

Quick, Timely Reads
On the Waterfront

Slicksleeve
Bay-Rat Hygiene Lessons

By David Frew
August 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.

(Caution: This essay may be too disgusting for anyone below the age of 65)

Mention the word "Slicksleeve" to a veteran bay-rat in Erie, Pennsylvania and you will probably receive a knowing smile in return. There were a few things that we did not learn from our mothers, and this probably qualifies as one of them. Most bay rats seemed to suffer from post-nasal-drip, a condition that led to a near-perpetual flow of clear-colored (or yellow), viscous nose liquid. For many, this substance could easily have been used as a substitute for 60-weight motor oil. Trips to the family doctor were to be avoided at all costs during those old days, and since a runny nose was seemingly not as serious as a sore throat, chickenpox, or the mumps, it was generally ignored (apologies to Ear, Nose, and Throat specialists who are gagging as they read this).

If we were called upon to attend a serious social event, like church or a family visit, we would always tuck a freshly laundered handkerchief into a pocket of our Robert Hall gabardines. But for regular neighborhood adventures, such as climbing through the Bayfront dumps or scaling sand piles on the docks, handkerchiefs were definitely not cool. As far as noses were concerned, we always went "commando."

Slicksleeve mostly happened during colder months when we were outdoors, fighting the elements. Decked out in cold-weather jackets, we were ready for anything, and since most everyday outerwear items those days were hand-me-

downs from older relatives, we did not have to worry about aesthetics. The “adventure coats” were usually extra big so that they would last for years as we grew into them. The jackets were made in non-descript colors and constructed of stiff material that was halfway between plastic and thick cloth. Often they had previously been traditional work jackets worn by welder or mechanic relatives and then passed down long after their best-used-by dates.

The legend of Slicksleeve has been told countless times and passed along. An oral tradition. On a cold day, many years ago, a bay-rat who was experiencing an extra leaky nose decided to discreetly flick away some offensive fluid that had been running down the side of his face and getting into his eyes. With one deft movement of his right hand, the long snot-string flew up into the air where it caught in a wind gust and returned like an organic boomerang, landing on one of his friends. As disgusting as it may seem to watch someone flick a string of nose gunk away, there is one outcome that is far worse: having the putrid stuff land on you! The deadly possibility of launching a string of snot into a headwind and having it return to stick to a friend is what led to the traditional bay rat Slicksleeve.

No handkerchief? Traveling with friends? Nasty stuff dripping from your nose? Instead of flicking it away, you grip the goo gently between the thumb and forefinger and deftly wipe it onto the sleeve of your coat. It is the polite and courteous thing to do. A moral imperative! For right-handed kids, the wipe-ings were deposited on the left sleeve just north of the jacket elbow. And that is where a skilled observer might find a well-developed Slicksleeve.

Take a close look at any veteran bay-rat in a work jacket or an old photograph. Carefully observe the left elbow of the winter jacket and there will probably be a strange, shiny stain, approximately the size of a fist (if the stain is on the right sleeve, the bay-rat is probably left-handed). Sometimes hand-me-down jackets came pre-equipped with Slicksleeves. This meant that the original owner was an experienced adult Slicksleever, a common occurrence among men who work outside. Who has the time to dig around their pockets, looking for a flimsy handkerchief while they are in the middle of a critical weld or an important brick-laying project?



Somehow the Carhartt logo has become a trendy fashion brand, akin to BMW or Patagonia.
(Photo by [Stanimir Filipov](#) on [Unsplash](#))

I would like to say that our Slicksleeved jackets were quite like today's popular Carhartt coats. But they were not. Not even close. Trendy brown Carhartts, often worn by people who are carrying proper handkerchiefs and wearing distressed, designer jeans will probably never be worn while welding or lying under a car to change a muffler. As authentic fashion accessories, Carhartts rarely have a Slicksleeve. The price, almost \$300 for a mid-range model, may give the illusion that its owner is a working person, but for something that expensive an actual Slicksleeve could be unbearable. Just one modern jacket could have paid for a very nice used car or the first semester's tuition at Gannon in the old days.



