

# Quick, Timely Reads

## On the Waterfront

### Warning Signs: Special Bay Rat Invitations

By David Frew  
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*Editor's note: Following is an On the Waterfront Classic by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence David Frew. The Jefferson first published it in October 2021.*

*The eastern Cascade Dock of the 1950s housed mountains of sand. It is shown here with two old ships (the Rockwood and Hydro) waiting to be scrapped and rows of coal cars in the foreground.*

The best way to assure that something would soon be overrun by Bay Rats was to put up any kind of warning sign. “No Trespassing?” We asked why and became inspired to find out. “Do Not ...” was a challenge. Why not? We asked. We were not criminals, just curious and skeptical. And why not? At school we were learning that those characteristics were common among adventurers, entrepreneurs, and other heroes. Naturally, we fancied ourselves to be heroic as we patrolled the environs of the northwest bayfront in Erie, Pennsylvania, learning stuff.

Some of the most inspiring mysteries during those days were connected to the Cascade Docks, so we were drawn there as if by some magnetic, spiritual force. There were three different piers, and each had its own distinct personality.

The western dock was populated by Perry Ship Repair, but that company concentrated its operations on the east side of the pier, leaving the western edge of the dock to the activities of fishermen as well as us kids. The central dock was shared by Perry, which needed the deep-water basin between the two piers to float the ships that it was working on, and E.E. Austin, a cement company that was a veritable beehive of commercial activity. Cars, trucks, and cement mixers were constantly coming and going.

Our favorite pier, however, was the eastern dock, which was a semi-ignored sand dock that was serving as a spillover storage area for Erie Sand and Gravel Company. The west side of that pier was filled with large piles of sand, just waiting to be climbed and explored. As a further inducement to us there was a strip of trees and vegetation on the east side of the pier. Perfect cover for strategic sand pile invasions.

There were “No Trespassing” signs planted in the ground on all sides of the highly enticing sand pile, and when we first began exploring and climbing, employees would yell at us and chase us away. But we soon learned that if we came in the evening, we could have the place to ourselves without annoying interruptions. We interpreted that as meaning that the “No Trespassing” signs actually meant no trespassing during the day. And once we learned to limit sand pile climbing to the evening hours, we had the place to ourselves. Imagine the joy. Climbing to the top of a mountain of pure white sand that seemed to be thousands of feet high, then throwing ourselves from the peak and into thin air, only to land unhurt in soft sand. Sometimes the landings resulted in one of us sinking almost waist deep. Hmm.

In August 1994, I learned the reason for the danger signs on the Cascade Dock sand piles, about 40 years too late. I was at Long Point, Ontario with my friend, Dave Stone, and after returning from a day of hunting for shipwreck remains, we were greeted by Dave’s wife Jean, who told us of a nearby tragedy. Four young boys had died that afternoon while climbing on the sand at Port Burwell’s Sand Hill Park.

The park is a privately operated beachside attraction built around a series of Lake Erie sand dunes that tower more than 350 feet above the water. Earlier that day, the boys, ages 9 to 11, had ignored warning signs and climbed about halfway up a sand dune that rose above the beach. Then quite suddenly the shelf of sand where they were sitting collapsed and they were instantly buried by tons of sand. Bystanders rushed to their aid and dug frantically with their hands or crude beach toys, but by the time the boys had been located and freed from the sand it was too late. The Ontario Provincial Police speculated that relatively high water levels as well as a recent rainstorm had destabilized the dune, causing it to collapse on the boys.

These days my reactions to giant sand piles have shifted. I no longer think of them as opportunities to climb or play “king of the hill.” The once daring Bay Rat has become a grumpy old man who yells at kids who are climbing on them. And at parents who are watching. The most obvious sand hills these days are at Presque Isle. Mounds of replacement sand waiting to be used for beach replacement.

There are no more accessible sand piles on Erie’s bayfront. Modern aggregate companies have compressed them near the channel entrance, and they are under tight security. And the former “East Cascade Dock” has been redeveloped into Liberty Park, a lovely park with playground equipment, a concert venue, and ferry landing.

*The old Bay Rat sand dock has been transformed by bayfront development. It has become Liberty Park, a beautiful concert venue and an amazing improvement in public use.*

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*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](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 *daily from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.*

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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