backed currencies in their vaults. Now they have none. They maintain the fiction that they have reserves by keeping a small amount of fiat currencies, which are not even paper anymore but just electrons in a central bank computer.

The private banks create money out of nothing as loans, which are listed as assets on the bank books and used as reserves. Customer deposits are liabilities to a bank as it is responsible to make good on them. When loans are paid back, the reserves diminish by that amount. People don't understand that to a bank, the best customer is not someone who saves money in an account and pays off her credit card every month. The best customer is one who rolls over debt on a credit card at 19% to 26% interest (the average rate), is paying a mortgage or car loan, and saves little. What happened since 1971 was that banks began using loans as reserves to make more loans, creating an exponential rise in debt and inflation. The first pyramid scheme, single-family house mortgages, failed in 2006 and touched off the Panic of 2008. The next pyramid scheme is unfolding now, as the Euro crisis demonstrates just how much debt everyone had in Europe.

### **Publish It Not In The Streets Of Askelon.**

No one is left who can remember when currency was issued by private banks or individuals. Economic historians and numismatists are among the few who know that throughout history until the last century, people commonly used gold, silver, warehouse receipts, and bills of lading to pay their expenses. Governments also issued currency but whenever they tried to take advantage, the citizens would switch to something else.

As a result, legal tender laws came into force everywhere. Legal tender means that everyone must accept government-issued fiat currency as payment in private transactions and to pay taxes and fees. The sheeple today have lived all their lives, as did their parents and grandparents, under the legal tender system. They therefore assume that only governments can issue currency. The idea that private institutions could use something else is not even dreamt of. Economists, all of whom work for governments, universities, or financial institutions, write that private currency was unstable and liable to default, while neglecting to mention what government currencies have been like. The Germans are still scarred by the Weimar hyperinflation, the Hungarians can remember when a septillion pengos wouldn't buy a loaf of bread, and Zimbabwe trillion-dollar notes are a popular novelty item today.

It doesn't have to be hyperinflation either. The Millennial generation is puzzled why 1930s movies show bank robbers planning elaborate heists to steal only \$10,000, and wonder why 1960s supervillains threatened to destroy the world unless they were paid \$1,000,000 in cash. We buy a loaf of bread for \$3 today and consider it cheap. I recall my mother filling the back seat of the car with \$20 worth of groceries for a family of four in the 1960s; now I buy \$20 worth and carry it home in one small bag. Ah, but we live better than before, some critics say. True, but currency printing had nothing to do with it. We do not have laptop

computers and smartphones today because the government depreciated the currency. The Industrial Revolution proceeded during the gold standard era. Antibiotics did not come on the market because a scientist was trying to beat the exchange rates. Steve Jobs did not invent his various iGadgets because loans were cheap. Microsoft didn't grow because Bill Gates needed extra cash to buy \$3 loaves of bread.

### **The Daughters Of The Philistines Rejoice.**

The single most important advantage that currency producers have is that they get the benefit of spending it before the inflation it causes raises the prices of goods and services. This is a point that the general public do not understand and it is why elastic money is so popular with governments and banks. Schlichter emphasizes this aspect of currency creation several times to drive home the point. Suppose that the government gave every citizen \$1,000,000 at the same time and announced it well in advance. Every business owner would mark up his prices simultaneously, knowing that the addition of that much money will depreciate the currency and raise his input costs. Demand would also soar for consumer goods, thus raising prices. Those who think they could retire now that they have \$1,000,000 would get a nasty shock when they pay their utility bills or buy groceries. Supposing everyone did retire on \$1,000,000, what happens when they need a plumber or the car starts making a strange noise?

If they decide to splurge on a large-screen television set, why would any clerk wait on them instead of quitting? What would happen instead would be a massive burst of inflation. People who retired thinking they could enjoy a life of ease on their million will instead be forced to go back to work to pay the \$10,000 per month rent or house ownership expenses.

