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Quick, Timely Reads
On the Waterfront

The Front Porch: 1950s' Social Media

By David Frew
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The traditional, metal porch glider

Like many bayfront neighborhood homes, my house had a large front porch. On the first warm weekend of the year the family would converge on this sacred house appendage with scrub brushes, and soap to clean and shine the floor, railings, and furniture. We were also fortunate to have a metal glider, which would be adorned

with comfortable cushions each spring. Some of the really lucky “porch dwellers” in the neighborhood had something that was even better; a wooden swing suspended by metal chains hooked to eye bolts in the ceiling. Porch swings were uber-gliders. One gentle foot push and occupants were treated to near perpetual motion. Noiseless and soft.

Many happy 1950s hours were filled with family, sitting on that porch. As neighbors wandered by we always reached out to them and often invited them to join us. Just sitting and talking. Our porch contained a window that led to the living room. We often opened the window just a crack to thread an extension cord from an inside wall outlet to the small table that graced the space between two metal chairs and steel glider. The table was large enough to hold a pitcher of iced tea or lemonade and a half dozen glasses. It was the epicenter of family entertainment. Alternatively, it could hold enough playing cards to host a game of pinochle or canasta, contests that we played for hours on the porch.

If there was a Cleveland Indians baseball game on during any given evening, playing cards would be displaced by a small radio that would be tuned into the exciting action. Somehow conversations, even when there were visitors, would continue while the game was in progress. Everyone understood how to be quiet during critical moments. Runners on base, Al Rosen at the plate, or a double play. Since almost everyone in the neighborhood was an Indians fan, radio echoes reverberated through the neighborhood and were amplified by dozens of nearby broadcasts.

The most important aspect of our front porch (and many of the others in the neighborhood), however, was its role as a gathering place. As neighbors wandered aimlessly past the house, many following the Italian custom of the “*passégiata*” (walking aimlessly along a regular route with no purpose other than to meet and greet friends and neighbors) we would always invite people to join us on the porch. If several showed up, we dragged folding chairs out to accommodate them. We shared iced tea, lemonade, or other beverages, and sometimes repeat guests would arrive, bringing drinks or snacks to share.

Politics, world events, sports, and other topics were celebrated on that porch and kids sat patiently, listening and learning from adults. It was an ongoing civic lesson. Those were such wonderful times for everyone that it is difficult to understand how the art of porch-sitting disappeared.



The classic wooden porch swing

As I survey my current neighborhood, which was developed in the early 1930s, it is easy to see what happened to porch-sitting. It was architecturally extinguished. My neighborhood, which is almost as house-dense as the bayfront area where I grew up, has very few porches. Most houses were built without them. And the few that were designed into my “modern” west side neighborhood are tiny by comparison to the massive porches that graced front expanses of turn-of-the-century homes. Barely big enough for two small chairs. In addition to the physical lack of porches, my current neighborhood has never had a regular summertime plethora of aimless walkers; folks who are wandering with no clear destination or objective. Modern neighbors apparently have lives that are far too busy to encourage wandering and greeting each other. In fact, people walking through my neighborhood are generally viewed with suspicion.

Fast forward a few architectural decades, and the front porch has shifted to the rear of modern suburban homes. The once-popular front porch has morphed into a rear deck. Raised to the importance of rooms in the rear of the house and connected by enormous patio doors, the typical modern deck is equipped with pergolas, heaters, gas grills, fire tables, decorative lights, and fountains. Modern decks are much larger than their earlier porch relatives. But why? The traditional parade of neighbors wandering along and being invited to join families for iced tea has disappeared. Modern suburbs are not walkable. To be a pedestrian in most of them would clearly be dangerous not to mention the probability that wanderers might be accosted by the police.



