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Quick, Timely Reads
On the Waterfront

Waldameer School Picnics: *Scantily Clad Ladies, Nuns on a Roller Coaster, and the Amazing Chicken*

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.

The Flying Scooter, Waldameer's most exciting ride

Who said Catholic School kids "don't have as much fun?" Every spring at about the time that classes ended for the year, my Roman Catholic grade school, St. Andrew, sponsored the "funpalooza" event of the season: the annual Waldameer School Picnic. For one wonderful day, kids gathered, parents prepared picnics in the park shelters, and our teachers showed up to have fun. For many of us the annual school picnic was a first opportunity to see teachers outside of the stodgy classroom environment. And it was quite a revelation. While we watched, the sisters mixed with parents at the picnic pavilion and sometimes they were actually

laughing and having fun. We even spotted a few of them drinking beer that our moms were providing on the down-low. But the most exciting spectacle was watching nuns on the amusement rides. The thrill rides seemed to separate the "cool young" sisters from their more "mature," traditional colleagues. We stood in stunned silence as carloads of nuns rode Waldameer's "frightening" roller coaster, descending the first hill with hands in the air screaming. Wow!

By today's Ravine Flyer II standards, the 1950s-era Comet roller coaster was mild, but we thought it was pretty exciting when we were kids.

We didn't appreciate the Victorian tradition of Waldameer at the time, or that it was once a "streetcar park." Like dozens of amusement parks in the United States, Waldameer (woods by the sea) began as an exposition park on the outskirts of town. Located almost exactly where it is now, it was originally a rural community gathering and picnic area as opposed to an amusement center with thrill rides. During the streetcar era, Erie's main urban transportation company extended its West Eighth Street tracks to the location of today's Waldameer, where a turnabout and covered station platform were built. Eventually, the streetcar company purchased the exposition park.

There were two pressures for the streetcar company to extend its tracks, one external and the other internal. First, the Erie Catholic Diocese in a largely Roman Catholic city had just opened its new Trinity Cemetery on West Eighth Street. And in an era before people had automobiles the diocese thought it would be important to provide public transportation for families who wanted to visit loved ones who had passed. The city had recently passed a rule that individual churches could no longer have attached, individual graveyards, creating a problem for people who would have to travel great distances to visit graves. In the burial business, a graveyard is a small, church-owned plot near an individual church while a cemetery is a large area open to persons from a variety of individual churches. After opening their new cemetery, the Catholic Diocese was concerned that without public transportation, no one would use it since it was so far out of town in 1880s terms. The new cemetery was somewhat controversial since the diocese forced several city parishes to close their existing graveyards and move the interred to Trinity. Several Catholic families fought against moving family members.

Trinity Cemetery at West Eighth Street and Peninsula Drive opened in 1869 and was perceived to be out in the country.

The streetcar company's second and internal reason to extend its tracks was to improve its own business. Like streetcar companies near Coney Island in New York and Kennywood Park in Pittsburgh, Erie's streetcar company suffered from a lack of weekend ridership. The answer to that business problem motivated the birth of most American streetcar parks when a run of tracks was extended to gathering places just outside of town to encourage Saturday and Sunday use of the tracks and equipment. And Waldameer, which was originally a picnic grove with a few pieces of playground equipment, a baseball field, and trails through its beautifully wooded north end, was not originally imagined to be an amusement ride center. Like many other streetcar parks that began as expo centers, however, playground equipment was gradually replaced by amusement rides. Carousels, small roller coasters, children's amusements, and other rides gradually appeared as a way to attract more visitors. While Coney Island and Kennywood Park evolved in almost exactly the same way, Waldameer had a distinct advantage over other parks. It boasted a large, sandy, freshwater beach that could be accessed from its beautiful forest trails. From 1895 until 1925, when Presque Isle State Park finally built a road down the hill and onto its new (1921) state park, the Waldameer beach was the only Lake Erie swimming area in the area.

