

Quick, Timely Reads  
*Reading in the Time of Coronavirus*  
On the Waterfront

Bay Rat Refrigeration: The Iceman Cometh  
*(With Apologies to Eugene O’Neil)*

By David Frew  
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*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 Neighborhood ice truck was a regular and welcome sight.*

Try telling this one to grandchildren: “We didn’t have refrigerators when I was a kid!”

Instead, you’d then explain, we had ice boxes. But not all of us. A few of the high-end kids had clunky, off-white, cold machines in their kitchens; ugly devices

that sounded like cement mixers when they ran, which was most of the time. Most of my bay rat colleagues had wooden ice boxes that held a block of ice near the top (cold air sinks), and where prudent homeowners placed their most delicate items (meat and fish) right on top of the ice.

Individual compartments, accessible via doors with brass latches, marked the fronts of these devices and a drainage system sent melt water through an internal pipe to the very bottom where there was a removable tray to be drained as blocks of ice melted. In the standard model below, the righthand door opened to shelves with vegetables and greens stored toward the bottom. The lower left-hand door, just under the ice, was used for dairy and meat. An ice compartment on the top left could hold either one 50-pound or two 25-pound blocks.



*I found one of these solid oak, front-loaders in a junk store in 1971, purchased it for \$12, stripped the old paint and refinished it. The ice went into the upper lefthand compartment. Note the hinged bottom piece that allowed a drip tray to be removed and emptied.*

Household ice acquisition technology involved placing a small cardboard card in a front window. The two-sided card featured two different bright colors. One side (green) signaled the ice man to deliver a 25-pound block of ice, while the opposite side (yellow) told him to bring a 50-pound block. The iceman carried the block of ice into the house, using ice-tongs and slid it into the ice box. The iceman picked up a truck full of 100-pound, rectangular blocks of ice each morning as he began his regular route. Each of the large 100-pound blocks was scored so that it could be divided into smaller pieces.

Once he arrived at a neighborhood stop, the iceman used a variety of professional quality picks to deepen the depressions at one of the score lines. If a customer had signaled the need for a 50-pound block, the ice man would chop away at the score-line in the center of a 100-pound block. After chipping away at the pre-designed score line until it was a few inches deep, the ice man would slide the big block to the edge of the tailgate, then chop, pick, and break off the smaller piece that was needed.



*A worker chops a smaller ice block from a 100-pound slab.*

The chopping operation created a wonderful opportunity for neighborhood kids, who were drawn to the iceman like bees to honey. There was nothing quite as refreshing as a chunk of fresh ice on a hot summer day and our neighborhood iceman was friendly and generous to the kids. He probably understood that he was helping “cement” his market position in the neighborhood, so he never failed to pass a few “choppings” to the kids. He would pull into a spot on the street and immediately be surrounded by kids, begging for ice.



*A deliveryman carries a 50-pound block (note the score mark in the center).*



*Vintage ice tongs*



*The iceman's tools: the pick and a chopper*

The 1950s iceman was delivering “produced” rather than harvested ice. There was only one local ice company in those days, Wayne Ice, on Erie’s lower east-side. During the 1800s, there had been several companies selling harvested ice and all of them were located near Presque Isle Bay. The logical reason for that was that the bay was the original source of harvested ice. Given the challenges of ground transportation during those early times, the closer the company with its insulated cold rooms to the source of the ice, the less “shrinkage” in delivering the product. Ice was usually harvested two times per year from Presque Isle Bay and sometimes a third time formed in sheltered corners where the water would refreeze after ice was cut.

There was even an icehouse on Presque Isle near Misery Bay. Harvesters on Presque Isle took ice from both Misery Bay and the lagoons where it re-froze quickly and could be cut several times per year. Eventually, however, logistical issues of moving ice from Presque Isle to Erie became more daunting than the advantage of the extra harvests. By the 1950s, icehouses were producing their own product, using modern freezing technology.



