

# JEFFERSON EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

Quick, Timely Reads  
On the Waterfront

**Counting Crows:  
*Onetime Faithful Guardians of the Strong Estate***

By David Frew, Scholar in Residence  
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*The American Crow: intelligent, organized and loud*

From the beginning of time, it has seemed that declaring something off limits makes it irresistible. Especially to kids. For the boys in my neighborhood, the mysterious Strong Estate represented the “Holy Grail” of forbidden adventures. The abandoned, walled-off property adjacent to the bay with old buildings beckoned to adventurers like us. We had to go there but there was a danger. Kids who were apprehended at the Strong Estate were heavily fined, supposedly to pay for damage that had been done to property and buildings.

The estate had a caretaker who allegedly watched over a kennel filled with vicious dogs and called the police when there were trespassers. The watchman would yell when he realized that the property had been “penetrated,” often threatening to release the dogs in a bellowing voice. But we never saw a dog. In addition to the cranky caretaker, there was a regular police patrol. A solitary Erie police car rolled through the estate several times per day, regularly driving along narrow interior roads. Car #104. When we watched, gathering intelligence as we always did, the police officers seemed to be as fascinated by the estate as us.

After careful scouting and hours of meticulous observation, we learned the routines of the watchman, and the police, and we had convinced ourselves that the alleged vicious dogs probably did not exist. Thus began the incursions. We generally entered the estate from a low point on the eastern wall. That was a handy entrance point since there was an easily accessible public path that ran along the outside of the east wall. The path led from Cranberry Street along the east border of the estate to the cottage-boathouse compound where Dave Bierig’s sail-making shop is now located. The wall protecting the estate was covered by barbed wire but we always carried an old towel, which we would position over the wire to protect ourselves when we scaled the obstacle.

Once over the wall the first time, we tiptoed about taking in wondrous sights of the mysterious place that we had heard so much about. Carefully, we listened for signs that we had been detected. There were none. We knew how to blend into the background, and we were confident that we would be able to avoid detection by the caretaker. When and if the police arrived to cruise through the grounds, they would be so noisy and obtrusive that we would have more than enough time to see them coming and escape, as well. We devised alternative escape routes in case of detection and had confidence we could outmaneuver either the cranky caretaker or the cops. Not so much the vicious dogs, if they really existed.

All was going well until suddenly and quite unexpectedly ... we were busted! As we crept across the property to the west, there was a sudden outburst from a flock of crows. Giant black birds perched in trees overhead had seen us and began a loud cawing sound that could have been heard as far away as the bayfront. Not dogs or the caretaker, not the police ... crows had discovered us. Knowing that we had been “busted,” we ran toward the northern wall and “apparent” safety. We

had barely gone a few yards when the voice of the caretaker shocked us, drowning out the cawing of the crows.



*Strong Estate crows were perpetually stationed in the trees at the center of the property.*

“I see you nasty little (expletives),” he screamed in a thick Scottish accent. “The police are on the way.”

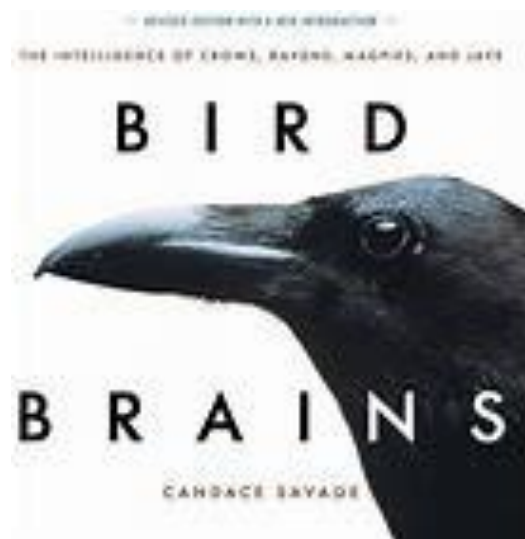
In a heartbeat, we sprinted to the northern property wall and vaulted over it into knee-deep water on the Presque Isle Bay side. Technically, we were off the forbidden property but still vulnerable. The crows continued their relentless cawing and the caretaker’s threats tormented us as we struggled to wade through the water at the edge of the property toward the Cascade Docks. Eventually, we reached the relative safety of the Bierig cottage compound and began walking toward the docks, but we suddenly realized that if the police had simply driven to the docks we would be caught. Wet shoes and pants would be exactly the evidence required to take us into custody.