By the 1950s and our school picnic days, Waldameer had become an exciting amusement park with relatively modern thrill rides like the flying scooter, comet roller coaster, fun house, Ferris wheel and exciting "ye mill chutes" boats. The central boat ride, which wrapped around Waldameer's beer garden, was mostly enclosed in dark tunnels, where scary creatures jumped out at the riders. The very end of the boat ride featured a death-defying plunge down a steep chute and into the sunlight. The most important homage to Waldameer's Victorian roots, however, was its penny arcade and by the time my friends and I were in eighth grade and "well-seasoned," it had become our favorite part of the park. We were too cool for most of the regular rides and bored with picnic activities organized by the PTA mothers in the reserved shelters. But the mysteries and adventures of the penny arcade beckoned.

Arcade visitors would pay to blow into this machine to test their lung power. Sanitary?

Penny arcades appeared as a part of amusement parks in the late 1800s and early 1900s. They were a variation of the circus sideshows made popular by P.T. Barnum, and evolved to be the mysterious and dark bowels of the parks. Seemingly wholesome rides populated the rest of amusement park midways. Entering the doors of a penny arcade was like stepping through a magical gateway and into a forbidden world. For a percentage of the nation's amusement parks the penny arcades were male-only. There were games of chance, including modern pinball machines during the 1950s, as well as the traditional old-style games of endurance, skill, and chance. Many were housed in free-standing wooden or metal housings. Some of the games challenged one's manhood by asking, for example, if a person could prove that their lungs were "strong enough" to lift a dozen frogs or 10 lifeguards into the air by blowing through a rubber hose. Others specialized in issuing gypsy-style fortunes. All of them were activated by inserting coins.

A penny arcade fortune-telling machine

For us boys one of the most seductive part of the arcade was a row of viewing machines where a spool of three-dimensional stereo cards could be rolled so that images would come to life and characters seemed to move. There were several "wholesome" penny machines, featuring such favorites as Niagara Falls and the Grand Canyon, but we were not interested in them. We preferred the forbidden "adult" machines, which featured scantily clad ladies cavorting in revealing, one-

piece, woolen swimsuits. Those beach fashions would have seemed dull by today's Sports Illustrated swimsuit edition standards, but in the 1950s? We immediately noticed that neither the nuns nor the PTA moms followed us boys into the arcade. And female classmates stared with abject disgust when we were spotted leaving the darkened confines of the evil empire. Somehow they knew.

