

## Quick, Timely Reads On the Waterfront

### Frew Family Connections and Roots *From Wilmington, Delaware to Erie's West Fourth Street*

By David Frew  
June 2021

*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.*



*Today's trendy and beautiful Riverfront Park in Wilmington, Delaware bears little resemblance to the makeshift, spillover port downstream from Philadelphia where my family landed in the late 1700s.*

There have been a number of powerful connections between Erie, Pennsylvania, and Wilmington, Delaware in my life. They began with my own immigrant family. The Frews were Scottish Highlanders who specialized in hardwood lumbering near Inverness. They were loyal members of the Fraser of Lovat Clan. After the Battle of Culloden (1746), the British disallowed clan activities and made life difficult for Scottish loyalists. According to my grandparents, we were eventually "forced to flee" to Ireland, a short ferry trip from our home near Inverness. The ultimate plan was to leave Europe and come to America, but the trip took much longer than had been anticipated. The first issue was raising the required money

to make the trip, which took several years. But then, just as the family was ready to leave for the Americas, the Revolutionary War broke out and they were stuck in Ireland for several more years.

The Frews were finally able to depart Ireland in the late 1700s. They crossed the Atlantic with another Scottish family, the Russells, joining thousands of immigrants who came to America under similar circumstances: Scotland to Ireland to America. Since they were Scottish but traveling from Ireland, sometimes after spending years there working to save money for the trip, they were commonly called “Scots-Irish.” That term was insulting to my grandparents who did not want to be associated with Ireland. It is estimated that 200,000 such immigrants came to the United States before the Revolutionary War with an additional 100,000 arriving after the conflict had ended.

A long and uncomfortable Atlantic passage delivered the Frews and Russells to Wilmington, Delaware, which became their home for several years. Philadelphia was America’s biggest and busiest seaport at the time and Wilmington was a spillover port just downriver. One Russell family member had been to America and back and reported that the very best place for Highland Scots that was interested in hardwood lumbering was Warren, Pennsylvania, and that was their ultimate destination. But before the two families could leave for the “promised land,” they had to settle in Wilmington to work, earn money for the trip across Pennsylvania, and make preparations. The fathers of the Frew and Russell families were foresters who knew how to fell trees, mill them into boards, and do rough carpentry and cabinetmaking. When they arrived at Wilmington, they and their sons worked at local lumber mills to earn money while they dedicated free time to constructing wagons and collapsible rafts for their anticipated trip to the West.

While their story as well as their planned route across Pennsylvania seems unique, it was not. They were part of a huge wave of immigrant settlers moving along established American trails and before leaving Wilmington they knew exactly what was needed. The plan was to use wagons for following the main trail that ran next to the Susquehanna River and to transfer the wagons onto rafts, which would be pushed upstream or drifted downstream on rivers and creeks when there was flat water. Transitions were time-consuming and difficult, however, and to accomplish them two families made protracted stops at Danville and Driftwood, Pennsylvania (home of cowboy film star Tom Mix) and at Port Allegheny, New York, upstream from Warren. Some of the “stops” lasted a year or more.

The most popular trail followed the Susquehanna River and many of the early settlers used wagon and raft combinations as they made their way toward the Ohio Valley. The pathway was an established Indian trade route that had been developed by the Susquehannock Indians. The Indians who inhabited that region of North America were also called the “Conestogas” by settlers because of their wagon-building skills. Interestingly, the Susquehannock (Conestoga) Indians were the most important trading partners of the local Eriez people and their trade routes reached well into the Great Lakes region.



*The confluence of Conewango Creek and the Allegheny River in Warren*

Both the Frew and Russell families were fortunate to have two grown sons who were able to join their fathers, creating a work party of six. Family manpower allowed them to earn money as they made the difficult trip through the wilderness. And the “human power” was to become essential at the end of the trip. After pushing west from Wilmington for seven years, the final and easiest portion of the trip was a downstream run to Warren in the Allegheny River. When the two-family rafts, containing wagons, tools, clothing, and supplies, finally floated into the city of Warren, however, it became apparent that the Frews and Russells had arrived too late to take advantage of the best possible land. Warren was already overcrowded with settlers. With a crude map of the countryside and its waterways in hand, they made a decision that was only made possible by the strength of the six able-bodied men aboard the rafts. From the center of Warren, where the Allegheny meets the Conewango, they reversed course and began to paddle, push, and winch their way up Conewango Creek, pushing east into less settled land.



