

## Quick, Timely Reads

*Reading in the Time of Coronavirus*  
On the Waterfront

From Erie's Downtown YMCA to Port Dover  
*The Mysterious Strong Vincent*  
*Kid from the Steamships*

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 a new series of articles for the Jefferson, the retired professor takes note of life in and around the water.*



*Steamships laid up near the Cascade Docks, early 1950s (McDonald Collection, Hagen History Center)*

For anyone on Erie, Pennsylvania's lower westside, the annual lineup of vintage steamships anchored for the winter and waiting to be serviced was a familiar sight. Each year at the end of the shipping season, the ships would slowly begin

to arrive. One by one, they would anchor just north of the docks, and as they lined up, they would stagger positions with one facing southwest and the next orienting its bow in the opposite direction. Each ship would each set two anchors, either from the bow or stern, and as they anchored, huge truck tires would be suspended between alternating hulls to minimize friction between the ships. They would “ice in” for the winter while Perry Shipbuilding sent workboats with welders, pipefitters, mechanics, painters, plumbers, and electricians back and forth to work through each ship’s wish list of winter repairs.

Lake freighters carried resident crews of engineers and maintenance workers during the shipping season. Fleet owners used onboard engineering crew to keep their ships in constant motion from early spring until the end of the shipping season when the locks at both Welland and the Soo closed for the year (usually on or near January 1). But regular crews could not tackle major jobs like engine rebuilds, structural welding or rewiring. Major projects were delayed until winter lay-up time.

Over many decades, Erie had developed a reputation for being a winter lay-up center. The business began at the eastside docks during the late 1890s and continued through World War I, reaching a peak just before World War II. During the 1940s, Perry Shipbuilding took up residence on the Cascade Docks where they built Yard Ferry (YF) Class boats for the U.S. Navy. Armed with bow-mounted machine guns, the YFs were designed as armed workboats for naval bases but they were well-equipped to set mines. Perry built seven YF Class boats between 1941 and 1945.

Twenty years ago, one of my handball playing partners was Pete Dion, a 70-something, former national champion who grew up in Erie. Dion had attended Erie’s Strong Vincent High School on the city’s west side and near the waterfront. One day when we had finished playing, Pete mentioned that he and his wife (they graduated together) had assumed responsibility for tracking down classmates for an upcoming 50-year class reunion. They formed a committee and went to work finding almost all of the members of their graduating class in preparation for a summer celebration. After contacting almost everyone, they recalled one elusive student they had not been able to find. He was, as Pete put it, “the mysterious kid from the steamships.”

Pete recalled that the mystery kid was from Port Dover, and that he showed up for class at Strong Vincent each year just after Christmas. The elusive Port Dover boy attended Strong Vincent for several months each year, but in the spring, when the ice melted, he would disappear, bemoaning the fact that when he returned to Port Dover he would be going to school much longer than his Erie friends because of the area tobacco farms. School in Port Dover began later than at Strong Vincent so that Ontario kids could work local tobacco fields, picking the valuable fall crop. To compensate for the late school start, Port Dover students remained in school through the end of June, a tragic notion for his Erie friends.

Pete and his reunion committee classmates recalled the hardworking, friendly kid from the steamships. And a special few even got to accompany their Canadian friend, whose first name was Jim, to his winter home on the water. Those lucky friends told of walking across the frozen bay during the winters of 1947 and 1948, climbing aboard a Great Lakes steamship, and having a glorious experience, exploring all of the decks. They described meetings with Jim’s father, who was a captain with Canadian Steamship Lines (CSL). Jim’s dad was

responsible for wintertime security, maintenance, and repair of the fleet of frozen-in CSL ships during their winter lay-up in Erie. During those years, it was common for steamship companies to anchor one or more ships near the Cascade Docks, and CSL usually had at least four or five there. Some years there would be 20 or more ships iced-in near the Cascade Docks.

Jim introduced his Strong Vincent friends to a world that most Erie kids could only have imagined. He led them through engine rooms, cargo holds, bunkhouses, and the bridge, where his father demonstrated the electronics and navigational equipment. Then after hours of exploring, Jim's mom would cook sumptuous meals for the boys in the ship's galley. Bursting with pride in his father's profession, the kid from Port Dover shared hair-raising stories of adventure on the Great Lakes; tales of storms and waves that his father would add to when he stopped to meet his son's Erie friends.

