

Remember Y2K? Charlotte and Jerry Proctor, centers of Birmingham SCA and SF fandom, certainly do ...

THE END OF THE WORLD as we know it

Charlotte Proctor

All our married life, whenever my husband Jerry and any of his friends got together they played “end of the world” games. Sometimes the game carried over into real life, as during the Cuban missile crisis when Jerry dug a hole in the basement so we would have a place to cower behind earthen walls until the shock waves were over. Then, of course, we planned to hose down the roof, to wash the radioactive dust away. Over the years, other variations of the game were played. In one, we planned to take a bolt-cutter to the armory down the road so we could steal heavy duty all-terrain vehicles and flee to the hills with our loved ones and supplies. Twenty-five or thirty years ago, Hank Reinhardt started putting in his two cents’ worth, and the plans became even more elaborate. It didn’t matter what scenario was posited: nuclear war, total social and economical collapse, riots, civil strife, plague, famine – every possibility was covered. Hank only hoped that when the balloon went up, he would not be too old to participate.

Now, I don’t want you to think these people in my living room were loonies like you read about who take to the woods, act out their fantasies and call themselves “survivalists.” No, they just talked about it. On Sundays, they went target shooting. When Julie Wall was learning to shoot, one of the practical tests was to hit a man-sized target from the window of a moving VW. She did pretty well, but Jerry complained he could never hit anything when Julie drove – she’s always been a speed demon. I had rather read about how people cope with the end of the world, in books like *The Postman* and *The Stand*, and stories like “Nightfall” and “Inconstant Moon”.

So you can imagine Jerry’s delight when he found out about Y2K. Here was an actual threat to prepare for! Having just recently retired from *The Birmingham News* he had time on his hands, anyway. First, the basement had to be cleared of all the accumulated VW parts – fenders, transmissions, tires, carburetors, etc. etc. etc. From my point of view, this was a definite plus – we hadn’t owned a VW for years. In the process, a lot of other junk disappeared and shelves we had not seen in decades reappeared.

A word about our basement: it fits Jerry. The rest of us who are not vertically challenged must either stoop, or scuttle hunched over like Quasimodo, until we can find a place between studs without endangering our noggins. Jerry has always liked his basement to retire (retreat?) to. I recall when our youngest was 3 or so, I was making sure he knew where he lived and who lived with him. He named himself, and me, and his three sibs, but left out his father. “What about Dad?” I asked him. “Oh, he lives in the basement,” Forrest replied.

After the basement was cleaned out, painted, more light fixtures installed, and made home to discarded furniture and rugs, it became almost habitable. In case of gasoline shortage, a bicycle is at hand, and if things get really nasty there is a goodly supply of ammo. It was time to provision! While I was not as concerned about Y2K as Jerry, I didn’t discourage his new hobby. I had never had a pantry before. Too, it kept him off the streets, and I knew where he was and what he was doing. But he did require a little direction.

His first purchases were these huge, institution-sized cans of pears, tomato sauce, and the like. No, no, Jerry! There is no way we can use this much food without it going bad. And that defeats the purpose. He countered with the proposal that we invite “everybody” over to eat it up

when we open big cans. I didn't like that idea either as I am supposed to be retired, too. Feeding and cleaning up after "everybody" is not my idea of retirement.

Canned goods in six-packs from Sam's satisfied both of us. Next came dry goods, sugar, flour, beans, rice, pasta and oats. Oats! He bought a *hundred-pound* bag of oats. We sat down and had a little talk about rodents. We talked about Rubbermaid containers, and freezer bags to hold smaller portions in the large containers. (This is the man who bought a Rubbermaid *shed* for the side yard— he should *know* about Rubbermaid containers.) Speaking of freezer bags, that reminds me. Another purchase was a freezer for the basement. A small chest-type freezer sitting under the old floor furnace also served to keep one from killing ones-self on the sharp corner of the furnace, now air return and filter portion of the a/c system.

Jerry's next foray was to look for plastic containers. "Do you *know* how much those things cost?" he exclaimed. Next stop, Thrift Store. Not only did he find large plastic containers with lids for a little bit of nothing, but somewhere he came up with a *huge* round, tall, tank-like container for water, which supplements the countless gallon jugs of water already stored. Lack of water will not be a problem during Spring flooding, as the low spot in the basement fills up in no time and has to be pumped out daily. He has an electric pump, but if the power goes he can always siphon it. A propane lantern is standing by. The spare gasoline and propane tanks and bottles are stored in the Rubbermaid shed – which will melt, but it will not rust!