Governments and bankers who create money try to keep that fact as opaque as possible. They want the benefit of spending it before prices go up. What they particularly like to do, as Schlichter details in this book, is to put the currency where it will do the most good for them. Not for the nation, not for the people, not for posterity, but for them. This means social programmes to curry favour with every special interest group. Crop subsidies for farmers, cultural palaces for artists and performers, six-lane freeways so commuters can get to work four minutes faster, and export subsidies for factories operated by overpaid union workers. In the USA, half of all Americans do not pay income tax, while the top 1% pay about one-fifth of all taxes. The difference has been made up by printing currency to cover the gap.

The critical factor with being the first spender of fiat currency is that it triggers misallocation of resources. Expensive war machines using valuable metals are blown up in Middle East deserts. Suburbs of McMansions are built far out into the rural areas so commuters can sit in multi-tonne vehicles in traffic jams

and burn extra gasoline. Cellphones and laptops are used for a year and then tossed into landfills when they are replaced by the next model. These are all consequences of the first spender being the government.

Politicians always listen first to the people who elect them. No, not you, the corporate lobbyists. Civilian aircraft are too expensive to develop on their own, so Boeing and Airbus first lobby their friends in high places to build new military planes lest the enemy get ahead of them. Real estate developers can't make profits unless people can be brainwashed into thinking that they must have a single-family house in the suburbs, so politicians keep interest rates low to encourage mortgages and build six-lane freeways so they can get to work on time. Retailers have to sell their stock somehow, so they encourage customers to buy painlessly with credit cards.

The bills come due later rather than sooner, and it isn't the first spenders who are stuck with them. Low interest rates diverted resources into building houses in neighbourhoods that should never have been developed. Eventually reality barges in, as the American housing market found out in 2006 and as the Canadian housing market is just now discovering. The government can keep printing currency, but private banks are placed into a quandary. They can create fiat currency but only by loans.

If customers begin defaulting on those loans,

the bank's operating capital goes down. The less capital a bank has, the less money it can loan. The less capital a bank has, the greater the percentage liability of its customer deposits and trading accounts. That was what brought down Bear Stearns and Lehman Brothers in the terrible summer of 2008. They had heavily invested in different types of toxic paper that were ultimately based on mortgages and credit card balances. When those went into the toilet in 2007, it was just a matter of waiting for the annual reports in early 2008. After that, bank runs developed on the two. Goldman Sachs, JPMorganChase, and other banksters found themselves in exactly the same situation, but by then the Federal Reserve had been panicked into printing trillions of dollars to prop them up.

Schlichter discusses the fractional-reserve system of banking in greater detail and emphasizes that once you deposit currency or open a brokerage account, you no longer have a right to that amount. You only have a claim to it. If the bank is doing well, and not too many people are claiming back their money, you can get back the coloured pieces of paper you deposited. If the bank fails, you do not have a constitutional right to the amount in your account, only a claim like any other creditor. As Schlichter writes: *"Every fractional-reserve bank is at risk of bankruptcy if too many depositors ask for their money back."* That is what brought down Bear Stearns and Lehman Brothers. That is why the Federal Reserve had to supply trillions to Goldman Sachs and

JPMorganChase, so they could redeem the toxic paper they sold to overseas customers. Had the Fed not done so, there would have been a full-scale currency war against the US\$ by all the other nations. In that event, the first spender advantage of the Fed and the American government would have evaporated, since the advantage only works if people accept and use their currency. -6-

### **Their Weapons Of War Perished.**

The current financial problems facing the USA and Europe have been drawn out by the failure of governments to let the system purge itself naturally. Had all the banksters on Wall Street been put out of business by bankruptcy, there would have been a huge dislocation at the time but the world economy would by now be recovering, not still staggering from crisis to crisis. It is not for lack of examples. Japan's financial economy crashed two decades ago, but the government printed countless yen to prop up real estate prices and banks. Two decades later, their stock market still hasn't recovered, nor real estate or the banks. Their economy is still stagnant.