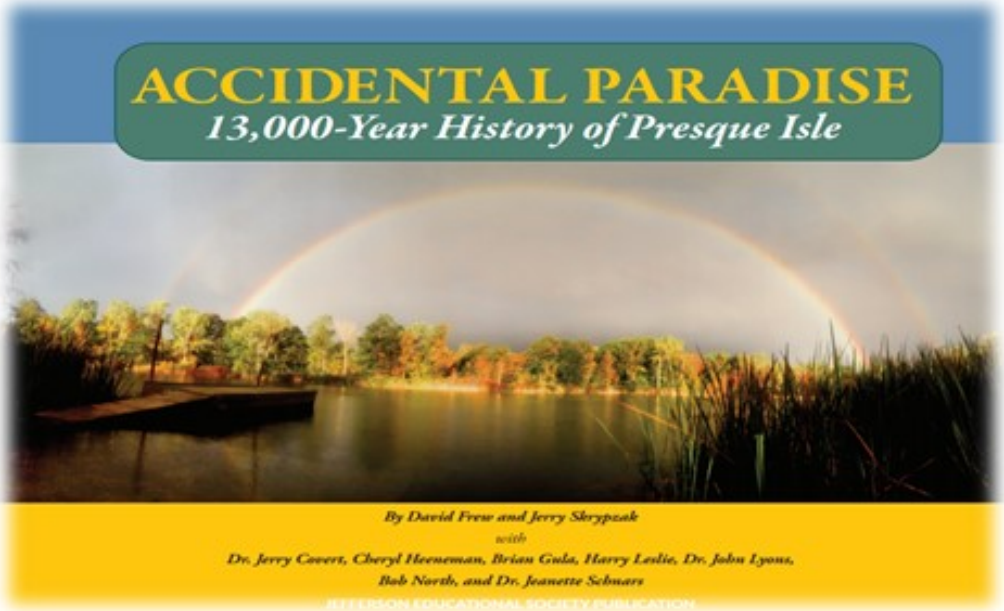
Of all the attractions at Waldameer's penny arcade the most engaging was the fortune-telling chicken. It was a wise, white bird that wore a dark-colored turban and responded (operant conditioning, of course) with an answer every time someone slipped a nickel into the coin slot above his (or her) cage and asked a question. Eventually, we rushed from the scantily clad Victorian ladies and surrounded the chicken. And as soon as we had crowded into the space surrounding the cage, Swami Chicken became excited. We fought to drop nickels into the slot on the cage and yell out stupid questions. As we did, the chicken went into action. Each coin activated a chunk of corn that dropped into a basket inside the cage. When the corn appeared, a bell rang and the magical chicken pecked at it until it was consumed. The psychic bird's pecking, in turn, caused an important truth to appear on the side of the cage; these truths were a series of odd sayings that seemed remarkably like the language used by the forbidden Magic 8 Ball. They were mostly unrelated to questions asked by the person who put the coin in the slot, but we did not care. We had been warned by Catholic schoolteachers that the 8-Ball, Ouija Board (and probably the chicken) were theologically blasphemous and could lead us down dark and evil pathways. But we put nickels into the chicken's coin slot anyway. Like the scantly clad ladies, Swami Chicken was probably at least a venial sin but we were young, reckless, and planning to confess our terrible sins sometime before we died.

Apparently, we were too much for the chicken. Within moments of our arrival at the cage, the chicken's human assistant showed up, yelling in a barely understandable language and telling us to get away from his bird. Waldameer and its penny arcade opened at noon during those days and, by 1 p.m., the chicken cage had a cloth cover over it with a yellow rope preventing us from getting close. "You boys are going to kill my chicken," the handler screamed as he ended our fun for the day. Disappointed, we left the penny arcade and headed toward Monkey Island, where we could throw peanuts to the sad animals that waited impatiently for humans to feed them.

Waldameer's resident monkeys were not a happy or carefree lot. They stood staring out of their enclosure in an unfriendly way, obviously hoping that someone would throw treats to them but resenting their concrete prison. The inner boundary of their area was surrounded by a water-filled mote and sometimes the monkeys were forced to swim for thrown treats that fell short of the actual island. My "friends" struggled to make that happen by tossing things just out of their reach and into the water. Mean spirited. Sometimes, however, the monkeys were able to extract some revenge. After significant teasing by the school picnic boys, which included throwing wads of paper into the monkey mote instead of peanuts, irritated monkeys would wad up chunks of monkey doo-doo and sling them back at us. We loved it when somebody got one of those projectiles in the face.

Monkey Island was not exactly a happy natural environment.

Years later, when my friend and coauthor, Jerry Skrypzak, and I were interviewing the longtime owner of Waldameer, Paul Nelson, he shared stories about the monkeys. Toward the end of their time at the park there were increasing criticisms regarding the deplorable state as well as the stench of Monkey Island. It was hard to sanitize properly until the end of each season when the monkeys had to be sent away to warmer winter climates. Finally, after one season during the mid-1950s, a decision was made not to bring them back. Paul later learned that some of the monkeys who had spent years at Waldameer were "transferred" to NASA, where they "worked" in the space program. I wonder if the alpha monkey who splattered my friend, Richard, in the face with a handful of doo-doo might have become an astronaut. None of us did.



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.

To watch "Accidental Paradise: Stories Behind The Stories" click here.

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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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