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## Quick, Timely Reads On the Waterfront

### Ridin' the Rails: Bay Rats and Trains

By David Frew  
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*Our dream locomotives were the streamlined passenger trains of the 1950s.*

Railroad trains were an important part of life for Bay Rats. Our bayfront paradise, during the era before the new Bayfront Parkway, was crowded with railroad cars.

They were mostly filled with coal that was being delivered to the docks. We watched as locomotives delivered and then shuttled coal cars around the docks and marveled at how adept trainmen were at connecting and disconnecting strings of either full or empty cars. At the time there were a dozen tracks between the base of the bluffs where we hung out and the docks, our regular territory. And the best way to get to the docks was by hopping across the cars.

We would perennially climb over parked coal cars on our way to the docks, which was a trigger for the ever-present railroad detectives to show up and chase us. Dueling with railroad detectives became a sport. They drove easily identified, plain automobiles with blackwall tires and small hubcaps. We would see them coming from “a mile away,” and be ready for them. Railroad cops were generally overweight, in terrible physical condition, and always wearing clunky leather shoes. There was literally no chance they could catch us if we ran. So, we always ran, as they yelled various threats. Technically, it was illegal to cross the railroad tracks, but it was either that or walk almost a mile out of the way. For us, the direct route was a moral imperative.

After numerous clever escapes, the railroad cops began to catch on to our tactics. We would generally run south toward the overgrown bluffs, where we could easily melt into the trees and bushes. En route we were sure to climb up and over several “parked” coal cars. Eventually the cops came up with a more sensible approach than chasing us on foot. While one of them would seem to be in pursuit, the other would drive around to the top of the bluffs near Liberty Street, hoping we would walk right into his waiting handcuffs. But we were usually aware of that tactic and would trick the guy who was in a car waiting by running along the paths on the side of the bluffs until we reached Cascade Street, after which we would melt into the playground at Second and Cascade and look like all the other innocent kids. While we never got caught, there were stories of hapless friends who were apprehended, usually by giving themselves up. Their parents had to pay \$25 fines.

Our railroad explorations were not limited to the tracks on the north side of the bluffs. The most exciting trains transited the tracks south of us and naturally we went to see them, as well. The high-speed tracks did not feature rows of coal cars being shuttled around at low speeds. They were railroad superhighways where fast trains went back and forth, heading to far-off places like Chicago and New York City. We were awestruck by the power and speed of the trains that we saw rushing along the southern tracks, especially the passenger locomotives. We often sat near the sides of the high-speed tracks just watching. Sometimes we counted the number of cars on the longest ones. Once in a while, we placed pennies on the tracks so that after the train ran over them we could collect souvenir-flattened coins. Every kid should have one!

Parents told stories about the famous Nickle Plate tracks, which were just south of West 12th Street and the excitement surrounding a land speed record once set

by Train #999 on a run between Albany and Chicago. That portion of the tracks, which was at “lake level,” was ideal for such an event and the publicity helped affirm Nickle Plate’s tag line, “fast freight.” The event became an international newspaper headline and took place in 1893. The Nickle Plate train was clocked at an astonishing 112.5 miles per hour, a land speed record at the time. The train that achieved that remarkable record is currently preserved and on display at Chicago’s Museum of Science and Industry on the “South Side.”



*Nickle Plate Engine #999*

Train travel was also a common experience for many of us. There was regular service west and one of the guys had grandparents in Ohio who he often visited via the railroad. On several occasions my grandmother took me on train trips to visit family in Warren, Pennsylvania. It was end-times for passenger railroad service on the old Philadelphia & Erie route, which had been taken over by the Pennsylvania Railroad. The cars were only half full and they plodded along rough old tracks that everyone complained about at a frustratedly slow pace. But it was a train ride, and it was exciting.

