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Quick, Timely Reads
On the Waterfront

The Airport: *A Magical Mystery Tour*

By David Frew
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Dr. David Frew, a prolific writer, author, and speaker grew up on Erie's lower west side as a proud "Bay Rat," joining neighborhood kids playing and marauding along the west bayfront. He has written for years about his beloved Presque Isle and his adventures on the Great Lakes. In this series, the JES Scholar-in-Residence takes note of life in and around the water.

Original construction of the "new" Erie International Airport was completed in 1958.

These days there is such intense security at airports that if a person simply loiters for a few moments near the passenger pickup or rental car areas, a uniformed authority will be investigating almost immediately. But things were different

during the 1950s. Instead of exuding a feeling of official security and seriousness, the old Erie Airport had the feel of a middle-class boat marina. Not a fancy yacht club, but a working-class boat harbor.

The western end of the airport was filled with small, privately owned and experimental airplanes of almost every imaginable description. They ranged from homemade to restored military and antique airplanes and included mono-wing and bi-wing models. The airport was home to dozens of ordinary backyard mechanic types who had devoted their energies to building and maintaining small airplanes instead of automobiles or boats. The owners of these airplanes, often partner groups of three or more men, seemed to be perpetually working on their beloved aircraft, washing, polishing, and tinkering with engines. Airplanes were blocked to the ground and held in place by chains and eye bolts that had been driven into the ground, seeming much like the motorboats that water-based marina tenants tied to docks. And the variety of aircraft tethered in place on the west end of the airport was stunning.

If there was any security at the small, private airplane end of the airport, it was barely noticeable. When my father drove us there, which he did on many occasions, there may have been a perfunctory security guard but a quick wave from his window and my father and I were driving along airport runways, looking at individual airplanes, and hunting for people that he knew. I suspect that his easy access may have been connected to the fact that he was a World War II veteran as were many of the small plane owners.

Once we had identified a familiar face, my father would park next to that person's airplane and strike up a conversation. Topics were aircraft related and usually revolved around top speeds, flying ranges, and detailed discussions of the last flight that a particular airplane had made. Since I was (emphasis on the past tense) a cute, redheaded kid with freckles, I often found myself lifted into a cockpit and sitting behind a steering wheel. Wow!

I always hoped that someday one of the airplane owners would offer to take us up in the air for a ride. But that never happened. In fact, there were very few actual takeoffs or landings among the moored airplanes at the west end of the airport. There was a lot of talking about flights and the occasional engine startup, but very few actual flights.

On rare occasions when an owner would show up with cans of gasoline, fill his fuel tanks and liberate an airplane from the chocks and chains that bound it to the ground, there was a lot of excitement. Almost everyone from the private end of the airport would follow the lucky pilot who was about to take off, using the small runway reserved for private airplanes. Everyone would watch the takeoff and cheer. It was amazing to observe how short most of the flights were. Planes would lift off, disappear over the horizon and then return, usually within an hour.

The airport was much more glamorous and mysterious in those days, probably because so few people had actually taken airplane rides. I did not take an airplane trip until several years after I had graduated from college and began working as an engineer. And I was not alone. Few of my friends had taken airplane rides before me. My job as a field engineer required that I visit customers regularly and it was only that artifact of my professional life that caused me to become a regular air traveler. But during the 1950s, when I was visiting the Erie Airport on weekends with my father, air travel was a mysterious and infrequent opportunity

for most people, an activity that seemed to be common among the wealthy or adventurous.

Interestingly, there was a dedicated west side club for people who were interested in airplanes and flight. The Aviation Club, a private organization of airplane aficionados, was established in 1933 on West Lake Road within a few miles of the airport. It continued as a social and supper club for decades before it finally went out of business in the 1980s. Given its premier location and lovely facilities, several private restaurants have attempted to re-open the old Aviation Club facility as a public restaurant but none of them seemed to make the grand old club work.

The former Aviation Club currently bears the sign of a recent entrepreneur, Alto Cucina.

