

## Quick, Timely Reads

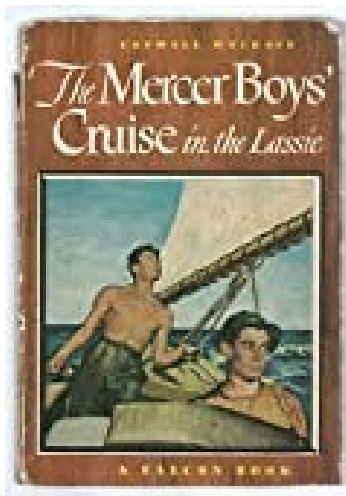
*Reading in the Time of Coronavirus*

### On the Waterfront

## The Mercer Boys: Psychological Roots of a Dream

By David Frew  
February 2021

*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.*



*This Mercer Boys book helped to launch a personal dream.*

On one of my regular quests for used Hardy Boys books at the Erie Bookstore, I stumbled into the Mercer Boys. Mercer Boys books were not as aesthetically pleasing as Hardy Boys books. The covers were cheap-looking, shiny, and easily damaged. But there were no Hardy Boys books that day and the two Mercer Boys books that I found were inexpensive, roughly half of what Hardy Boys books cost. So, I purchased them and took them home. I was immediately drawn to the "Cruise of the Lassie," which featured a cover illustration of Don and Jim Mercer

as they skippered their sailboat, the Lassie. The adventure in the book told the story of brothers, Don and Jim, and their friend Terry Mackson, as they spent a summer on a 30-foot sailboat that had been given to the boys by their father. They sailed in and out of Atlantic Coast inlets and bays for several weeks, and as usual, managed to solve a mystery (I won't spoil it).

By the time that I encountered Mercer Boys adventures, I had become a sailboat voyeur. I had spent countless hours sitting on the bluffs above Presque Isle Bay, watching sailboats. My favorite was an Erie Yacht Club beauty named, Enigma, which was a regular on the bay. My infatuation with that particular boat, a classic wooden beauty built in Erie, had expanded to the point where I wandered down the bay to the Erie Yacht Club one day to take a look. My encounter with Enigma was not a disappointment. After sneaking into the Erie Yacht Club, it was not hard to find her berth and a walkabout revealed an absolute classic; a piece of art. Enigma was built by local master boat builder, Herman Lund, and launched in 1930. She sailed here into the 1970s, serving as a training ship for generations of locals who crewed aboard her during races.



*Enigma was a local favorite until she was sold to new owners from Port Dover.*

Eventually, I acquired and read all six of the Mercer Boys books from the 1948 series and as I was to learn later, those books had an actual author, rather than a series of ghostwriters. Albert Capwell Wyckoff was an age contemporary of the Hardy Boys' primary ghostwriter, Leslie McFarlane. McFarlane was born in Ontario in 1902 and Wyckoff was born in New Jersey the following year, 1903. Wyckoff was not as fortunate as McFarlane who had been part of an educator family. To make matters worse, his father passed away at an early age and he was forced to drop out of high school and work to help support his family. At one of his jobs as a switchboard operator, he had a lot of idle time, which he used to write. He completed the first few of 10 in the original series while at that job, and like McFarlane, sold them outright without royalties. His books went to the A.L. Burt Company for \$200 each. After selling the first two books, he used his newfound money to get married, buy a car, and go on a summer mission trip to the Appalachians for the Presbyterian Church. Apparently \$400 went a long way in those days.

Evenings at youth camp in the mountains of Kentucky provided free time and Wyckoff continued to write (typing two-finger style) Mercer Boys books. At about the same time (early 1930s), he produced an autobiographical work, describing his Presbyterian mission work in Kentucky and Arkansas. That book was published by the church. By the mid-1930s, he had become dissatisfied

with his Mercer Boys publisher, the A.J. Burt Company, and severed his relationship. That was when he began writing another similar boys' adventure series called the Mystery Hunters, but it was not successful.