What to do? Instead of walking into the obvious police trap that we expected to be waiting at the docks, we climbed up and over the bluffs to the United Oil storage fields. Once there, we removed our shoes and socks and tried our best to wring the telltale water out of our clothing. After an hour or so, we sent a scout to the edge of the hill to check for police cars. Expecting at least two or three police cars, we were relieved that there were none. Apparently, there must have been another major crime in Erie that afternoon. Perhaps a bank robbery or a riot. We snuck home, thankful to have escaped a close call.

Days later, we reconvened to plan our next incursion. This time we understood that the real guardians of the Strong Estate were not imaginary dogs, or a crabby curator, or episodic police patrols. To successfully invade the mysterious property by the bay we would have to deal with the crows. Returning to the “scene of the

crime,” we began to observe the flock of crows stationed in the trees at the center of the estate. After watching the crows from the safe side of the wall, we learned that they seemed to disappear each morning at about 9, not to return until afternoon. But once they had roosted in the trees for the day, they were on guard and watching.

We experimented with the crows. We learned that if we climbed to the top of the wall and made noise they would begin the loud warning caws, which always brought the caretaker out to investigate. It didn't take much to agitate the crows. Hand waving from 100 yards could do it. From observations we intuited that the best strategy would be to sneak into the property in the morning after the crows left. Alternatively, we could enter the estate from the north side and stay under the cover of the trees and brush and wander about without the crows knowing. That turned out to be a generally better entry point since our original idea of scaling the east brought us too close to the custodian's building for comfort.



*One of several contemporary books that describe the intelligence and social behaviors of crows*

Absent the pressure of an imminent arrest and a huge fine, I have since learned a lot about crows. My ornithological education began at the Erie Zoo decades ago when I took my children to the barn where several rehabilitating creatures were being cared for. Upon entering the building, there was always a loud series of whistles and greetings from what I first presumed to be a parrot. It was a crow with a broken wing who could not be returned to the wild. Amazingly, he had a broad repertoire of sounds, including whistles and single-word greetings. When we inquired about the resident crow, we were told that since he had arrived, he had picked up on many of the sounds and conversations that he had listened to and how he happily worked everyone for treats as he mimicked whistles and words.

Years passed and I began to see crows at bird rehabilitation centers where keepers volunteered stories about their intelligence. I was not surprised to learn that crows are among the smartest of all birds. What shocked me, however, was information presented at a lecture by a Cornell University faculty member and researcher. He suggested that crows were not only intelligent, but also that they lived in extended family groups of up to 25 birds, and that their families were organized into complex social systems. Researchers regularly observed crows cooperating in food gathering, organized defensive behavior, and territorial defense in which they defended each other and their homes from threats. Working in teams, crows have been observed chasing larger predator birds, including red-tailed hawks away from their roosting spots. Most astonishing is the observation that crows seem to mourn the death of family members and perform funeral rituals.

In one series of experiments, individual crows were trapped, held in cages for several days, and then released back to their regular territories. While they were being held, some of the crows were treated badly while others were treated generously. The badly treated crows were not harmed. But they were spoken to harshly and chastised at random for no reason. Meanwhile, the positively treated crows were spoken to in gentle, calm tones, reassured and given treats. Once returned to their flocks, the experiment continued. Experimenters who had worked with the trapped crows visited the roosting locations of the crow flocks and found that they were immediately recognized. When an experimenter who had been negative or threatening to the captured crow entered a roosting area, all the crows, not just the one who had been held in custody, immediately began to caw loudly, and make threatening gestures, which included dive bombing the person. If one of the experimenters who had been kind and generous to a captured crow walked into a roosting area, the crows seemed to welcome him (or her).



