

# JEFFERSON EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

Quick, Timely Reads  
On the Waterfront

**Florida Migration Dreams:  
*Buz Sawyer May Have Started It All***

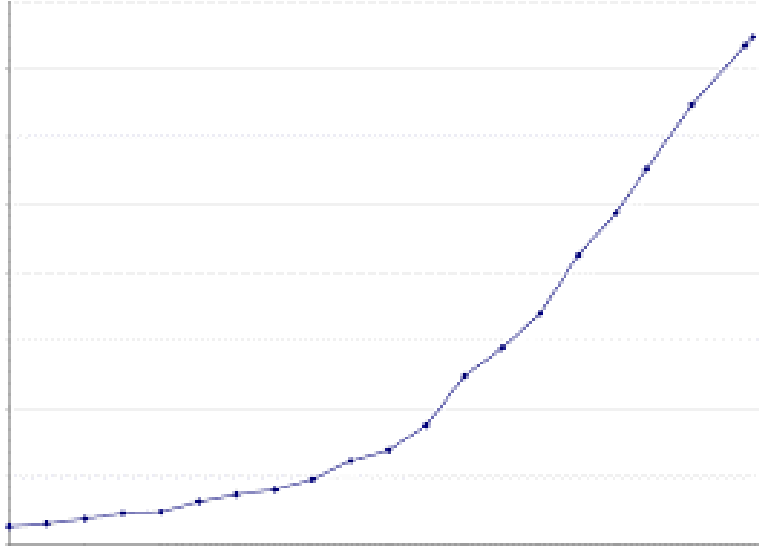
By David Frew, Scholar in Residence  
February 2024



*Rosco Sweeney, an antihero, may have helped to inspire generations of snowbirds.*

These days it seems that dozens of friends and associates depart Erie just before the wintery weather each year and head for sunny, warm Florida. Snowbirds. Some of them eventually seem to reverse their migration patterns, shifting from episodic Florida visitors to the reverse; people who make only occasional trips

back to Erie during the hottest summer months. The “tell” for these folks is a Florida license plate appearing on the rear bumper of a once-familiar Cadillac that used to be registered in Pennsylvania.



*Graph of Florida population, 1900 to 2024*

What created the hyperbolic interest in moving to Florida? Especially for elderly northerners. Between 1950 and today, the population of that state has grown from 2.5 to 23 million people, an almost unimaginable rate of change. During the same period, Pennsylvania also grew, but at a much slower rate – from 6 million to 13 million. Fixated as I am with the 1950s, I now wonder if part of the explanation could be connected to the old Sunday newspaper comics.

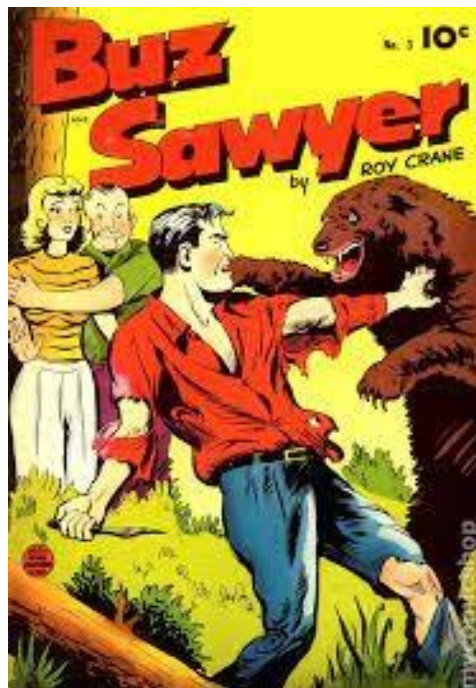
Once home from church each Sunday, the most exciting event of the weekend was reading the comic sections of the Sunday paper. While parents focused on politics, current affairs, and sports, we kids fought over the comic sections. There were dozens of exciting weekly strips, some funny and others filled with serialized adventures. But there was one that we did not get: Buz Sawyer. We read it, but wondered what it was about. The comic strip began during the WWII era with an action hero and naval pilot, Buz Sawyer, who like so many of our action heroes was fighting against the forces of evil. Also like many heroes, Buz Sawyer had a “sidekick.” Rosco Sweeney was a loyal friend who stood with Buz, fighting off bad guys. He wasn’t as heroic or tough as Buz, but he was a good guy. Brave in his own way.