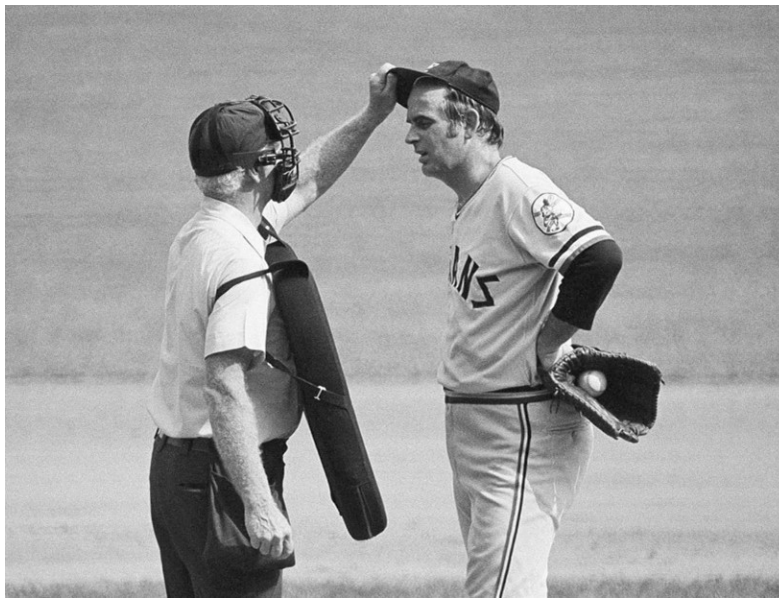
A modern Carhartt Jacket is so expensive that no reasonable person would risk staining the sleeve.
(Photo by [John Branch IV](#) on [Unsplash](#))

It is probably more likely that you will see Carhartt gear at a wine bar, sports bar soccer match, or sushi restaurant than at a construction site these days. So don't expect to see an authentic Slicksleeve when you are out at a trendy place. But take a look anyway.



Hmmmm?

And just one more thing: According to the “Legend of Slicksleeve,” if a mechanic found himself in a situation where a quality lubricant was needed he could wet a finger, rub it in small circles on his sleeve and extract enough slippery goop to solve most any problem. Where do you think that spitball pitchers like Gaylord Perry learned how to make baseballs do crazy stuff? In his case, it was probably “Slickcap”.



An umpire hunting for Perry’s secret stash of slick stuff. These days it is called “goop.”

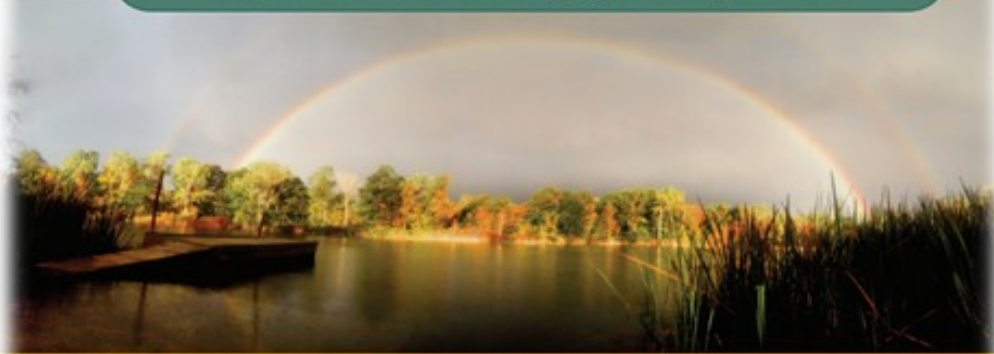
The inspiration for this story came from my friend, Jerry Bien, an authentic bay-rat.

Accidental Paradise Available at TREC

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 beautiful book on Presque Isle recently 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.*

For more information, send an email to 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

[Caring for Erie's Economy: Childcare is Economic Development](#) written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence Court Gould, MPA

[Book Notes #68: Take Me Out to the Ballgame's "Feminist" Origins](#) written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence Dr. Andrew Roth

[Connections and Inspiration: From West Fourth Street to Polk State and L'Arche](#) written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence Dr. David Frew.

Jefferson Educational Society | jeserie.org