*The winter ice harvest took place on Presque Isle Bay. Note the elevator on the bluffs, lifting slabs of ice up to an icehouse.*

There is an ongoing example of the ice business in Pittsburgh at the Heinz Museum. Locals call it the “Icehouse” for good reason. The building is on the end of the “Strip District,” where Pittsburgh’s meat, fish, and vegetable industry thrived. Pittsburgh’s Icehouse served those industries. In addition to being one of the very best museums of cultural and social history on the planet, the Heinz Museum has carefully preserved and is currently curating the building’s

original purpose as an icehouse. Visitors can see and visualize the original technology by which ice was received, stored, and sold. Thick, insulated walls and floors still contain lifting and moving hardware that once handled the ices. It is interesting that much of the ice supplied to the icehouse was harvested from Chautauqua Lake, which sits at a 90-degree angle to the prevailing wind so that its narrow width facilitated several ice harvests per year.



*The Heinz Museum (Icehouse) is a more-than-worthwhile field trip for Erie people. There are wonderful restaurants, including Lydia's Italian Trattoria nearby.*

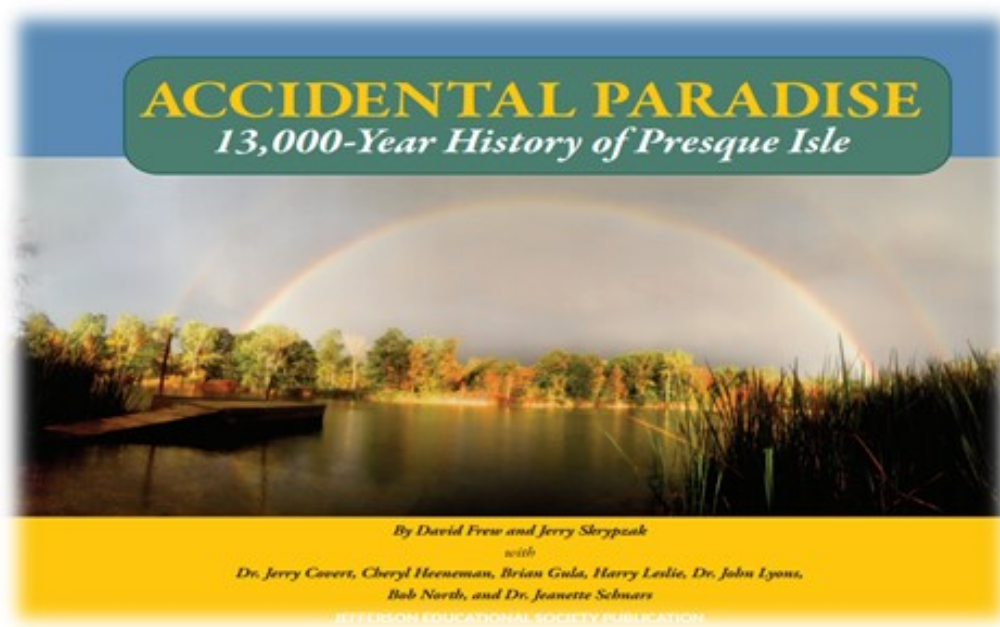
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*For a more detailed and technical history please see: Gosnell, Mariana (2017) "Ice: The Nature History and Uses of an Astonishing Substance" Chicago: University of Chicago Press ISBN 13-978-0-226-30496*

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## Accidental Paradise Available at TRECFC

*Accidental Paradise*  
by Dr. David Frew and Jerry Skrypzak



## Accidental Paradise Available at TRECFC

The much-anticipated new book on Presque Isle 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](http://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](http://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 *Wednesday through Sunday from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.*

For more information, send an email to [aperino@TREC.org](mailto: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.*



## In Case You Missed It

[President Biden’s Inaugural Address And What We Share](#) written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence Dr. Andrew Roth

[New Book on Presque Isle Belongs in Every Home](#) written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence Dr. Andrew Roth

[Finding the Forts: Schwinn Expands Our Territory](#) written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence Dr. David Frew.

