

JEFFERSON EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

Quick, Timely Reads On the Waterfront

Gazing North from the Bluffs *Remembering Some Favorite Brantford Indians*

By David Frew
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Editor's note: Following is an On the Waterfront Classic by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence David Frew. It was first published in March 2021.

*“Known by the thread of music woven through
this fragile web of cadences I spin,
that I have only caught these songs since you
voiced them upon your haunting violin.”*

“Autumn’s Orchestra,” by
Pauline Johnson Read by
Canadian actor Donald
Southerland at the opening of
the 2010 Vancouver Olympics

From the bluffs overlooking today’s Bayfront Parkway in Erie, Pennsylvania, long before modern development, a kid could sit and ponder. I was that kid, planted there almost a half century before bayfront development.

Sitting, gazing, dreaming. “What was over there?” I wondered as I gazed north. I could see well beyond Presque Isle from my “White Rock” vantage point and follow the deep blue water north to the horizon.

During those primitive times, long before Google maps, there was absolutely no one within my sphere of contacts who could answer my questions, and I was becoming obsessed. I wondered and dreamed until 1970 when I moved back to Erie after three years of graduate school in Ohio and drove over to see for myself. To say that I immediately fell in love with the north shore of Lake Erie, and Port Dover in particular, would be a gross understatement. My wife Mary Ann often refers to me as “Dover Dave.”



Downtown Brantford, AKA Telephone City

When we began visiting Port Dover in our sailboat, we met wonderful friends who generously made time to entertain, often taking us to their homes for meals. Two of those friends, John Mitchel and his wife Nadine, lived north of Port Dover in Brantford, Ontario, and the first time they took us there we entered the downtown by passing a mural featuring Tonto (Jay Silverheels), Wayne Gretzky, Pauline Johnson, and Alexander Graham Bell, four of the town’s famous residents.

Silverheels as Tonto is the familiar Lone Ranger sidekick of television fame and may be Brantford’s most recognizable son, but Pauline Johnson was unfamiliar. But I soon learned she was Canada’s premier poet and short story author and had made an amazing impact on the literary world. Johnson, whose Mohawk name was Tekahionwake, lived from 1861 to 1913. Her poetry, which was popular in North America and Europe during her lifetime, has become even more celebrated recently. She was a leading voice in Native American as well as women’s rights and has recently become an icon in North American literature. I felt foolish for not knowing her work and began reading her poetry soon thereafter.



E. Pauline Johnson, Canadian poet

My other favorite Brantford Indians (not counting Tonto) were missing from the town mural. They were Robbie Robertson (The Band) and Graham Greene. I first noticed Robertson in 1969 when Mary Ann and I slipped away from our Ohio campus one evening to see the film “Easy Rider.” Released in 1969, “Easy Rider” was revolutionary in its use of already-released music as a soundtrack. Instead of hiring a composer to create a soundtrack to augment, which had been filmmaking custom, Peter Fonda and Dennis Hopper, the movie’s script writers and directors, decided to use favorite songs from their personal record collections. After lining up the “best sequence” in which to play the music, they began with preselected songs and then wrapped a script around the music. Dennis Hopper later remarked that while Hollywood producers were convinced that they should continue featuring Rock Hudson and Doris Day with ultraexpensive musical scores, most younger moviegoers had moved on. “Easy Rider” was completed for \$500,000 and grossed \$19 million in its first year.

Most influential for me was a song by The Band, called “The Weight.” It was a haunting blend of spiritual, religious, and cultural images set to a folk-rock musical theme. The Band was the former Ronnie Hawkins backup group that had regularly played at Port Dover’s Summer Garden and had gone on to work with Bob Dylan when Hawkins decided to leave the road and move to Toronto. With the exception of Levon Helm, all of the members of The Band were from southern Ontario and within a short distance of Port Dover.



Robbie Robertson on stage with Bob Dylan

Robbie Robertson, who grew up splitting time between Toronto and the reservation at Brantford, wrote “The Weight,” and several other songs during his time with the musical group. He was The Band’s primary songwriter. In considering the life work of Robertson, who withdrew from the road and The Band after Martin Scorsese’s musical documentary, “The Last Waltz,” was released, he is clearly a musical and creative genius. Since leaving The Band, Robertson has involved himself in film soundtracks, Native American activism, a solo songwriting and playing career, and authoring books. (Robertson died on Aug. 9, 2023 at 80).

