

Quick, Timely Reads On the Waterfront

Old Friends? *Niagara, Michigan, and a Random Frigate*

By David Frew
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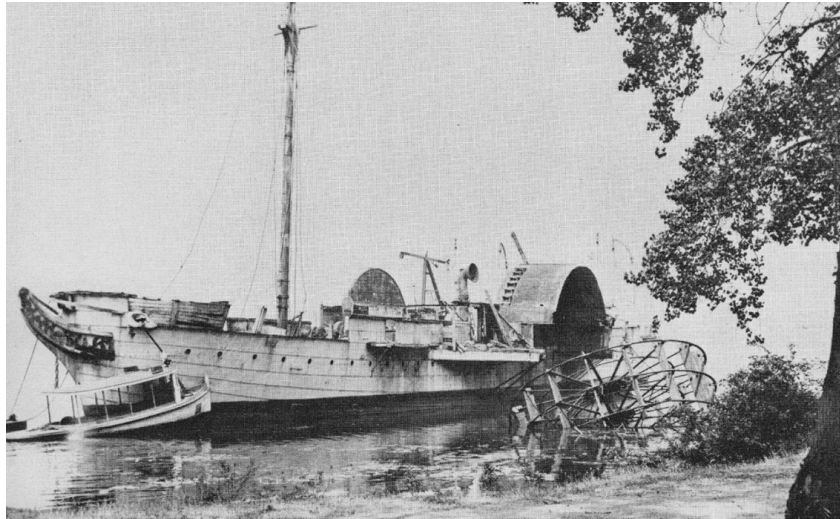
Dr. David Frew, a prolific writer, author, and speaker, grew up on Erie's lower west side as a proud "Bay Rat," joining neighborhood kids playing and marauding along the west bayfront. He has written for years about his beloved Presque Isle and his adventures on the Great Lakes. In this series, the JES Scholar-in-Residence takes note of life in and around the water.

*Old friends, winter companions, the old men,
Lost in their overcoats, waiting for sunset.
Sounds of the city, sifting through trees,
Settle like dust on the shoulders of old friends."
-- "Old Friends" by Paul Simon*

Big bayfront news! Summer 1949. The Wolverine (renamed from the Michigan in 1905) was being towed to the Cascade Docks to be cut up for scrap. After being ignored for decades at Misery Bay, a renegade movement by a few locals who wanted to rid Presque Isle of a "rusting eyesore" had defeated numerous counterarguments in favor of preserving and restoring the once-venerable ship that had successfully guarded Erie against the once-threatening British in Canada, had apparently won the argument. President Franklin D. Roosevelt, a naval history buff, had attempted to come to its rescue, pleading for the preservation of what he termed "an incredibly important piece of naval history." But to no avail.

Iconic waterfront character Joe Divel had successfully bid on the job. He was to pump the old iron ship dry, float it away from the shore of Misery Bay, where it had been run aground, and tow the Wolverine to the Cascade Docks to be cut up for scrap. Divel was cranky under the best of circumstances. He was also legendary for weaving loud "F-Bombs" into almost every sentence that he uttered.

That day, however, was far from “the best of circumstances.” Things had not been going very well. Divel had experienced difficulty pumping Wolverine dry and even more problems getting it away from its shoreside prison. Its long tenure on the edge of Misery Bay had resulted in Wolverine’s hull digging into the sand while weeds and tree branches grew into and through the hull. Hard aground, it had to be winched and kedged free, inch by inch. That unanticipated task had taken almost three full days. Then when it finally floated free, the iron ship was taking on water faster than Divel could pump it out. Wolverine was at risk of sinking. But Old Joe was clever. He climbed aboard and pounded cotton batting, newspapers, and oily rags into cracks and crevices, slowing the leaks. Another day of work. Only then was he able to begin the perilous cross-bay tow, more than four days behind schedule.



Wolverine at Misery Bay in 1948 with Joe Divel’s wooden workboat in the left foreground.

Divel was understandably in a hurry. Trying to rescue a hopeless schedule deficit and determined to deliver Wolverine before she sunk, he was towing her much faster than prudence might have dictated. With a crowd of spectators on hand to watch the final voyage of Erie’s beloved iron warship, Divel’s wooden tug rounded Crystal Point and came into view. Engines screamed as the veteran wooden tug, with Wolverine trailing behind it, moved toward the Cascade Docks tethered by a tow wire. As the Divel parade approached, spectators wondered aloud about the towing speed. But who could or would tell Joe Divel anything? Tensions grew while the wooden tug and its enormous consort approached, relentlessly carving an intimidating bow wake and not slowing. When a few hundred yards from the dock, Joe seemed to realize that there could be “some” trouble. How would the massive iron ship following just behind him and weighed down by thousands of gallons of extraneous bilge water, be slowed or stopped?



