

JEFFERSON EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

Quick, Timely Reads
On the Waterfront

Bay Rat Branding: Robert Hall

By David Frew, Scholar in Residence
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The Tractor Supply Company Logo

I have a psychologist friend who also enjoys being a farmer. He grew up on a farm and when he is not seeing patients, he is busy operating a large “spread” south of Erie. His place includes a barn filled with intimidating-looking field equipment and several huge tractors, some of which are vintage models with tires that are taller than I am. His absolute favorite store is Tractor Supply, and he uses his

frequent visits to that mecca of agricultural accessories to purchase many of his most beloved wardrobe accessories.

The prominent “TSC” brand logo on his shirts, sweaters, and sportcoats are, for him, a badge of honor. When acquaintances sometimes inquire about the apparently mysterious fashion “mark” suspecting that it must be a new and high-end Madison Avenue accessory company, he proudly explains that it is the Tractor Supply brand mark.

As the average person who inquires presses on, wondering exactly what Tractor Supply is (apparently not everyone who lives in the city frequents that store) he carries on, talking about the agricultural equipment, animal feed, and fertilizer selections. Meanwhile, his exasperated wife rolls her eyes and wonders who would proudly wear a “TSC” brand mark?

Those conversations transport me back to the 1950s and to an era when lots of my associates wore clothing bearing two initials. For us it was “RH.” Those trendy Bay Rat fashion accessories were purchased at Robert Hall on Erie’s east side.



Robert Hall Clothing was the genius invention of Jacob Schwab, a Waterbury, Connecticut businessman.

Lots of my colleagues shopped at Robert Hall when we were young Bay Rats. Unlike Erie’s high-end clothing stores downtown, such as P.A. Meyers and Isaac Baker & Son, Robert Hall offered suits, sportcoats, and fall and winter jackets at reduced rates, and they were able to do so because of clever retailing strategies. Robert Hall was a national chain whose stores were always located in out-of-the-way areas of the towns where they did business. In Erie, for example, Robert Hall was on 420 E. 26th St.. And it had plenty of free parking. At peak, the company had more than 350 stores and produced its own clothing line, which ranged from low to high end.

They were innovators of big box retailing and operated without fancy accoutrements like Erie's high-end downtown department stores, like the Boston Store and Trasks. Robert Hall had all of its clothing manufactured in the United States, beginning in the Hudson Valley and later moving to the Carolinas. Everything about Robert Hall was "plain," including the pipe racks that held the clothing and wire hangars. They even had their own proprietary brand mark, "RH," that was attached to their highest end woolen wear.



Typical Robert Hall location with free parking

More quality...
more
good lines...
in others
and you.

**Westerfield
MEN'S SUITS**
...all wool fabrics
...all wool linings

31.95

SEE US TODAY...
Suits in...
Suits in...
Suits in...
Suits in...

Robert Hall

Westerfield was Robert Hall's premier woolen wear

Robert Hall focused on back-to-school and Easter as the two primary shopping seasons when the company knew that families would be compelled to purchase clothing for their children. They used radio to carry their brand message and invested in the creation and market testing of a catchy jingle that was played regularly during peak shopping seasons. The jingle was so popular that most people my age will still recall the catchy tune.

The Robert Hall Jingle

*“When the values go up, up, up,
And the prices go down, down, down,
Robert Hall this season,
Will show you the reason,
Low overhead,
Yes, low overhead.”*

The lines in the jingle made us think that we were in on the secret. We were smart to go to the out of the way store, park for free, and pay less for clothing we were going to outgrow in a few months anyway. Genius advertising was imbedded in our minds at a time when radio was king. To help “seal the deal,” Robert Hall stores offered alterations on the clothing that did not quite fit us kids. And for people like me there was a special department with a huge overhead sign: Chubby. I think I was in high school before I realized that chubby wasn't a special brand.

Robert Hall disappeared in the late 1970s. The company became a victim of malls, modern big-box stores, and Asian competition. The single competitor that had the biggest impact on them was K-Mart. The company went bankrupt in 1977. These days, Robert Hall clothing is very collectable. It is sought after by “fashionistas” who love vintage woolen wear. It was surprisingly high-quality stuff. Meanwhile, tractor supply has some great items, too. Could it become collectable some day?



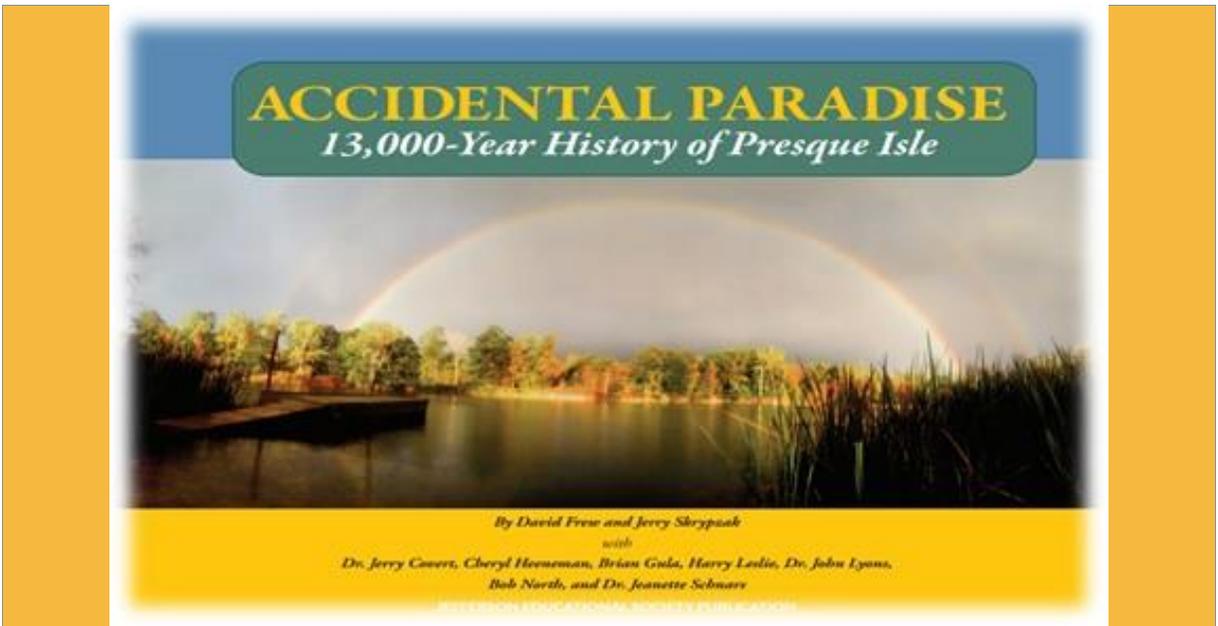
Tractor Supply Christmas Sweaters

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Accidental Paradise
by Dr. David Frew and Jerry Skrypzak



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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.

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.



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