

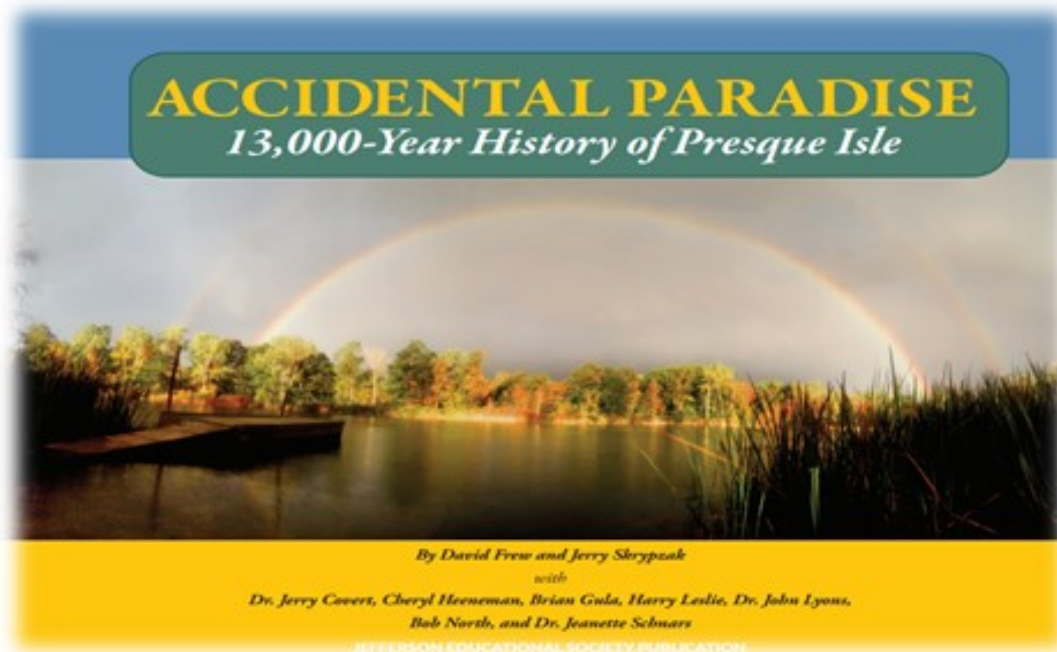
JEFFERSON EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

Book Notes:

Reading in the Time of Coronavirus

By Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence
Dr. Andrew Roth

New Book on Presque Isle
Belongs in Every Home



Searching for the perfect last-minute holiday gift for your ardent Erieite? Then hurry to the Tom Ridge Educational Center to purchase David Frew's and Jerry Skrypzak's latest Jefferson Educational Society publication, *Accidental Paradise: 13,000-Year History of Presque Isle*. In addition to Frew's *Jefferson Great Timely Reads*' "On the Waterfront" series recounting growing up on Erie's lower westside, which can be found [here](#), Frew has collaborated with Skrypzak on *The Rise and Fall of the Erie Extension Canal* and *Fortune and Fury: A History of Commercial Fishing in Erie*.

Well-written, deeply researched, and lavishly illustrated, *Accidental Paradise* almost perfectly meshes two sometimes conflicting genres. On the one hand, it

beautifully illustrates the best of large-format art books with its stunning Presque Isle seasonal portraits, as in this image of “Winter at Presque Isle.”



On the other hand, a work of first-class antiquarian scholarship, it recounts Presque Isle’s geological formation, Presque Isle’s Native American heritage, Presque Isle’s deep influence on the development of the city of Erie and Erie County, and the leaders who overcame Presque Isle’s challenges to create the region’s most valuable asset.

Oh, and by the way, it is a delight to read!

In the interest of full transparency, I need to quickly add, like the woman in *Jerry Maguire*, who famously said something to the effect “You had me at ‘Hello,’” Frew and Skrypzak had me at “Presque Isle.” Having first visited it in 1967 and then, after moving permanently to Erie in 1970, I have walked and hiked, run and biked over, well, not every foot of it, but almost all of it. I have prowled its beaches, trekked its trails, have swum in the lake and have kayaked its lagoons.

In fair weather, my wife Judy and I park along the lake road as near to the gate as possible and cycle eastward doing 10- and 15-mile loops. Frequently, in these days of sheltering in place, we will nosh a packed lunch admiring Presque Isle Bay from one of the bayside parking areas. And, as Frew recounts, Presque Isle’s influence on he and his wife Mary Ann’s decision to return to Erie after graduate school, Judy’s and my decision to return to Erie in 2014 after 11 years in Cleveland was decided by the importance of family, friends, and Presque Isle. Although Erie has many assets, summers and Presque Isle – in all seasons – make living in Erie delightful.

Since I am going full transparent here, I should add that I have known David Frew for 50 years. I first met David in 1970 when we were both faculty members at then Gannon College. David was the founding director of the MBA program; I was as junior a faculty member as it is possible to be – an Instructor in the English Department. Then, later in the 1970s, after having moved to another institution, I earned an MBA at Gannon in 1980. David was both my adviser and a teacher. I took *Organizational Development* under Dave’s tutelage. It was one of the best courses I ever took and Dave and Bill Rogers at Gannon, along with Bruce Johnstone at SUNY Buffalo, Joe Cotter at John Carroll, and Florence Marsh at Case Western Reserve are the best teachers I ever had the pleasure to know.