Divel's puny wooden tug rounds Crystal Point and heads for the Cascade Docks.

Joe Divel slacked the towline, hoping to slow his consort. But loosening the cable did not alter *Wolverine's* speed. Momentum was taking over, and the *Wolverine* suddenly appeared to have a mind of its own. Observers began to scatter from the edge of the dock at about the same time that Divel recognized that he and his puny wooden boat were trapped between an immense iron ship and the sharp edges of the Cascade Dock. With the dock getting closer by the second, Divel attempted a last-minute emergency maneuver. He untied the tow line, increased engine speed, and attempted to veer away from the direct-line course between the *Wolverine* and the Cascade Dock. But it was too late. With a terrible splintering sound, Joe Divel's workboat was overtaken, split almost in half, and sunk as it was caught between the massive iron boat and the dock. The only sound louder than the crashing and grinding of the tug was Old Joe's continuous string of expletives. Mothers rushed to cover innocent children's ears. Grown men laughed at the irony. People called it "Michigan's Revenge."

A few miles away, the *Wolverine's* old friend, the U.S. Brig *Niagara*, must have been feeling remorse. It was afloat in Erie's West Slip, where it had shared a berth with the *Wolverine* for years. Barely afloat. The *Niagara* must have been wondering if it was next since at about the time that the *Wolverine* had been taken from their shared dock space and run aground at Misery Bay in 1927, the *Niagara* was declared a hazard and closed to visitors. That moment in Erie's history marked the end of several glorious years for the "old friends." From 1913 to 1927, the two naval ships had been berthed almost side by side, giving the West Slip a decidedly military look. The two ships had each protected Erie and the Great Lakes. Their duty began in 1813 when the *Niagara* was built and became a two-ship partnership 30 years later when the *Michigan* (later *Wolverine*) was launched.



The U.S. Brig Niagara is shown sinking at its berth in the West Slip.

The first of the two ships to suffer badly was the Niagara when it was sentenced to experience the Purgatory of Misery Bay just before the Michigan was launched. It was scuttled there after the War of 1812 to suffer the indignities of neglect. But in 1913, the Niagara was resurrected from Erie's marine scrapyards and rebuilt to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the Battle of Lake Erie. As that was happening, the Wolverine was standing by, supervising the work. That was the year that the Niagara and Wolverine began to share celebrity status as they sailed together. Beginning that year, the Wolverine and the re-built Niagara enjoyed a glorious, shared history. They went on a victorious trip to Put-in-Bay together in 1913, toured the lake during the summer, and then returned to Erie to float next to each other in the West Slip.



The Niagara at Presque Isle just a few miles from the Wolverine's Misery Bay prison.

Fourteen years later, however, the Wolverine was moved away from the Niagara

and abandoned in Misery Bay. Left alone in the West Slip, the brig was slowly sinking at its downtown berth. Finally, the Niagara was removed from the water, disassembled and moved to Presque Isle, just a few miles from Wolverine. While the Wolverine was suffering at Misery Bay, the Niagara waited at Presque Isle with decks exposed to the weather, rotting, and seemingly doomed. Finally, after numerous attempts to restore it, the Niagara was re-launched in 1943 and towed back to her old berth in the West Slip, where it sat rotting again. Alone.

Those who believe that ships are sentient beings with a mystical ability to understand and to feel each other, knew that summer 1949 was bringing a terrible day. The old friends had, like the line in Paul Simon's song, sat next to each other in Erie's West Slip for years enjoying their celebrity as "sounds of the city fell on their shoulders." Niagara had been languishing on the Erie side of Presque Isle Bay for five years on the fateful day when Joe Divel towed the Wolverine to the Cascade Docks. Could the Niagara feel what was about to happen to the Wolverine? If so, it must have thought, "What a stupid fate." Cut up for scrap at about the time that the Niagara was sinking and about to be removed from the water, planted in a concrete coffin on State Street and left again to rot. Old friends. One cut into scrap metal and the second lowered into a cement coffin on State Street. Erie maritime history scorned.

But then there was a miracle. But just for the Niagara. In 1987, a wooden boatbuilding crew from Port Townsend, Washington arrived to begin another reconstruction. One of the old friends was destined to be reborn. Builders erected a privacy screen around the 1913 ship and used chainsaws to reduce it to bits. Then a structural framework was erected and the boat builders used pieces of the 1913 wood to ignite fires in traditional board-bending steam barrels. Streamed planking was hand-shaped to the new ribs and bulkheads and a new hull was slowly shaped. Old school! Years later in 1988, the newest Niagara was launched, rigged a year later and enjoyed highly publicized sea trials in July 1990. With a new and beautiful Maritime Museum shaped around it, the Niagara has become a proud resident of Erie's waterfront and in recent years there was a bit of a reunion.

