

Monopoly

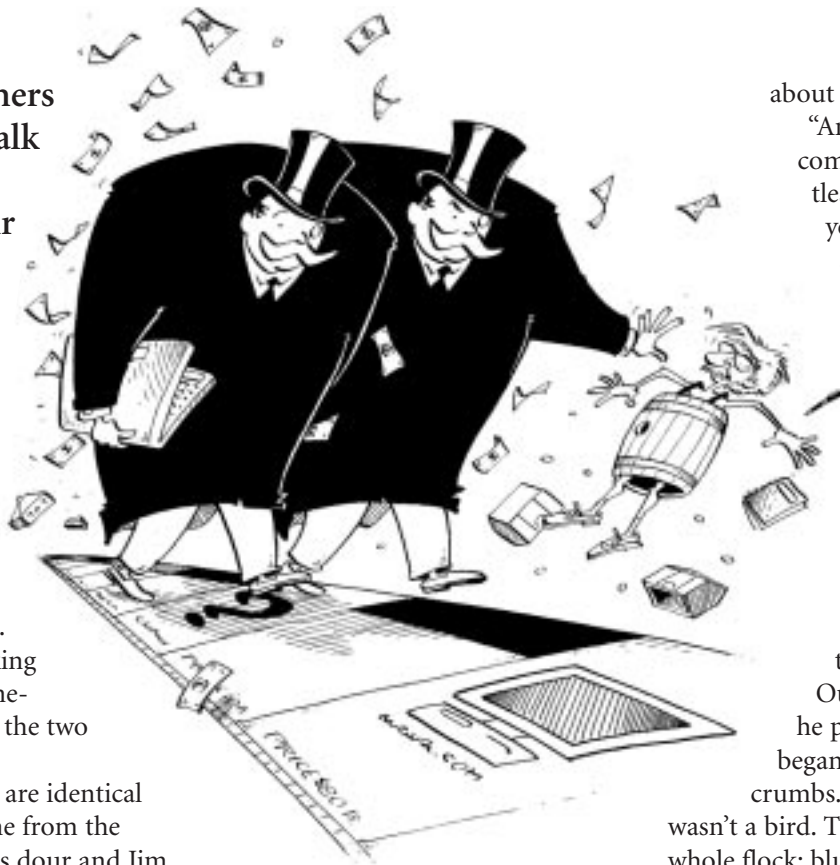
BY FRED STENSON

The Parker brothers were out for a walk downtown the other day in their black top hats, their mufflers and their overcoats.

They moved to Calgary from New York back in the 1970s, but you don't see them out and about much any more. I followed them, thinking I might eavesdrop something interesting from the two old gamesmen.

The Parker brothers are identical twins. You can't tell one from the other, except that Joe is dour and Jim is cheerful. In their famous game, Joe appears in the cards where you have to go to jail or to the nearest utility and pay the owner ten times what you rolled. Jim does the cards where there's a bank error in your favour or a rebate on your city taxes.

They were marching along the Bay arcade, south on First Street, then west along Stephen Avenue. At the end of the Bay, they plunged into the building and crossed through to Seventh. Then it was back to the corner of First and back to the Mall again. The same square over and over. When they passed the statue of the two businessmen who look just like them, they touched their top-



pers. Anyway, I was following them and the first thing I heard Joe say was, "Stop with the computers, will you?"

Jim shook his head so hard his topper spun. "Stop talking about computers," he says. "Computers run the world, there's not one in our whole game, and he says 'stop!'"

"There's nothing wrong with our game."

"Except the world is leaving it behind! Listen to me for once, Joe. This computer thing is the best idea I've come up with since the milk bottle playing piece."

"I was against that, too. We're

about real estate, not milk."

"And I said to you, milk comes to houses in bottles. Now I'm saying to you, modern houses and office towers are full of computers.

What can I do, though? I'm the World Wide Web. My brother and business partner is a vacuum tube."

Joe stopped walking. They were on the Mall side and he sat down on the nearest bench.

Out of his coat pocket he pulled a paper bag and began feeding out bread-crumbs. One second there wasn't a bird. Then there was a whole flock: bluey-grey pigeons.

"I said I'd go along with a computer playing piece. Maybe change one of the utilities to an Internet Service Provider. But that wasn't good enough. You have to throw out the whole game."

Jim sat down beside his brother. Peas in a pod, except for their expressions.

"My plan is so current, Joe. Every player, a rival computer czar. Every square on the board, some kind of software or dot.com business. The object: to compete until you've got it all. It's not that different, and the real beauty is, we don't even have to change the name!"

