



ConFederation program book cover art by Doug Chaffee

Fancestral Recall: ConFederation (Full transcript)

by Ron Zukowski & Warren Buff

Warren Buff recently sat down with Ron Zukowski to discuss ConFederation, the 1986 Worldcon. ConFederation is a major landmark in the history of Southern Fandom, it also paved the way for another little convention in Atlanta called DragonCon. Ron (with Penny Frierson) was the Con Chair. Here's how Ron remembers it...

RZ: Well, the real situation with putting a Worldcon or anything that big in Atlanta that is a spin off of DSC, of people deciding they wanted to have a meeting—and I didn't even get into fandom until 1975 at RiverCon—but one of the things that happened as I looked around at what the Francis [Steve and Sue] had done in Louisville and I said, "You know we got hotels that big or bigger in Atlanta." And they went to 1979 and had a real big NASFiC in Louisville, Kentucky,

which you know I said, "We can at least do that and we actually can do a Worldcon." And in the meantime, other people had been moving on this. Notable examples: Database maven Joe Sokol lived in Atlanta for a long time, he was one of the people on that. The author, David Weber has a brother named Mike. He'd been around a lot of fandom. I haven't seen him recently hardly at all.

WB: Yeah, I haven't seen him since Hank Reinhardt's funeral.

RZ: But he was at, briefly, he was at JordanCon/DSC and I spoke to him there for the first time in years. But he was in on that. His then wife Sue Phillips, who still does the literary thing, she was in on that. And a guy who runs a comic book shop in Atlanta was a leading light there, Cliff Biggers and his wife Susan, who has health issues now, but she was very active then and working with him and they all were part of the Atlanta Science Fiction Club—ASFiC, I think, was the acronym—and people decided they were going to try to do that.

And I was all in favor of this but I was nobody in particular. But then something happened in my life. I got hired by a guy who ran two organizations, the Georgia Optometric Association—eye doctors, eyeglasses, doctors—and the Southern Regional Council of Optometry. He was part of that, and they had a big convention, twenty-five hundred optometrists and another thousand service personnel, and that would alternate between, wait for it... Atlanta and New Orleans, just like science fiction conventions did, because those are the two biggest cities. And so I just learned what was necessary to mess with the convention. So I didn't know I was preparing for anything big. And everybody who was in ASFiC also had a lot of friends in the other two cities in the ABC thing [Atlanta-Birmingham-Chattanooga]. Birmingham had a much more vibrant fandom then. Now most Alabama fandom that I'm aware of is in Huntsville but then Birmingham had just as big a contingent and Chattanooga had a big contingent already.

WB: Right.

RZ: And since neither of those places were quite big enough and had quite the airline connections, [fans said,] "Ok, we'll hold our nose, Atlanta can do it and we'll help." And boy did they ever help. As a matter of fact, I got a co-chairwoman out

of that. The wife of a then prominent attorney who's since passed away Meade Frierson and his wife, Penny Miller [Frierson] was my co-chair. And basically we split that thing up in that Penny was the meet-and-greet and quietly "You are going to do this, aren't you?" lady of the thing, and I was the guy who wandered around with the lists and you know, tried to organize things and all so when I walked in to the hotel, at least the Hilton, they knew who I was. I was the guy who was with the eye doctors a few years back. Now, as far as all the fandom there is all kinds of fan politics involved, all kinds of people saying this and that and as far as the city of Atlanta going for it, it really was amazing to me how well it "just came together" even though we had some fractures and frictions. It was amazing to me how well it came together and it did seem now after all these years to be an "it just happened" kind of thing but it wasn't, there were a lot of people that were analyzing this and working at it, trying to make it work. The biggest situation that I think we actually faced is that people, the fans, had a tendency to be centered in the publishing area which tended to be the Boston, New York, Washington corridor and of the groups we were bidding against, both of them were in that corridor. New York had a bid also using the relatively new for them Marriott Marquis and I don't remember which hotels Philly was using but Philly wanted to do the convention and so that was our opposition and [the] real serious situation was that we had two strong fan groups in those cities. And also in those cities we had some people who were either pissed off at the cities or they liked one group of people in the cities, and not the others, and so you got some kind of things where everybody had something against one of the other groups.