So, what makes *Accidental Paradise* such an enjoyable read? Well, there are a

great many reasons.

First, organized overall in a loosely chronological fashion in its first seven *Sections*, it tells its stories in *Sections*, subdivided into *Chapters*, that themselves present their content chronologically beginning with “Genesis” and proceeding 13,000 years to “Economics” and the challenges associated with maintaining a free public park on a constantly shape-shifting sand-spit.

A large part of those challenges in the contemporary era is balancing the region’s commercial dependence upon Presque Isle as the linchpin of its tourism industry with the interests of those who want to preserve the peninsula in as “natural” a condition as possible. This is an old American issue only partially related to environmental concerns. Frew covers it well in his chapter on “Modernizing the Park: The 1957 Master Plan, New Beaches, and Infrastructure.” Regarding *infrastructure*, read not only roads and picnic pavilions, but also restrooms, concession stands, and recreational trails.



Pedal surreys on the trail

Frew, secondly, tells the story of that sand-spit’s evolution after the creation of the Lakes Erie – originally there were two – by the retreat of the Wisconsin Glacier in a clear and lucid manner. A fascinating part of the story is Frew’s explanation of how that evolution continues into the present as the peninsula continues to press eastward at Gull Point despite humanity’s best efforts to keep it in place. That eastward press is the result of Lake Erie’s washing the sand relentlessly to the northeast and the resultant “succession” development of Presque Isle itself, a phenomenon first noted by Dr. Otto Jennings in the early 20th century. The newest part of the peninsula is its easternmost shore; its oldest Ridge VI along Fisher Drive extending westward to roughly Leo’s Landing and the Stull Interpretive Center.

Although I am not directionally challenged, I have always erroneously envisioned the lake’s wave action impacting Presque Isle in a north-to-south direction and the peninsula’s development being south-to-north. Wrong! Actually, the lake impacts the peninsula somewhat obliquely along a SSW-to-NNE axis, washing along the peninsula’s length, curling around its easternmost edge, and depositing sand there, as it enlarges the eastern end and narrows the western end. That’s my layman’s take on what is happening. Frew’s account is much more exact, but an illustration he provides of Jennings’s “succession theory” imposed over a modern-day map of Presque Isle illustrates the process quite clearly. Fascinating stuff!



Third, related to all of that, Frew explains how today's state park is in many respects a human-made creation; in the process, he introduces us to the individuals whose efforts either directly or indirectly led to the modern Presque Isle.

Along the way, in addition to Dr. Otto Jennings, you'll meet some well-known names in Erie history, like Judah Colt; the Reeds – founder Seth, son Rufus, and grandson Charles; the Weindorfs, who fished the peninsula; steel magnate Andrew Carnegie and one of the most fortunate opportunities that did not get seized; William L. Scott and his Massassauga Hotel at “the Head” of the peninsula (roughly where Sara's Restaurant is now); John Tracy and his son D.D. Tracy and their Tracy Point Hotel; Alex Moeller, the German immigrant who transformed Waldameer and his successor Paul Nelson; and Ted Majeroni, who owned several iconic 1950s and 1960s era Presque Isle attractions – the Home Drive-In, The Beachcomber Inn, and The Big Fish, which graced the hill overlooking Presque Isle.

Speaking of Rufus Reed, whatever happened to Presque Isle's cranberry bogs and Reed's attempt to preserve them by establishing “Cranberry Day?” Reed's motives were mixed – he wanted to preserve the cranberries and other species to stabilize the peninsula's habitat to prevent it from washing away, thereby ruining Presque Isle Bay and undermining his commercial interests along the city-side shore.

Still, what happened to “Cranberry Day”? You'll find out.

All these individual's stories bring to life the background of well-known Erie landmarks and establishments connected to Presque Isle either in the past or today. Chapters on the various yacht clubs directly or indirectly attached to Presque Isle are joined by an interesting chapter on the early history of the Kahkwa Club. But far and away the best chapter in this vein explores Presque Isle and Waldameer's connected destinies. The intricate relationship Erie's two iconic parks have danced since the demise of the Head's hotels and recreation areas at the end of the 19th century is one of the book's great strengths. Beginning with its founding in 1896 as a trolley park destination, Waldameer is one of 11 remaining American Trolley Parks and the third-oldest amusement parks in continuous operation. Frew details the parks evolution in fine-grained detail and wonderful illustrations provided by Skrypzak.



Boardwalk over the Lagoons at Waldameer Beach

The chapter on “*First Nations People: Indian Myth, Modern Scholarship, and Anthropology*” is as fine a summary of that topic as you are likely to find. Frew points out that much of the common lore about the Eriez Indians is unsubstantiated, although “modern anthropological evidence suggests that the Indians who lived closest to Presque Isle were here for more than 9,000 years.” In two tightly written chapters, Frew explains the tension between the six Great Lakes tribes and the Iroquois nation to the east.

