

40 Years in the Desert

Volume 11
Number 1

The Further Adventures of Matthew Saroff, Itinerant Engineer

As always, I will start with contact details for the Saroff Brood™. Our address and phone number are still the same: 3702 Labyrinth Road, Baltimore, MD 21215, and (410)585-1508, as are our emails: msaroff@pobox.com for me and sindara@pobox.com for Sharon¹.

My home page is <http://www.pobox.com/~msaroff/>, and back issues of this are online at <http://www.pobox.com/~msaroff/40/>.

At this rate, I expect the Mendenhall Glacier to Expand and Swallow the Town²

It started snowing Sunday, February 16. After 30 hours, later, 28.2 inches (716 mm) of snow had fallen in Baltimore. It was the worst winter storm to hit since record-keeping began in 1871³. Needless to say, 2003 was the wettest year in record for Baltimore, and this is more interesting in that it followed the drought year of most of 2002.

The snow was up to my waist and Governor "Bad Hair" Erlich declared a state of emergency placing a ban on non-emergency driving for about 18 hours.

I couldn't get to work until Thursday. Heck, I couldn't even get all the snow off my car until Tuesday. It looked like a snow drift with rear view mirrors⁴.

Milestones

Harry "Hal Clement" Stubbs, died in his sleep on October 29, 2003, he was 81

Best known as the author of the book *Mission of Gravity*, which he wrote under the pseudonym of Hal Clement, he was perhaps the most scientifically astute of the hard science fiction writers.

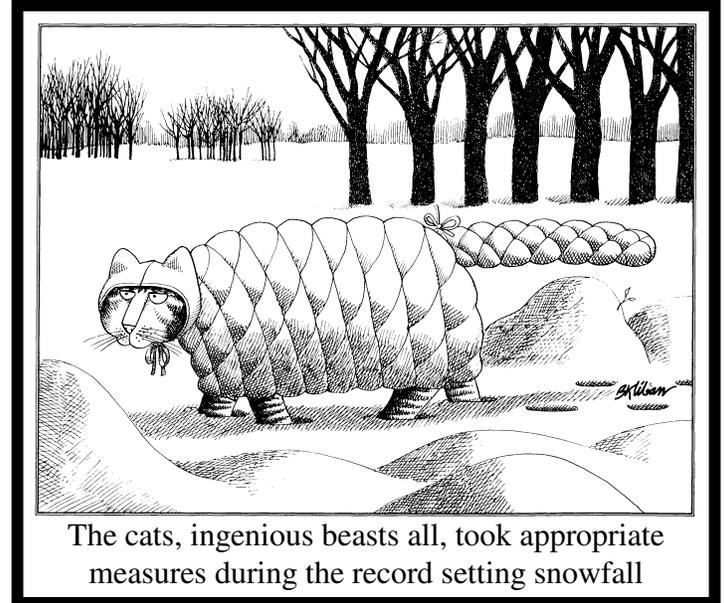
He was a fixture at science fiction conventions, and was always very helpful when people had questions about putting science into science fiction. He corrected bone headed scientific errors more gently than anyone I've seen before or since, likely an artifact of the 40 years⁵ he spent as a school teacher.

He flew 35 combat missions on B-24s during WWII and served active duty in the 1950s, including being in a trench a few hundred yards from an open air nuclear test, and retiring as a full colonel.

Sharon's uncle Max Fessel turned 100.

Elryn, our ginger tabby cat, had an abscessed tooth. They pulled the tooth, but the infection healed shut, and they had to operate to remove the infection and install drains.

After a long bout of antibiotics, and flushing the drains with



The cats, ingenious beasts all, took appropriate measures during the record setting snowfall

Betadine on a twice daily basis for a week, she seemed to be fine, but then her kidneys gave out, so now we have just two cats.

While I detested Elryn for most of our time together, I developed a real affection for her dealing with her infection. Nothing says loving like flushing out pus filled surgical incisions.

Flying with Children and Other Disasters

I'm missing my year end deadline to put this out but this time, I have an excuse.

From December 24 through January 4, we are visiting my west coast relatives, my dad, Ron, step mother, Irene Hecht, and grandmother, Sylvia, in Portland, OR, and my brother Stephen, sister-in-law Margaret, and niece Eugenia in Seattle, WA.