And Atlanta had two virtues. First off, it was brand new second off, people were already starting to have to change planes in Atlanta. And I said, "You know, well I could just fly there and I could stop," and we had a number of good contacts that were willing to talk us up among people. We seemed to get out ahead mostly because: a) it hadn't been there, and b) people had finally gotten over the idea of thinking of the entire south as though it were Dogpatch from *Lil' Abner*. And the final thing was all the airline traffic, people said, "There's got to be something there, there's all the airlines." And then into this—although he never attended the convention, I'm not sure he ever realized it was there—John Portman, the architectural and developmental overlord of

Atlanta in some ways, he decides that having designed two big hotels wasn't enough, he wanted to design a third one, and it was also going to be run by the Marriott and it was called the Marquis and they were going to be opening in 1986. So when we walked in there to talk to those fellows we not only had the hotel across the street, the Hilton—which was in competition with them—already interested... they had nobody booked because they didn't even have a building until they finished it. And so we're sitting there and talking about 4,500–5,000 people actually it may have been more than that, we may have gotten close to 6,000 but I honestly would have to dig it out and see.

WB: It's a matter of record, I can look up the number. [Attendance was 5,811.]

RZ: Yeah, but here's the other thing about it... Since we had that [projected attendance] those hotels were not worried about weirdness, or whether a brand new ad hoc 501(c)(3) organization could do anything. The Marriott was desperate enough (and the Hilton didn't want to give any ground to the Marriott) that the idea of working this thing out if it was really that big [was favorable to them], and so they were very helpful. We were going to be voted on in L.A. in 1984 and L.A.'s 1984 Worldcon was held on a Hilton property. And that was *very* useful.

But my biggest thing was I didn't have that many enemies in fandom, nobody had heard of me. I actually knew what a hotel was and how to talk to it. Some fans may be wonderfully accomplished in whatever they do in their mundane life but when they get involved in fandom they want to forget that and be something else.

WB: Some of them do.

RZ: And so you have to kind of keep one foot in both worlds. Mike was real good at that and several of our other people were real good at that. Meade was an actual attorney of note in Birmingham, Alabama. He also had kind of Old South mannerisms and some of the connections with that world of people who looked upon this whole area and culture as somewhat different than the rest of the country, and that was really helpful.

And then came up the matter of the guests which you are

not supposed to talk about before you are selected *at all*. I think the Philadelphia people may have gotten the idea first, but somebody among the three bids got the idea. They looked around and they said, “Ray Bradbury has never been,” and a little bit of skulduggery and digging and asking people questions we found out that he was going to be invited by two other previous conventions, but they lost [their] bids. So we did something, we not only talked about guests we actually made an agreement. I don’t know that that would’ve been quite considered the right thing to do, but we all said, “The rest of the guests are up to us but if we win it’s going to be Ray Bradbury.” New York... Philadelphia... [we all said,] “If we win it’s going to be Ray Bradbury.” So all three of us could walk in as a group and talk to Bradbury’s people and say it doesn’t matter who’s won, Ray is going to get it—will Ray come? And the only problem was that Ray Bradbury had a real problem with flying. Here’s a guy talking about us going to Mars and I found out after he died, and it was on a biographical thing that he didn’t even drive a car, and he lived in Los Angeles when he moved from Illinois. Most of his life. I don’t know how he managed that trick I’ve never seen anybody in L.A. who didn’t have a car attached to them. You know, as soon as they turn say twelve. But we got him there anyhow. We got him on the plane and that was an unexpected hurdle because you’re not supposed to war against each other by promising a “better guest,” so you never mention it at all, but in that case we had to make an arrangement and it was unprecedented, I don’t think it will ever happen again because it won’t be a situation like that where a major guy has been proposed and then the organizations proposing him got beat twice. I think it was at least twice may have been three times but it was at least twice. And so people said, “No, we’ve got to have that,” and there was a lot of cooperation there.

I think the biggest thing as far as the regional and southern fandom what happened was really amazing is that all the city envy, kind of got settled early on. Birmingham and Chattanooga threw in pretty much with us, Nashville under Ken Moore’s well, I don’t know if you can call it leadership where Ken Moore is involved but it was something, people certainly would do what he asked them to do and when Dan Caldwell did our art show he was from Nashville in those days, may still be for all I know.

WB: Last I knew he was living in the Nashville area.