Eventually, Wyckoff was ordained a Presbyterian minister and shifted his writing away from boys' adventure books and toward Christian novels, which as he later reported, were more in keeping with his values. Wyckoff died at an early age and, years later, his biographers, Christian Mattison and Thomas Davis, described him as having been an amazingly prolific author. In their "Collectors Guide to Hardcover Boys' Series Books" (Published by MAD Books in 1997) they noted that Wyckoff had published an astonishing total of 29 books and six plays. His major book series included 10 Mercer Boys books, four Mystery Hunters books, seven Adventure Novels, and eight Christian Novels. The Christian novels were published under the name Albert Wyckoff to distance that work from earlier boys' adventure books. Albert was his legal first name, but he had officially used Capwell.

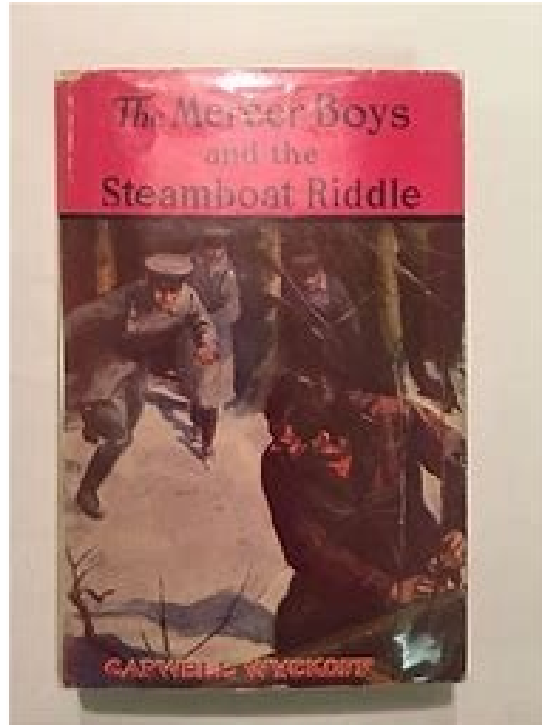
In 1948, long after Wyckoff had completed his Mercer Boys books, World Publishing Co. purchased the Burt Company and took control of the books. They dropped four books from the series, used an editor to modernize the language, changed a few titles, and republished the Mercer Boys as a set of six. Collectors who have any or all of the original 1930s editions, which were not as widely printed as the 1948 series, are fortunate to have valuable and rare books.



*Rev. Albert Capwell Wyckoff, a few years before his death in 1953*

Wyckoff continued to write for the rest of his life. But he lost interest in books and shifted his attention to short stories and articles that he sold to magazines such as Boys' Life. He often joked that he earned more for the short stories that he wrote later in life than he had for the earlier books. After he had passed away, his wife found two unpublished novels and several more Christian plays. Sadly, no one seems interested in creating a Capwell Wyckoff library collection as has been done with Leslie McFarlane and the Hardy Boys series. I would hope that someone in Kentucky, near Rev. Wyckoff's last Presbyterian parish, might take up this cause. Except for the enormous book sales, Mercer Boys books were at least

up to the standard of the more famous Hardy Boys series. Perhaps Lindsey Wilson College, which is in Columbia, Kentucky, the town where Wyckoff passed away while serving as pastor of the Columbia Union Presbyterian Church, might be persuaded to take up the challenge.



*This first edition "The Mercer Boys and the Steamboat Riddle" is currently on sale for \$599. In addition to being one of the early series of ten, it was one of the four eliminated in 1948.*

A few days ago, I dug out my boxed collection of Hardy Boys books, and among them I found six Mercer Boys books. At the top of the stack, I encountered my favorite, "Cruise on the Lassie," dusted it off, and re-read it (in about two hours). Realizing, as I now do, that the language had been modernized, I understand why the Mercer Boys had an appeal that the Hardy Boys lacked. For Frank and Joe Hardy, criminals were "suspicious chaps." Chaps? Who uses that kind of language? The obvious answer is, "Everyone talked like that during the 1920s when the books were written." For Mercer Boys books, written in the 1930s and sanitized in 1948, criminals were bad guys and all of the written dialog was presented in familiar prose.