Suddenly, Joe gripped Jim by the

front of his coat and gave him a shake. "You think you're fooling me!" he yelled. "But I've seen the prototype! I've read the rules! I know what's going on!"

"What part didn't you like?" Jim asked, fluffing himself like a pillow.

"What I like," said Joe, "is real estate. You buy properties. You build houses, then hotels. You rack-rent the tenants. Now that's reality."

"An outmoded reality, Joe. In the world of today, you buy e-space and e-property. That's where you build things. In cyberspace."

"Things like what?"

"E-financial institutions, e-stores."

"Eat an e-burger. Next time you're in New York, stay in an e-hotel."

"C'mon, Joe. That's not what's bugging you. Fess up."

Joe rummaged in his capacious overcoat pocket and brought out a handful of cardboard cards. Blue and yellow. I knew instantly they were Chance and Community Chest. I had always found Community Chest the more generous of the two.

One at a time, Joe held the cards aloft and read them.

"Take the computer language that you didn't quite invent, but own, and make it the standard for computers. Collect \$20-billion."

"Who wouldn't?"

"Your operating system is standard on all computers. Your Internet browser is a mouse click away. Collect \$80-billion."

"Nice move."

"Stave off the anti-trust bums by letting competing software work with your operating system, but only sort of."

"Business is not charity, Joe."

"You have been found guilty of monopolistic practices. Spend a few billion appealing. Drag it out for years. When the government realizes you can afford more legal work than it can, pass Go as often as you please."

"I suppose you think there's something wrong with that."

Joe held the last card, and, though

the blank side was toward Jim, I could tell he knew which one it was. "This," said Joe, "I really hate." Joe adjusted his monocle and read. "Congratulations. You have a monopoly. Now that you own the board, throw it in the fireplace. Under a false bottom in the old game box, there is a CD. Pop it into your computer and Presto! A brand new electronic game appears. Remember, you own the board, so why not rename it and everything on it? Bobopoly. Bobwalk. World Wide Bob. Now sit back and collect your hard-won rents and royalties."

"And you find that objectionable," said Jim.

Joe unquipped his eye so his monocle dropped. He regarded his brother with a dangerous coldness.

"The object of the game is to get a monopoly. When you get a monopoly, you win. The game is over."

Jim looked back imploringly. "But why, Joe? Why can't the game go on? Why can't the monopolist enjoy the fruits of his or her good play beyond the point of mere winning?"

"Because it is also beyond the point of mere fun? Because there is no one left to play against?"

"No one to play against, yes, but millions of people to play with. To land at your businesses. To spend their cash on your products. Imagine the joy of collecting all those windfall profits."

"I have an idea," said Joe. "While you're at it, change the name. Call it Monotony."

"I admit there may come a time when it isn't so much fun any more. But with all your power and money, you can always do something. Maybe give computers to a million disadvantaged children. A few acts of philanthropy on that scale and you could run for President."

"That's it," said Joe. "That's the problem. You're power mad. Ever since the fall of the Iron Curtain. It used to be enough to own Boardwalk. Now, you want to run the country."

Jim's hand moved slowly into his pocket. In a flash, out came a rolled newspaper and he struck Joe a blow on the shoulder. Just as quick, Joe drew his newspaper, and they were pummeling away. I was about to intervene when Jim jumped up and pounded off. At the end of the Bay, he kept going.

I sat down in the space he had vacated and held my head in my hands. "I can't believe it," I said.

"Believe what?" said Joe, who had gone back to feeding pigeons.

"That I've just witnessed the end of the most famous partnership in the history of games."

"What? That? That was no breakup, that was a meeting."

He thrust his hand into his pocket and came up with a black and red ledger, which he had adapted into a daytimer. He flipped to the present date and there it was: "Product development meeting. Downtown. Two p.m."

"My goodness. Are your meetings always so, so feisty?"

"Oh my, yes. Once, we met on a Saturday after we had both bought the New York Times. Nearly put each other in the hospital. You challenge the other man's idea, see? Put it to the hottest test you can."

His crumb bag was empty. He scrunched it and chucked it deftly into a garbage can. "Frankly, I think Jim's onto something with this computer thing."

"You'd throw out the old game?"

"Course not. Not unless people stop buying it." He looked at me closely. "What business are you in, young man?"

"I'm a writer."

"Ahh," he said, as if everything were clear. "And that's perhaps where you should stay."

Fred Stenson is the author of *Teeth*, humorous fiction about professional hockey; *Working Without a Laugh Track*, fiction about modern-day relationships; and the non-fiction histories *Rocky Mountain House* (fur trade) and *Waste to Wealth* (oil and gas history).