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On the Waterfront

**Erie's Version of New York Stickball:
*From 'Rhapsody in Blue' and 'Porgy & Bess'
to Gridley School***

**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.



Plastic PG (practice golf) balls

During the mid-1950s a brand-new baseball-related game found its way to Erie, Pennsylvania's west bayfront neighborhood: PG ball. Related to the traditional game of stickball that had long been a favorite in and around New York City, PG Ball was made possible by the invention of small, white plastic, golf-ball sized balls. The designed purpose of the innovative new PG balls was to allow golfers to practice swings in restricted areas. A well struck 9-iron would travel 50 feet or less and be much safer around backyards.

PG balls did not break windows. Our discovery of these magical spheroids allowed us to play exciting games of baseball in confined areas. We began by playing in the street. Something was used for home plate, like an old rock or square board and from that spot a pitcher's mound was identified, along with bases. Instead of a traditional baseball bat, we used broomsticks, which were sometimes "enhanced" with friction tape. Mop handles and other wooden tools were used, as well. The problem with playing in the street was the traffic. Every time a car passed, the game would have to be delayed, disassembled, and rebuilt.

PG ball could be played with almost any number of participants. When there were not enough kids to occupy the bases after a series of base hits, we used "official baserunners." If a player who was occupying second base scored with an official runner on third base, two runs were counted. A clever pitcher could make the PG ball do all kinds of in-flight tricks with a ball, simulating curve balls, knuckle balls, and drop balls. Eventually, we moved the game from the street to select neighborhood driveways but when the contents became more physically constrained we began to suffer from lost balls. PG balls came in packages of three for a dollar but even at this seemingly low cost it was annoying to have them get stuck on rooftops and or in gutters. It was even more agitating for the homeowners whose gutters and downspouts were being clogged by noisy PG ball players.

Eventually, we discovered a world-class PG ball venue. The east side of Gridley School was laid out perfectly. The building blocked the prevailing southwesterly winds and the brick courtyard on the east side of the school was lined with a painted set of rectangular stripes. The inside square was almost a perfect infield with white lines representing the foul line to left field, the comers serving as bases and the right-hand line marking the edge of center field. Naturally we used the sandlot tradition of designating right field as out. We began traveling to Gridley regularly to play and often attracted a crowd. There were at least two other groups of kids frequenting Gridley to play PG ball. And sometimes the groups would challenge each other, playing games with as many as six on a side.

PG ball was an adaptation of the popular game, stickball, which had been played in New York since the end of World War I. Broomsticks were used for bats and soft rubber balls instead of the PG balls that we used. The most popular stickball ball

was a handball, the slightly larger sphere that was used throughout New York for playing one-wall handball. Black rubber handballs were easy to obtain since the “better” handball players used them just a few times and then discarded them because they had lost some of their original “bounce.” Stickball required a larger space than PG ball since the balls traveled much farther. Like PG ballplayers, stickballers used bare hands instead of baseball gloves, making the sport less equipment oriented and more informal than traditional baseball.



Willie Mays plays stickball in Brooklyn in about 1952.

There is a famous stickball story that spans distances between New York and the beaches east of Charleston, South Carolina. Composer George Gershwin grew up near the inner-city streets of New York, where he became an avid stickball player. Friends characterized him as fiercely competitive and highly skillful. During the time (early 1920s) that he was writing “Rhapsody in Blue,” perhaps his most famous composition, he reported that he broke away from the drudgery of composition several times per day to play stickball in the streets near his home. Gershwin later credited his fresh approach to writing as well as his seemingly tireless devotion to the creation of a new kind of American music, a hybrid of classical and jazz, to the breaks that he took to play stickball. In 1934, based upon his growing acclaim, he was commissioned to write the American opera, “Porgy and Bess,” which is set in the Gullah regions surrounding Charleston, South Carolina.



George Gershwin plays stickball in New York.



George Gershwin poses in front of his rented cottage at Folly Beach.

A stickler for immersing himself in context, Gershwin decided to move to the Charleston area to write. To that end, he arranged to rent a cottage on Folly Beach, where he installed a piano so that he would be able to work. Folly Beach is located on the barrier island immediately east of the city. He did not want to work in the city of Charleston itself, since it was so different from the rural context of the Gullah culture that he was trying to capture in *Porgy and Bess*.