RZ: He doesn’t get around much anymore, he’s even older than I. And there were folks in New Orleans who were cooperative then and stuff like that. And so we had a lot of people from all around who were very cooperative and buried some interesting, probably some *very* interesting hatchets which that’s another thing that was an advantage of having somebody like me involved. The Friersons knew where a lot of bodies were buried and had been talking to these people ever since they met and got married at the University of Alabama timeframe. But I didn’t know anything except the local Atlanta scene and I didn’t know that much about that and I never tried to rub anybody the wrong way, but I never also made any great effort to chat up one group or the other because I was too dumb. There’s an advantage in being dumb about some things. And that was, I think, that the thing is that the region actually came together, to put this in place and the other thing that worked is because it was a brand new facility it had Mr. Portman’s organization behind it. They knew nothing about who was going to go in there whether us or any other convention, but that meant that the Atlanta Convention and Visitors Bureau was very fond of us, DragonCon was a gaming convention founded the same year it was much earlier in the year, it was around this time actually.

WB: I thought their first event was 1987. [The first DragonCon was held in 1987; their first fliers debuted at ConFederation in 1986.]

RZ: It might have been 1987, but I got the impression they also had at least a little gaming stuff going on in 1986 but I could be wrong, it could be a year later. Anyway, no one was on the scene, and nobody had ever done anything like this in the area and so it was a perfect storm. You could not duplicate that again. The only thing I kept doing was just asking people about this or that or something else and people sometimes make up their mind “No” but more often they said “Yes” and most often they came through.

And then there’s the story of how we budgeted very, very tightly because we had been under the impression, and it turns out research proved this, that a lot of organizations seem to get the impression—whether they were in Europe or America—that being a nonprofit organization almost mandated them to lose money. They really didn’t think that but

you got the idea that that's what they thought and some previous conventions had lost money, sometimes rather large amounts I understood, but we budgeted very, very tightly and then our final at the door price was something absolutely horrendous. I'm going to use the even number of a hundred bucks for 1986, which was tremendous. We said that it was an effort to necessarily keep things down it was just saying, "Okay guys, we have plotted out for this many of you, that's how many supplies we have." Joe Selko doing the con suite had this many things lined up, we're doing certain things. So if you come it's that much of an additional burden on us and what happened was it didn't bleeping matter. They showed up anyway. They paid that seventy-five or one hundred bucks and we wound up with revenue over expenses of a tremendous amount. I'm going to say more than 50 grand and that created the pleasant problem of what went on afterwards with that, and also that anything we wanted to do last minute. There was no question. I had no trouble authorizing last minute stuff once we actually had an inkling that that was happening but it had to show up and so we didn't authorize everything we wanted to show.

WB: I've heard legends of sushi in the con suite.

RZ: Joe may have done that. I didn't get up to the Con Suite that often.

WB: The chair seldom does.

RZ: Yeah, the chair *never* does. Penny's husband was squiring around Ray Bradbury. And Penny was going around doing all the mom things except on this gigantic scale... working her own sons to death, etc. And I was there being the guy that the hotel guys walk up to and say, "Is this gonna happen now and is that gonna happen then?" and I could tell them whether it was or wasn't. And they were happy as long as somebody knew. And so, yes, amazing things were done in that regard, and it also enabled us to kick a couple of other things off. For instance, I believe there was some money spent to help one of those previously erring cons out that hadn't made enough money.

WB: I know that the 1983 in Baltimore had lost a good deal of money.

RZ: Yes, and I think we did something to help there. But maybe even Mike wouldn't be able to remember because the records and stuff were so long ago. I think they probably actually got soaked in ether or something I'm not sure but I know that.

And another thing is I know the Atlanta Radio Theater, I'm still involved with that, they were just spinning off as a (c)(3) organization to be a more educational thing. They had been fairly commercial, they had actually been on commercial radio for a while and they were transitioning. We were able to get them a grant and so that was a lot of things, but all that really was was tight budgeting. It was Irvin Koch, which was different than what he actually was when you talk to him, it was Irvin Koch obeying the stereotypes that some people have in their minds of Jewish people. Really tight with it. And also people actually cooperating among those three cities, the three closest cities, and others like Nashville, Louisville, and others, and everybody cooperating and like I said it was a perfect storm. You couldn't duplicate that again, plus there was more a sense of Southern pride than that people weren't quite yelling yet quite as much about "You racist people, you want to go back to slavery" and a) that was absolutely absurd and b) the whole idea was to be welcoming, friendly, "hi y'all" and that was more of the image we wanted to convey of Southernness. And by gosh, most of our southern fans conveyed that to people.

