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Quick, Timely Reads
On the Waterfront

Reverence for Place:
May 25 Jefferson Program Follow-up

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.

Editor's note: If you missed the Jefferson "On the Waterfront" program on May 25, this essay will serve as a summary. If you were there, it details the final portion of the talk.

Iroquois longhouses were abandoned every seven years to protect the Earth.

After two years and more than 100 "On the Waterfront" essays I paused to chat with Jefferson staff members and ask an important question. What was it that everyone seemed to like about these essays? I began the process of writing these short reflective (nostalgic) pieces at the beginning of Covid-19 largely as a therapeutic outlet for my writing, which suddenly seemed to be less in demand during the pandemic. At the beginning I wondered if anyone would be interested but the response was overwhelmingly positive. Finally, after two years of essays it seemed that we should develop a special program that would be intended to explain the "On the Waterfront" essay series and its apparent popularity.

To prepare for the Jefferson program, I took a deep dive into the psychology literature and found an "apparent" theoretical explanation. Nostalgia. The literature was filled with discussions of "nostalgia," which could be summarized as a celebration of the "good old days." Studies focused on the proclivity for people to recall the best of the past and to celebrate their recollections. Images of Norman Rockwell and covers of the Saturday Evening Post come to mind in considering the imagery of nostalgia. Interestingly, the psychological literature seems to have reversed itself over the years with respect to the impact of nostalgia. In the early days nostalgia seemed to be touted as a temptation toward a dysfunctional descent into a troublesome and unrealistic set of distractions from reality. Defense mechanisms. There were warnings regarding the many ways in which a descent onto nostalgia might distract from practical problem solving. An escape from reality. Reading these early opinions made me wonder if my essays could have been doing more harm than good.

In recent years, however, the general opinion of nostalgia seems to have shifted from negative to positive. Contemporary researchers are suggesting that the "old days" may, in fact, offer lessons in values that have positive applications to modern life. This 180-degree turn in the literature seems to have been connected with COVID.

As I continued to search for explanations for the positive reactions to "On the Waterfront," however, it seemed that something more than just the power of nostalgia was driving reader reactions. Something that connected the power of nostalgia with the familiarity of old neighborhoods and their memories. Just as I was struggling to think of a way to summarize and finalize the May "On the Waterfront" Jefferson program, an old familiar song began to play on Sirius radio. Opening guitar chords from "The Weight" by The Band filled the room where I was working and propelled me back into the old days. It simultaneously reminded me of the recent work of Robbie Robertson, virtuoso guitarist and songwriter. Personal nostalgia? The haunting use of the "C sharp minor" cord following a resonant "A" cord makes "The Weight" absolutely recognizable, even after all of these years since its 1968 release. A signature Robbie Robertson sound from the 1960s.

A young Robbie Robertson, at right, with Rick Danko in 1970

The entry road to Magnolia Plantation near Charleston, South Carolina

My connection to Robbie Robertson will always be associated with Port Dover, Ontario, a town that has become a second home. Robertson, who grew up on the Iroquois Six Nations Reservation just south of Port Dover, was drawn to the Summer Garden, a concert and dance venue at the lakeside town. He was there every time Ronnie Hawkins played. An aspiring guitar player and songwriter, 14-year-old Robertson was fascinated by transplanted American Ronnie Hawkins and his band when they played. They were the "house band" at the Summer Garden, a sprawling concert venue on the beach. Eventually, the Hawks, Ronnie Hawkins' backup group, decided that Ontario was too "different" for their tastes. With the exception of Levon Helm, they departed, returning to their homes in the American South. When that happened, Robertson convinced Hawkins to hire him as a bass and guitar player and to bring several of his Ontario musical friends into a new backup band. Robertson and his friends originally used the "The Hawks" as their name but after Hawkins decided to withdraw from the group and go on his own, they eventually changed their name to "The Band."

By an odd stroke of fortune, Bob Dylan learned about The Band and came to Ontario to listen to them play (Dylan's manager was from Toronto). It was the time in Dylan's career when he was planning a shift from acoustic to electric music and he offered Robbie Robertson the opportunity to join him in the transition. Robertson refused to join Dylan without the rest of his group and Dylan finally accepted. As a result, "Bob Dylan and The Band" was born. Early reaction to Dylan having gone electric was negative and Robertson and his friends were discouraged by audience reactions. Eventually, however, audiences warmed to the new hybrid Dylan sounds and shortly afterward The Band went solo and began to enjoy great success.