Schlichter writes that the American and European governments have painted themselves into a corner. With interest rates at record lows, the economies of these countries still haven't recovered, and unemployment remains high. Any increase in

interest rates, however caused, will worsen the situation, so the misallocation of resources continues. Currency printing by the Federal Reserve is now in the tens of trillions of dollars, and the Europeans are just starting to ramp up their Euro printing to the same level. Yet all the currency injected has done nothing because it went to the banks, who squirreled it away as reserves. The banks can't loan it out because consumers are not borrowing like they used to. Some of the banks also have tens of trillions of liabilities for derivatives they sold and can't get out of. So the situation grinds onward, world without end.

What is to be done? Schlichter specifically states that he is not a financial advisor and does not make recommendations. He does mention physical gold in hand as an insurance policy. Physical gold in hand means you have it in your safe deposit box, not a piece of paper such as a futures contract or ETF. Physical gold is not an investment; it is protection against inflation and never goes bankrupt. For the most part, the average person will stumble about listening to bad advice from the mass media. Low inflation is good. Buy that large-screen television set. Lock up your money in bonds that pay nothing.

Schlichter's book is, however, a useful warning sign on the road to economic stagnation that we will be walking for many years to come. Forewarned is forearmed.

## **VIOLATING THE SQUARE-CUBE LAW**

by Dale Speirs

There was Hiroshima, Nagasaki, Chernobyl and then Fukushima, but where are the giant ants or superheroes? If we are to believe the comic books and Hollywood movies, they should be a pestilence in Japan and Ukraine by now. Alas, it turns out radiation doesn't create critters the size of houses. It just gives you cancer and anemia.

There are hundreds of giant animal movies and I'm certainly not going to blow my pension money on buying more DVDs of them, but I do have a few accumulated, mostly from those 50-movie collections of copyright-expired films. I'll review some of them in phylogenetic order. This article only looks at present-day ordinary animals grown large because of human tampering, be it radiation or mad scientists. It excludes dinosaurs run amok like Godzilla, alien species, King Kong (a natural occurrence), or giant prehistoric animals disturbed from their resting places by earthquakes or nukes (such as a praying mantis or a beast from 20,000 fathoms). I'll do some of those in future issues.

The square-cube law, first studied by Galileo Galilei in 1638, basically states that as a given shape increases in size, its volume increases faster than its surface area. In biology, its application means that as land animals increase in size,

their bones, legs, and organs must change in proportion to handle the increased mass. A mouse the size of an elephant would instantly collapse because its legs would shatter under the weight, and a giant ant the size of a minivan could not move unless it had legs like an elephant. In mathematical terms, if the mass of an animal triples (cubed), the muscle cross-sections, which determine strength, only double (squared). King Kong, giant ants, giant tarantulas, and giant deadly mantis could not exist. Note, however, that this only applies to land animals. Aquatic animals can grow very large because they are supported by the buoyancy of the water. Air, in contrast, has little buoyancy for animals.

Many of the earliest monster movies from the first few years of the 1950s were decently made with SFX that were reasonable for the technology of their time. Unfortunately once the initial movies demonstrated a successful new sub-genre, the fast-buck studios piled in with shoddily-made monster movies. The latter were so common that they gave the entire sub-genre a bad name. The better movies were lumped in with the dregs and never taken seriously again.

### **Invertebrates.**

THEM! (1954) was one of the earliest movies about animals made giant by radiation. It was nicely produced, and did well in theatres as a respectable film. It was not shlock churned out for drive-in

theatres like many of its successors. The giant ants were reasonably well done on the screen, given the technology available then, and the script was well written.

The movie begins in New Mexico with a little girl found wandering through the desert in a state of shock. Police and medics are both stymied in the initial investigation, which produced much evidence but no useable clues to figure out what is going on. There are strange circular footprints in the desert sand, a vacation trailer and a roadhouse are trashed for no apparent reason, and eerie noises are heard out on the land. The supporting cast depart this life abruptly at regular intervals, not just from massive physical trauma but also injection of large amounts of formic acid.

