

JEFFERSON EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

Quick, Timely Reads On the Waterfront

Tarzan Swings: Risking Life and Limb at the Bluffs

By David Frew
December 2021

Dr. David Frew, a prolific writer, author, and speaker grew up on Erie's lower west side as a proud "Bay Rat," joining neighborhood kids playing and marauding along the west bayfront. He has written for years about his beloved Presque Isle and his adventures on the Great Lakes. In this series, the JES Scholar-in-Residence takes note of life in and around the water.



The site of the Wallerstein Apartments at the corner of West Second and Cascade streets was a once vacant, forested lot in the 1950s and affectionately dubbed "Second Field" by the Bay Rats.

Before the appearance of the Laura Wallerstein Apartments or its predecessor, the United Refinery Corporate headquarters building, the corner of West Second and Cascade streets in Erie, Pennsylvania was an empty and forested (in the urban sense) lot, and a gateway to Bay Rat adventures. The kids called it Second Field, an obvious reference to its location on West Second Street. That's obvious in hindsight, but not so much in 1950.

A kid could disappear into the dense vegetation that covered the entire lot and follow pathways that led north along the west side of the wilderness then turned east, following the bluffs overlooking Presque Isle Bay. The northern edge of the field followed the upper contours of bayfront bluffs that now tower over the modern parkway. But in those days, long before modern houses and condos

began to appear on West Second as well as Front Street, the northern edge of the bluffs was a wooded wasteland.

From our vantage point on the edge of the bluffs behind our Second Field Adventureland we could see the Cascade Docks, Presque Isle Bay, and Cascade Street. The street (which moved to Cranberry later) dropped down to the docks along the west side of Second Field.

Cascade Street was busy then. It was populated with trucks servicing the docks, and especially the cement mixers that were constantly departing the docks and heading for construction jobs.

The actual docks were busy as well, with ships coming and going regularly. Our secret spot on top of the bluffs became a regular meeting and adventure planning spot; the location where we concocted dozens of exciting adventures.

During the 1950s, one of the movie staples that we had all grown to love was the Tarzan film series. The once first-rate films that had been made in the 1940s had become B-movies that regularly played in neighborhood movie houses like the Gem Theater on West Fourth Street. We had faithfully seen most of them.

One of the most exciting sequences in each Tarzan film was the scene in which he swung through jungle trees on vines, often carrying his girlfriend, Jane, while bellowing his patented yell. Tarzan was able to travel for miles through otherwise impenetrable jungle, using only vines for transportation. He had allegedly learned to move about in this highly efficient manner from his friends, the apes, who often accompanied him as he traveled.

Naturally, we wondered if we could emulate Tarzan's vine swinging. And why not? We were there in our own jungle. There were no apes but there was an enormous cottonwood tree growing about halfway down the side of the Bluff. No vines? No problem. We would make one.



A Tarzan movie poster

The Tarzan of the movies was played by Olympic swimming star Johnny Weissmuller. He starred in 12 of Edgar Rice Burroughs' jungle adventures that were made into films between 1932 and 1948. Although he claimed to have born in Eastern Pennsylvania in 1904 (possibly so he would qualify for the U.S. Olympic team), Weissmuller emigrated from Europe. He came to America at age one, lived in Pennsylvania for a short time, and grew up near Chicago. He became

an accomplished swimmer at an early age and when he was only 11 he lied about his age, joined a local YMCA swim club, and eventually became its star swimmer. Weissmuller toured extensively with the Illinois Athletic Club, competing at YMCAs across the country. He once swam in a meet at Erie's Downtown YMCA.



Erie's venerable Downtown Y, where Johnny Weissmuller once swam in a meet, was established in 1910. It is shown here during the 1950s.

His fame grew when he earned medals at both the 1924 and 1928 Olympics. Then during an extensive post-Olympic career, he toured the country, appearing in AAU events and setting countless records. Weissmuller easily made the transition into acting since most of his early films did not have extensive speaking roles. By the time his Tarzan series had ended, he had become comfortable with speaking parts and went on to make many additional films.

As we sat on top of the bluffs contemplating the huge tree in front of us, we suddenly realized that it would be perfect for a rope swing. All we had to do was to find a suitable rope. And with the Cascade Docks beckoning, we abandoned our bluff-side perch and went scrounging.

It did not take long to find a suitable length of nasty, old, discarded rope. Possibly a working line from a ship. Half-submerged near a dock, it was a beat-up piece of three-strand cotton rope, stained with oil and torn. There were several separations in individual lines. But we knew we could salvage it.

Returning with our prize to the basement workshop of one of the kids, we went to work repairing and cleaning. We used ordinary laundry soap and a brush to clean it and then borrowed (from our mothers) needles and thread to mend the damaged cord. In just a few days we managed to return the nasty, discarded line to usable condition, although several of our patches may have failed an objective aesthetics test.

Using a clumsy hand drill we bored a big hole in a discarded board, threaded the line through the opening, nailed it in place and created a seat. Tarzan did not need a seat on his jungle vines, but we thought that we might.

This left us with only one problem: how to climb the tree and attach the rope to one of its upper branches? That issue was solved when we found several huge, rusty nails in a basement coffee can. Finally, one of our dads knew how to tie a bowline (loop) in the tree-end of the refurbished line so that all we had to do was

scale the tree, thread the looped end over a logical spot on a major branch, place the bottom end of the rope with the seat through the loop and pull it tight. We tied a messenger line made of a smaller rope to the seat so that we would be able to retrieve the rope swing after using it.