Robbie Robertson with Ronnie Hawkins

Robertson with film director Martin Scorsese celebrating an anniversary of "The Last Waltz"

During the late 1970s, and at the absolute peak of their success, Robbie Robertson announced that he was through with touring. He told observers that he was convinced that the road life of a rock & roller was dysfunctional and would eventually kill all of them. His decision angered most of the members of The Band, and Levon Helm in particular, who sadly harbored a grudge until he died. It was Robertson's idea to punctuate the end of the The Band's touring days with a final grand concert and he contacted film producer, Martin Scorsese, to arrange the event, which was filmed and called "The Last Waltz." That documentary film is widely available and still worth viewing. The signature event attracted dozens of additional musicians who appeared on stage in California with The Band during their last public concert as a way of paying tribute to their work.

"The Last Waltz" was not the end of Robertson's career. Instead, it signaled a transition from his life as a rock & roll road musician toward more serous artistic contributions. Connections with Martin Scorsese opened avenues toward filmmaking and writing. His most commercially successful work involved writing soundtracks for several successful films, including "Raging Bull," "Gangs of New York," "Wolf of Wall Street" and "Phenomenon." As he gained notoriety for film scores, Robertson was asked to collaborate with other artists on new songs and recordings. His partners included such diverse recording stars as Neil Diamond, Eric Clapton, George Harrison, Van Morison, Joni Mitchell, and U2. Robertson's contributions included songwriting, vocal work, and a number of guitar tracks.

But his most insightful and thoughtful work can be found in his writing, where he explains the gradual return to his Native American roots. In his 2016 book, "Testimony," a retrospective on his career, Robertson discusses his "awakening" in the American South during an early trip to the Mississippi Delta. Traveling with Levon Helm and Ronne Hawkins, he describes the first trip that he had ever taken from Ontario and his impressions as a young boy of only 18 with the American

South, cradle of folk and blues music. Arriving in an entirely foreign place, Robertson talks about "feeling" the powerful musical and cultural identity of a place that was so incredibly different from his own life in Ontario that it provided an awakening.

In a strange way it took that trip for Robertson to understand his own native heritage and how powerful the impact of life on the reservation at Brantford, Ontario, just north of Port Dover, had been. It is in the context of growing up and of living in a particular "place" that Robertson discusses the importance of "place." In Mississippi, Robertson was able to feel the rhythms of the culture and begin to understand how his life in Ontario had influenced him. In his writing he introduces and examines "reverence for place," defining it as learning to appreciate the influences that the place where a person grows up is extremely important. Since Robertson's self-proclaimed, great awakening in the American South, he has been propelled to examine his own life as a Native American. This journey led to a long series of projects that he has directed, orchestrated, or influenced. One of the most important was "Hiawatha and Great Peacemaker," a book that he published in 2015. The Hiawatha project included recordings of traditional songs sung in native dialect. In addition to the dozens of projects that he has supported regarding the Iroquois Six Nations and the Brantford Reservation, Robertson has very recently become involved in the Chaco Canyon project in New Mexico. Chaco Canyon was a mysterious central meeting ground for North American natives, which anthropologists have recently been dissecting.

During his recent explorations of Native American culture and life, Robertson suggests that having been in North America for 13,000 years or more, aboriginal people may have developed a more powerful understanding of and a "respect for place" than their recent European-transplant neighbors. European arrival (1492) was relatively recent, only about 500 years as opposed to 13,000. In terms of elapsed generations (a generation is about 30 years), a common anthropological marker, Europeans have only been here for 17 generations as compared to Native Americans who have been here for more than 40.

It took groups of migrating Native Americans (as well as groups of Europeans) many generations to make their way across the continent and settle in the places where they ultimately chose to stay, but according to Robinson those locations may have been more "final" and sacred for Native Americans than for Europeans. Native people stopped at places that seemed physically perfect for supporting life and being aesthetically positive. They stayed and built communities. Europeans, on the other hand, were more likely to have been discontented with arrival destinations. They were constantly imagining and hearing about better circumstances, which were generally in the "west." Natives concentrated on building community while transplanted Europeans seemed more interested in moving on to the "next better location." They did not originally experience the "reverence for place" that was an internalized instinct for Native Americans.

