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On the Waterfront

**Strange Origins:
The Mysterious Elderberry**

By David Frew, Scholar in Residence
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Elderberries blooming

One of the special late summer treats for Bay Rats was provided by a patch of elderberry trees that grew along the bluffs between today's Cascade and Plum streets. By modern agricultural standards they were probably bushes rather than

trees, but each summer they bloomed, presenting us with an amazing fruit treat. For “feral” kids who were perpetually hungry, the lush berries presented an opportunity to refuel with lots of tasty snacks.

The first time that I was introduced to the tasty berries I was suspicious that the older kids who were trying to convince me to eat them were playing a trick. I expected to get sick or worse after eating them. But then I saw several older kids wolfing them down by pushing giant bunches into their mouths and pulling the branch that they were chewing on slowly out of their mouths. Hunger finally convinced me to take a risk, after which I became a dedicated elderberry pirate.



A delicious clump of berries

The bluffs behind today’s Front Street contained a network of well-used trails during the 1950s. The most traveled path was positioned about halfway down the bluffs. It was sculpted into the side of the hill and stretched from just below today’s Laura Wallerstein Home at West Second and Cascade streets to approximately today’s Cornerstone Hotel. At about Liberty Street, the path had a strange intersection. The mid-bluffs path ended at a large concrete formation that everyone called “White Rock” and, strangely, there was another path there that reversed course from White Rock.

The second trail went down the bluffs hill and to the west. That (westward) trail was not well-traveled. It had become overgrown with scrub brush, small trees, and waist-high weeds. But it was obvious that at one time there had been a wide trail that led up to the bluffs from the level of the railroad tracks below and ended at White Rock. These were the days when several sets of railroad tracks spanned the width of a flat area that now contains the Bayfront Parkway.

We looked at the overgrown path dozens of times before we finally decided to explore it. And when we eventually bushwacked our way down and through this

relatively wild trail, we encountered the large grove of elderberry trees (or bushes). How they got there or why there were so many of them was a mystery, but the discovery of this amazing grove of fruit trees guaranteed that we would be visiting on a regular basis. As we began picking and eating the delicious berries, we soon discovered that others had also known been visiting. In addition to the kids who had discovered them, several adults regularly visited to pick elderberries.

Years later, I learned that my friend, Dave Bierig (Erie's traditional sailmaker), and his family were among those visitors. The Bierigs owned a boathouse at the foot of Cranberry Street (now the location of Dave's sailmaking shop) and his parents regularly picked elderberries at the same grove that we had "discovered." They would watch for the flowering buds as they walked back and forth to their boathouse and when the berries ripened, they would pick large quantities of the fruit to make pies and jelly.



Huge white flowers on the ends of the elderberry trees signaled the impending arrival of the fruit.

It was Dave who eventually explained the purpose of the path that led up the hill from railroad-track level to White Rock. During the era of steam locomotives, each train had to be regularly filled with water. The path up the hill from ground level was actually a railroad siding with steel tracks. And "White Rock" was a huge concrete barrier at the end of the run that served to prevent steam engines from falling off the end of the tracks after climbing up the hill to fill their water tanks. His explanation nudged a memory of an old, broken-down wooden structure close to White Rock.



A vintage steam locomotive being gravity-filled with water at a water tank

First mystery solved. White Rock was not a naturally occurring rock formation as we had hypothesized. It was a man-made chunk of concrete. A second mystery was also explained. The wide pathway leading up to White Rock from the west was a railroad spur that had long been abandoned. The steel rails were removed and used elsewhere during an era when nothing went to waste. But the elderberries?

To answer this question, I consulted with several biologists who explained that elderberry bushes and trees are woodland opportunists. They commonly take root in newly cleared areas near overgrown woods and brush. And they thrive in wet conditions. The actual “sewers” of our wonderful wild fruit trees were birds. They feasted on wild berries, including elderberries, and then dropped fertilizer-encapsulated seeds as they flew about. The abandoned railroad path would have been a prime and fertile location since it was “tilled” by the removal of the steel rails and cross ties, and wet from decades of water transfers, which would have seeped down the hill to the location of the berry grove.



Still my favorite: elderberry jelly

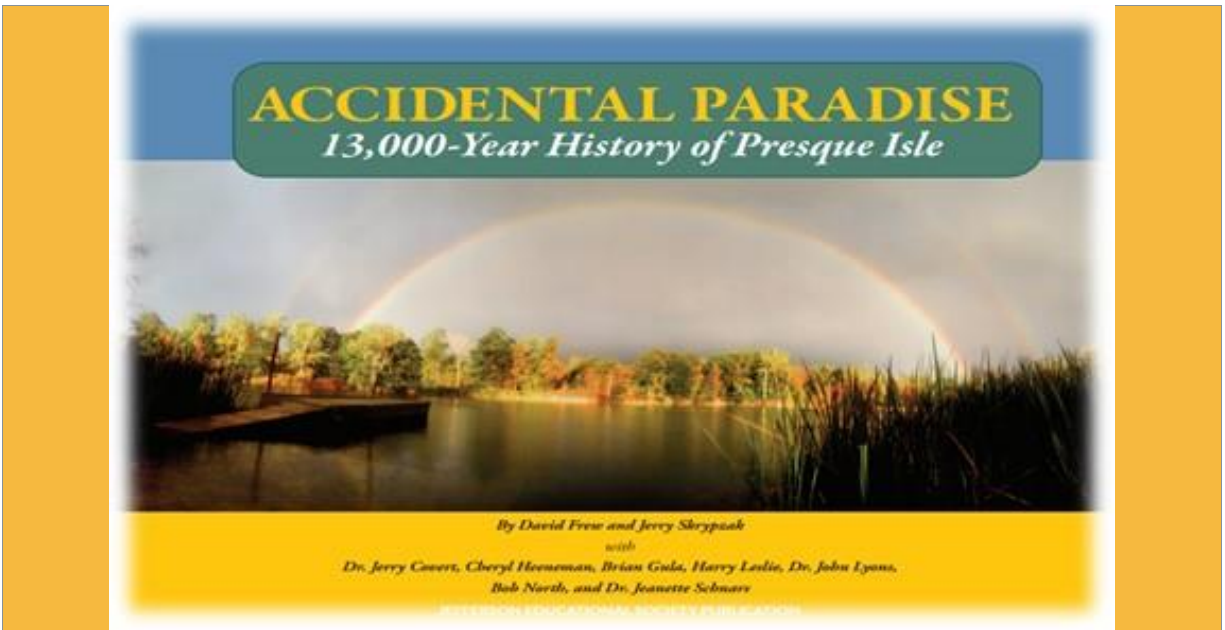
Years later, elderberry remains my very favorite jelly. And I now know why it is so expensive. When I proudly dragged armfuls of branches and berries home and presented them to my mother she gasped and then reluctantly made them into a (very) small amount of jelly. Hard to clean and requiring the addition of quite a lot of sugar, she proclaimed the berries “more trouble than they were worth.” Too much sugar, and probably not good for us, but I loved it!

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by Dr. David Frew and Jerry Skrypzak



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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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