The modern rear deck, including a rattan furniture ensemble

Modern home builders often launch new suburban developments by bulldozing and leveling property, which has included the removal of “annoying” mature trees. Ridding an area of large trees and their roots saves many steps in the planning and development of water, sewer, gas, and electrical lines, as it allows builders to proceed with ease in the process of excavation. Prospective owners are told that they will be free to landscape the fronts of their homes with “valuable” shrubs and new ornamental trees. The lack of large backyard trees, which were common in older neighborhoods, allows homeowners to plant golf-course quality, bright-green lawns. In addition to encouraging homeowners to expand the amount of space dedicated to lawns, the worst environmental trend in North America according to concerned environmental scientists, this trend dooms owners to a lifetime of expensive lawn chemicals and application equipment. “Wonderful” green lawns and a lack of trees create a corollary problem for back decks. Intense sunlight and summer heat makes the decks uninhabitable until evening hours. The answer? The number one deck accessory: a permanently mounted sunscreen that can be manually or electronically deployed to create shade. These modern shade accessories come in every imaginable size, shape, and color and allow homeowners to be able to use their expensive, luxury decks.



Without a retractable awning many rear decks are uninhabitable

There is a new “American success narrative.” A small, affluent family gathers for supper on its expansive rear deck. By themselves. While the father grills the evening meal, the rest of the family enjoys an expanse of comfortable, specialty deck furniture. Large rattan pieces with bright cushions and accent pillows. Gentle lights emerge from the deck as twilight comes. And the only other light emanating from this familiar family scene is the bright glow of smart phones. Children use Tik Tok, Instagram, Facebook, or Twitter to reach out to friends who will not be wandering through the neighborhood that evening. Parents shop online.

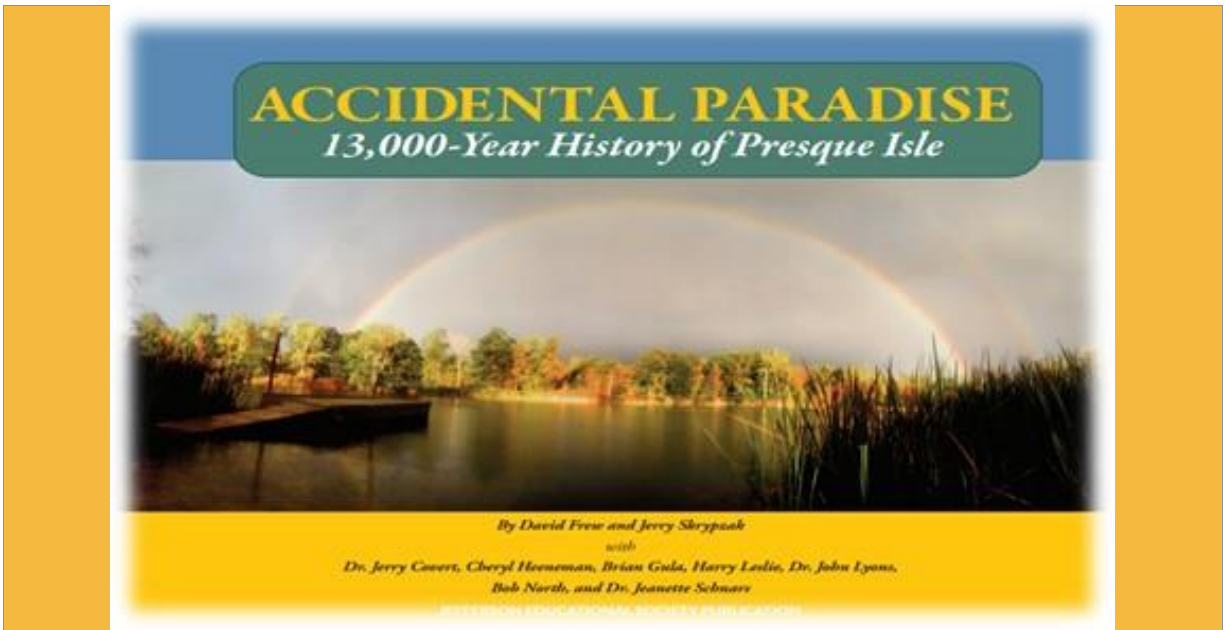
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by Dr. David Frew and Jerry Skrypzak



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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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