Psychologists now tell us these “sidekicks” were placed in stories so that mortals like most of us could relate to the story and feel that they were a part of a narrative, even though most of us lack the uber-human abilities of action heroes. Interestingly, Buz was a college graduate, but his sidekick was not. That

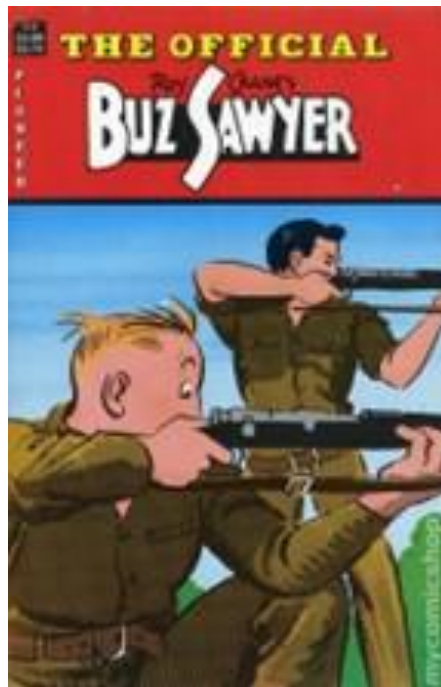
distinction would have resonated with most people at the time since in the 1950s college graduation was a rarity, unlike today. It is also noteworthy that the cartoon strip's creator, Roy Crane, attended college but never graduated.

After the war, Buz Sawyer continued to be an action hero, shifting from being a military person to a for-hire adventurer who worked for an oil exploration company. In his new role, Buz traveled the world, encountering dangers and adventures in far-off lands like Africa and South America. But what to do with Rosco? As the new peacetime adventures of Buz Sawyer grew increasingly complex, the presence of Rosco Sweeney began to seem logically clumsy and useless.

Cartoonist Crane did not want to do away with the trusty sidekick and had a novel idea. Borrowing from Al Capp's strategy of twisting his popular comic strip back and forth between wildly different contexts, from Dick Tracy to Dogpatch and 'Lil Abner, for example, Crane began alternating his cartoon between action hero Buz Sawyer and the life of Rosco Sweeney. The new context for Rosco Sweeney was Central Florida, where he painted a picture of the sidekick, living a civilian life in a place that was largely unknown and mysterious to the general public. Choosing Indiantown, Florida as a new home for Rosco, the cartoonist had the antihero sidekick move into his sister Lucile's house on an orange farm, where he began a regular life, filled with the kinds of problems that almost everyone could relate to.



*Action hero Buz Sawyer subdues a ferocious bear while Rosco watches.*



*Buz and Rosco during their military days*

Rosco was everyman. Relatable. He was an enlisted soldier unlike Buz, who was a college graduate and decorated naval fighter pilot. Rosco's Florida struggles involved roof leaks in the home that he shared with his sister, tree pruning in the orange grove, and selling his fruit so that he could make a living. He moved to Florida because he, the enlisted man with a small military pension, had to figure out how to live frugally.

Rosco and his sister (which immediately did away with uncomfortable sexual connotations) shared an old, broken-down home so they could live "on the cheap." Meanwhile, Buz was dining on caviar in glamorous locations and living as a celebrity in European castles. While the life of Buz seemed exciting, by contrast, readers seemed more interested in the ordinary things that were happening to Rosco.



*Rosco's sister (right) reacts when her brother is flirting.*

Cartoonist Crane had the entrepreneurial sense to follow the newspaper ratings. Readers responded much more favorably to the new adventures of Rosco Sweeney than the exploits of Buz Sawyer. Crane settled in Central Florida and created a commercial orange grove, which he operated on a day-to-day basis. Crane's hands-on understanding of life in Florida as well as the operations of an orange grove made his cartoon alter ego seem realistic to readers. And as the Buz Sawyer cartoon strip continued, the cartoonist had the good instincts to adjust as his readers reacted much more positively to Sweeney's Florida life.

As the comic strip matured during the 1950s, one of Rosco's most common problems involved the friends and relatives who would pack up, travel to Florida in automobiles and drop by unexpectedly. Rosco and his sister would come home after church on a random Sunday and find a large family of semi-familiar old friends who had just dropped in and were sitting on the porch. They were on a Florida vacation and looking for a place to stay. Many of these unannounced and unwelcomed guest stayovers would go on for way too long, creating friction between Rosco and his sister.