*The Holland America Land Company building where my (several greats) grandfather, John Frew, hiked in the early 1800s to purchase land still graces downtown Batavia, New York. It has been dubbed the “Birthplace of Upstate New York.”*

The up-current trip out of Warren was agonizing. The travelers tied ropes to trees and winched the rafts forward as they alternatively poled and got out of the rafts to push. The two rafts made their way east toward unoccupied and less expensive land, sometimes at the rate of only a few miles per day. After 10 days, they reached an apparently unsettled stand of hardwood along the banks of the Conewango, where they found a large tributary creek that could be used for powering a lumber mill. They stopped there and tied up the rafts while the two oldest boys walked to Batavia, New York while the rest of the family began to clear and plant land near the creek bank. As the boys hiked to the Holland America Land Company office to buy the land, the family waited, hoping that they would be able to complete their claim. It was an example of “settler faith.” That patch of forest eventually became Frewsburg, New York, and the creek where a

mill was built to power the lumber cutting operation was named Frew's Run.



*Downtown Frewsburg, New York*

Fast forward 100 years or so. It is the late 1940s and I am living on West Fourth Street in Erie, thanks to a grandfather who left Frewsburg and came here to work for Erie Insurance. Our next-door neighbors were the Modicas and their youngest son, Johnny, was playing football for Cathedral Prep. The most important game that year, for my family, was the one in which the Prep Ramblers played the Warren Dragons. Details of the game are fuzzy. I was young when my father took me to the game and my recollections have been infected by the fact that the game was revisited and re-told dozens of times as I was growing up. It was an important family milestone because my cousin, Phil, was playing for Warren and our next-door neighbor, Johnny Modica, was playing for Prep. It may have been a pre-season exhibition game since it was played in August. We drove to Warren (a few miles from Frewsburg) to see the game. The Warren field was less formal than Veterans Stadium in Erie. There were no bleachers or entry gates, just a big open field, where spectators gathered on the sidelines. Prep slaughtered the Warren team, and my cousin, Phil, often joked about the mismatch over the years, as well as the size and speed of Prep's players, who were enormous compared to the Warren Dragons. Phil, who started at guard, was only 5-feet-5 and weighed less than 140 pounds. A lineman? George Hesch, who later starred as a basketball player at Gannon and subsequently became head coach, was the running back.

Meanwhile, Johnny Modica became a star running back at Prep. We watched him play several times that season and, according to my father, he was destined to play at the collegiate level. Instead, he volunteered to serve in the Korean War after graduation, serving in the Navy for more than three years. When he was discharged, Johnny returned to Erie, lived at home and went to Edinboro, where he majored in art and played football. He was a star running back at Edinboro and we went to see him play but my strongest recollection of him was as an artist. During the summers, he would paint in his backyard and I often bothered him as he worked on several canvases at a time. My favorite was a large portrait of Pagliacci, the sad clown, which he framed and gave to his mother. That painting graced Mrs. Modica's home for decades.

When he graduated from college, John Modica took a job in Wilmington, Delaware as the art teacher and head football coach at Brandywine, a new high school. His coaching dilemma was that the new school began by accepting only freshmen with a plan to add another class each year. John was given the option to begin his football program by only playing at the junior varsity level. Instead, he opted to compete with his all-freshman team at the varsity level. The first year was difficult but by the second season, his experienced players managed to compete, despite having only freshmen and sophomores. In his third year, he

won the state championship and began a multi-year run in which Brandywine football became a dynasty. While he was teaching, he managed to earn a master's degree in art from Temple University. When John Modica finally retired from teaching, the school honored him by naming their new all-purpose athletic stadium "John Modica Field."



*The Scoreboard at Brandywine Field in Wilmington, Delaware*

John Modica left teaching but he did not retire. He was asked by the governor of Delaware to become the State Secretary of Parks and Recreation, a post he held for more than a decade. His selection clearly was based upon his coaching success as well as his outgoing personality. His shift into politics was as successful as his stellar coaching career as he propelled Delaware's parks into the modern era, expanding and growing them significantly during his tenure.

When I was in charge of Gannon's MBA Program during the 1970s, the faculty developed a capstone course for graduate students who were at the end of their curricula. The course featured a community-oriented, team consulting program in which MBA students were organized into project teams and assigned to real-world projects. This exercise class allowed the university to contribute to the community as it encouraged students to diagnose and solve complex business problems. During the early 1980s, I was contacted by Gene Giza, Presque Isle State Park's superintendent, who described a complicated park management problem that seemed perfect for the capstone students. It was a multi-faceted problem and a solution had the potential to advance the operations and the revenues of the park; a perfect challenge for students hoping to move into public service. As the students were working with Gene, we became acquainted and I spent time at his Presque Isle office. During one of our discussions, Gene mentioned he had grown up in Wilmington, Delaware and that he had worked for the Delaware Department of Parks and Recreation for more than a decade.