*Experimenters who had been nice to the cage-trapped crows found that the birds readily flew to them after being released and even allowed themselves to be hand fed and held.*

This series of experiments, which has been replicated both with and without experimenters wearing face masks, suggests that crows remember. In addition, they recognize individual humans. And most interestingly, crows are able to communicate either a threat or a positive potential to other members of the extended family (flock).

More than 60 years after my friends and I first encountered the Strong Estate crows, I have finally begun to understand and appreciate those birds. The Strong caretaker was regularly feeding them. We watched him spread food scraps for the crows on several occasions. As a result of his attention, the crows continued to roost at the estate and while they recognized him as a friend, others, including invading Bay Rats, must have been interpreted as a threat. The caretaker didn't need vicious dogs. His crows were smarter and better.

*Author's note: The best source of information about Crows and other birds is the Cornell University School of Ornithology.*

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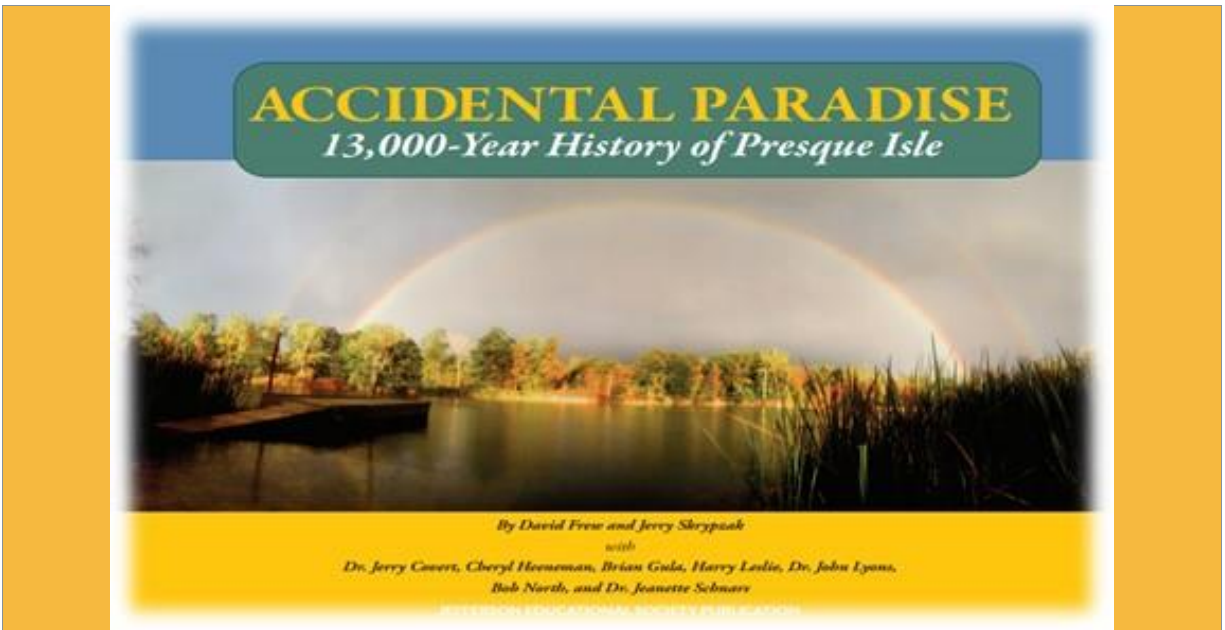
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***Accidental Paradise***  
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For more information, send an email to [aperino@TRECf.org](mailto:aperino@TRECf.org).

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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