The state police bring in the Doctors Medford, father and beautiful daughter, both of whom are entomologists. There is a nice scene in the desert where a couple of characters are talking stage front about a plot coupon, while in the background we see Medford's daughter trying to walk across deep sand in high heels. The actress seems to be muttering something under her breath, probably about idiot directors who don't realize that high heels are not suited for cross-country travel.

Unlike most movies of this type, not a lot of time is wasted in figuring what is responsible. Medford Senior notes that the area



in New Mexico was downwind of atom bomb testing, and since formic acid is used by ants to kill their prey, he quickly reaches the obvious conclusion. Once the giant ants are confirmed, there are no disbelievers or foot-draggers in the bunch, and everyone gets down to business immediately. We soon meet the first giant ant, not a believable construct in today's world of computer graphics, but good for the technology of six decades ago.

Major resources are soon mobilized. The Medfords point out that the nest must be destroyed before the queen leaves to start a new one. They don't kid around. First they use phosphorus bombs, then throw in cyanide grenades, and finish up with flamethrowers. Unfortunately they discover that two newly hatched queens have already flown away. They were too late in discovering the nest.

A command-and-control centre is established and the search begins. A freighter is attacked off the coast of Texas, and a badly-lacerated body is found in Los Angeles. The dragnet closes in on the storm sewer system of the Los Angeles River. The army is brought in to search the hundreds of kilometres of drains. The new nest is located and an attack launched with flamethrowers, grenade launchers, and completely ineffective assault rifles. The last of the ants are destroyed. The movie concludes with the characters philosophizing about what humans and the atom bomb hath wrought. All told, this was a good movie.

A 1993 comedy movie MATINEE spoofed this movie by using a film-within-a-film called MANT. This interior movie, of which numerous sections are seen, is about a man bitten by a radioactive ant and who turns into one, human-sized at first and then a semi-trailer-sized one terrorizing the city. Very funny and well worth seeing on DVD.

TARANTULA (1955) opens with the death of a man in the desert from acromegaly (the Elephant Man's disease). Professor Gerald Deemer is experimenting to develop a nutrient solution that will save an overpopulated planet from starvation. In an infodump, he lectures an innocent bystander that by the year 2000 there will be 3.6 billion people on the planet and no way to feed them. The nutrient solution causes animals to grow to giant size but in humans it causes high-speed acromegaly that kills within days instead of years. The nutrient solution is made from radioactive isotopes, so that's alright then, but things are going astray everywhere. There is an accident in the lab. A tarantula that had just been injected with nutrient solution escapes out into the surrounding mountainous desert and begins to grow.

The local inhabitants are suspicious of Deemer, unaware just yet of the giant tarantula but certainly nervous about the sudden outbreak of acromegaly, normally an extremely rare disease. The leading man, who is the county doctor, investigates.

He smiles way too much and in inappropriate situations. He is the hero but seems more suspicious than Deemer. If I were the sheriff, I would have arrested him on suspicion of everything. Meanwhile, back in the desert mountains, the tarantula is roaming about, pausing frequently on the horizon to pose for the camera. Ranchers are finding cattle and horses stripped to skeletons. People are dying in mysterious circumstances all over the county. Deemer himself becomes contaminated with his nutrient solution and develops acromegaly.

The denouement comes when the tarantula finally shows up at stage front and centre. First the locals try boxes of dynamite on the big spider, but that barely musses its hair. The U.S. Air Force is called in. The aerial views show them flying over flatlands with rectangular farm fields, while the ground views of their attacks show the tarantula in the mountainous desert. First the fighters launch air-to-surface missiles, which only irritate the beast. The tarantula is finally stopped with enough napalm to take out a large Vietnamese village.