And there was another miracle! The bow of the Niagara's old friend, the Wolverine, has been moved to within a few feet of the Brig Niagara inside the museum. In a moment of incredible generosity, the businessman who executed the 1948 scrapping of the old iron ship, Sam Tannenbaum, decided to save the bow section of the ship. In doing so, Mr. Tannenbaum deprived himself of much of the profit margin.



Sam Tannenbaum shown with the restored bow in 1993

Does the third iteration of the Brig Niagara have a soul? Has that spirit passed through two earlier brigs? Does it feel and appreciate the fact that its old friend, the Wolverine, has been moved to within a few feet of it? Does the Niagara long for the camaraderie once shared by two old friends? What is next for Erie's maritime history?

Chapter Three. Sometime during the last few years, a proposal was hatched in Harrisburg to bring a 450-foot, retired navy frigate to Erie and permanently place (anchor) it in Presque Isle Bay, west of Dobbins Landing. The ship, the Oliver Hazard Perry, was the first of a new class of ships built during the 1970s and 1980s to replace oversized and inefficient World War II era vessels. The new ships were designed as inexpensive, multifunctional warships and given the designation "guided missile launchers."

The Oliver Hazard Perry was launched in 1977 and served the Navy until 1997 when it was retired from service. In 1979, in deference to its name, it made a Great Lakes tour, which included Erie as well as Toledo, Ohio, and the site of the Battle of Lake Erie, where its namesake, Commodore O. H. Perry, led the American fleet in a defeat of British naval forces near Put-In-Bay in the Battle of Lake Erie. When the frigate was taken out of service, the Navy placed it in a special category of museum-ready ships eligible for donation. This strategic maneuver was motivated by interest from an Ohio group that hoped to bring it to Toledo as a museum ship to help memorialize the War of 1812. Unfortunately, that group was unable to raise the support needed to take over the ship and the Navy finally sold it for scrap in 2006.



Oliver Hazard Perry on its Great Lakes cruise in 1979.

The Philadelphia owner of the frigate was planning to take advantage of the lucrative scrap metal market of the mid-2000s when he took possession of the mothballed ship, and if he had been able to time the market fluctuations, he could have made a huge profit. The Oliver Hazard Perry represented more than 4,000 long-tons of scrap, a potential fortune compared to the meager proceeds gained from cutting up the Wolverine. But timing the market does not always work and the 2008 North American economic crash sent the value of scrap plummeting. The once “lucrative deal” associated with the frigate disappeared in a heartbeat like so many commodities and stocks at the time.

Scrap metal has still not rebounded. What to do? In a plan that seems on its surface to be an homage to history, a local nonprofit organization was formed with a purpose similar to the Toledo group of the early 2000s. Why not tow the ship from Philadelphia through the St. Lawrence Seaway to Erie and permanently “place” her here as a lasting tribute to Erie’s role in the War of 1812? And the optimum location, according to the plan, would be in the water just west of Dobbins Landing. Funding would be provided by a Congressional earmark, sponsored by U.S. Rep. Mike Kelly, R-16th Dist.

What could possibly go wrong? According to supporters, the “anchored” Oliver Hazard Perry would provide a new tourist attraction in a place where thousands of people could be shuttled for visits. The frigate has a draft of 22 feet, however, and could not be moved into the relatively shallow basin west of Dobbins Landing so the first major issue would be dredging. A channel would have to be created, leading from Presque Isle Bay’s deep water turning basin to the west and around Dobbins Landing. What would happen to the toxic dredging spoils? More disconcerting is that the bottom structure in that part of the bay is slate, which cannot be dredged up like the mud and sand more typical of the shipping channels in the east end of the bay, according to marine experts. The slate would have to be removed mechanically as it was for the Niagara’s current berth and stacked on shore to be dried and tested for toxins.

Assuming that the frigate could be guided along a new dredged channel and anchored in place west of the downtown dock, how long would the dredged

channel remain? How much time would it take for the new channel to become silted shut so that the Oliver Hazard Perry would be permanently fixed in its location? An additional project complication is that a breakwall would have to be constructed on the north side of the anchored ship to protect it from seasonal northwesterly storms with their high winds and waves.