The “Warren Express” carried packages and other freight so that when it arrived at a station it had to be unloaded, making the time schedule less than reliable. During my brief tenure as a passenger, the passenger station at Warren ended so that my grandmother and I were forced to exit at Corry, where we had to be picked up and driven the rest of the way. The station at Corry was much bigger and more important than the one in Warren since Corry’s identity was that of a railroad boomtown. The closure of the Warren station eventually led to us traveling by Greyhound Bus instead. Faster but far less exciting.



*The once-popular train line from Erie rumbled through dozens of familiar small towns on its way to Warren.*



*The style of train that made the run from Erie to Corry and Warren*



*The Warren railroad station, now closed, was close to the river on Chestnut Street.*

My enthusiasm for trains has never gone away. Having both a son and grandson who live on the West Coast (San Francisco and Oregon) has provided the perfect rationalization for cross-country train rides. Mary Ann and I usually fly out to see them and then take a train home. Having a daughter in Chicago provides a place to leave a car while we are traveling.

Amtrak offers two routes that span the continent, connecting Chicago to the West Coast: (1) the Empire Builder, and (2) the California Zephyr. The first is a more northerly route. It links Chicago with Portland and Seattle. While that route is beautiful, most railroad aficionados generally agree that the California Zephyr, which connects Chicago with Oakland (Emeryville), is Amtrak's best route. The California Zephyr climbs up and over the Sierra Nevada's, passing through the infamous Donner Pass, and then climbs up and over the Rocky Mountains, skirting Reno, and Lake Tahoe on its route. We always book a room, which includes the cost of meals in the dining car. That trip takes three days and two overnights, which seems off-putting when I describe it to friends, but after repeating the trip several times I still find myself plastered to the window in our room, gazing at the most beautiful scenery imaginable. And best of all, I'm "ridin the rails."



*The route of the Zephyr*



*An Amtrak California Zephyr climbs up a mountain pass*

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*Author's note: I hope that the statute of limitations on my railroad crime spree has expired and that a reader or two might be inspired to take a train trip.*

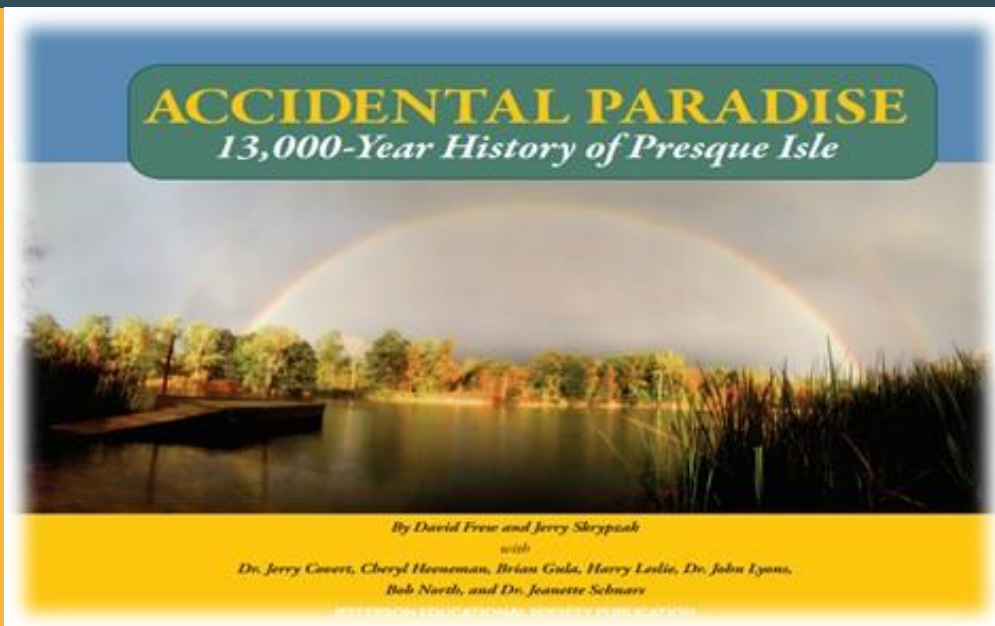
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*Accidental Paradise*  
by Dr. David Frew and Jerry Skrypzak



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