While in Seattle, we took a day trip to Snoqualmie and went sledding. Our kids had a real blast with their first exposure to the juxtaposition of hills and snow, though due to my complete ineptitude, Natalie also got a black eye. I was tossing a plastic sled up the slope to my wife, and the wind caught it, and it hit Natalie in the cheek.

My Daughter Has an Appreciation of the Surreal, Does This Makes Her Precocious?

Natalie loves the TV show "*Iron Chef*", a very surreal competitive cooking game show from Japan that's a a weird juxtaposition of Bushido⁷ and Escoffier⁸.

There was an attempt to recreate the show with an American version starring **William Shatner**, with "mixed results"⁹.

"The most likely way for the world to be destroyed, most experts agree, is by accident. That's where we come in. We're computer professionals. We cause accidents."

-- Nathaniel Borenstein, inventor of MIME

¹ Love of my life, light of the cosmos, SHE WHO MUST BE OBEYED, my wife.

² My mom said this when hen we moved to Juneau, Alaska. We had moved from Anchorage (9.2 on the Richter Scale earthquake), and Fairbanks (floods) before that, and she was wondering if we were in for another natural disaster.

³ The new official total has finally displaced the legendary "Knickerbocker Storm" of Jan. 27-29, 1922, which stood as the winter benchmark for 81 years at 26.5 inches. The storm earned its name from the roof collapse at the Knickerbocker Theatre in Washington, which gave way under the snow, crushing 98 people and injuring 130 others.

⁴ I know that all my friends from Eire, PA⁵ and Buffalo, NY are looking at this, shaking their heads, and saying, "What a wimp."

⁵ AKA, the "Mistake by the Lake".

⁶ 2 years in public school, and 38 years at the Milford Academy.

⁷ Literally the way of the warrior. It is the Samurai code.

⁸ August Escoffier, the father of French cuisine.

⁹ "Apart from that Mrs. Lincoln, how was the Play?" type mixed results.

We are not going to make it as a species....

*Kerouac bobblehead doll giveaway*¹⁰

LOWELL, Massachusetts (AP) --A homegrown literary icon will be remembered next month with an honor usually reserved for sports figures: a bobblehead doll.

The first 1,000 fans at the August 21 game between the Lowell Spinners and Williamsport Crosscutters of the Class A New York-Penn League will receive bobbing likenesses of Jack Kerouac. ...

GOD HELP US ALL.

Things I Hate

I'm at a gas station after filling up, and there is a guy in front of me whose goal in life is buying every single %\$\$@# lottery ticket in existence. He wants to know the existential consequences, cross referenced with lunar cycle, of each ticket.

It's almost enough to make me support the death penalty.

A Proclamation of the Greatest Significance

After no small amount of cajoling, instruction, perseverance, hand wringing, and dirty underwear it is our pleasure to formally announce the potty training of Charles E. Saroff.

Truth be told, I'm not entirely sure of the efficacy of all the fuss. It seemed to have little effect on his behavior.

Then, over 48 hours, he just seemed to get it. It was like throwing a switch. This may be one of those "Stages of Development" things that Piaget^{11,12} wrote about.

I Get a Gold Star at Work —LITERALLY

I began the year at General Dynamics Amphibious Systems on the AAV prognostics systems¹³.

While the working environment was nice, the commute, 75+ mile drive through the heart of Washington, DC was killing, and the prognostics system was slowly having its resources cut, and w.

When the program is dying the death of a thousand cuts¹⁴, It's time to update your resume.

