

# JEFFERSON

## EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

### Quick, Timely Reads On the Waterfront

#### Color Television: It'll Never Catch On

By David Frew  
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Blame it on “Bonanza.” The iconic, 14-year television series that was set in the Lake Tahoe region and starred four ranchers who offered an important morality lesson each week, has been celebrated as one of America’s very best television series. At the time that it was released, however, it was most famous for being the first network show to be broadcast in color. We had listened to news about the revolutionary new show, and we were anxious to see it. An amazing television program and in color, just like a downtown movie. But none of us had a color television set. We had also listened to the din of muttering by fathers who probably did not want to give up their perfectly good black and white televisions and buy an expensive new color set.

What to do? Fortunately, one of the high-end, neighborhood drinking establishments had a color television, so we devised a plan. We would go to the Boulevard Bar and Grill at the corner of Liberty and Fourth Streets and watch “Bonanza” on their set. They had a huge, brand-new, color television in an elevated corner for the viewing pleasure of customers. We would become customers. What could possibly have been wrong with that strategy? Clutching quarters, we entered the bar a few moments before the magical “Bonanza” hour and took a seat. A friendly waitress appeared and asked when our parents would be arriving. Brushing off her question we confidently ordered a round of cokes,

sat back and waited for drinks to arrive, not to mention the beginning of Bonanza on the big screen above us.

There would be no cokes. Instead, the bartender approached the table and told us that we would have to leave. "Too young to be there without an adult," we were told. When we asked if we could just stay a few more minutes to watch the beginning of "Bonanza" we were gently escorted through the front door. What next? Undaunted, we launched Plan B. The television set was situated in a corner that was clearly visible from the large front window, so we gathered outside and waited. At exactly 8 p.m. we heard the music. The "Bonanza" theme song with Pa Cartwright, Adam, Hoss, and Little Joe riding horses across the vast Nevada Territory plains, all in glorious color! Big excitement. The volume was loud enough to be heard through the plate glass window but sadly the bar had placed a privacy curtain screen along the bottom of the window. The opaque curtain was blocking much of the view. They did this back during the 1950s to protect innocent women and children from seeing the terrible spectacle of neighborhood men drinking. It may have been a law at one time.



*From top are the Cartwrights, Ben and his three sons: Hoss, Little Joe, and Adam*

No problem. To improve the view, we climbed up onto a ridge of thin brick edging that helped anchor the large glass window. From that glorious vantage point, we had an almost perfect view of the television set. We made it until the second commercial before the same pesky bartender came outside to tell us that we were

trespassing and not allowed to climb on the brick window edge. After a brief discussion of constitutional law that included a side brief on public versus private property, he went back inside, and we were able to take up a less obvious position at the window. Not as good as the elevated space above the window curtain but at least we could see.



*The Boulevard Bar & Grill has changed hands several times, but the building and bar windows are still there. The brick edge that we were able to stand on has been removed.*

The bartender made one more trip outside to help us understand his interpretation of constitutional law as well as local privacy ordinances. We listened politely but did not leave. Midway through the second half of the show we heard the familiar sound of a police siren. Within moments, our old friends in Car #104 pulled up and began to dig their way out of the front seat. We were quite familiar with the neighborhood police patrol and their general lack of patience with nuisance (smart ass) kids, so we ran. Given the clunky shoes that they wore and our detailed understanding of neighborhood backyards, alleyways, and fences they had no chance of catching us.

When we shared our enthusiasm about “Bonanza” and color television the next day, parents greeted us with skepticism. “It’ll never catch on,” one father prophetically exclaimed. “Who needs color?” We failed to mention the police chase.

There were several problems with color television, leading parents to “rub it in” on more than one occasion. The most serious matter was the “Winky Dink” poisoning scandal. A popular children’s television show appeared in the 1950s: “Winky Dink and You.” To improve ratings, raise revenue and make the show interactive, creators marketed a press-and-place, plastic screen cover that child viewers were encouraged to write on, using special Winky Dink crayons. Shows featured puzzles and other activities that encouraged children to write directly on the plastic screen cover, eventually solving mysteries, creating maps and introducing other issues.



*Kids draw on their Winky Dink screen covers.*

Production of the show was halted over concerns that X-rays from picture tubes, especially the tubes on the new color televisions, might harm children who were getting too close to the screens because of their crayon markers. Decades later, after Bill Gates had praised the show both for its clever marketing of screen covers and cary9on kits as well as its interactive connection to children, Winky Dink was reprised. New episodes were made in the late 1960s and sold with interactive screen kits. By that time, it had been determined that the dangers of X-ray exposure may have been exaggerated.

The attachable, mylar screen cover from Winky Dink influenced some in one additional innovation. A tri-colored screen cover was marketed during the late 1950s and early 1960s, claiming that it would "convert" an ordinary black and white television to beautiful color. The plastic screen, which was green on the bottom, pink in the middle and blue on top, was intended to tint black and white images of grass (at the bottom) people (in the center) and sky (near the top).



While some parents purchased them, arguing that it was a less expensive solution for creating a color television, most users found them unacceptable. These days it seems that our parents may have been wrong. Color seemed to catch on!

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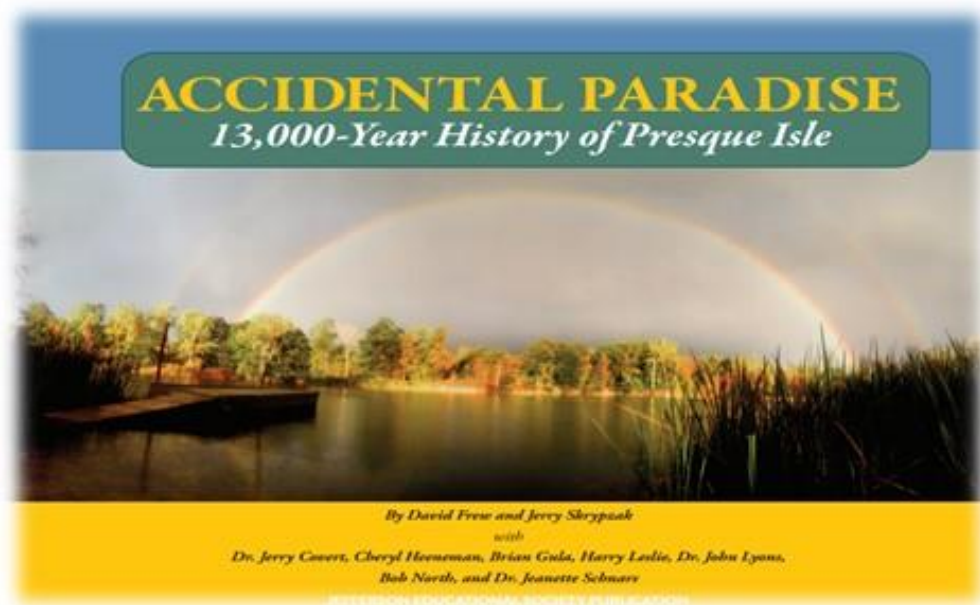
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To watch "Accidental Paradise: Stories Behind The Stories" click [here](#).

## 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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