The SFX are generally well done, using live animals matted onto the film in supersize compared to the actors. There are some scenes filmed in daylight and over-exposed to make it look like night, with the night sky being bright as day while cars drive in gloom. The script was well written, with no idiot plots.

TEENAGERS FROM OUTER SPACE (1959) begins **-10-** with a flying saucer landing in rural California. The aliens, who indeed are teenagers or at least 20-somethings, are looking for places to breed gargons, their food animal. Gargons are lobsters that grow to house size and hop about on their tails. One of the aliens takes pity on the Earthlings and tries to warn them. The actors who played the aliens were apparently told by the director to speak in a monotonous voice with either a Slavic or German accent, depending on the actor. The actors who played the humans also spoke in a monotone but in different ways, so I suspect that was their normal voice. The only exception was the heroine, who spoke in a breathless voice as if she was suffering from asthma. If any of them got minimum wage, they were grossly overpaid.

The special effects are underwhelming. Establishing shots of cars driving at night consist of cars driving in daylight with their headlights on and the sunlight gleaming on the paint. The occupants are shown in closeup inside the cars with pitch-black windows, their faces only illuminated by dashboard lights. The gargon (there is only one) is a photo of a lobster turned vertical and superimposed on the film negative. It hops along on its tail, holding its claws high and motionless. The film editor was grossly overpaid if he received even a penny because the gargon negative is transparent and the background shows through the animal as it hops about the hills.

The aliens are finally stopped by the sympathizer sacrificing his life and blowing up the flying saucer. The explosion is represented by a stock shot of a volcano eruption, cropped to show only the ash billowing out the crater, then a quick cut to smudge pot smoke from a hole in the ground. This is a movie that should only be seen while you are drunk.

ATTACK OF THE GIANT LEECHES (1959) starts off with men in rubber suits attacking moonshiners and good ole boys in a Florida swamp and sucking the blood out of them. There is the usual slow build to the crisis. People keep disappearing and the lawman finally realizes it ain't the gators doing it. The leeches aren't actually killing their victims but are paralyzing them and storing them in an underwater cave as blood supply units. One of the good ole boys decides to do some fishing with dynamite, which flushes out several human bodies from the caves and convinces the skeptics.

This prompts a posse to get serious. The leading man and his sidekick go scuba diving to find the cave, where a damsel in distress awaits them. As they hunt for the cave, the posse waiting on the shore discuss how it was the giant leeches came into existence. One of them firmly declares it was because of all those rocket launches at nearby Cape Canaveral. "*Well, they use atomic energy in the first stage of their launchers.*", he says. This immediately moves the film into the alternative history genre. To

be fair, the Space Age was only two years old at the time the movie was made, and public ignorance about rockets was still high, especially among Hollywood producers.

Getting back to the film, there is an underwater battle with the leeches as the two scuba divers plant dynamite inside the cave and swim for shore. After the explosion, rubber suits start popping up everywhere in the lagoon. The posse celebrates. As the closing credits begin to roll, the camera tracks one surviving giant leech swimming away through the tangled vegetation, evidently with an eye towards a sequel.

### **Reptiles.**

THE GIANT GILA MONSTER (1959) is set in Texas, where everything is bigger, including the wildlife. The opening sequence is a rural malt shop where the teenagers hang out. They all speak without accents, except one Frenchwoman. Must be the part of Texas that was colonized by Canadians. The movie starts off in the traditional manner, with people going missing one by one, and their puzzled friends wondering how come Bob and Mary didn't show up for the sock hop.

The real stars of this movie are the godawful special effects. Throughout the entire film, which takes place almost entirely at night,

the sky changes from day to night every few minutes. Cars are shown driving with their headlights on and the ground and car in murky darkness, while the sky is bright and clear. Seconds later, the occupants get out of their car into Stygian darkness for close-up scenes, but when they drive off in a long view, the sky is bright again. I wonder why anyone ever thought they could simulate darkness in daylight filming by using gray filters and over-exposing the film. There is a delightful scene, supposedly at night, where the shadow of a boom microphone can be seen on the ground following the actors.