During the post-World War II peak of small airplane flying of the 1950s and 1960s, there were two other airports in the Erie area. One was at the site of today's Millcreek Mall. The Kearsarge Airport, as it was informally known, featured two groomed grass runways and dozens of small, resident private airplanes. As Peach Street became developed, the land was simply too valuable to justify the existence of such an operation and it was abandoned. During the same general time period, there was a larger air operation between Erie and Wattsburg that managed to host a few commercial and charter flights. Like the west end of the Erie Airport, there were dozens of privately owned, small airplanes. Eventually, however, progress claimed the Wattsburg Airport as well, and Erie International Airport (now Tom Ridge Field) eventually remained as the only public airport. Moorhead Airport in North East is now a private airstrip.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of Erie's airfields (including Erie Airport's western small airplane area) included a constant lineup of hopeful parachutists wandering about and hoping to catch a ride up into the air so they could jump out and experience the adrenalin rush of a parachute ride. They were mostly World War II veterans looking to replicate old paratrooper experiences. Civilian parachutists hung around all three local airports, asking private pilots for one-way rides. They carried their own parachutes and usually offered to help pay for the gasoline if an owner would take them up and let them jump. Naturally the number of parachutists increased with good summer weather. Eventually, the spectacle of parachute riders startling people by landing in neighborhoods and backyards raised concerns among local authorities. They often added to the annoyance by asking to use telephones so they could be picked up. One by one, all local airports, beginning with Erie Airport, began to prohibit the parachutists from hanging about and begging for rides.

When I started to work at Gannon in 1970, one of our upper administrators, who happened to be a World War II veteran and ex-military pilot, owned a share in an airplane that he and two partners maintained at Erie International. After getting to know him, he offered to take me for a ride. He was always looking for passengers since most of his friends and family members were afraid to go with him.

Dick's airplane was a serviceable old model that had neither instruments nor a radio. He did all of his flying by, as he called it, "the seat of his pants." If the weather was not perfect, he did not fly and if he ever saw a weather front approaching, he would immediately return to the airport and land. His plane held

a maximum of three people, two in the front and one in a cramped rear seat. While the gasoline filler cap was on the outside of the plane, there was a small adjunct cap between the two front seats. That opening had a long wooden dowel pin protruding through it with several painted lines marked on it. Dick explained that it was a mechanical fuel gage. As gasoline was consumed during a flight, the floating stick would sink into the fuel tank and by noting the fractions on the stick's painted circles (1\8, 1\4, 1\2, etc.) the pilot knew how much fuel remained. Pretty scary!

The only other cockpit "instrument" was an ordinary bolt that hung from the headliner of the airplane's interior. Dick explained that it was a "tell," which would alert the pilot to the altitude (angle) of the airplane in bad weather. Apparently, it was possible to think that a plane was flying on the level, even when it was actually moving at a severe angle through clouds. "Don't plan to need it," Dick reassured me.

We took off from Erie Airport on a bright, sunny day, using a small runway that was not even close to the main runway that serviced regular commercial flights. We taxied along for a very short distance and lifted off into the southwesterly wind. The takeoff was so short and easy that it seemed quite amazing. Banking to the northwest, we cruised out and over Lake Erie before he turned east and headed for the bluffs along the shore between Harborcreek and New York state. And that was where I experienced one of the most frightening events of my life. Assuring me that he knew exactly what he was doing, my friend reached down and switched off the airplane's engine. "This is why my wife will not come flying with me," he laughed. With a deafening silence that was both pleasant and frightening, Dick guided the plane into a controlled descent until suddenly, and as if by magic, it began to ascend. In that strange silence we continued to rise until Dick explained that we had to be careful not to go up beyond the altitude limit for private aircraft, although it was never clear to me how he knew what our altitude really was since there was no altimeter.

Somewhere near the New York line, we banked south and turned the airplane back toward Erie. Continuing to catch updrafts along the edge of the water, Dick piloted along the lakeshore toward Erie for a while and then replicated the maneuver. We repeated the turn several times, gliding back and forth for more than an hour with Dick skillfully feeling his way from one updraft to the next. Finally on a tack back toward Erie, Dick smiled and said, "moment of truth." He turned the key and the engine sprung to life, making me feel much better. When I asked what he would have done if the engine did not start, he reassured me that it had never failed, and even if it did there were lots of places where he could glide to a safe landing. I was not entirely reassured but Dick was happy that we had barely used any fuel.