A couple of things we did that were different, we had an actual public speaker give our keynote address; my Congressman at the time, a guy named Newt Gingrich, he gave the keynote address. It was very much almost cribbed from two personal friends of his. They wrote *Future Shock* and Newt knew those people and basically it was very much a future shock thing. No political notes, no partisan content.

WB: And he's written science fiction.

RZ: And he has written science fiction. That was later though. And then also we had an opening ceremony thing because the same guy who was involved with Atlanta Radio Theater, Thomas E. Fuller (Tom Feller is still very much with us, he was just in the room) but Thomas E. Fuller, the longtime creative director of Atlanta Radio Theater [who] passed away several years ago but he wrote a little play in one short act called *Creation is a Circle* and we did that as our opening thing. I just

didn't walk up there or Penny just didn't walk up there and say, "Hey, y'all welcome to Atlanta. The 1986 World Science Fiction Convention, the 44th Worldcon is in session." We didn't say that, we did say that but we added this thing, *Creation is a Circle*, and I was told a hundred times my gosh nobody's ever done that before. I find that a little hard to believe, I mean L.A. has actors working as short order cooks. They didn't think of that? They did. Somebody may have but they didn't do it, they didn't make it happen. And we did.

And we also seemed to have a level of cooperation between those hotels that didn't start until later bigger stuff started happening. They generally are very fiercely competitive between the organizations with the nameplates which are not the people that are running it—that Hilton's owned by somebody else. It's not Paris's dad. And no actual Marriott was involved with the Marriott but their company was running it. And I think that nevertheless they are very fiercely competitive usually, but for that they worked it out and that was fine too. It's the way things are supposed to work in this business, sometimes they don't, they did for us.

And the additional thing was at that point in time, people were willing to say that we had our whole guest list and stuff seemed in tune with them. People were willing to accept the idea that Ray Bradbury was a major force in literature whether or not they believed he wrote science fiction. Noted, all three of the guys who were running the bids for the three cities, all three of us had been approached by members either of our committee or close friends in fandom and they said, "I hear you're going to..." *We can't talk about who we're going to ask for a guest.* "But you know, Bradbury doesn't write science fiction." *We said we can't talk about who we're inviting for a guest.* But nevertheless, people had figured that out. Sort of. On the other hand, a lot of people had said, "Gee, it's time. We've honored Heinlein three or four times. We've even gotten around to Clifford Simak. So why not Ray Bradbury? He's pretty good, he's been around a while."

And so that went over very well and we only had one untoward incident with the Hugos and it wasn't an untoward incident—somebody refused a Hugo. But I won't go into that unless it's necessary.

So we're still working. It was again a perfect storm, everything went very well. I don't recall actually doing anything which means I must have done a lot, but nevertheless if I can't recall it it must have been all detail shit that's now passed away.

And we didn't have any serious monetary situation and that was because people came anyway. Which is the other thing about all conventions, if you can get it... I don't think we had very much local publicity but we had a little tiny bit. A couple of mentions in articles in newspapers and everybody talked it up in fandom. And this was the first time that people in the region had been able to go to something that they could get to that they didn't have to drive for four hours and that also contributed to a number of people showing up who had never shown before.

So that's my story and I'm sticking to it. And that's off the cuff. I'm sure I've forgotten a lot of people I didn't mean to. I tried to mention all the folks that I remember were there. Of course there were leading lights of fandom around: Jerry Page, Hank Reinhardt and stuff, and they were helpful. But as far as the committee goes it was either people from out of ASFiC like myself, from Atlanta, the Birmingham club, which was more or less me and Penny and Charlotte Proctor. And Jerry Proctor was a newspaper editor in those days.

WB: Is that the club that published *Anvil*?