The Gila monster is shown crawling about dioramas, intercut with full-scale shots of the actors. On one occasion a fuel tanker is seen going down the road under the usual bright night sky. Jump cut to a shot of the Gila monster in bright daylight flicking its tongue, then back to the driver screaming and steering his rig into the ditch despite the camera clearly showing he was nowhere near the beast. In sudden pitch blackness, a plastic toy truck then explodes instantaneously and flames billow out through the windows that obviously never had glass in them.

Another piece of sloppy editing is a scene where the Gila monster knocks down a railroad trestle as it crawls along a diorama. Jump cuts then alternate between the diorama of the collapsed bridge and an onrushing train. Each jump back to the train shows a different engine pulling it. One cut shows a streamlined diesel,

another shows a flat-nosed yard engine hauling freight cars, and the diorama scene shows a passenger train crashing into the gully when it hits the fallen trestle. Cue the screams of injured passengers, as the Gila monster slurps them up. **-12-**

Still hungry, the Gila monster moves off to a nearby barn where the teenagers are holding a sock hop. It bumps its way through plastic toy cars in the parking lot, and then bashes in the side of the balsa-wood barn. Some of the cars are visibly jiggled by the animal but sustain no body damage, not even a paint scratch. The plot is the same as every monster movie, and I won't bore you with the details, save that the giant Gila monster is finally disposed of by loading a toy car with nitroglycerin and letting it freewheel into the beast.

### **Mammals.**

THE KILLER SHREWS (1959) opens with the very first line being that classical "*Sure is quiet out there*". But fortunately no one replies "*Too quiet.* (pause) *I think I'll go outside and have a look.*", followed a moment later by roaring, screaming, and the sound of crunching bones. In this movie it is spoken by a boat's pilot, taking a cargo to a mysterious island where Dr. Marlowe Craigis has been doing his experiments. The quiet is the calm before a hurricane arrives, caused by falling air pressure. On arrival, Captain Thorne Sherman decides to stay in the harbour

rather than run the risk of being caught out on the open sea by the hurricane. This sets up the cast to be isolated for the duration beyond outside help. That and the fact that he immediately falls in love with Dr. Craigis's daughter Ann.

Everyone moves inside a heavily-fortified compound where Craigis has his laboratory. Sherman is puzzled by the heavy defense because he thought Craigis was working with shrews. The first infodump begins when the drinks are served and Dr. Craigis explains his experiments. He is trying to solve the human overpopulation crisis by breeding shrews with a lower metabolism, which, if transferred by genetic engineering, would cut down on the amount of food that humans would need. Craigis gives Sherman an extended lecture on the eating habits of shrews, in a word, voracious. Unfortunately, a batch of experimental shrews escaped a few weeks previously and mutated into giants the size of German shepherds.

As the hurricane moves in, the first victim is eaten by the giant shrews roaming the island. They are nocturnal, which is why they didn't show up when Sherman first arrived during the day. They only come out at night, thus allowing them to be briefly glimpsed in the murky film exposure. That's just as well, for the giant shrews are dogs with pointy rubber masks tied to their faces and what appear to be sheep pelts draped over them. The good news, Doctor Craigis tells everyone, is that having eaten all animal life

on the island, they will turn on each other, and the few survivors will then die of starvation because of their high-speed metabolism. The bad news is that it will take a few days to wait them out, which the cast don't have.

In the meantime, there are the usual alarms and excursions. The supporting cast are picked off one by one as the giant shrews do their part for population control. The thick walls of the compound are adobe, which become soft mud from the torrential rains, and the shrews have no trouble digging through it into the building. Soon the interior is over-run by dogs in sheep's clothing and rubber masks. Not surprisingly this horrifies the cast.

The Captain's facial expressions run the gamut from bland to blank, but he is counterbalanced by Ann, who shrieks at every little thing. The viewer who watches for continuity errors can also admire the scenes where Sherman is shown in close-ups with shrubbery behind him but in the establishing shots he is standing with his back to a solid wall.