Gershwin at Folly Beach in 1934

As in the composition of “Rhapsody in Blue,” Gershwin faithfully worked on “Porgy and Bess” every day. And like his experiences with Rhapsody, he often found himself needing to take breaks from the grind. He began by walking on the beach until one day when, quite by accident, he came upon a group of locals playing stickball. They had marked off a playing field on the sand and were meeting almost every day to play. Gershwin approached them and asked to play and after originally being skeptical since he seemed much older than they were, they agreed. Soon George Gershwin developed a routine in which he took breaks from his work once or twice a day to play stickball. And amazingly, according to the regular players, he was very good.

Again, Gershwin reported that his stickball breaks helped him to complete a composition. This time it was “Porgy and Bess.” Even more amazingly, the young men that he was playing stickball with had no idea who their unassuming new friend was. Just a cottage renter who was there temporarily from somewhere “up north,” they thought.



The piano that Gershwin used to compose “Porgy and Bess” at Folly Beach is on display at the Charleston Museum.

After he had completed “Porgy and Bess,” and when Gershwin knew that he was going to be leaving Folly Beach to return to New York City, he invited all of his stickball friends to have dinner at his cottage. Not realizing that they were about to be treated to a huge feast, the locals showed up, expecting sandwiches or hot dogs. Instead, they were ushered into the large cottage to enjoy a beautiful sit-down meal. When one of the boys noticed a piano, he asked Gershwin if he played. George responded by sitting down and playing “Rhapsody in Blue.” And that was when the stickball boys finally discovered who their famous new friend really was.



Gridley School is gone. Our old PG ballfield has been blacktopped, fenced in, and changed to a parking lot. But when I pass by, I can still see the thrilling home run balls that were hit to left field and the close calls at second base. I see ghosts of old

friends diving for fly balls. Running out singles when pitcher's mound was out. And when I go to the beaches east of Charleston each winter, I feel the presence of George Gershwin, stickball player, at Folly Beach. These days when I hear "Rhapsody in Blue," one of my very favorite musical pieces, my mind conjures up images of Charleston, Folly Beach, Gridley School, and PG ball.



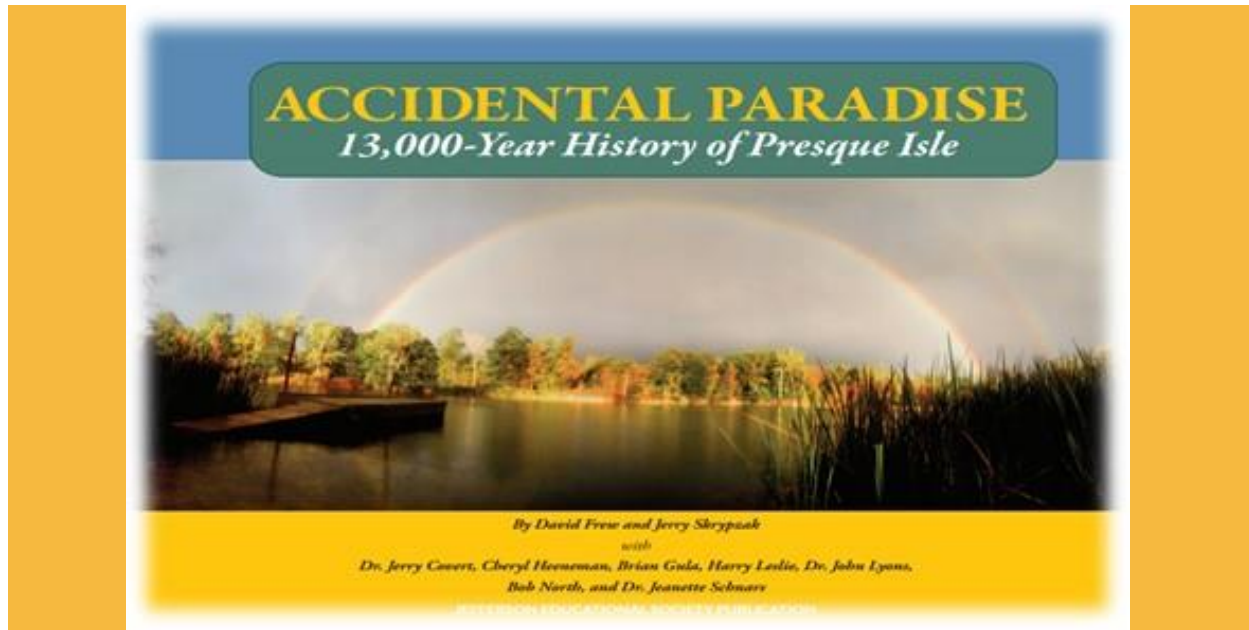
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Accidental Paradise
by Dr. David Frew and Jerry Skrypzak



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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.

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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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