When the Erie boys asked Jim if he planned to follow in his father's footsteps and become a ship's officer, however, he answered with a definitive "no," adding that he "would never subject his family to such a life." Long summer weeks. Months without returning home, followed by winter separations did not seem to be the best life plan to young Jim. Even though the job of winter fleet supervisor was the most coveted position among CSL's captains and Jim was pleased that his dad had received the prestigious honor, it was painful for him to leave his Port Dover home, friends, and school each year. Then after being gone for three months, he was sent back to catch up with new classes and different teachers (Canadian versus U.S. history, for example). Jim vowed that he would never do that to his family.

Pete Dion knew I was a regular Port Dover visitor and asked if I might be able to help. I made a mental note of Pete's descriptions of the Port Dover friend who would have been in the Strong Vincent graduating class of 1948 and promised to investigate. A few weeks later when I was in Port Dover preparing for my annual Gannon University Canadian Studies field trip, I began with a visit to the local high school, where I knew the principal. That turned out to be a dead end because Port Dover's Composite School was not in existence when "Jim" had been going to school. The principal, Terry Walsh, promised to inquire while I continued to ask other people. My next stop was the Harbour Museum, which was about to open an exhibit on ship captains from Port Dover, and they sent me to chat with Rob Cromwell. Cromwell's father had been a fish tug captain and his grandfather a commercial ship captain, a promising lead.

I was already planning to visit Rob since I was hoping he would take my Canadian Studies students for a boat ride, so I walked to the town pier to see him. When I arrived, he was busily polishing a huge antique medal that he had planned to loan to the museum for the upcoming exhibit. As we chatted, he explained that it was a family heirloom. The medal had been awarded to his grandfather, Captain Oliver Robert Cromwell, for heroism in saving the crew of a sinking American schooner on Lake Huron. The medal had been presented by U.S. President Grover Cleveland, and Captain Cromwell became a minor celebrity because of the award. His company, Canadian Steamship Lines (CSL), had elevated Grampa Oliver Cromwell to the prestigious position of senior fleet captain, which carried with it the prized winter assignment of supervising the winter lay-up of the company fleet in Erie. Eurika!

With Pete Dion's class reunion question seemingly solved, I asked Rob Cromwell for details. It was his father, James Robert Cromwell, who had been the kid from

the steamships and attended Erie's Strong Vincent High School in 1947 and 1948. Rob's dad had made good on his pledge not to subject his family to the life of a CSL ship captain. But James Robert Cromwell didn't drift far from the water in his choice of occupations. Growing up in Port Dover, Rob Cromwell's dad, "the mysterious kid from the steamships," became the captain of a fish tug instead of a steamship. Like his father (Rob's Grandfather, Oliver), James Cromwell had lived a life on the water, but he was home every evening and always had winters off.

James "Jim" Cromwell made every effort to convince his son, Rob, to join him as a commercial fisherman. At a young age, Rob was dragged kicking and screaming from bed on weekend and summer mornings at a time when most of his friends were just coming in from an evening of fun. While school chums were playing cowboys and Indians or baseball, he was pulling perch and walleye from gill nets and tending to trawling equipment. Thus, in some ways, he was as separated from the normal life of an Ontario kid just as his father had been when he was spirited away to Erie's Strong Vincent High School every winter. So when James Cromwell tried to convince his son to follow him into commercial fishing, Rob resisted.

When Lake Erie Steel Company (STELCO) came to Port Dover, Rob Cromwell saw a way to avoid subjecting his family to a life on the water that involved early morning runs to gill nets and the dangers of being on a cantankerous lake as his family worried. Instead, he took an industrial job with benefits that allowed him to be home each evening and to have regular summer vacations instead of winters off. But the Cromwell tradition of life on the water had infected him. Rob bought a boat with commercial capabilities, started diving, and began to operate a marine salvage and dive company in his "spare time." Not only did he have a maritime business like his own father, but he worked double shifts at his main job to support his maritime avocations.