Hank's influence is still felt in his hand-me-down toys that Jerry inherited. They include three Roman siege machines: trebuchet, catapult, and springal. When I protested these would not be useful in a Y2K crisis, Jerry said, "Not unless I use them as models to build larger machines ..."

Over time, the Y2K crisis lost its feeling of urgency, and the pantry (as the basement food storage system is now called) took on a life of its own. The news stories assured us that Alabama Power is Y2K compliant, so it was safe to stock the freezer. The shelves are almost full. I can rustle up supper for six on a moment's notice. We've read stories saying that Mormons have always been counseled to have emergency supplies for their family, so now we are feeling proud that we, too, can feed our nearest and dearest for a good while, if worse comes to worse.

But if it doesn't, the first thing I'm going to do is take those huge cans of pork and beans to the PATH Center for Women and Children. (And I did.)

POSTSCRIPT

After the dust settled, and Y2K was a bust, we took inventory.

On the plus side: we took three Volvo wagon loads of rice, beans, flour, sugar, oats and institutional-size canned goods to the PATH shelter for women and children.

I have a pantry for the first time in my married life, albeit one in the basement. If we are snowed in for a week as were in the Storm of the Century – March of 1993 – we won't go hungry and neither will our family, friends and neighbors.

On the minus side: using up excess. Necessities (toilet paper) and luxuries (Pepsi) are used up quickly enough but the problem is getting rid of the survival food. Our son Justin has agreed to take two bags of oats, but we detect a certain lack of enthusiasm.

Salmon, I've found, isn't as tasty as when my mother served it. Salmon croquets are pretty and all but they still smell fishy. The only one to eat them with any gusto is Baby Kate, but then she eats everything with gusto.

END OF THE WORLD GAMES

Jerry Proctor

Why do I like to play end-of-the-world games?

I hail from a different world and time from those of most SF fans, those born after 1960 and 1970, those who know nothing but the finest and richest era in all of human history. Oh, they read about my world in history books composed by youngish scholars who weren't there either and who – when puzzled by the past – invent reasons for seemingly unreasonable events. Our current president is representative of that generation which, when faced with inconvenient facts, invent new “facts” more to their liking.

I've seen civilization come unraveled many times since I arrived on this planet in the month of Augustus in the year 1929, a truly landmark period. It ushered in the Great Depression and the rise of the modern totalitarian states of Europe, along with their despotic counterparts in Asia, led by mad dictators out to rule the world. The floods of 1936 interrupted first grade in my East Arkansas schools were crammed with refugees who were fed by merchants, including my grocer father. The Depression fostered a comradeship of misery. It did foster in me the central philosophy of Boy Scoutdom: *Be Prepared*.

Then came the wars, but you have probably seen them on the History Channel a.k.a. the Adolf Hitler Channel. So when Y2K loomed, compared with what had gone before, it did not seem such a much. I had lived a good portion of my life without either computers or television. Y2K was more like an annoying speed bump in a shopping center parking lot: one could neither avoid nor ignore it. It probably wouldn't wreck the car but it might jangle one's kidneys.

Thus I began preparations for Y2K Armageddon and soon learned that one cannot be just a little bit prepared for the end of the world. You must go the whole hog, all the while being whipped by the hellfire-and-damnation prophets and soothed by happy-talking bureaucrats. As necessary preparation one must reread the scenarios of every end-of-the-world science fiction thriller and prepare for each and every eventuality including invasion by goggle-eyed Americans and sexual molestation by lustful UFO medical personnel. (I could never understand why alien doctors found it necessary to use a rectal thermometer the size of a fire hose on Christopher Walken – or why Walken seemed to enjoy it.)

Charlotte has made much of my stockpiling 100 pounds of oats. But I say “He who is without oats, let him throw the first corn cob.” (This is an old Arkansas aphorism that seems to fit every occasion.) I just can't imagine enduring the anarchy of *Nightfall* with only 50 pounds of horse chow. Who know? Lustful alien UFO personnel may have evolved from equines.

Assuming the doom and damnation crowd was correct I first turned my attention to amassing a large cache of arms and ammunition. This wasn't difficult since I already had a goodly supply on hand, so I could now tackle:

Food. After cornering the oat market I attended an event misnamed “The Y2K Gun Show”. There one found about a dozen guns for sale and the rest of the premises devoted to victuals so primitive and devices so clever they would have satisfied both a Custer scalping party and a band of rabid environmentalists. There were bushels of wheat, packages of pemmican and beef jerky, water purifiers which would make sweet the contents of an average sewer and containers of dried milk, all at prices which would have shivered the timbers of an ordinary Wall Street banker. They wanted \$36 for a can of dried milk that could be bought at the nearest

Bruno's supermarket for \$15 and at Sam's Club for \$7.88. "Jerry," I thought, "you have wandered into the Great Year 2000 Scam. Besides, you don't eat crap like this. You worship canned chow mein, pink salmon, steaks, stuffed crab, spaghetti, and potato soup!"