*Rosco weeds the garden in Florida*



*Roy Crane continued working on the popular Buz Sawyer comic strip until his death in 1977 in Orlando, Florida.*

Did Rosco Sweeney's life in Florida and its endless stream of northern visitors, hoping to learn the mysteries of Florida, create a generation of people obsessed with our most southern state? I wonder.

The 1950s era growth of that state was astonishing. Over a 15-year period, the population doubled twice, and the source of growth was clearly not internal (families getting bigger). It was a rush of northerners, searching for a better life. The rush created problems as old-time Florida politicians (The Pork Chop Gang) struggled to accept the diversity that characterized the new Florida, but that is a story for another time.

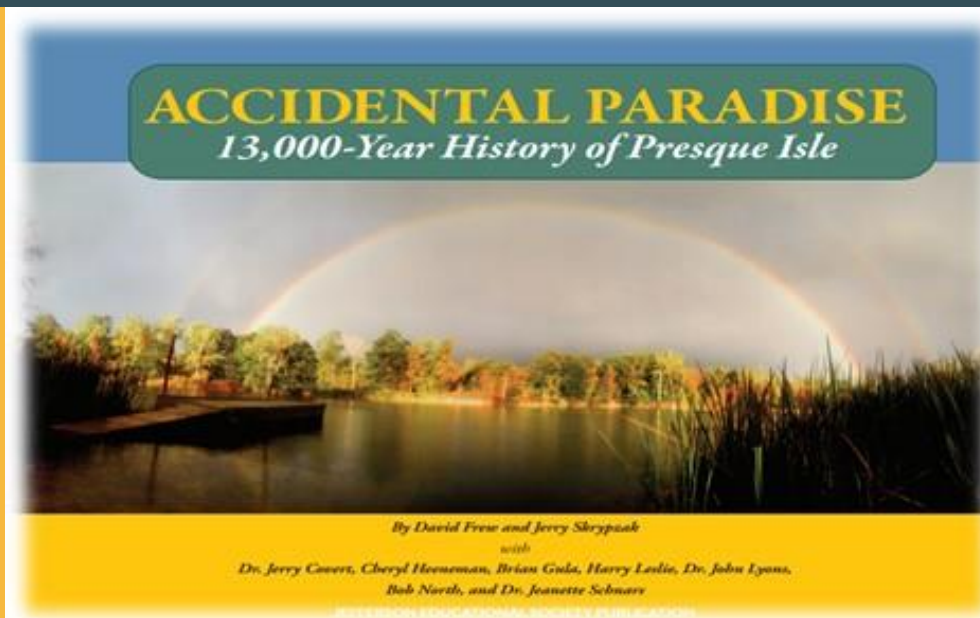


[Subscribe to JES Publications Mailing List!](#)

[Support JES | Donate](#)

## ***Accidental Paradise Available at TREC!***

***Accidental Paradise***  
by Dr. David Frew and Jerry Skrypzak



The beautiful book on Presque Isle published by authors David Frew and Jerry Skrypzak – “**Accidental Paradise: 13,000-Year History of Presque Isle**” – is on sale at the Tom Ridge Environmental Center’s gift shop and through a special website, [AccidentalParadise.com](http://AccidentalParadise.com).

The book, priced at **\$35 plus tax and shipping**, can be ordered now through the website sponsored by the TREC Foundation, [AccidentalParadise.com](http://AccidentalParadise.com).

Presque Isle Gallery and Gifts on the main floor of TREC, located at **301 Peninsula Drive, Suite #2, Erie, PA 16505** will also handle sales **daily from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.**

For more information, send an email to [aperino@TREC.org](mailto:aperino@TREC.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.*



## In Case You Missed It

[Quick, Timely Reads | William Penn is News Again](#) written by **Larry Flatley**

[The Wider World | A Brief Journey into Central Asia](#) written by President of DC Analytics **Diane Chido** and **Aidai Tynybek kyzy**

[Truth in Love | Literacy, Learning, and Leadership: How African American Males Study, Graduate from Predominantly White Institutions of Higher Education](#) written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence **Dr. Parris J. Baker** and **A'Darius S. Porter**

[Be Well | Finding Relief from Post-Nasal Drip](#) written by health and wellness expert **Debbie DeAngelo**

[Classic Book Notes #1 | The White Album](#) written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence **Dr. Andrew Roth**

[On the Waterfront | The Hardy Boys: Bay Rat Literature](#) written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence **Dr. David Frew**