The second Brantford Indian, Graham Greene, has a Tonto connection. When Jay Silverheels passed away at 67 in Los Angeles in 1980, he left instructions to spread his ashes at the Brantford reservation where he was born. He also left a large endowment, which was to be used to establish a school for the performing arts in his name. Noting that he had been enormously lucky to have been successful as an actor, Tonto’s instructions were for the school to focus on technical preparedness rather than acting since there were many more jobs for grips, gaffers, and other technicians. One of the school’s first graduates was Graham Greene, who landed a job working with Bruce Springsteen’s road crew. Greene was the “production technician” whose job was to stage all of the guitars for the musicians, including the lead singer, and to tune them all both before and during the shows.



Canadian actor Graham Greene

Greene's big break came one day when Springsteen popped into a concert venue hours before a show was scheduled to begin. When Springsteen entered the hall, he was struck by Greene's skill and musicianship as he was tuning and sound checking each guitar. Graham Greene, who is an accomplished musician, was moving from guitar to guitar, fine tuning and singing. As Bruce Springsteen engaged Greene in conversation for the first time, he was struck by Greene's skills. And when he learned that Greene was of Indian descent, he introduced him to his friend, Kevin Costner, who was in the planning stages for the blockbuster film, "Dances with Wolves." Greene eventually became Costner's primary Native American adviser and acting-extra recruiter for the film. He also played a leading role in the film and was nominated for an Academy Award, even though he had little film acting experience. Costner was immediately attracted to Greene because he was a fluent Iroquois speaker. I bumped into Greene at Port Dover once, on the town pier where he was eating an ice cream cone. Graham continues to write and act.



Port Dover Pier is a favorite place to stop, sit, and contemplate.

One of my favorite Port Dover pastimes is sitting on the town pier, “gazing backwards,” a spiritual exercise during which I sit quietly on a bench and look toward Erie. My favorite time for this “backwards gazing” is at dusk and, as I sit staring at nothing, I try to allow sights and sounds of the North Shore to replace the visual landscape of Erie’s 1950s bayfront. In place of the Cascade Docks and Presque Isle, the Port Dover Pier invites images of fish tugs, 1,000-foot ships at Nanticoke, and Long Point.

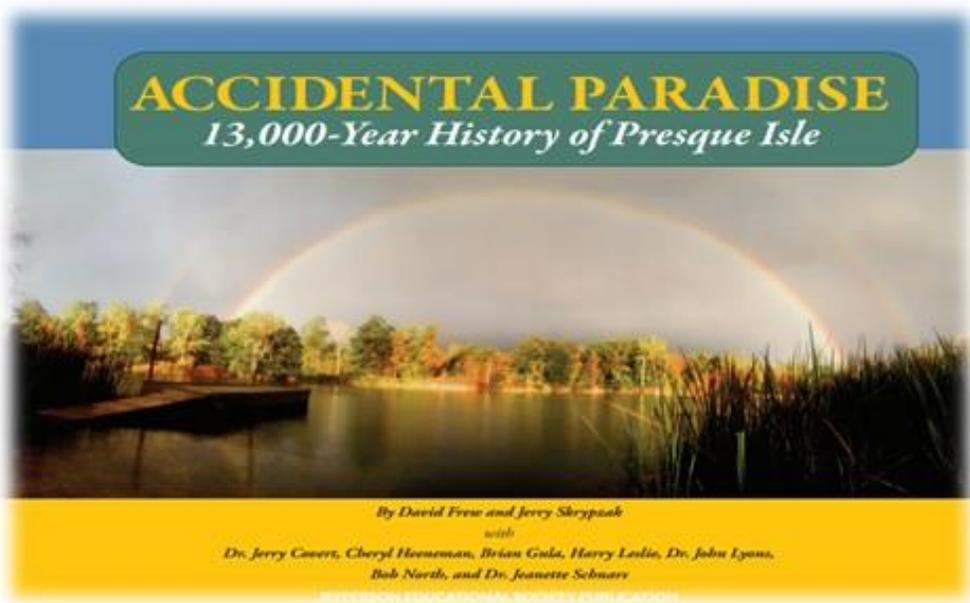
Reflecting upon a long love affair with Lake Erie, Port Dover, southern Ontario, and time that I have spent “on the other side,” running programs, doing research, and enjoying Canadian friends, it seems obvious that those long-ago boyhood contemplations from the bluffs may have been at the root. Quiet hours imagining life on the north shore of Lake Erie ignited a fire of curiosity that has not yet been quenched. And I often tell Mary Ann, “there are worse obsessions.”

Robertson et al (2013) *Legends, Icons and Rebels: Music That Changed the World*, Toronto: Tundra Books ISBN 978-1770495715

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 Skrypak – “**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@TREC.org.

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