That's how I came to stock my Y2K pantry from the gourmet shelves of area groceries which led to purchase of a freezer to preserve fresh meats, breads, pies – in short, anything that can be frozen. Some acquisitions were controversial. When I mentioned to Charlotte that I had purchased both bread flour and corn meal she snorted: "How many times in our married life have you seen me make corn bread?" I could recall a few precedents – Kennedy's assassination, first moon landing, arrival of Julie Wall for a hen party. "Immaterial," said I loftily. "I had envisioned things getting really bad and you hammering our tortillas on a flat rock." Sometimes these things sound better when left unsaid.

Next on the list (assuming Asimov got it right in *Nightfall*) was light and heat. Alabama Power has been notoriously reliable in the past and Alabama Gas even more dependable. Both said they were prepared for anything computer chips could throw their way. But caution counseled one shouldn't lean too heavily on the establishment. Just in case, I stashed away plenty of propane, gasoline and a Coleman lantern.

Water was a different story. The Birmingham Water Works is not the sort of institution to foment confidence among the unwashed public. In recent memory its Board of Directors barely escaped jail for handing our public money to anyone who dropped by and asked for it. Its rumored they believe Y2K is a new rap group. In such a serious matter I consulted a super-survivalist, Jimmy Fikes of Jasper, Ala., who has drilled a water well in his backyard. As we were chewing on the problem the old light bulb went off in my head. "Jimmy," said I, "I am an idiot. I live just six blocks from East Lake which holds tens of millions of gallons of rain water. I'll just drive down and scoop it up."

Ever the pessimist, Jimmy objected: "What if you get there and find several dead bodies floating in the water?"

"Not to worry," I said. "I'll just fish them out, give them a proper burial, then fill my water barrel." Later I had an even better idea. My basement fills with water every January anyway. I just wouldn't pump it out as usual. Then to add a bit of insurance I bought a 50-gallon tank, filled it from the tap, then added a cup of bleach to annoy the bacteria.

Getting ready for the end of the world is a lot like Lewis' shopping list when he was planning the Lewis and Clark expedition. You have to foresee every emergency, even those you couldn't imagine in your wildest fantasies. But Lewis did have one smashing advantage. The government forked over \$38,000 to grubstake him. You have to make due with what you've got, which means cutting corners and using the materials you have on hand to do more than one job. For example, you can probably skip gifts for the Indians; you can get by on only one barrel of gunpowder and use the spare boat sail as a sleeping bag. In modern terms it means using your gallon of bleach for what it was intended for: killing germs, purifying water, and treating athlete's foot.

Medicines are a special sore point. The American Medical Association, that great therapeutic nanny, has made it all but impossible to stock really effective remedies. For a time survivalist bought non-prescription antibiotics from veterinarians for extreme emergencies. Now the pill pushers and their mental equals in Congress have closed that loophole. They would rather you die than swallow the wrong dose. Consider what one might need if he had to perform an emergency amateur appendectomy during Armageddon. A good painkiller would be a start, but

the AMA and drug-chasing politicians have long ago outlawed anything much above the level of aspirin. Second on the list would be an effective internal germicide. But nowadays you can't even buy sulfa drugs without the doc's okay. You would be forced to do the deed with 18th Century tools and a bottle of alcohol. Personally, my plan was to load up my FN FAL, trot down to the pharmacy and take what I want – the medical establishment can just kiss the hem of my tartan. Our pharmacist does pack a .38 but I would outgun him by miles.

One exasperating thing about survivalism is that every survivalist wants to survive in his own fashion. A friend advised me to flee to his farm. "Not practical," I told him. "I have a large extended family in Birmingham. I'll have to fight in out on this line." Another want to turn his house into a fortress and open fire on the hordes of starving peasants when they come to filch his food. "Be light on the trigger," I advised him. "When the smoke clears you'll have 20 or 30 bodies in your front yard and in three days you'll be the commander of Fort Smelly." Still another collected canned goods, then ate their contents before the end of the year. A fourth forgot about food entirely and collected gadgets like wind-up radios, cranked flashlights and walkie-talkies. A fifth – who lives in the woods around Atlanta – hatched a brilliancy: "I'll buy a short wave set and you buy one and we'll be able to communicate even if the phones go out." Recalling that he had no food stocks I decided the only purpose of his radio would be to contact me and complain that he was starving. I didn't want to hear that. And a female friend confessed she was planning a Y2K commando raid – she would hit an Eckard's drug store for diapers, Tampax and other hygiene products. Since she packs an automatic one can only conclude she would get most of the items on her shopping list.