Surprised to learn his connection to Delaware, I asked why he had moved to Pennsylvania and the answer stunned me. He told me about having political ambitions; hoping that he might advance to the position of department head (secretary). And that was when he shared a story about John Modica. He knew that John had grown up in Erie but did not realize how well I knew him. When John was appointed to be director of the department where he had worked for more than a decade, Gene was disappointed that a director had not been promoted from within the department and decided it was time to leave for a system that might be less political. That was when he shifted to Pennsylvania's Department of Conservation and Natural Resources.

A few years later, it happened again. When a new neighbor moved into the house

across the street, I noticed a Delaware bumper sticker on his car. After introducing myself and learning that he had grown up in Wilmington, I asked if he knew John Modica.

“Coach?” he responded. “Played football for him.”

Small world connections were demonstrated one more time! Dr. Chuck Watkins had come to Erie to run the Watson Curtze Museum (before the merger with Erie County Historical Society), and, like Gene Giza, he eventually asked if my MBA students could help. They later worked with him to develop a strategic plan for the museum. Chuck had continued his education at the University of Delaware, earning a Ph. D. in museum studies before coming to Erie. He became not just a good friend but a wonderful mentor for Gannon graduate students.

John Modica served two successive Delaware governors. After his tenure as Secretary of Delaware’s Department of Parks and Recreation, he was asked by the next governor to be Secretary of the Department of Human Resources, quite a challenge since that assignment was so different from his lifetime of sports and coaching. But he rose to the occasion once more and did that job with enthusiasm and skill, completing another eight years of service to the state of Delaware.



*John Modica*

I stayed in touch with John over the years as he continued to visit Erie until his mother, Celia, passed away in 1988. He would come for a few weeks each summer and I would make sure to see him. He stayed at his old Fourth Street home when he visited and I welcomed the opportunities to sit at his mother’s kitchen table and chat like I had when I was growing up.

Characteristic of so many Italian homes, the Modica kitchen was the epicenter of everything. John would sit at the table each summer and after asking about my own work, he would fill me in on the details of his career in Delaware as well as the growth of his family. At the time it did not mean too much to me, but John often mentioned his relationship with a Delaware politician named Joe Biden. John Modica knew him well and regularly complimented his dedication to the people of Wilmington.

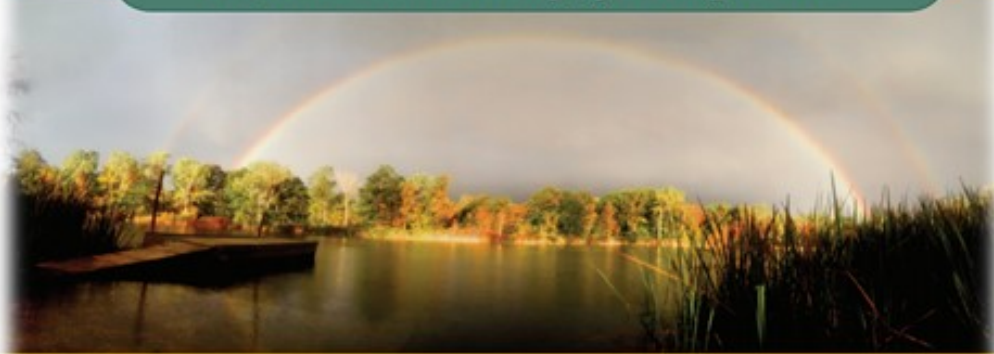
---

## Accidental Paradise Available at TRECF

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

# ACCIDENTAL PARADISE

*13,000-Year History of Presque Isle*



*By David Frew and Jerry Skrypzak*

*with*

*Dr. Jerry Covert, Cheryl Heeseeman, Brian Gula, Harry Leslie, Dr. John Lyons,  
Bob North, and Dr. Jeanette Schnars*

JERSEYSON EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY PUBLICATION

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](#).

Subscribe to JES Publications Emails!

Subscribe to Book Notes Emails!

## 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**

[Celebrate Juneteenth on Saturday](#) written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence Dr. Andrew Roth

[Boarders: A Bay-Rat Phenomenon](#) written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence Dr. David Frew.



Jefferson Educational Society | [jeserie.org](http://jeserie.org)