Living closest to Presque Isle, the Eriez Indians, inhabited much of Lake Erie’s south shore between Dunkirk, New York and Sandusky, Ohio. The name “Eriez” is an Indian name for Lake Erie; it was probably given to the Europeans by the Iroquois identifying the people who lived along the lakeshore.

What happened to the Eriez? In “European Arrival and the Beaver Wars,” Frew recounts the devastating effects of the European hunger for furs upon both the animal and Native American populations. Caught in the middle, the Eriez were ultimately assimilated by the Iroquois, in particular the Seneca to their immediate east. *Accidental Paradise* details the three-edged fate of the Eriez after the final wars between the Eriez and the Iroquois between 1653-1656.

Most people probably know it was the French who gave Presque Isle its name, which means “almost an island.” The French were the first Europeans to establish a formal settlement near what eventually became Erie, first at Fort Presque Isle and then at Fort LeBeouf. Marking their presence to this day is the Old French Road connecting the two forts.



Diorama of Fort Presque Isle commissioned by the WPA

The story of English settlement of the region is not as well known. Frew details it in “American Settlers and the Town at Presque Isle,” in which you will meet Andrew Ellicott, as in Ellicottville, Judah Colt, Daniel Dobbins, and the Reeds. In several chapters, Frew tells the story of Erie’s settlement and the

critical role played by Presque Isle as first the French, then the English and finally the Americans realized both its strategic military value and commercial potential. Regarding its commercial potential, *Accidental Paradise* traces the history of the peninsula's fishing, lumber, and ice industries.

One of the more fascinating tales relates the peninsula's near-death experience as Andrew Carnegie and local leaders considered building a steel and coal shipping facility on it. Realizing that the better opportunity was in shipping iron ore to Pittsburgh and annoyed by Erie's business leaders, Carnegie built his facility in Conneaut, Ohio. Sometimes what does not happen is more important than what does. Had Carnegie built his facility on the peninsula, then today it would be a wasteland dragging Erie down with it. Instead, it is a literal paradise serving not only Erie's commercial needs as a tourist mecca, but also as a source of peace and pleasure for all Erieites.

How did Presque Isle become a state park? Thanks to the leadership of Erieite Isadore Sobel, who Frew calls an "unsung hero" in transforming Presque Isle into a park, and a steering committee he guided, in 1921 the Pennsylvania Legislature voted unanimously to make Presque Isle the state's second state park. The steering committee morphed into the State Park and Harbor Commission of Erie, which was granted oversight over the park.

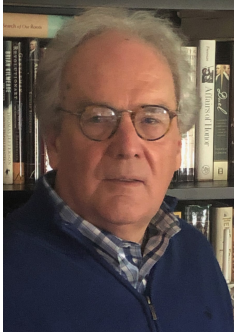
Detailing the evolution of the park's administrative infrastructure and the political maneuvering required to ensure its survival fills several important chapters. It is a story that resonates down to today as the park's physical survival through sand replenishment remains an issue and the question of charging an admission fee periodically rears its head. Guiding Presque Isle through these frequently contentious issues has been a roster of exceptional Park Superintendents from Captain William Morrison in the 1920s and 1930s, to current superintendent Matthew Greene. In between, Frew relates the contributions of superintendents Mike Wargo, Eugene Giza, and Harry Leslie who were instrumental in creating the park as it is known today.

Creating today's park involved a continuing balancing act between the demands of nature and people's desire to access the peninsula's beaches and interior trails. Regarding access, for example, involves dredging work that widened the narrow neck connecting Presque Isle to the mainland, building Presque Isle's road system so that its interior could be approached from the west in addition to the ferry service at Waterworks Park, and the construction of various amenities, such as the canoe house at the lagoons. But how to do all of this while preserving the park's natural environment, which, of course, is the park's greatest attraction?

There are so many stories it is not possible to summarize them here. Read *Accidental Paradise* and meet the people who made modern-day Presque Isle possible. It might have been a geologic accident that created the peninsula, but it has been the dedicated involvement of numerous people like Karl Boyes, Tom Weindorf, the superintendents who labored to make the park a success, Governor Tom Ridge, who began his Presque Isle involvement not only as a child of the 1950s on family excursions to the beach, but as a part-time maintenance worker in the '60s, birder Jean Stull Cunningham, chief lifeguard Frank Pettinato and the system he built, and contemporary citizens groups like the TREC Foundation, Presque Isle Partnership, and many others who continue the struggle to sustain it.

Yes, for any Erieite, the perfect Christmas – no, the perfect anytime – gift: *Accidental Paradise*, the story of Erie’s treasure: Presque Isle State Park.

Accidental Paradise: 13,000-Year History of Presque Isle, a publication of the Jefferson Educational Society in partnership with the TREC Foundation at Presque Isle, can be purchased on the website, accidentalparadise.com. Cost is \$35.



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[Strong's Pond: Mystery and Tragedy](#) written by prolific author, historian, and Jefferson presenter, Dr. David Frew.

