

JEFFERSON EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

Quick, Timely Reads On the Waterfront

Ghosts of Hotels, Excursion Ships, Dance Halls

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.

Among the favorite stories that we listened to as kids were exciting descriptions of Erie's legendary wonderland, a combination beach, picnic ground, amusement park, dance pavilion and hotel complex located at the westernmost end of Presque Isle Bay. In retrospect, our parents, who were born during the late teens and early 1920s, could not have had direct experiences with the Head. It was "finished" decades before then. They were telling us second hand, romanticized stories that they had heard from seniors or they were passing along newspaper accounts of the "good old days" that had continued to make the front pages through the ugly times of World War II. These were the ingredients of an urban legend, and we wanted to check it out.

The rational way to get to the location of the former Head would have been to ride bikes to Sommerheim Drive (summer home in German) and follow the road north. But Bay Rats were far from rational. To travel to the Head, we walked down Cascade Street to the docks, then followed Cascade Creek to Cranberry Street. Then we followed the path north to Presque Isle Bay. The Cranberry Street path ended at the bay next to the northernmost border of the forbidden Strong Estate. For several of the years during the 1950s the water level was so low that we were able to follow a sliver of beach along the north side of the concrete wall that guarded the water side of the estate. From the west side of the Strong Estate, we were able to walk the beaches behind homes on South Shore Drive, dodge around both Ferncliff and the Erie Yacht Club, then continue until we reached the base of Sommerheim, the eastern boundary of the fabled Head.

The opportunity to take this route was directly related to the Lake Erie water levels. Fortunately for us, the last few years of grade school, when we were big enough to plan such extended journeys, were times of relatively low water. There was a strip of beach along the shore for almost all of the way west. The foot of Sommerheim Drive was a very nice public place in those pre-911 security days and we were barely noticed among the fishermen and picnickers who often congregated there. But the rest of the journey west was dangerous. We had been warned by older kids of an overly aggressive caretaker who looked after the western end of the Head.

We were used to the caretaker at the Strong Estate. He would be alerted to our incursions at the Strong Estate by the noisy flock of “watch crows” that would begin to caw loudly almost every time we tried to sneak into the place. That caretaker would yell at us and threaten to turn his vicious dogs loose. But we never actually saw him. Or the dogs. The caretaker at the head was much more formidable. He was a tough old guy (probably about 50) who would actually chase any kids he caught wandering through his protectorate. The scary guy at the Head (Mr. Ralph) lived in a shack there and he could regularly outrun some of the kids. He would set his sights on “the slowest kid” and once he caught that poor kid, he was famous for gut-punches. He would commonly stand the kid straight up by pulling on his hair and then punch him really hard in the stomach. Fortunately for us, the first time that our expeditionary force had finally reached the Head the caretaker was missing. We had the place to ourselves and what a wondrous place it was. In the center we found the remains of a small, cleared pasture with broken down and rotting fence posts separating it from the rest of the area. From the old circular pasture there was a broad trail leading up the hill toward the old horse farm that we had already explored above the Head. The most remarkable thing about the area adjacent to the road that led to Presque Isle was its astonishing array of old ruins. Nearest the east side we found the old foundation of a huge building that had been left to rot in place. And rot it did, with leftover wooden bits showing the results of long-term water exposure. As we walked around during a time of relatively low water, we struggled to understand what we were seeing. Wondered what had once existed in this place that our parents had told us about. It had been only 30 years since a new road opened the new Presque Isle State Park, more than two lifetimes for us but a blink of the eye in historical time.

One of the most confusing aspects of the Head was its constantly changing size. At peak and during very low water, the property extended to almost 20 acres. But during high water cycles, because of the relatively flat topography, it shrunk by almost 50 percent to less than 12 acres. During the heyday of activity, the entrepreneurs who built hotels, dance halls, and amusement rides, including a large roller coaster, had little understanding of Lake Erie’s changing cycles of low and high water. As a result, they placed infrastructure on beaches that were doomed to disappear. There were clubs or hotels at the Head for more than 30 years, beginning in 1872 and continuing through 1904, when William L. Scott’s second Massassauga Point hotel was abandoned.