Would locals and tourists enjoy the aesthetics of an old, rusting ship, lying between the public dock and the beautiful new convention center? Would guests at the Sheraton appreciate the sight of a mothballed Navy ship? Who would take on the expensive, labor-intensive duties of maintaining the new ship and could a significant number of visitors be attracted? How would visitors be ferried to the ship? Does anyone really know how much the maintenance would be in the medium to long term? Finally, if as some observers have predicted the frigate fails as a tourist attraction, could it ever be removed? Or would the community need to look at a deteriorating ship for decades. Wolverine on steroids? Unlike Erie's historic old friends, the Niagara and the Wolverine, which were easily deconstructed (even with ancient technology), the task of removing a 450-foot ship from a dredged slot in the bay could be daunting. That reality suggests that the viability of the Frigate Oliver Hazard Perry project would seem entirely dependent upon the ability of its keepers to generate revenue as a tourist attraction and or as a slightly offshore meeting and party venue. And given the struggles that the Maritime Museum has had attracting visitors, the short Erie tourist season, and competition from a growing number of well-run hotels with existing conference centers on the waterfront (not to mention the convention center), the frigate project is viewed by many as risky at best.

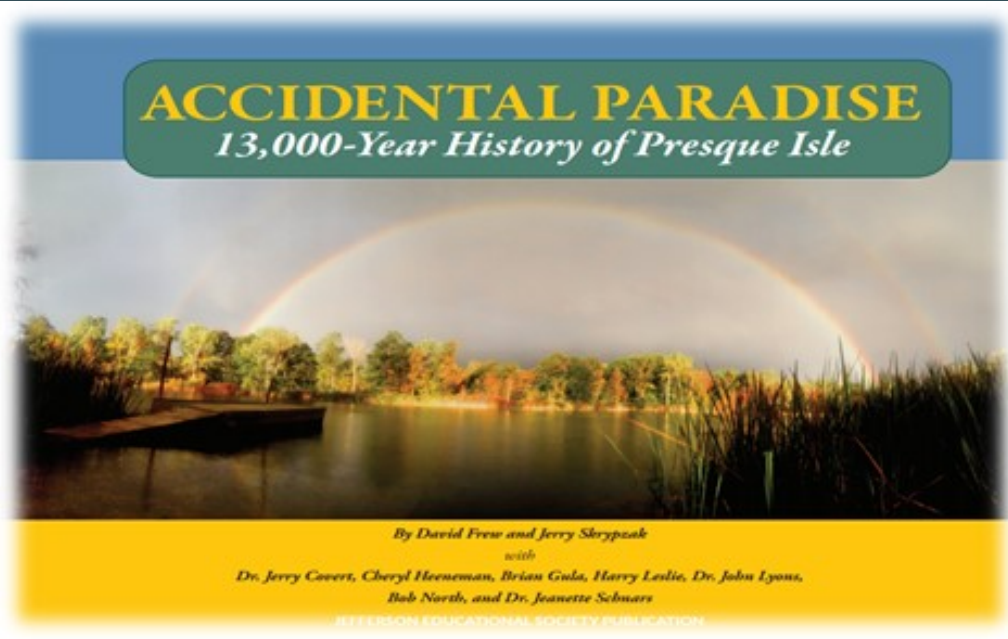
Some local observers have suggested an alternative location: a new, special-purpose pier built east of today's Donjon Shipping, within sight of the outflow of historic Mill Creek and inside the already-dredged turning basin. This option, while seemingly more expensive than dredging a channel around Dobbins Landing, would provide the advantage of land-based access to the ship, but at the cost of an additional pier. That pier, which might turn out to be less costly than the dredging project, could be used for other purposes and would be serviced by the existing Ore Dock Road. With respect to the long-term finances of the Oliver Hazard Perry Frigate Project, if things did not work out, the ship could be towed away.

Finally, what of the argument that the Frigate Oliver Hazard Perry might add to Erie's rich naval history by virtue of its name? That supposition may be questionable, however, since Perry himself was a controversial naval hero who was in Erie for a relatively short time while he harbored and exercised political aspirations. Some argue that Perry's 1813 victory at Put-In-Bay should have been credited in part to his second in command, Jesse Elliott, or to British bad luck. Perry was not the longest serving master of Niagara and began the battle with the Lawrence, not the Niagara, as his flagship. Of course, some also argue that Elliot, commanding the Niagara before Perry took over command when the Lawrence was disabled, had refused to engage in battle until Perry took over. But should Perry's name be celebrated as an important marker of local history? Should a 1977 frigate become a local monument and placed alongside Dobbins Landing? Would an eastside dock be a better location? With so many questions to be answered, perhaps we should ask the Niagara or the Wolverine.

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Special thanks to Sister Margaret Ann Hardner, SSJ, for suggesting this topic and

Accidental Paradise Available at TRECF

Accidental Paradise
by Dr. David Frew and Jerry Skrypzak



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@TRECF.org.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Historian and author David Frew, Ph.D., is a Scholar-in-Residence at the JES. An

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