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On the Waterfront

Bumper Hitching
Recalling Bay Rats' Popular, Dangerous Winter Sport

By David Frew
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Editor's note: Following is a "classic" On the Waterfront article by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence David Frew. It was first published in January 2023.



Bumper hitching or, as it sometimes turned out, dragging

It was an exciting cross between water skiing and bobsledding, and the only requisite was snow. More than some snow, it had to be the kind of big snow that covered the concrete streets. That is why our regular hangout, West Fourth Street, rarely worked. There was so much traffic on West Fourth Street, including buses, that heat from tires as well as episodic coatings of ashes and salt melted the snow too quickly. Just a few hours after the biggest snowstorm the snow would be melted away. And for the unofficial sport of bumper hitching, patches of concrete could really mess things up. The proper venue required a snow- and ice-coated street as well as a strategically placed stop sign. That was why West Second and West Third streets were our favorites. Those were the less used streets where newly fallen could last for days. Additionally, this important Bay Rat sport was best played at night under streetlights.

Once we had scouted out an appropriate location, we would carefully lace up smooth, leather-soled shoes, head for the designated “playing field” and wait. Usually while hiding behind a mailbox or tree. When an unsuspecting motorist approached, one of us would walk slowly across the intersection, making sure that oncoming cars came to a complete stop. With the visible Bay Rat standing in the crosswalk, the rest of us would casually walk behind the car, squat down and grab the bumper. The trick was to be subtle; not a traditional skill for most of us.

Then when the car pulled away from the intersection the fun began. There would be several kids sliding along while holding onto the bumper. There were prizes for elapsed time, top speed, and total distance but we never worked out the fine details of which metric was most important.



This modern bumper-hitching photograph illustrates the essence of the sport.

What could possibly go wrong? The primary dangers to hitchers in those days were dry patches of concrete, which would cause the hitcher’s shoes to stick suddenly, sometimes throwing him violently into the air. Sometimes this changed hitching to dragging. On several occasions the driver of the car that was towing

the hitchers would be startled into slamming on his or her brakes. The danger of a sudden stop was that the hitchers could be thrown either into the back of the car or, worse yet, under the car. One of the worst possible situations occurred when a driver, usually a male, realized what was happening and decided to give the kids a “thrill.” By slamming the brakes on suddenly, a driver could force hitchers to slide under the car or slam into the trunk. Another trick, turning violently, could send unsuspecting hitchers flying to the left or the right.

Flash forwards several decades. Technology has elevated hitching from a sport to a transportation system, especially in big cities. In place of leather shoes on snow, skateboards and rollerblades have helped to shift hitching to a new method of transportation. The new “sport” is called “skitching” and involves grabbing any convenient part of a car or truck that is headed in the desired direction and letting it pull the rider. Skitchers, especially the ones in New York City, have used their new and free transportation system to power the delivery of small package and message services. While most civilian drivers in big cities are put off when a skitcher appears near their car in his or her rollerblades, and the act of skitching is clearly illegal, it is nearly impossible to stop it. Meanwhile, cab drivers, who are the most common free-ride targets, generally ignore tagalongs. When police try to catch the skitchers, they are at a distinct disadvantage since the young, athletic “street criminals” are generally able to escape on their rollerblades.

According to the “Urban Dictionary,” the word skitching is a combination of “skate” and “hitching.” The definition of the activity includes bicycles, skateboards, and traditional roller skates in addition to the more common rollerblades. In addition to those fair-weather methods, wintertime skitching includes sliding behind cars on snow-covered streets. Skitching has become so “legendary” that several electronic games have been developed in which gamers earn points by hanging onto vehicles in traffic, sling-shotting from one car or truck to another and achieving elapsed time or distance records quite like Bay Rats did during the 1950s.



Skitching is the modern replacement for hitching. No snow is required.



Screen shot from a modern sketching video game

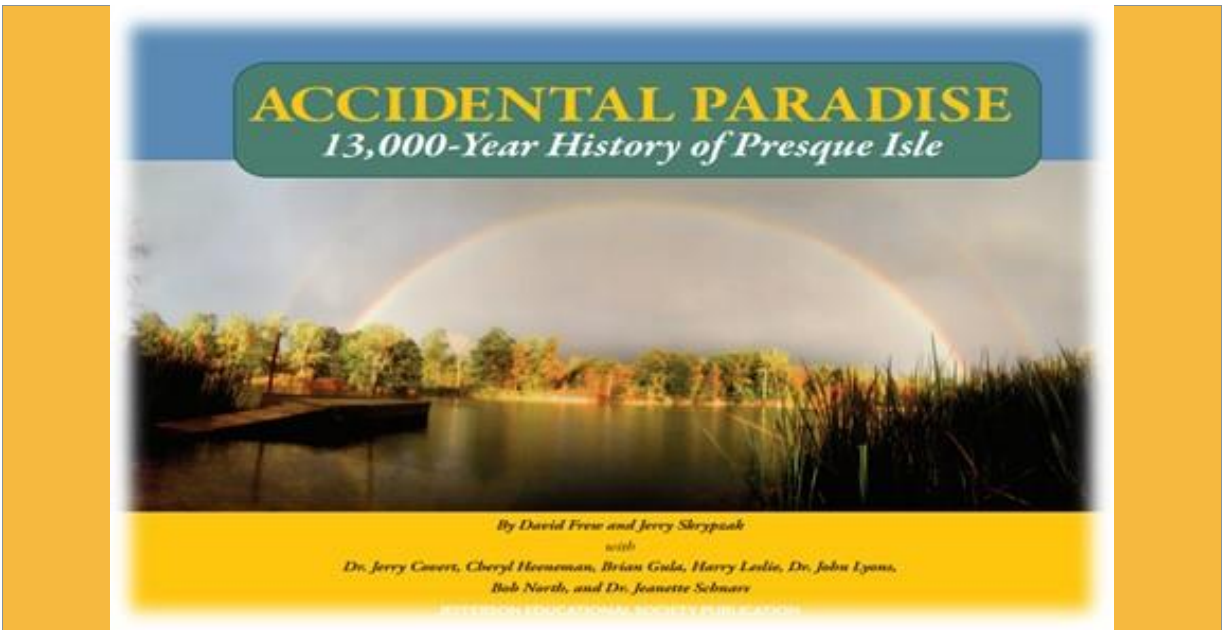
Who knew that we Bay Rats were revolutionizing a modern sport/transportation system/electronic game? Bay Rats were innovators.

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For more information, send an email to aperino@TRECf.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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