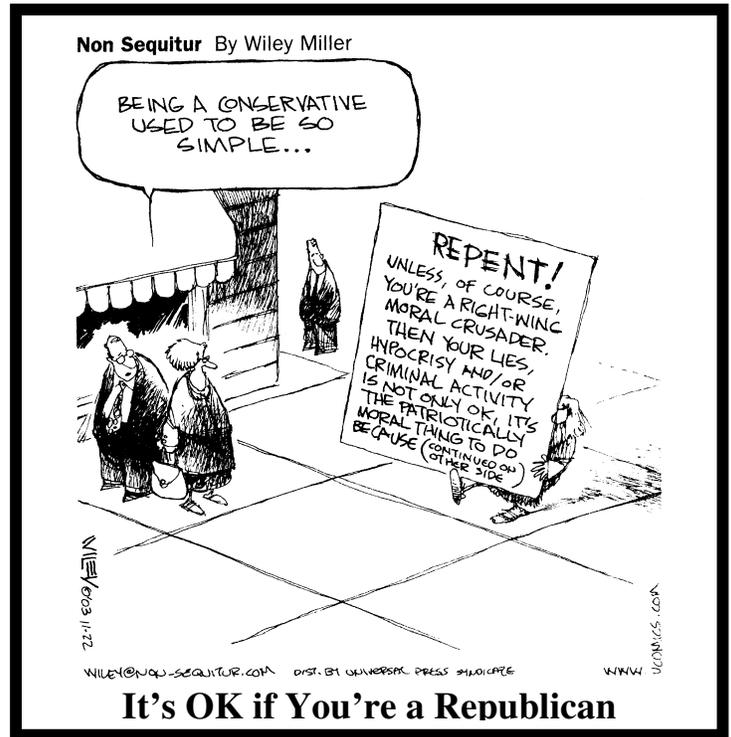
I found a new position at United Defense, part of the Carlyle Group¹⁵, in York working on the Future Combat System (FCS).

These vehicles are to be as capable as their predecessors, the M-1 Tank, the Bradley fighting vehicle, and the Paladin self propelled gun while being able to fly on a C-130 Hercules.

The intention is that there will be a family of vehicles, a "Tank", an infantry fighting vehicle, a self propelled howitzer, a mortar carrier, a reconnaissance vehicle, a command and control vehicle, a medical evacuation vehicle, a medical treatment vehicle, and a recovery and maintenance vehicle.

The Boeing Company and Science Applications International Corporation (SAIC) are the prime contractors, and the vehicles have been sub-contracted to General Dynamics and United Defense, and I'm working on the recovery vehicle (FRMV), which has been allocated to UD's York, PA division.

The FCS is to be part of a network that includes unmanned ground and air vehicles, and enough processing power and



network interfaces to choke a horse. The idea is to create fully networked war fighting system.

It involves **seriously** "Buck Rodgers" technology, such as hybrid propulsion, an active protection system that will intercept incoming missiles and long rod penetrators, and electromagnetic armor¹⁶

I finally an idea that might be original enough to a patent. It belongs to UD, those are the terms of my contract, but I want the plaque and \$1 that you get paid as a consideration for assigning the patents.

I've been here since August, and my commute is only 50 miles of rural highways.

One of my more interesting experiences involved "Firewall" training. This training is because UD has been given contracts by Boeing to do 4 of the 8 vehicles for the Future Combat System (FCS), but the some subsystems must be competitively bid.

Since some of these subsystems are areas where UD has significant expertise, so a firewall has been put up, so that people who will be drawing up the specs (me, for one) won't give an inside track to other folks at UD for their proposals.

We had an hour long training meeting, and at the end of the session, we were told that folks who were behind the firewall would get a **GOLD STAR** on their badges so that people can tell that we are involved in drawing up specifications and requirements that will be used to request bids at a glance.

When they told us about the gold star, I wasn't the **ONLY** one to have a problem keeping a straight face.

First, I'm working for the most evil group of political insiders and war profiteers in this side of the Bush Crime Family¹⁷, and now I get a gold star from them.

Let us redefine this week. Let us claim it right back from the hounds of fearful conservatism. Let us call it "Shut the Hell Up and Get Your Damn Conservative Agenda Out of My Love Life Week."

-- Mark Morford

¹⁰ <http://www.cnn.com/2003/US/Northeast/07/29/offbeat.kerouac.bobble.ap/index.html>

¹¹ Jean Piaget was a noted cognitive psychologist who attributed many issues of childhood development to development of the brain at the time when breakthroughs came through.¹²

¹² Piaget is also of interest on another issue, false memories. He had vivid memories of a kidnapping attempt being foiled by his governess, but she later admitted fabricating the account to make her employment situation more secure.

¹³ See last issue for more information.

¹⁴ A particularly vile form of execution where the victim was stripped then bound in a kneeling or prone position tightly shrouded in netting. The small nodules of skin that stand out through the mesh are then sliced away with a knife.

¹⁵ A particularly nasty privately held corporation that is owned by people who make their money from trading on their political connections to secure military contracts, so that they can sell out later at **obscene** profits.