As the days of 1999 dwindled down we Y2K prophets watched for signs of the coming Great Disaster: a driver's license bureau computer in Maine issued permits for "horseless carriages"; a utility in Iowa dated its water bills "January 3, 1900." With each new omen we smiled knowingly at each other and condescendingly at the unaware and doomed dunces around us. Our president took to the airwaves to assure us the federal government was fully prepared for Y2K. We cackled and slapped our knees: Clinton had never told the truth before. Why should he start now? Was this not the same concupiscent woodenhead who, in an attempt to kill a lone Arab terrorist, dropped missiles on a herd of goats in the middle of Afghanistan? The State of Alabama – two weeks before Jan. 1 – suddenly awoke and confessed it was only 79% ready. Our new governor, in the true Clintonian manner, blamed it all on his predecessor. Birmingham placed its policemen and firemen in call for Jan. 1. Alabama did the same with its National Guard. Rumors and news reports abounded that some federal agencies had canceled turn of the century vacations. Further rumors held that this or that electric utility executive had bought a generator for his home and stocked it with 10,000 gallons of diesel fuel.

On a more factual level I learned *sub rosa* that a local millionaire had stocked his condominium with enough food, arms and ammunition to last out the siege of Leningrad. I learned this from one of his gate guards in whom the rich man had unwisely confided. "I'm just a dumb ol' guard," he grinned, "but if it really hits the fan, I know where to go and who to take it away from."

Birmingham's zoo is located on the fringe of Mountain Brook, a veddy, veddy rich little city where my friend, the guard, does his guarding. "Very few people know anything about basic survival," he lectured me one day. "Zoo animals, some of them, would make good eating, like the buffalo. But you have to know your business. If you tried to eat a mandrill, well, he might eat you first. It might be a good idea to skip the predators – and also the chimpanzees. They're meat

eaters like us and they might add you to their menu. It might be the best plan to hunt all these rich poodles running around town. Vietnamese think highly of dog meat.”

As December waned, more folks discovered we might be headed for Glitchville and rushed to buy food. Bruno’s supermarket adopted a hard sell with big placards: “ARE YOU READY FOR Y2K?” More omens increased. Down the road in Bessemer the water utility issued its December bills dated “Jan. 4, 1900.” Two days before the cataclysm a sudden electric power surge killed one of our VCRs.

On the day before New Year’s Eve I dropped by the second-hand bread store to pick up a load. “Please have some small bills,” said the lady behind the counter. “Everybody is going to the bank to draw their money out and they all have twenties today.” I handed her a wad of ones and asked: “Are they afraid of Y2K?” “Very afraid,” she said. Since she was an older woman I mentioned the Depression. “Yes, you and I can get by,” she said, “but my children couldn’t cook without a microwave.” This evoked the image of stunned, hungry and shivering kids huddled around their dead and dying TVs, VCRs, microwaves, cell phones, battery toys, computers and ham radios. I headed straight for the bank and withdrew an extra \$300.

It’s now New Year’s Eve. Local radio shock jocks are having a big time with Y2K. One shock jerk has a talk contest going: “If you only had 12 hours to live, how would you spend them?” On-call policemen were advised, if called, to report with two clean changes of uniform. First reports from foreign nations around the world began pouring in. Y2K arrived in Sydney, Australia to cheering crowds and no problems. It passed on westward through Tokyo to Moscow. Surely if there were problems they would crop up first in Russia; but no, even their nuclear power plant turned over without a glitch. If the world were coming to an end this was a strange beginning. Even the much-maligned Russian missiles were behaving themselves. Birmingham’s mayor retired to his command center in city hall. First alert went out to the Alabama National Guard. The governor seemed to be missing – perhaps he was covering a bombproof shelter somewhere. About 7 p.m. he reappeared and announced Alabama was ready.

As Y2K swept around the world from Moscow to Paris to London, leaving cheering crowds, fireworks and no problems in its wake, it became apparent the millennium bug was the biggest bust since Comet Kahoutek. I said to heck with it and departed with Charlotte to a New Year’s Eve party where I consumed enough wine to get pleasantly smashed. Back home again, as the clock registered midnight, I didn’t feel like celebrating.

All I could feel was a vast relief. I had lived through the 20th Century.

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