These days, Rob's tug, Josh Ann, sits in the commercial harbor and he has added a net house operation near the commercial docks. When Rob planned his future, he knew he would be able to retire from STELCO at an early age and operate his diving and marine salvage business on a full-time basis. STELCO was purchased by U.S. Steel toward the end of Rob Cromwell's tenure there, but he worked for a few more years and retired to his first love, running a dive charter and marine salvage business with his tug.

Meanwhile, my handball associate's perplexing question was answered, and the "mysterious kid from the steamships" had a last name to go with his first. It was too late for an invitation to the Strong Vincent reunion since Rob's dad had passed way. But it was not too late to list James Cromwell on the program that was developed to honor Pete Dion's 1948-1998 Strong Vincent High School reunion.



*Pete Dion in 1948 and Pete Dion in 1998*

The winter lay-up business in Erie continues but it has shifted dramatically since Litton Industries left town. When Litton designed its facilities at the foot of Holland Street, it created the 1,250-foot drydock that was necessary for the launch of the Stewart J. Cort. After Litton retired from the business, its successors, including current Erie-Western Pennsylvania Port Authority tenant Donjon Shipbuilding & Repair, have used the drydock to attract a new era of lay-up business. Donjon's drydock is one of only two on the Great Lakes and the only one on the upper lakes (above Niagara Falls) so that all of the 1,000-foot ships on the lakes must use Erie for extensive hull work.

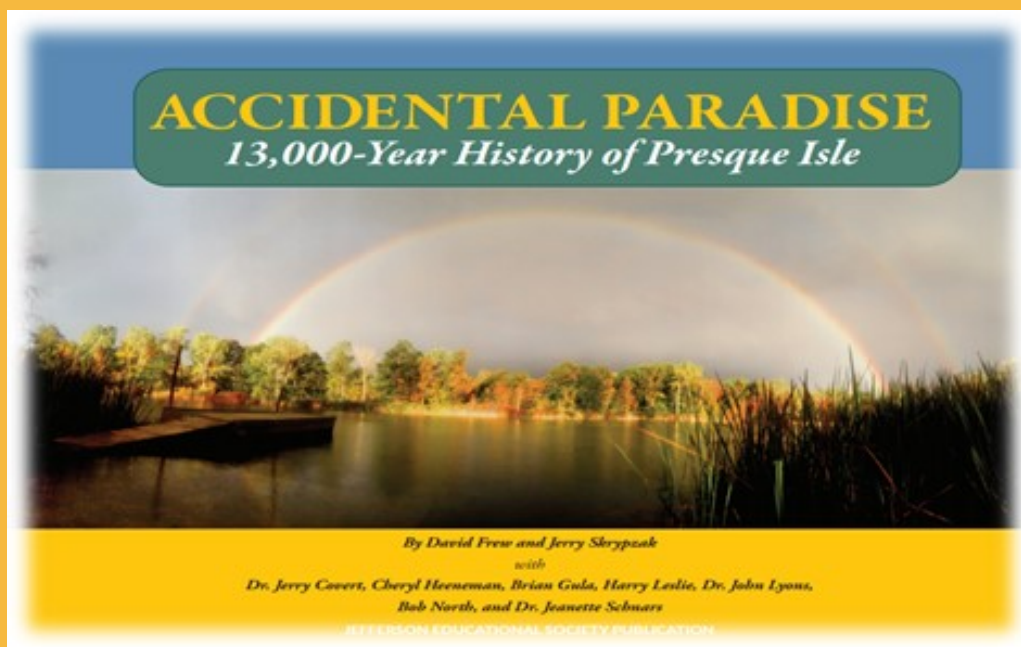


*Erie's Donjon Shipbuilding & Repair facilities with a 1,000-foot ship in the drydock*



*A large ship is blocked up inside the Donjon drydock.*

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



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 exclusively through the end of the year 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.*

To watch "Accidental Paradise: Stories Behind The Stories" click [here](#).

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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**In Case You Missed It**

[Heroic Centrim: How We Got To Now](#) written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence Dr. Andrew Roth

[New Book on Presque Isle Belongs in Every Home](#) written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence Dr. Andrew Roth

[The Ragman A Bay Rat Salvage Business](#) written by prolific author, historian, and Jefferson presenter, Dr. David Frew.

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