RZ: Yeah, that's the club that published *Anvil*. Charlotte probably actually had more to do with that club than the Friersons, but nevertheless they were involved in that. We had a number of people from the Huntsville area. Some of them genuine rocket scientists at the time and all these people that are still alive are now retired from NASA and retired from the Army thing there or serving as consultants, but they were very much active and having to work in those days when we still had a space program. What the hell happened to our space program? That's the end of my political statement. They were all helpful. The Chattanooga fans were absolutely marvelous and Mike was living in Atlanta in those days but he certainly never forgot the place where he came from and we even, once we had won the thing, we even had people that helped out and there was one person who was on our committee but never got to show up, he did a lion's share of work: Joe Siclary. Now he's back in New York I understand but he was living in Boca Raton at the time. And here's two little personal notes, tragedies for both Joe and myself, my mother passed Memorial Day of 1986 or actually the Sunday before it and Joe's father was diagnosed with, I believe, cancer and passed away in the fall, but he still had to be taken care of. And Joe

was the one so Joe could not get to Worldcon. And I wish that Joe Siclary had been able to be there and there wouldn't have been any brickbats, he would've been able to do it. He would have worked things out and he would've got all the accolades that he deserved there. But he did a lot of work. We had a guy who has since moved out to the, I believe, Arizona area, Avery Davis did a lot of work on the operations part of things. There just was a lot of things, like I said that just came together in a way that is really difficult to describe. It was not a complete accident, but it seemed a lot more accidental than it was and it worked so well.

And I think we did so well it's partly to blame for something a lot of written SF fans get a little disturbed about: DragonCon, because you had that going on and it was also called science fiction. The hospitality industry, which thinks movies are also science fiction, not that they can't be, they just don't seem to make it. Another editorial comment there. Nonetheless, I think that sort of smoothed the way for them.

Unfortunately though, it was so wearing to do that, I basically took every year, beginning 199- off from fandom. So what was said to me by a famous author, that my reward for running a good Worldcon would be to be run out of the local club on a rail. That really didn't happen. But I did find myself going, "Can I live my life now?" and I went off and sorta did that. So I'm only now getting back in when I'm retired and useless.

But yeah, the amazing kind of things that went on... the weirdness, the people attempting to pull fast ones on a new group of people that they had never heard of before that were a new corporation that they had never seen before. There could be a thousand stories, but fortunately I don't remember most of them and basically what I remember is people being amazingly cooperative even if they didn't like each other or at least if you read the old APAs you would get the impression they certainly didn't like each other. If you read either the actual words or sometimes you had to go between the lines but usually you didn't have to go very far between the lines people they had said, "So and so is really stupid about that idea," and it sometimes got personal but we had a lot less than that I thought we would ever have and things worked out and we did a couple of things that were new and worked and the whole idea of lining those hotels up and even using a couple of rooms in the Regency Hyatt House so we had two of Portman's three massive buildings working for us, even that

worked. So I have to say it was a great success and I can remember it fondly now. Certainly if someone was talking to me about this in 1991 it would have darker memories so I hope that gives you some notion.

WB: Oh yeah. That's a great half hour. Just as a formality I want to make sure that you're comfortable with this being used for fanzines and other similar historical projects.

RZ: Yes, because they don't know where to find me and then I have no problem with that. Like I said, the only thing... I could not mention everybody's name off the top of my head. I do remember people who helped.

And we may not have been the very first one but I think we're one of the first ones to have somebody that actually looked after whether folks who had some problems moving around and other things could do that. And there's a lady named Samantha Jude, she herself was a victim of polio, and she was interested being able to move her wheelchair around in places and so we actually had a serious effort to try to work it out and the Americans with Disabilities Act I think was brand-new at the time.

WB: It didn't even come through until the '90s. [The ADA was passed in 1990.]

RZ: Okay, so there was literally no acknowledgment of that. But where the hotels were already starting to think about it, Samantha made sure that they thought about it harder. And we probably were as accessible as it was possible to be in that time and that was largely her and her husband Don Cook's effort on that part. So they made it a little bit easier for those people; I won't say easy, because sometimes nothing is easy even for those of us that still have all our feet working. But that kind of thing happened, and it came together because we had the right people and they thought this was cool and wanted to work on it and also I got to admit there was a strong desire among a lot of people to say the South is really as good as the rest of the country, we can hold these things too. And I think we proved it, but who knows? 

You can hear the entire interview on Fancyclopedia at http://fancyclopedia.wdfiles.com/local-files/confederation/Ron_Zukowski_on_Confederation.mp3.

We also recommend reading "Wake Up and Smell the Coffin!" a reminiscence of ConFederation and the bid for Nolacon II, 1986 in Guy Lillian's Challenger at <http://www.challzine.net/27/27coffin.html>.