¹⁶ I pull this off the web so that I know that it is public, so don't put John Ashcroft in my shorts. The URLs are: <http://www.uniteddefense.com/cap/futurecombat.htm>, http://www.uniteddefense.com/pr/pr_20030908.htm, <http://www.army.mil/aps/2003/realizing/transformation/operational/objective/enabling.html>, <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/systems/ground/fcs-t.htm>, <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/systems/ground/fcs-t.htm>

¹⁷ Poppy Bush left the board of the Carlyle Group about a year ago.



Just when I thought that it couldn't get any more surreal, it **did**, when a vendor, Rotek, a producer of large diameter bearings, turned out to be a division of Thyssen Krupp.

Fritz **Thyssen** was a German capitalist who bankrolled Hitler, and was himself funded by Prescott Bush and his friends in America.¹⁸

It's official, I'm one of the evil overlord's minions, and I'm waiting for the face concealing uniform so that the hero can use it to infiltrate the complex?¹⁹

I'm sure that some of my step siblings, who expressed distress at the thought of my **wanting** to work in military contracting, are feeling a bit of shadenfreud²⁰ right now.

Looks Like a Call to Trek Support

From the Philadelphia Inquirer, Posted on Tue, Oct. 07, 2003:

"In Sunday's Arts & Entertainment section, an article about the film *Kill Bill* erroneously referred to Ricardo Montalban's character in *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan* as a Klingon. Khan was an evil human bent on universal domination, though he does quote a Klingon proverb".

Love is a Many Splendored Thing

*Kisses and punches thrown at wedding reception²¹
The Revay's wedding reception was a riot...., at least as far as police were concerned.*

....
*By the end of the night, police arrested five people...
Michelle Revay stayed out of the melee until her husband was arrested. She asked to accompany him to jail but was told she could not because she was not under arrest. So, she punched an officer in the face, the police said.*

Anthony and Michelle Revay were released from jail yesterday on \$5,000 bonds.

....
The bride and groom were unavailable for comment - they

"Was this what you wanted out of life, to end up imitating the doomed villain in a cheesy B movie? Tell me, does that dark helmet fit comfortably? Are all the minions cringing in proper form? "No, Mr. Torvalds, I expect you to die!" I'd ask if you'd found the right sort of isolated wasteland for your citadel of dread yet, but that would be a silly question; you're in Utah, after all."

-- Excerpt¹⁸ from open-source advocate Eric S. Raymond's response to SCO CEO Darl McBride's claim that IBM is stage-managing the open source community's response to its campaign against Linux.

are honeymooning.

To Revive a Word

The word "snollygoster"²² has been dropped from the 11th edition of Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary.

Harry Truman was among the last public figures to use this word in public, and I mean to use the word, meaning "a shrewd, unprincipled person, especially a politician", as often as I can^{23,24}.

Making Lemonade

It's rather likely that those of you have followed my political statements in this over the past few years have wondered one thing, when will I get off my tuchas²⁵ and do something about this.

I am volunteering for the Dean campaign, and I've sent the proceeds from my "Liar" T-shirt²⁶ Sales (and a few additional bucks beside) to the Dean campaign, and I'm precinct captain my neighborhood, organizing

phone banks and literature drops.

The campaign web site is <http://www.deanforamerica.com>, and volunteers meetings are organized through an insanely good web site at <http://www.meetup.com>.

Somewhere, my mom is saying, "What took you so long?"

The Obligatory Political Rant

Seeing as I am now involving myself in the political process working for Dean, I thought that I would allow a guest rant. This is from an anonymous Bear Stearns stock analyst.²⁷

When I saw that article the other day about a market being established to bet on the probability of wars, terrorist attacks and assassinations, I dissed it completely out of hand as nonsense, incredible nonsense. All I could think of was what the blotter would look like. Let's see. I'm short the Osama Bin Laden December '04 calls, long 2 ambassadors to Middle East countries and have an Iraq/Iran swap on. I'm also considering some North Korean incident converts, but they've gotten away from me lately. "Get

¹⁸ The full rant, and it's truly prize is at http://armedndangerous.blogspot.com/2003_08_17_armedndangerous_archive.html

¹⁹ This the traditional method of infiltrating an evil overlord's lair, whacking low level minion who wears a face concealing uniform. Our hero then takes his uniform, and with his face covered, enters the complex undetected.

²⁰ Shadenfreud: a German word meaning deriving pleasure from the misfortune of others.

