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Quick, Timely Reads
On the Waterfront

**Cigarettes, Coupons, and Canasta:
*The Card Table that Killed Grandma***

By David Frew
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An official Raleigh coupon

There was a perpetual cloud of smoke in my house when I was a kid. A blue-gray haze hovered over the parlor where my live-in maternal grandmother spent much of her time. The culprit? The Raleigh cigarettes that she, my mother, and many of our relatives consumed. Our home was not unique. Many of my friends had similar home clouds during the 1950s, a magical time when few if any people understood the health issues associated with smoking. For my family, the toxicity of smoking was almost certainly accelerated by the huge number of cigarettes smoked, which was in turn driven by clever marketing.



Sir Walter Raleigh

The Brown & Williamson Tobacco Company, maker of Raleigh and several other cigarette brands, used patriotic references to American history in combination with a brilliantly conceived coupon program to attract smokers. The cigarettes were named after Sir Water Raleigh, a romantic character from the early days of American exploration. Raleigh traveled to the coast of today's North Carolina from England, where he encountered tobacco and potatoes. Native North Americans had been using tobacco for centuries, but it was unknown in Europe. Sir Walter returned to England and introduced an entire continent to tobacco, essentially launching an enormous industry as well as a trade route relationship between Europe and the Americas. Tobacco drove the economies for more than a century and became a component of the slave trade.

Part of Raleigh's appeal was that he was considered a bit of a rogue, having so annoyed the Queen of England that he was eventually placed in prison. But his legacy in the United States grew. Much of the tobacco country that evolved in the Carolinas bears his imprint, including the modern city of Raleigh, North Carolina.



Raleigh cigarettes carried the image of Sir Walter.

To encourage smokers to overconsume each pack came with an official looking coupon (extra coupons were given to those who purchased by the carton) which could be redeemed for premiums. And there was a large catalog filled with wonderful items that smokers could get, for free, by redeeming their coupons.



The Raleigh Coupon Catalogue

The Raleigh coupon stash at my house was housed in a sacred corner of a kitchen cupboard, and each time a new pack or carton of cigarettes was opened the accompanying coupon (or coupons) were immediately transferred to the vault. Adjacent to rubber-banded stacks of coupons, a sheet of paper was taped to the cupboard door. The tally sheet contained a continuous running total of coupons. In a strange way, the coupon system at my house symbolized "hope." And

everyone knew exactly what we were hoping to acquire with our Raleigh coupons: a beautiful new, folding wooden card table.

My grandmother was a very cool lady. She called a spade a spade and often decorated her day-to-day language with salty sailor language. In a nice way, of course. She wandered about the house with a cigarette hanging from her lips and was somehow able to smoke almost perpetually without touching the cigarette with her hands. But her coolest skills involved card playing. She knew the rules to every game and was able to shuffle a deck of cards with the magician-like skills of a Los Vegas card croupier. Playing cards would literally leap from her fingers as she performed the magical shuffle.

While other neighborhood grandmas that I knew focused their attention on instructing grandchildren to read books or perform domestic tasks, such as cooking or cleaning, she was teaching me to play cards. And to shuffle. Her very favorite game was “Canasta,” a wildly popular card game during the 1950s. Canasta, also known as Argentinian Rummy, was developed in 1939 and spread to the United States as well as Europe during the post-World War II era.



At its peak, Canasta was marketed in an attractive giftbox that contained a plastic player's rack.



The player's rack

Eventually the family “dream” came true. We managed to save enough coupons to redeem a beautiful folding table from the catalog. The Canasta playing tray with its two decks of cards was firmly taped to the center of the table, which became a permanent bit of household furniture. The beloved table remained in the open position and was placed in a corner of the parlor so that it was always a simple matter to start a game.

The Canasta table tenure seemed to last forever. For a little kid. Sadly, however, my grandmother began to experience prolonged coughing spells, sometimes with blood. As the coughing slowly increased, her energy faltered, and she lost interest in cards. I remember going with my mother to take her to a doctor’s office several times. Amazingly, from a modern perspective, the office had the same blue haze that characterized our home: a thick cloud of cigarette smoke. A doctor’s office with ashtrays? Even more astonishing was the doctor who, himself, seemed to be perpetually smoking and had no suspicions of the cause of her illness. He wore a white coat, a stethoscope and a cigarette. What an image.



The table

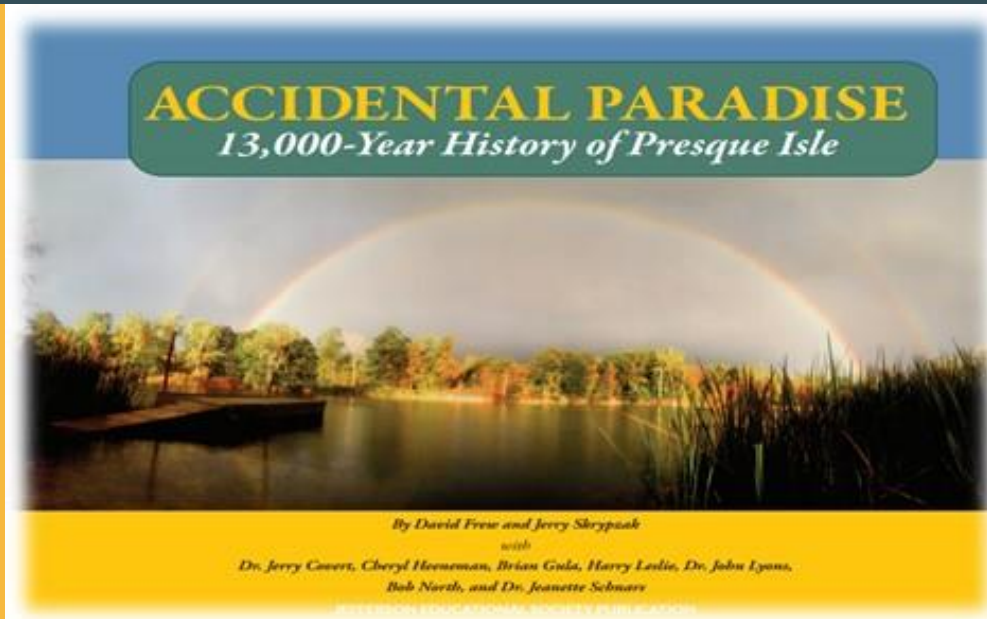
Eventually my grandmother passed away. We folded the table, put it away, and stopped playing Canasta.

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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.

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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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