The Tarzan swing installation went well. We sent a small kid up the tree with a hammer that he used to pound the big nails halfway into the trunk, a technique we had learned from watching telephone company linemen. When that was done, another kid scaled the tree, using the nails, and tossed the loop-end of the rope swing over a large branch. Then all we had to do was to push the bottom end with the wooden seat through the loop and pull it tight. Presto! The Tarzan swing was completed, and we were swinging through the air.

There were two dangers. The first, and most obvious, was flying off the swing when it reached the apex of its trajectory. Some serious injuries could have happened if anyone did that, but thankfully it never happened. We were not completely stupid.

A second unanticipated danger was staying aboard for too long. We soon learned that it was possible and big fun to remain on the swing for more than one out-and-back cycle. While our preliminary test trips were single out-and-backs, we found that it was better to stay on the rope for two or three cycles.

There was a danger, however.

If a swinger waited too long, for too many revolutions, he could find himself suspended several feet in the air after the momentum had ended. That would leave the helpless Tarzan wannabe almost 10 feet above the ground with no alternative but to drop to the ground. And that was where the real problems emerged. There was more than one sprained ankle and there were several nasty brush burns after swingers stayed on too long.

We used the rope swing for weeks and so did many of the other neighborhood kids. After several days we would return to find such long lines at the rope swing that we had a hard time getting a turn.

Then one day we showed up at the bluffs to find our beloved Tarzan swing torn and broken. Patches that we had sewn in the torn rope strands had given way and our swinging days were done. The loop near the top of the tree, where we had attached it to a large branch, remained there for years, a reminder of Bay Rat ingenuity.

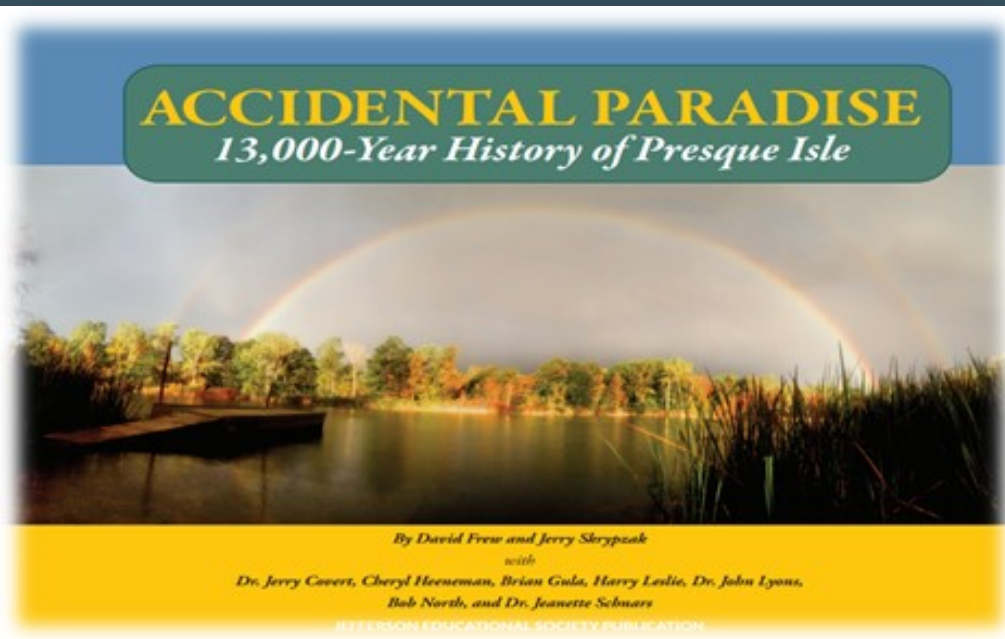


Actor Lex Barker as Tarzan is with his faithful friend Cheeta. Barker succeeded Johnny Weismueller in the role.

Our hero, Johnny Weissmuller, lived until he was 80 years old. Toward the end of his movie career physicians learned that he had a serious heart condition that had gone undiagnosed. Sadly, he suffered a series of strokes during his 70s and had to spend the final years of his life languishing in a Hollywood assisted living home for actors.

Looking for a Holiday Gift for the Reader in your Life?
Accidental Paradise Available at TREC!

Accidental Paradise
by Dr. David Frew and Jerry Skrypzak



With the holidays fast approaching, don't forget to consider adding **Accidental Paradise** to your book wish list. It would make a perfect gift for the Presque Isle lovers in your family!

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@TREC.org.

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

Subscribe to JES Publications Emails!

Subscribe to Book Notes Emails!

An earlier version of this article featured a caption that misidentified actor Lex Barker as Johnny Weismueller. It has been corrected.

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.



In Case You Missed It

[A-Caroling We Will Go! \(Part One\)](#) written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence Dr. Andrew Roth

[Horse Heroes: Comings, Goings, Beringia, and Climate Change](#) written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence Dr. David Frew

[How to Put Equitable Development to Work for Erie, Pennsylvania](#) written by Sustainable Solutions Consultant Court Gould, MPA

Jefferson Educational Society | jeserie.org