Less than a year later, my friend and colleague decided to use his airplane to make a trip to Rochester, New York. With one of his partners aboard, he used binoculars and an ordinary roadmap to follow Interstate 90 to the destination. Upon arrival, Dick made a soft landing on the periphery of the airport and taxied down a paved drainage ditch to an area of the Rochester Airport that seemed to be hosting several small private airplanes. Just as he was congratulating himself on his success, however, a truck filled with airport security people intercepted him. They read him the "riot act," and confiscated his airplane.

When they asked why he had not alerted the air tower to his impending landing he replied that he did not have a radio – not the answer they were looking for. After a rental car return to Erie followed by a long series of legal negotiations, Dick was allowed to disassemble the wings of his "arrested" aircraft and haul it back to Erie on a truck. Shortly after that, he gave up his share in the airplane at the urging of his wife and friends. I was sad since I had hoped to repeat our gliding trip.

Dick later admitted that flight technology had passed him by and he purchased a sailboat. Two-dimensional flying. Since those wonderful days of gliding along the edge of Lake Erie, my friend and colleague retired (name withheld to protect the innocent), moved to Florida, and eventually passed away. But I will always remember the precise moment when he switched off the engine.

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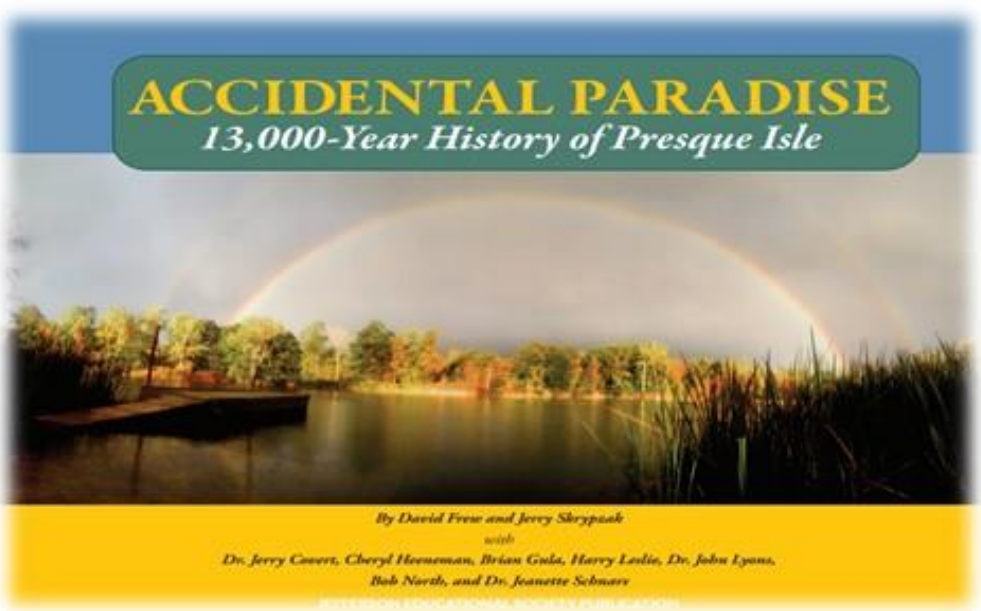
by Dr. David Frew and Jerry Skrypzak



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**.

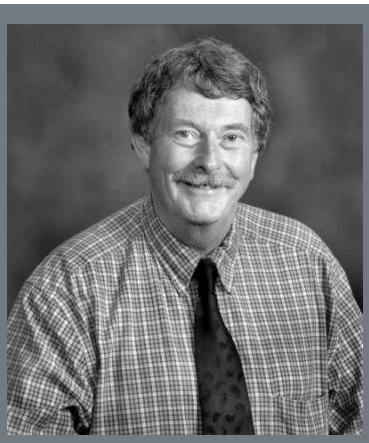
The book, priced at **$35 plus tax and shipping**, can be ordered now through the website sponsored by the TREC Foundation, **AccidentalParadise.com**.

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@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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