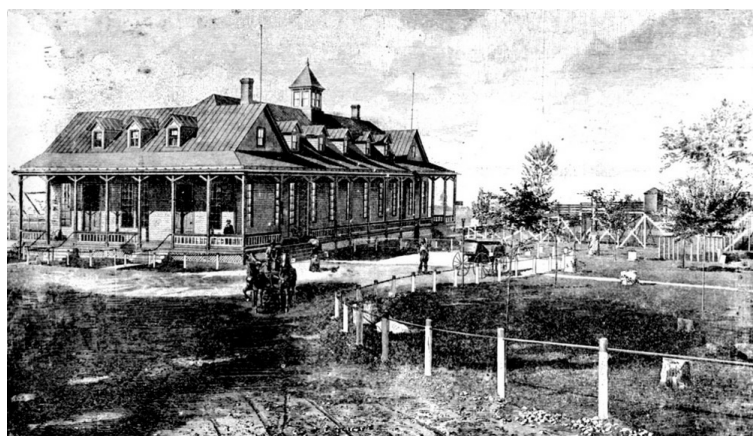
The first clubhouse destination was at the western end of the Head near today’s Sara’s Campground and on the original Laird Farm. The second, the Fisherman’s Inn, was opened at the foot of Sommerheim on property owned by John Tracy in 1874. The Fisherman’s Inn was a successful workingman’s club that specialized in fried fish and beer and could be accessed either by boat or by land using Sommerheim Drive. The new Fisherman’s Inn effectively drove the Baccus Club out of business and having seen the success of that club the men who were

running Scott's west farm (before it became a horse farm) convinced their boss to buy the property where the Baccus Club had been and to open a high-end hotel. Scott's new place, Massassauga Point resort hotel, opened in 1879 and began to attract a relatively high-end clientele, which was almost exclusively travelling to the Head by excursion boats from downtown Erie. A combination of crude 19th century wiring, remote locations, and fire became the enemy of the early buildings. Scott's hotel burned to the ground in 1882 while he was away in Virginia, buying horse farms. Both the Fisherman's Inn and its successor, the Tracy Hotel, also burned.



Created by Erie architect J. D. Dean, William L. Scott's first Massassauga Point hotel was an opulent structure.

After Scott's original hotel burned in 1882, he announced that he was at least temporarily finished with the hotel business. As the new owner of two Virginia horse farms, he said that he was going to convert his western farm, above the old hotel, into a horse-breeding farm. John Tracy quickly moved into the market vacuum created by the loss of the hotel by replacing his workingman's club with a new and larger hotel building, the Tracy Hotel. While Scott was reorienting his efforts and resisting suggestions by his farm managers to build another hotel (which was totally unlike him), the Tracy Point Hotel opened at the foot of Sommerheim. Business at the Tracy Point Hotel suffered from problems at the old Kahkwa Club, which had opened on Sommerheim Drive just up the hill. Meanwhile, Scott was making plans to use the property where his old hotel had been to create infrastructure for his new horse farm (Algeria Farms). His managers drilled both gas and water wells at the property with the intention of using the new utility lines for the stables and barns on top of the hill.



Scott's second Massassauga Point hotel opened in 1885.

In 1885, after Scott's Algeria Farms managers completed all of the needed additions to the horse farm, they convinced him to build another hotel at the

Head. The dance pavilion from the original hotel was still standing and the deep gas and water wells near the old hotel site promised the possibility of free utilities. They assured him that modern wiring would protect the new hotel from fire. Reluctantly, Scott agreed and, in the summer, a new hotel opened. It was not as opulent as the first hotel, but an excursion boat landing pier and other amenities were soon added, including a large roller coaster. The opening of the second hotel had been partly inspired by the large crowds, which had continued to gather at the Head during the years after the 1882 fire to enjoy picnicking, camping, and swimming. Scott's new hotel effectively ended the success of the Tracy Point Hotel to its east and the new place became the only successful business at the Head.

But the "Massasagua Pleasure Grounds," as it was called in the local papers, was not to persist. Ultimately, three factors ended the popularity of the area: (1) high water, (2) cholera, and (3) the growth of Waldameer Park. Cycles of high water ate away at the hotel dock, making it increasingly difficult to host excursion boats from downtown, and by the 1890s it had become almost impossible to travel there by boat. As that was happening, the infrastructure of the Head was eroding. Interestingly, the economic composition of visitors had slowly changed during the mid- to late-1880s. High-end visitors from excursion ships were slowly replaced by working class people who were coming for the day to use the beaches for swimming and picnicking. The new and less affluent gatherers did not have as much money to spend.

Next there was a long-term and persistent cholera (reported as typhoid) scare in Erie. Local newspapers began to report sicknesses and deaths linked to exposure to the enclosed waters of Presque Isle Bay. People were warned to avoid areas of the bay that contained stagnant water. That description almost defined the Head. Finally, in 1890, the Erie Traction Company, which had purchased today's Waldameer property, extended its West Eighth Street streetcar line to Trinity Cemetery under pressure from the Erie Catholic Diocese. Since they were so close, they added a track extension across the street to the entrance of Waldameer.