The survivors decide to make a run for it. Despite it being daylight, the shrews are still out and about, so just running for the water's edge won't work. (Shrews can't swim?) The cast use some old chemical drums as individual tanks to protect themselves as they waddle to the boat. Rather ingenious

at that. I must remember this

if ever I am attacked by giant shrews when visiting my oil wells. Sherman gets the girl, and her father admits that his research was a blind alley. One assumes that they notified the local constabulary about the dead men. It would be interesting to attend the coroner's inquiry on that one.

## ZINE LISTINGS

by Dale Speirs

[The Usual means \$3 cash (\$5 overseas) or trade for your zine. Americans: please don't send cheques for small amounts to Canada or overseas (the bank fee to cash them is usually more than the amount) or mint USA stamps (which are not valid for postage outside USA). US\$ banknotes are still acceptable around the world.]

[SF means science fiction. An apazine is a zine for an amateur press association distro, a perzine is a personal zine, sercon is serious-constructive, and a genzine is a general zine]

**Bizzarrism #12** (\$8 from Chris Mikul, Box K546, Haymarket, New South Wales 1240, Australia) Professionally printed in card covers, with biographies on a few of the nuttier humans to walk this planet, from pious Catholics with the stigmata of Christ, the Garinger Museum set up by the man himself as a monument to his ego, a Shakespeare Folio thief, the man who founded the Hare Krishna cult, Mussolini, and various other confidence men. Not a quick skim but a serious read.

**Vanamonde #994** (The Usual from John Hertz, **-14-**  
236 South Coronado Street #409, Los Angeles,  
California 90057) Single-sheet weekly apazine with a wide  
variety of comments and observations.

**OSFS Statement #399 to #400** (The Usual from Ottawa SF  
Society, 18 Norice Street, Ottawa, Ontario K2G 2X5) SF  
clubzine with local events, some letters of comment, and lots of  
astronomy and science news.

**Grunted Warning #15** (The Usual from Stuart Stratu, Box 35,  
Marrickville, New South Wales 2204, Australia) Cut-and-paste  
zine of weird news from around the world.

**The Ken Chronicles #24** (The Usual from Ken Bausert, 2140  
Erma Drive, East Meadow, New York 11554-1120) Perzine,  
starting up with Ken's research into an old diary he bought in a  
flea market and finding out about the woman who wrote it and her  
family. He's been buying techie gadgets and touring Florida.  
Also some miscellaneous reviews and letters of comment. He  
mentions Joe Walsh in a music review. When I am driving in the  
Rockies adjacent to Calgary, there are two songs that are  
absolutely perfect for the winding roads of the jagged valleys:  
Walsh's "Rocky Mountain Way" and Kraftwerk's "Autobahn".  
You've never really heard either of them until you've driven  
Highway 40 in Kananaskis with those two songs on stereo deck.

**Alexiad V11#4** (The Usual from Lisa and Joseph Major, 1409 Christy Avenue, Louisville, Kentucky 40204-2040) Lots of book reviews, SF fandom commentary, horse racing, and lots of letters of comment.

**Fadeaway #30** (The Usual from Robert Jennings, 29 Whiting Road, Oxford, Massachusetts 01540-2035) SF zine that starts off with a detailed look at problems in the gaming conventions, particularly the Origins convention. Also some book reviews and lots of letters of comment.

**Christian New Age Quarterly V20#3** (US\$5 from Catherine Groves, Box 276, Clifton, New Jersey 07015-0276) An interesting essay on the blending of Buddhism into the parables of Jesus, as well as letters of comment.

**EOD Letter #23** (The Usual from Ken Faig Jr, 2311 Swainwood Drive, Glenview, Illinois 60025-2741) Apazine, with reviews of recent books of weird fiction and mailing comments.