My immediate reaction to re-reading "The Cruise on the Lassie" after all of these years, was that it was simplistic and painted a naïve picture of sailing. Perhaps, however, that was the best way to write for 10- to 12-year-olds. As I continued to read, I began to wonder about the psychological influence that this book may have had on my thinking about Erie, Lake Erie, and sailing. Could it have had a profound impact on shaping my return to Erie and the design of the life that I subsequently created for my family? Somehow it helped to recall an experience from the late 1970s. By that time, we had a large sailboat, which we were using to take extended family cruises. In addition, we had several small sailing and rowing boats that my three children and their friends used to enhance life at the Presque Isle Marina, and to build skills.

My family had been invited to a fall semester Gannon party, a welcome event for new faculty. Our three children who were 10 (twins) and 11 years old were mixing in the crowd, chatting with people, and enjoying the event when my son suddenly

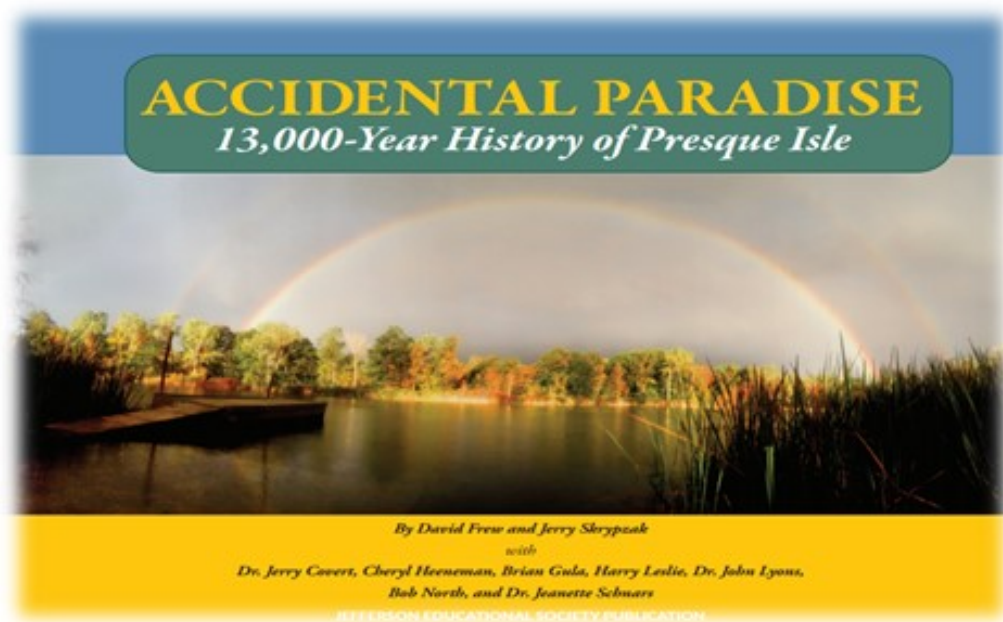
ran across the room, obviously disturbed about something. When I asked what was bothering him, he pointed to a new faculty member that he had been talking to and said, "Dad, that guy over there, just told me that he doesn't have a boat!"

A perplexing reality for my 10-year-old son. How could a person not have a boat? Did Capwell Wyckoff and his Mercer Boys books help create that?

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## Accidental Paradise Available at TREC

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



## Accidental Paradise Available at TREC

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 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.*

For more information, send an email to [aperino@TREC.org](mailto:aperino@TREC.org).

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

### 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.*



## In Case You Missed It

[Valentine Verse: The Pause That Refreshes](#) 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 Hardy Boys: Bay Rat Literature](#) written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence Dr. David Frew.

