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Quick, Timely Reads
On the Waterfront

**Bay Rat Winter Olympics:
*Toboggans Were for Wimps***

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.



The classic flexible flyer was capable of high speeds, and it had a steering mechanism.

We were vaguely aware of skiing, ice skating, and other traditional winter sports, but our favorite was sledding. Most of us had a trusty “flexible flyer” sled, the classic snow machine, which came in various sizes and could be used for a variety of purposes. Flyers were great, all-purpose winter transport vehicles. They could be used to haul groceries, fishing equipment or other bulky loads over snow-covered sidewalks. But their best and most exciting uses were as adventure vehicles.

We knew how to “soup them up.” Relentless runner waxing and rubbing chicken fat (a typical household item that we also used for softening baseball gloves) on the forward steering mechanism, made our flexible flyers incredibly responsive. The first big snow of the season would invariably find all of us towing sleds west toward Frontier Park (today’s L.E.A.F. Arboretum), which is still a popular sledding venue. When we arrived, we would often find the hills crowded with sled riders whose parents had delivered them in station wagons. Many of the station wagon kids came with long, cushioned toboggans. But those multi-passenger snow limousines were no match for our sporty flyers, especially after we made a few early warm-up runs, lying on our bellies. After the warmups, we shifted to the sitting position in which we would steer using our feet.

Once we were totally warmed up, we shifted to the most aggressive style, the cowboy position. Using this advanced flexible flyer style, the rider stood near the rear of the sled, holding the towrope in his hands. From that position, he (girls were much more sensible) could steer by pulling on either end of the rope. More than a few Bay Rats were treated to hospital emergency room visits after using the “cowboy” method. On a positive note, our flexible flyers would travel much faster

and be infinitely more maneuverable than the big toboggans unless there was a huge layer of snow to slow us down.

One of the interesting natural obstacles at Frontier was Cascade Creek, which lie beckoning at the very end of the sledding raceway. Unless a sled was moving very fast, which was most likely to happen when there was a thin layer of snow over an icy terrain, it would stop long before its rider came close to the creek. But on the very fast days, it was possible to be launched from the northerly creek bank over the scruffy trees and brush that lined the creek. On days when that happened, a “lucky” sled rider could actually land in the water. Or worse yet, on the frozen surface of the water. On one of those occasions, our most gifted cowboy-style rider was the recipient of an ambulance ride from Frontier Park to Hamot Hospital. We told his parents several “white lies” describing the events that had led up to his glorious Evil Knievel-style creek jump. No problem, his broken leg was out of the plaster cast by the end of the school year. It was a badge of honor.

For as much fun as Frontier Park sledding was, however, there was a closer and much more exciting sledding hill. The only minor issue involved in using it was that it was inside of a locked, no-trespassing zone. The United Oil fields at the site of today’s Bluffs Condominiums contained one of the absolutely great sledding emporiums of all time. The problem, however, was that we could use it only at night and even then we had to contend with a pesky night watchman who did not understand the importance of sledding as a neighborhood sport. We had to climb a barbed-wire fence while carrying sleds, sneak quietly along the east side of the oil depot and its offices where the night watchman sat, and then feel our way along the very narrow elevated ridge, which served as our sled launching ramp.



The contours of our old United Hill sled run are still visible behind the Bluffs Condos.

Once off and running, it was a bit tricky to steer our way along the raised ridgeline, but we were usually able to do so without falling over the edge and crashing. This was, of course, a testament to the maneuverability of our flexible flyers as well as our extreme sledding skills. The eastern edge of the United storage lot gave way to a more gently sloping and eastward curving hill that would wind its way along behind the oil tank storage yard and toward the location of today's Bayfront Parkway.

On some good days we were able to make two or three runs before our presence had alerted the night watchman. It was hard for him to catch us while running through heavy snow in street shoes while smoking a cigarette. Perhaps he did not really want to catch us? Several times he encountered us pulling our sleds along West Third Street on our way home. When he asked if it had been us who were sledding on the United Oil property, we denied it. Fortunately, this all happened before DNA testing.

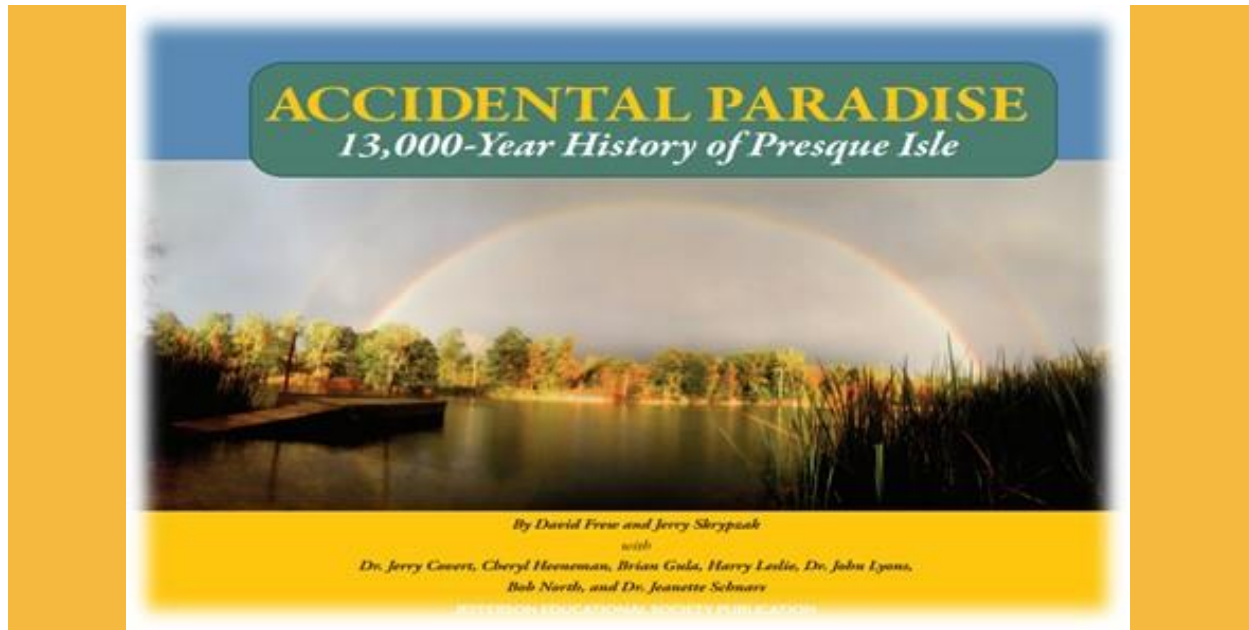
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Accidental Paradise

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.

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@TREC.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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