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## Quick, Timely Reads On the Waterfront

### Crosley: Much More Than an Odd 1950s Car

By David Frew, Scholar in Residence  
December 2025



*The 1948 Crosley convertible*

One of the neighbors had a red Crosley convertible, and he was happy to show it and its many “features” to anyone who asked. His 1948 model was one of a few thousand Crosleys built between 1939 and 1952. For us car-crazy kids, the Crosley seemed like a completely practical vehicle. Imagine a brand-new car for only about \$1,000. Great gas mileage. A convertible? Amazing. Crosley sold a number of different models, including a woodie station wagon and an open Jeep-like model. Something for everyone.

Like other manufacturers, Crosley ceased domestic production during World War II and returned production in 1946 with about 5,000 cars. Sadly, the Cincinnati, Ohio, company could not compete with Detroit’s Big Three automakers, which began manufacturing bigger and more comfortable vehicles that sold for just a few dollars more than the tiny 29 horsepower Crosley. In addition to being tiny, the Crosley was quirky. It could barely hold three people, had a hard time accelerating to speeds above 40 miles per hour, and sported a utilitarian interior. The company ceased production of automobiles in 1952, leaving a legacy for antique collectors.



*The 1949 Crosley station wagon*

The end of Crosley cars did not create a financial problem for company owner and serial entrepreneur Powel Crosley. He had imagined cars to be one of many retail products that he could design and sell, and the end of automobile manufacturing simply shifted his attention to other, and as it turned out, more important enterprises.

One of his first and best-known products was a household radio during the era when people were just beginning to listen to broadcasts and radio was exploding in popularity. His interest began when he tried to purchase a radio for his son only

to learn that existing options were wildly expensive, hard to find, and quirky. His reaction was to design and build a simpler and better one himself. Using that one as a prototype, he began production and eventually became national sales leader, offering reliable receivers for a very reasonable price. Crosley made millions of dollars on radios and was eventually inducted into the Radio Hall of Fame.



*The standard Crosley radio*

In his Cincinnati hometown, Crosley became most famous for being the owner of the local major league baseball franchise, the Cincinnati Reds, which played at Crosley Field. Crosley was not much of a baseball fan, but he sensed an untapped marketing opportunity. He imagined that attendance might be improved if games were played at night, but prior to his ownership, no major league stadiums had lights. Naturally, he changed that at Crosley field in the late 1930s, when he electrified the field.



*Powel Crosley inspects the new lighting at his Cincinnati Reds field.*

Sensing an opportunity in the wildly growing post-war consumer market, Crosley began to design and sell kitchen appliances. Why not? He had excess metalworking capacity left over from the former automobile production line. One of his most famous appliances was a refrigerator, the first model with shelves in the doors. He called it the “shelvador.”



*A magazine ad depicts the Crosley shelvador.*

From kitchen appliances he rapidly expanded to entire kitchens, including all-steel cupboards and countertops, and this is where I had a personal experience with Crosley. When we moved to Erie in 1970, we purchased a 1931-era home on the west side, and the real estate description advertised the “newly remodeled” kitchen. As I was to discover later, it was a Crosley kitchen.

Crosley was doing it again, shifting his automobile and steel-shaping capacity toward kitchen cupboards. Our home’s original 1930s-era kitchen had been equipped with floor-to-ceiling, wooden cupboards, which were built into the house as it was being constructed. Several neighbors still had original wooden cupboards. According to the salesperson who showed us the house, the old cupboards were too high and unwieldy, making it difficult to reach upper shelves, even with a ladder. Our modern kitchen, which had been added in 1955, was all steel, and much easier to clean. I originally had no idea of the connection between the kitchen cupboards and the quirky car that I had been attracted to as a boy, but I was about to learn.



*This 1953 Crosley model kitchen from an old catalog is almost identical to the one that greeted us in 1970 when we moved into our new home.*

Sometime around 1980, my wife Mary Ann and I decided that we did not like the steel kitchen. By that time, most neighborhood friends were replacing their original 1930 kitchen cupboards with attractive modern wooden ones and adding nice countertops. We decided to follow suit. After a few estimates, however, we wondered, was it worth it? Pausing the decision, we received a bid from a company that offered to reface our steel cupboard with wooden doors, but we were not pleased with their price or their product. And that was when I had an “inspirational” idea. I had some woodworking skills and tools, including a table saw. I could do a better job myself!

With the help of old friends, Dan and Tom Shade at Kraft Lumber, I ordered high-end wooden doors and hardwood strips that I bolted to the edges of the steel cupboards. Then after staining and varnishing the new wooden edges, I hinged the new doors into place and had a wooden kitchen for a fraction of the price. New granite countertops added to the aesthetics.

As I unscrewed the original steel doors, I noticed that each of them had a tiny, printed plate stating that it was manufactured by the Crosley Company of Cincinnati, Ohio. I wondered? Could there have been a connection? It was long before Google, so it took a while, but when I finally did, I had mixed feelings. The same company: kitchen cabinets and quirky cars.

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*Author's note: Powel Crosley, millionaire and genius entrepreneur, died in 1961. Sadly, my friend, Dan Shade, died a few months ago. His brother, Tom, is still*



*with us. These days I sit in the kitchen, looking at wooden cupboards, thinking about Crosley cars and old friends.*

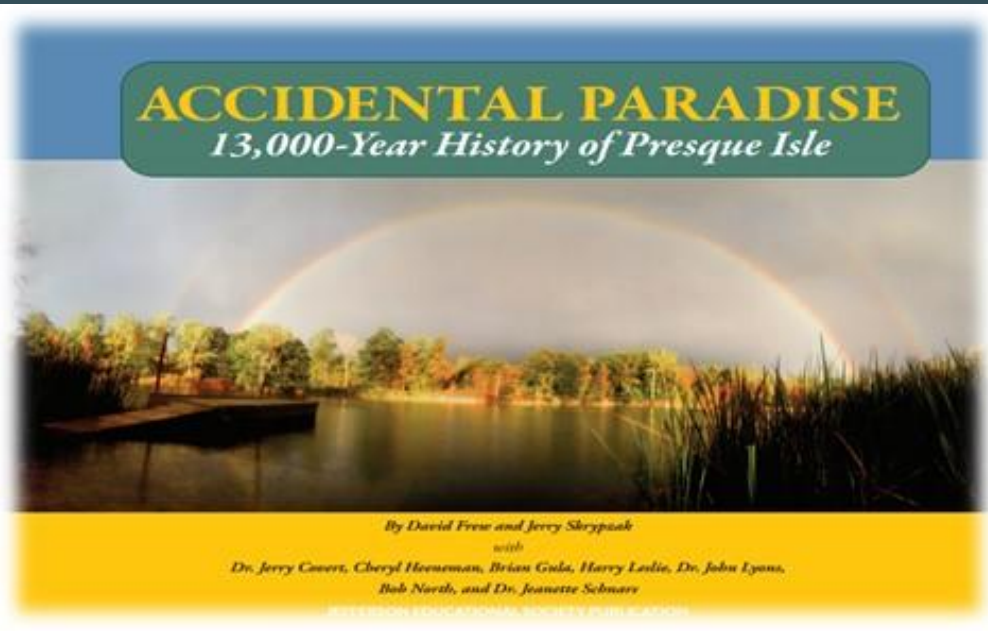
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### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*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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