

Quick, Timely Reads
On the Waterfront

Willy, Phil, & Bill: February Characters

By David Frew

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Editor's note: In honor of Groundhog Day earlier this week, following is an On the Waterfront Classic by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence David Frew. The Jefferson first published it in March 2025. Dr. Frew notes that Willy and Phil disagreed on Monday's Groundhog Day. Phil predicted six more weeks of winter, and Willy saw an early spring. Who do you believe?

For the last 25 years I have lived in two places. In addition to Erie, my beloved hometown, I have spent about 10 percent of the year on a small barrier island off the city of Charleston, South Carolina: Isle of Palms. Decades ago, Mary Ann and I decided that we did not want to become Florida "snowbirds," but that we needed a winter getaway. We chose February as the optimum time to get away and have become accustomed to a month or more on the ocean, listening to waves and watching dolphins.

February is an interesting month. It contains two important holidays: Valentine's Day and Groundhog Day. And now that I am older, Groundhog Day has become the more interesting of the two. The popular film, "Groundhog Day," has focused national attention on a holiday that most people regard as a bit less than logical. How could a rodent be a reliable weather sage?



Film Poster from the famous 1993 movie



The annual celebration at Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania

While Groundhog Day may seem to be a purely American phenomenon, the idea of a rodent predicting subsequent weather began as a European tradition. Its history seems to have begun in Germany, where the creature who was to have seen or not seen his shadow each February was a badger, not a groundhog. The event also has a religious root, having begun in Europe as an adjunct to Candlemas Day. It traveled with German immigrants to the Americas, and to Pennsylvania in particular, during the 1800s. Though it is celebrated in several locations throughout the state, it has become most associated with Punxsutawney.

A popular 1993 film has focused Groundhog Day attention on Punxsutawney, which used to host an average of only 2,000 Feb. 2 visitors but now attracts more than 50,000 each year. The film, “Groundhog Day,” was a huge box office and

critical success and has raised the profile of the annual event. Interestingly, the event has become almost as popular in South Carolina as it has in Pennsylvania because Bill Murray, former “Saturday Night Live” star and lead actor in the popular film lives here. Murray was born in Evanston, Illinois (near Chicago) but he now lives in a beachfront home on Sullivan’s Island just south of our place. Sullivan’s, along with Isle of Palms, is one of the two now-connected barrier islands, which protect Charleston from the Atlantic Ocean.



The bridge connecting Sullivan’s Island with Isle of Palms at Breach Inlet



A scene from the film with Bill Murray holding Phil, the groundhog

Technically, this means that Bill Murray is our neighbor, and we share a beach. We first became aware of this odd coincidence more than a decade ago when we encountered fellow beach walkers who asked if we had seen “Bill,” who had just walked along the sand where we were strolling. We had not then and still and have never seen him, but we now know that he regularly walks the same beach as us. Our “almost encounters with Bill” have continued over the years at bars, restaurants and other local places where people have often mentioned that “Bill Murray had just left.” Sullivan’s Island and Isle of Palms are not very big.

Gradually, searching for Bill became a sport, leading to visits to his restaurant in Charleston, where we did not see him. Perhaps someday we will get lucky but I am not counting on it.

Meanwhile, the new interest in Groundhog Day compels me to introduce a competing rodent-prognosticator: Weirton Willy. Ontario's groundhog weatherman is geographically closer to Erie and resides in a place that is much more "Erieish," so I have begun to wonder if we should all be paying more attention to him.

I became aware of Willy through sailing, which has taken me to the Georgian Bay, one of the Great Lakes' most amazing treasures. As might be expected, Willy lives in the town of Weirton, an absolute gem of a northern port town. Like Phil, Willy is a groundhog. But unlike Phil, Willy is an albino. This genetic characteristic conspired to create a major scandal for Weirton and its annual Feb. 2 celebration several years ago. Willy's handlers went to his "enclosure" to be sure that all was well and found the town's celebrity rodent dead.

What to do? It would have been a simple matter to find a random groundhog in time for the anticipated local media circus a few days later but an albino groundhog? Not so much. Under pressure to do something, the handlers tracked down a groundhog puppet and painted it white. Then on the big day when they went to ceremonially extract "Willy" from his cage and held him up, even briefly, they were busted. With cameras rolling, a reporter from the Toronto Star objected. "Hey, wait a minute," he screamed, "that's not a real groundhog. It's a puppet."

Publicity from the fake Weirton Willy incident has seemingly enhanced the annual town event. Since then, more people have been coming to the picturesque Ontario town each Feb. 2. The "fake Willy" scandal has inspired Weirton to replace its deceased former star with a new albino groundhog, erect a statue of the rodent, and create a large, comfortable year-round habitat for its celebrity creature. Well worth a visit. A placard near Willy's year-round home touts his record as a weather predictor, noting that he is far more accurate than other North American groundhogs.



Weirton Willy in a glass cage poses with the town mayor.



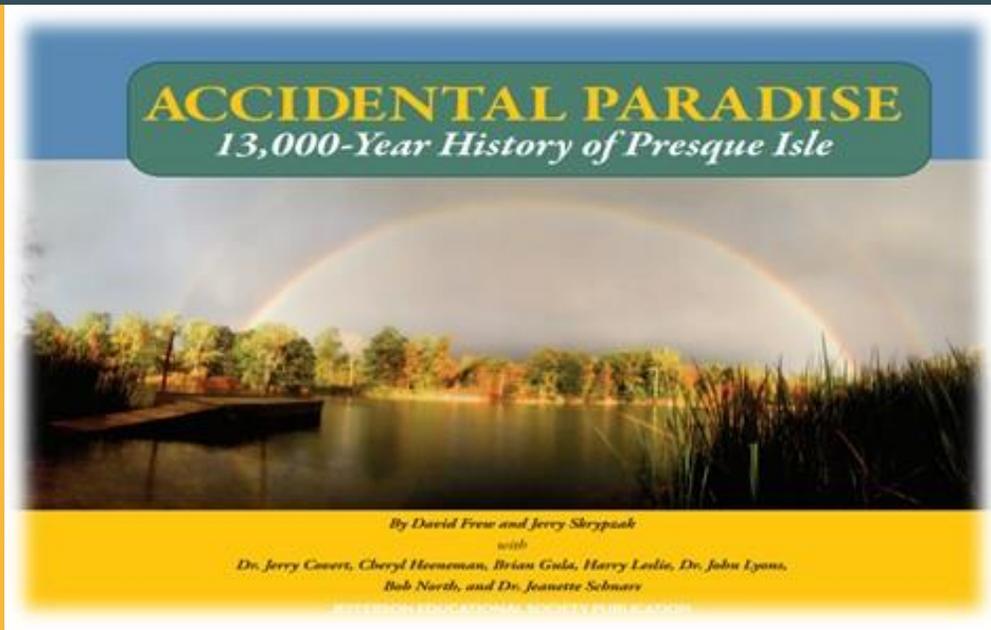
The new Weirton Willy statue

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Accidental Paradise
by Dr. David Frew and Jerry Skrypzak



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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@TREC.org.

To watch "Accidental Paradise: Stories Behind The Stories" click [here](#).



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Historian and author David Frew, Ph.D., is a Scholar-in-Residence at the JES. An emeritus professor at Gannon University, he held a variety of administrative positions during a 33-year career. He is also emeritus director of the Erie County Historical Society/Hagen History Center and is president of his own management consulting business. Frew has written or co-written 35 books and more than 100 articles, cases, and papers.

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