²¹ <http://www.cleveland.com/news/plaindealer/index.ssf?base/cuyahoga/1059476116151590.xml>

²² The Oxford English Dictionary suggests it may be linked to snallygoster, which derives from the German schnelle Geister, literally a fast-moving ghost, and which was a mythical monster of vast size -- half reptile, half bird . . .

²³ Which, given the depth of the venality of Shrub²⁴ and his evil minions, is pretty often, thank you very much.

²⁴ A shrub is a little Bush. Thanks to great writer and great Texan Molly Ivins for coining this term.

²⁵ This is Yiddish for butt.

²⁶ You can get the full story of the shirt in Volume 8, Number 1 of *40 Years in the Desert*. You can see the graphics at <http://www.pobox.com/~msaroff/liar>. I still have one shirt left, an XL.

²⁷ http://bigpicture.typepad.com/comments/2003/07/quote_of_the_da.html

me a look at the East Coast Tunnels and Bridges puts, will you?"

Huh? It just could not be true. Nobody is that warped. Well, evidently, they are. **Big time.**

Over the years, I have not managed to convey the venality and **incompetence** of George W. Bush and his minions as effectively or as succinctly as this fellow. I need to work harder.

I'm Getting Old

I was at a Torah study class, discussing the rivalry between Jacob and Esau, and we were discussing how Esau got into Isaac's good graces by getting Venison for him., and when I said that Esau sounded like Eddie Haskell of *Leave It To Beaver*, the guy directing the discussion asked, "Who's Eddie Haskell?"

Various Less Than Stellar News

For the first time since high school, I've been in a fist fight, or more accurately, I was assaulted.

Someone parked where my wife parks, despite her leaving notes on his windshield explaining her issues with multiple disabilities²⁸, and my wife made a loud comment to the effect about her being too nice a person to let the air out of his tires.

He heard, and in the ensuing "chat", he walked up and hit me.

I've now entered the fraternity of guys who've gotten hit because of stupid things that their women have said.

I ended up with a hole in my cheek, I could blow red foam through it that night^{29,30}, and he was taken away in handcuffs³¹

The trial is set for January 21, and I will be there to testify. I'll give you the blow by blow in the next issue.

Someone tried to steal my car, **TWICE**. The first time, they couldn't get it started, the 2nd time, they couldn't get the column lock to unlock, and left it in an intersection running.

While the Honda Accord is popular among thieves, mine is a **1988** model with **240,000 miles**. Why on **earth** would **anyone** want to steal this car?

So I now I own "The Club".

Sharon had a minor car accident in December. There were no injuries, but her fender and light cluster need to be replaced.

²⁸ Degenerative disk in her back, fibromyalgia, bad knee, arthritic wrist, etc. If she were a car Ralph Nader would have called her *Unsafe at Any Speed*.

²⁹ Remarkably evocative imagery, isn't it?³⁰

³⁰ It's healed fine. I took some prophylactic antibiotics, as is recommended for an injury to the mouth, but the scarring is minimal.

³¹ The plastic kind. I think that he spent the night in jail before being bailed out.

³² On the other hand, if you find a dead animal your yard, you might want to send it to them, via 4th class mail via Zimbabwe³³.

³³ Giving credit where credit is due, this idea is not mine, but was once used by **Harlan Ellison** to deal with a particularly recalcitrant publisher.

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ADDRESS CORRECTION REQUESTED

We got a used refrigerator which stopped cooling two days later. It takes nearly a week for the store (by that time, most of our food had spoiled) to send a guy out to look, and then they imply that it's somehow a figment of

our imagination.



With my Grandmother



With Dad and Irene

Four Generations in Two Photographs

This Spot
Left for
Mailing
Sticker

Eventually, they returned our **allegedly** fixed old fridge. The door still refused to seal, which was why we wanted to replace it.

Don't **EVER** shop at Target Appliance, 6316 Reisterstown Road, Baltimore, MD (410)358-4433. Poor service, poor products, and an **astonishingly** poor attitude³².

We ended up buying a "new" new fridge, which came with a piece of plastic with no conceivable purpose. We discovered that it was a **wine rack**. A bit of weirdness from Kenmore.

There will not be a recipe in this issue, I don't have the space.

That's about it for now, but stay tuned for the further adventures of **Matthew Saroff, Itinerant Engineer**.