**Show Me The Money #37** (The Usual from Tony Hunnicutt, Box 48161, Minneapolis, Minnesota 55448) Various essays and rants on the economic system of today's world. Several pages in each issue list layoffs of companies, with the implication that it is the economy, but I question some of them. The CALGARY HERALD newspaper (broadsheet) is listed with 30 layoffs, but given

Calgary's stable petroleum industry, that had nothing to do with the economy. (We have one of the lowest unemployment rates in North America.) The HERALD discontinued its Sunday edition in August because the Internet is destroying newspapers everywhere. I haven't paid for a newspaper since 9/11, when I bought the special editions about the Twin Towers, and before that stopped buying papers in 1995 when I realized they were just printing what I had read on the Internet the day before. Sears Canada laid off 400, but department stores are slowly being destroyed by, you guessed it, the Internet. Sears shut down three stores here in Calgary but I'm surprised they stayed open as long as they did. When I checked out their closing-down sale, denim jeans that I bought for \$20 elsewhere were priced by Sears at \$59 for the exact same brand.

**Challenger #35** (The Usual from Guy Lillian, 5915 River Road, Shreveport, Louisiana 71105) Doorstop-class zine, the theme of this issue being medicine, inspired by Guy suddenly winding up in the emergency ward after collapsing in a store. Others chip in with their operation stories, and lots of horror stories about paying out big bucks for health care in the USA. I've only been once in an emergency ward (burst gall bladder) and have no complaints. It reminds me of the old saying that you are only one breath away from the grave.

**Banana Rag #42** (\$15 for two issues from Anna Banana, 3747 Highway 101, Roberts Creek, British Columbia V0N 2W2) Mail art zine, starting off with Anna's performance art activities, zine and mail art reviews, and banana-related news items.

**Probe #152** (The Usual from SF and Fantasy South Africa, Box 781401, Sandton 2146, South Africa) SF clubzine with emphasis on locally written fiction. In this issue I particularly like an alternative history by Dennis Lane titled "A New Jerusalem", about a timeline where the Nazis got the atomic bomb first and fascism now rules the world. A South African has invented a time machine and gone back to 1927, where he passes information on how to build atomic bombs to SA delegates to a world communist convention. (Irony Alert!) He asks them to give the information to the Soviets so that they can forestall the rise of fascism and thus ensure the planet remains peaceful and free.

**BCSFazine #470** (The Usual from British Columbia SF Association, c/o Felicity Walker, 3851 Francis Road #209, Richmond, British Columbia V7C 1J6) SF clubzine with letters of comment, event listings, and a few articles.

**Brooklyn! #77** (US\$10 for four issues from Fred Argoff, Penthouse L, 1170 Ocean Parkway, Brooklyn, New York 11230-4060) This issue covers the Bushwick district in Brooklyn, now being overrun by yuppies gentrifying the streets.

## SEEN IN THE LITERATURE

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Shearer, P.M., and P.B. Stark (2012) **Global risk of big earthquakes has not recently increased.** PROCEEDINGS OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES USA 109:717–721

*"The recent elevated rate of large earthquakes has fueled concern that the underlying global rate of earthquake activity has increased, which would have important implications for assessments of seismic hazard and our understanding of how faults interact. We examine the timing of large (magnitude  $M =$  or  $> 7$ ) earthquakes from 1900 to the present, after removing local clustering related to aftershocks. The global rate of  $M =$  or  $> 8$  earthquakes has been at a record high roughly since 2004, but rates have been almost as high before, and the rate of smaller earthquakes is close to its historical average. Some features of the global catalog are improbable in retrospect, but so are some features of most random sequences if the features are selected after looking at the data. For a variety of magnitude cutoffs and three statistical tests, the global catalog, with local clusters removed, is not distinguishable from a homogeneous Poisson process. Moreover, no plausible physical mechanism predicts real changes in the underlying global rate of large events. Together these facts suggest that the global risk of large earthquakes is no higher today than it has been in the past."*