JEFFERSON
EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

Quick, Timely Reads
On the Waterfront

Bay-Rat Google:
The 1950s Encyclopedia

By David Frew, Scholar in Residence

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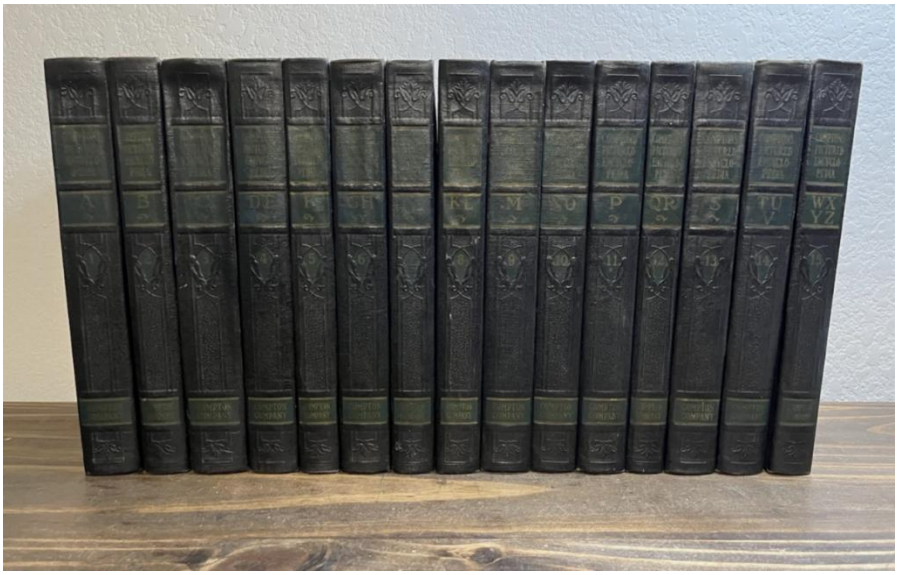


A set of Compton Encyclopedias like this one lived in a prominent location at my house during the 1950s.

These days, almost every barstool, family picnic, or office argument is easily and quickly settled with a smartphone. Any topic, including sports trivia, politics, cinema, and more can quickly be explored after a visit to online. Important questions such as “who won the 1959 World Series?” or “who was vice president in 1969?” are just a few of the countless questions easily answered by the artificial-intelligence voice that almost everyone carries in their pocket. Just wake up Siri or Alexa and ask them.

During the 1950s, however, we had something better: encyclopedias. There were competing “brands,” but each promised the gift of infinite knowledge to those who owned and used them. And each year, during the late fall, representatives of one of those magical gateway products visited our grade school in Erie, Pennsylvania, St. Andrew, to promote their product. I often wondered if St. Andrew received a payoff for allowing this unfair but powerful marketing enterprise?

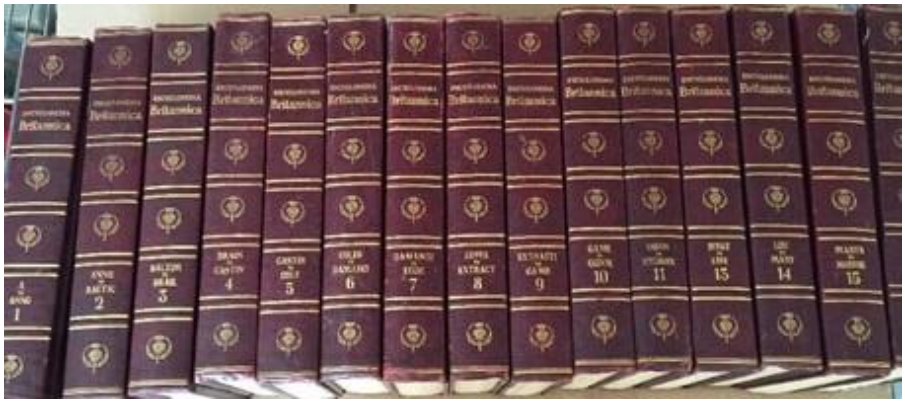
In the case of Compton’s Encyclopedia, the representatives who visited my school were a lovely couple who passed out snacks (clever) and then unveiled a large easel that held a series of images on cards. The “pitch” began with photographs of their own children, kids who had been mired in ignorance and floundering at school – before they were exposed to encyclopedias. Since the kids looked nerdy, the presentation did not immediately capture the attention of us kids, especially the boys.

Eventually, however, they unleashed their actual “close.” They told us that their own children had originally rejected the family encyclopedia that had been elevated to the role of sacred fixture in their home. Their set resided in a custom designed bookcase, an accessory that could be added to any encyclopedia purchase for a small monthly additional fee. They carefully noted that as the higher grades came along for their kids, bringing with them challenging homework assignments and required book reports, the family encyclopedia made homework easy. Their children were able to generate term papers and book reports by simply opening the beautiful set of reference encyclopedias that lived right there in the living room. Papers that might have required multiple trips to a library with hundreds of hours of research and confusing library shelves were completed in mere minutes. Their kids earned “As” and still had plenty of time left over for sports and leisure activities.