When Robertson's masterpiece song, "The Weight," was released in 1968, he was asked about the meaning of its lyrics. And the 25-year-old songwriter responded that it had just "come to him" during his trip to the American South but that he, himself, did not know where the words had come from. He characterized himself as a conduit through which automatic writing had flowed. A more philosophical Robbie Robertson at age 70-plus had other thoughts. Even though his artistic portfolio has expanded geometrically since the late 1960s, the meaning of the lyrics continues as an ongoing query. These days Robinson suggests that being raised bi-culturally between the Toronto home of his father and the Brantford Reservation of his mother and her extended family, caused him to be internally confused and caught between traditional Iroquois spirituality and the Protestant religion that he had been exposed to in the city. His arrival in the Mississippi Delta suddenly threw that dichotomy into shock. It was in the South that he began to understand "reverence for place" and to see that the "feeling" could apply to anywhere that people were established and happy. It was an experience that he recalled as a boy in Brantford but not in Toronto. And it was an overwhelmingly powerful feeling that he had experienced in the South.

"Pulled into Nazareth, was 'feelin' about half-past dead,
Just need a place, where I can lay my head."
–– Opening stanza from "The Weight," by Robbie Robertson

Reverence for place was at the root of the song and became the driving force in Robertson's return to his native roots. Robertson now speculates that it was his dual exposure to Protestant as well as Iroquoian spirituality that spawned the lyrics. Nazareth, the actual home of Mary and Joseph, and then Jesus, symbolized a spiritually powerful place where people are happy to live. The Nazareth feeling came to Robbie as he experienced the South and that feeling awakened the old Iroquois feelings of Brantford and his Indian grandmother's theology.

Perhaps it is this “Reverence for Place” in addition to “Nostalgia” that explains some of the positive reactions to the “On the Waterfront” essays. Did many of us, growing up in simpler times, actually love our childhood neighborhoods as well as the process of learning to negotiate them? If this helps to explain things it may also help to explain the common experience of readers telling me that they did not grow up in my neighborhood or even in Erie but that they could still relate. Perhaps they were experiencing reverence for place.

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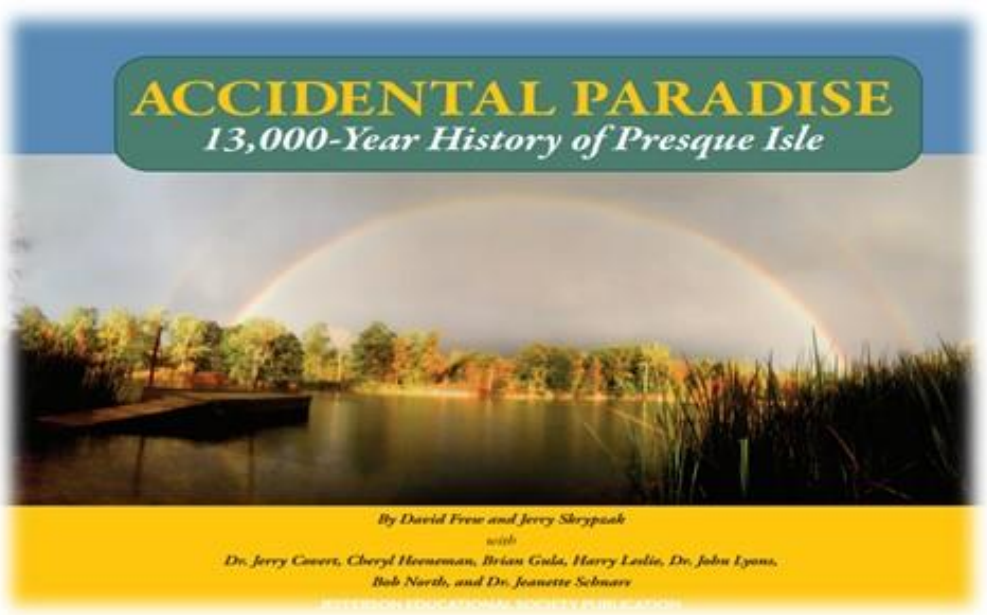
by Dr. David Frew and Jerry Skrypzak



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.***

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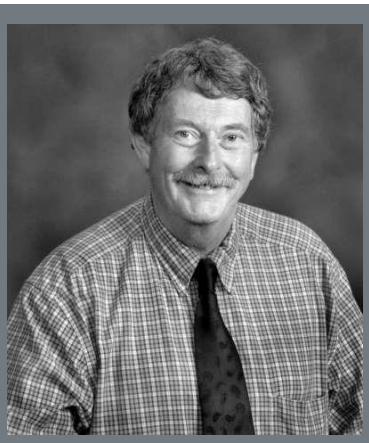
To watch "Accidental Paradise: Stories Behind The Stories" click **here**.

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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