At first, streetcars from Erie created an increase in visitors to the Head. People began using the West Eighth Street line to get to the Head. Streetcar rides were much less expensive than the excursion ships, attracting a different class of clientele. For a few years passengers had to ask to be dropped off at Algeria Farms or Sommerheim so that they could hike down to the water and the hotels. But eventually, the streetcar company added regular stops at both places. Scott's people tried to take advantage of the new visitors from downtown. They offered horse and wagon transportation to the bluffs overlooking the new hotel. Later they built a tram that carried streetcar visitors all the way down the hill to the Head. Gas lamps, bath houses, and other amenities were added as an inducement to visitors, but the replacement hotel suffered from the fact the new visitors to the Head were not renting rooms or purchasing meals in the dining room.

One of the final blows to the Head came when Waldameer began advertising its clean, disease-free, Lake Erie beaches. With the ongoing water-borne disease hysteria added to the relative ease of riding the streetcar past the Head, Waldameer continued to grow its crowds. Then there was a final and mortal blow. William Scott died suddenly in 1891 ending new investments in the Head. Scott's son-in-law, Charles Strong, and daughter, Annie, immediately began divesting themselves of operations. They transferred horse breeding activities from Algeria Farms on top of the hill to the two horse farms in Virginia then sold both of them as well as the Scott winter home at Cape Charles. They allowed one of the Algeria Farms managers to continue to maintain the property but ceased all activities

associated with transferring streetcar travelers to the Head. The manager of the hotel at the Head was charged with making the failing hospitality operation profitable but the owners did not provide new investments.

In 1899, the Erie Yacht Club leased the vacant Tracy Point Hotel. They were out of space at their downtown (foot of Myrtle Street) location and hoped to expand into the area at the Head. The anticipated influx of new EYC visitors with boats promised to improve business at the hotel and the Head. Sadly, the EYC's new location burned to the ground in 1901, marking another blow to the Head. By 1904, the manager who was running the hotel had given up and the place was abandoned. Water levels continued to rise, placing the abandoned and deteriorating building in jeopardy until a fierce storm in September 1909, during which a nor'easter with a 5-foot storm surge destroyed what was left of the building.

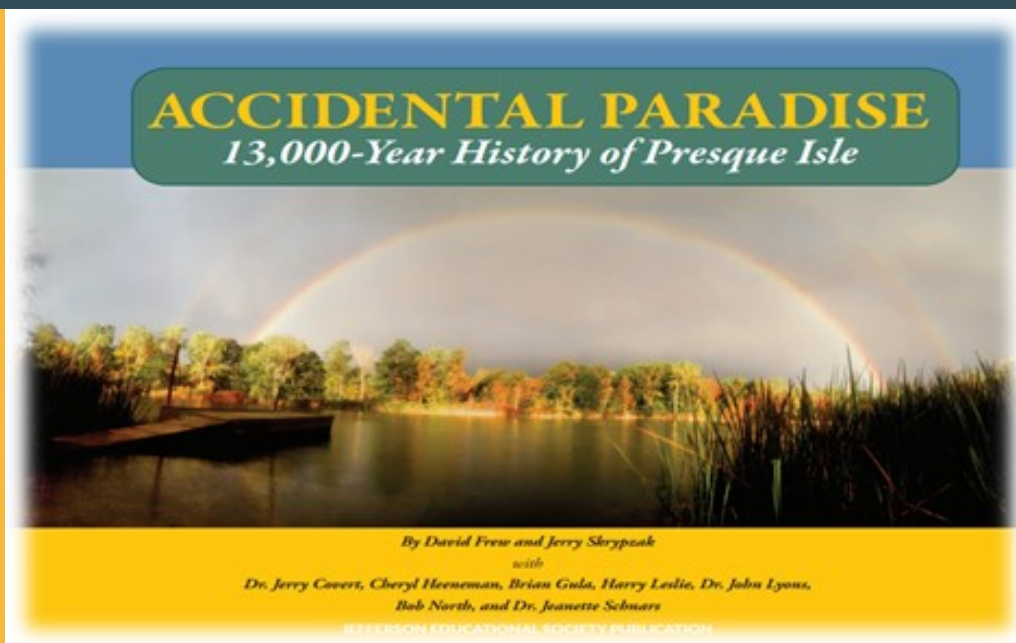
Almost five decades later, a Bay Rat exploration team wandered the area in an effort to understand the stories that we had been told. Disjointed tales of Erie's glorious past. Watching cars whiz by on the road to Presque Isle caused us to wonder if the "good old days" were really as good as we had been told.

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Accidental Paradise
by Dr. David Frew and Jerry Skrypzak



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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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