The persuasive couple completed their presentation with an offer to visit our parents at home so that they could chat with them about ways to make school easier and more fun. Just before they took our names and phone numbers, they explained that their own children had transitioned from being below-average grade school students to high-school academic rockstars with college scholarships. And of course, the secret was having an encyclopedia. What could possibly have been better?

Under more than a bit of conformity pressure, I filled out a card, divulging our home address and telephone number. A few days later, and as promised, the lovely people who had propelled their own children toward happiness and success, stopped by one evening to talk to my parents. Given the general economic theme at my house, which was "we don't have enough money for that," regardless of what the "that" might have been, I was shocked when my parents agreed to host the encyclopedia people. And they did. Even more shockingly, they bought a complete set of black, Compton's leather-bound encyclopedias. They selected the mid-level bindings but did not purchase the optional faux walnut bookcase. They must have realized that it was their last possible chance to save their son (me) from growing into an intellectual Neanderthal. I was on my way to happiness, free time, and academic success.

If I recall properly, the key aspect of the sales pitch was a small long-term, time payment plan for which my parents could be given the amazing opportunity to properly launch all of their children (there were just two of us) into success for just a few pennies a day. These days, I wonder what the interest costs were.



The Encyclopedia Brittanica was generally regarded as the high-end alternative

While my family purchased the "Compton's Pictured Encyclopedia," several of my public-school friends' parents equipped them with a primary competitor, the Encyclopedia Brittanica. That encyclopedia claimed to be superior because it periodically published updated volumes to cover happenings since the primary volumes had been released (unlike Compton's). What if a world-changing event had happened, Britannica asked? Promotional material noted that Compton's encyclopedias were "dated" and that their use was a bit less than the sales promise.

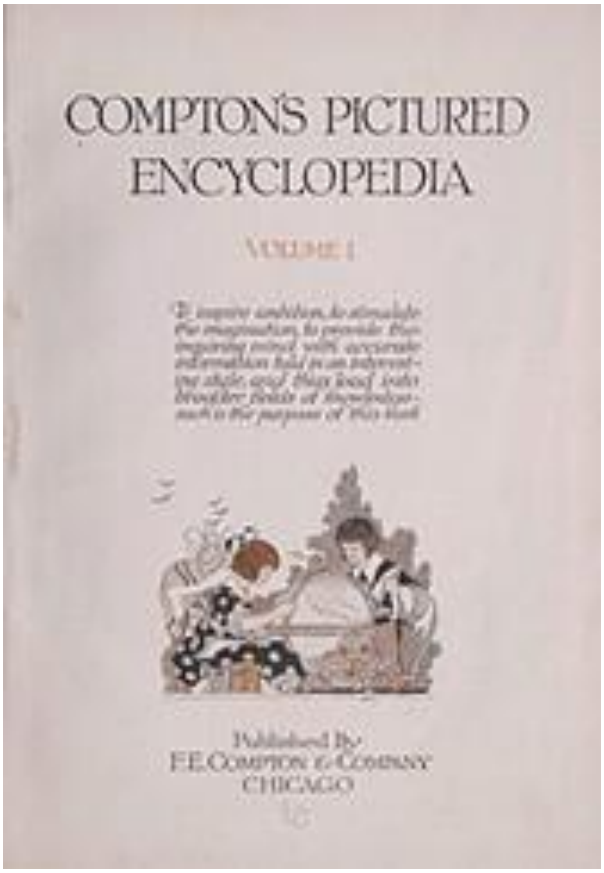
One annoying issue with our Compton Encyclopedia set was related to the general difficulty in looking up any particular topic. It seemed that most of the alphabetic references that I searched were wrong. For example, when I was hunting in the

"A" volume for "atomic bomb" I learned that I should have been looking the "N" volume for nuclear. Another common annoyance was that when two of us were hunting for a topic, we would often find that we both needed the same individual volume.

The allegedly superior Britannica had its own issues. The Britannica, which also played upon the notion that it was intellectually superior because of its British/European origins, was regularly updated with yearly of semiyearly volumes. While it included updated volumes, the materials in the undulated volumes were not particularly well-indexed. Newer information, but not easy to reference.

By the 1960s, the Federal Trade Commission had received thousands of complaints about encyclopedia salespersons, including both Compton's and Britannica sales forces. Concerns came in waves, beginning with the immediate post-World War II period and continuing through the 1950s and 1960s.

A Saturday Evening Post article from the 1950s pointed out the abuses and shoddy sales practices involved in selling encyclopedias



Compton's, while younger than Britannica, was also located in Chicago*

Salespersons were accused of high-pressure tactics that centered around convincing parents that without encyclopedias, their children would not do well academically, a supposition that was not supported by evidence. The operant factor in the typical sales presentation was guilt. They were also implicated in upselling parents unable to afford the cost of elaborate sets of encyclopedias, adding almost useless and sometimes dysfunctional features to the total sale and expanding the total price.

The worst news for the overall industry arrived during the 1960s when research began to suggest that encyclopedias were bad for children. Encyclopedia-based research for classroom assignments prevented kids from learning how to search for information properly. It made them lazy and led to dated and sometimes incorrect information. Then to make matters worse, numerous articles in high-profile news sources began to suggest that encyclopedia salespersons were door-to-door hucksters who were out to take advantage of people. The salespeople often used questionable tactics, including offering sales targets a discount if they provided leads that resulted in additional sales.

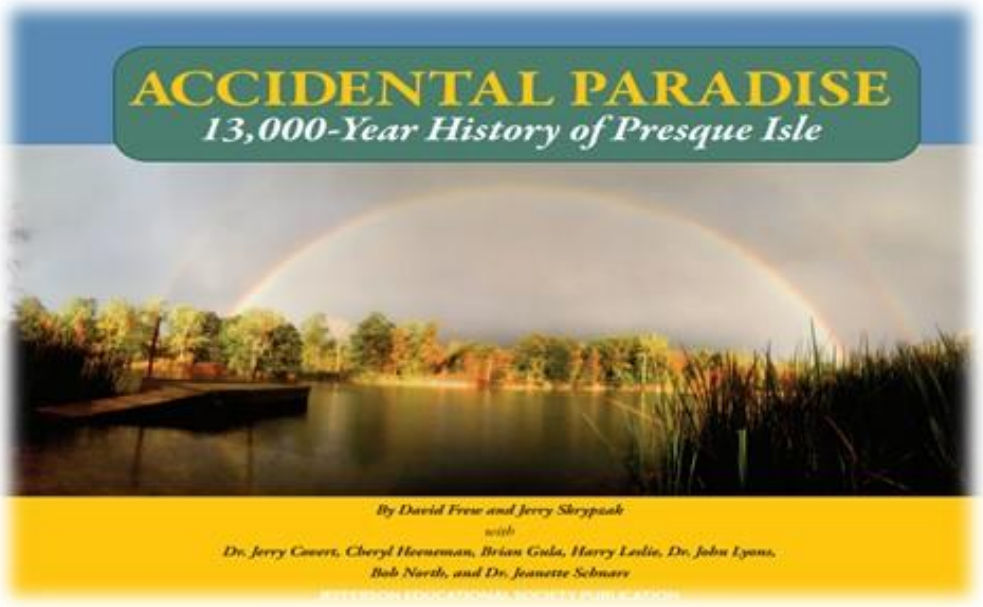
During one particularly famous and sleezy promotion, customers were promised free land in California if they were to purchase encyclopedias. The plots of land that were offered at Huntington Beach were too small to build on, but prospective encyclopedia purchasers were assured that they were extremely valuable as land investments. In reality, parcels of land that were given away were bits and pieces of road underpasses, swampland and portions of relatively worthless industrial areas.

Today, new print volumes of encyclopedias are rare, and old volumes are the stuff of eBay collectors. According to the internet, only World Book Encyclopedia is the only general reference encyclopedia still published in print.

Others, like Encyclopedia Britannica have shifted to all-digital resources, while other information-troves, like Wikipedia, have emerged and continue to evolve. Still, I can't help but wonder how today's students are faring, walking around with the World Wide Web in their pockets and at their fingertips. And are any AI, search-engine, or smartphone salespeople making the rounds in schools? Most of today's youth wouldn't have a landline number to share for them to call their parents anyway.

Accidental Paradise Available at TRECF!

Accidental Paradise
by Dr. David Frew and Jerry Skrypzak



The beautiful book on Presque Isle published by authors David Frew and Jerry Skrypzak – "**Accidental Paradise: 13,000-Year History of Presque Isle**" – is on sale at the Tom Ridge Environmental Center's gift shop and through a special website, AccidentalParadise.com.

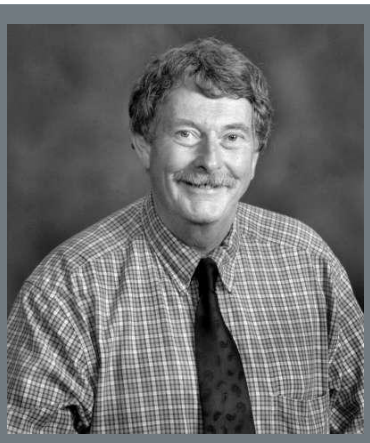
The book, priced at **$35 plus tax and shipping**, can be ordered now through the website sponsored by the TREC Foundation, AccidentalParadise.com.

Presque Isle Gallery and Gifts on the main floor of TREC, located at **301 Peninsula Drive, Suite #2, Erie, PA 16505** will also handle sales ***daily from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.***

For more information, send an email to **aperino@TRECF.org**.

To watch "Accidental Paradise: Stories Behind The Stories" click here.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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In Case You Missed It

Book Notes #206 | American "Pop:" Notes on American Popular Music, Part One written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence **Dr. Andrew Roth**

Death of the Daily Newspaper | Read between the lines: How local journalism addresses loneliness and polarization written by **Chloe Forbes**

Men in Crisis | Can Manufacturing Revive Men's Search for Meaning? written by **Jeff Bloodworth**

On the Waterfront | Home Expectations: From the 1950s to Now written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence **Dr. David Frew**

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