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# JEFFERSON

## EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

### Quick, Timely Reads On the Waterfront

#### **Ann B. Davis: *Prodigy Defined***

**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.*



*Ann B. Davis with then-Mayor Joyce Savocchio at far left and through the years.*



*Ann Davis: Yearbook photo from Strong Vincent High School, Class of 1944*

She was just another neighborhood kid. A quiet, unassuming girl who moved here from upstate New York with her family at age 3 when her father was transferred to General Electric's Erie Works. Ann Davis grew up a few blocks from me, attended Emerson School and Strong Vincent (during the time when it had seventh and eighth grade) and then went off to the University of Michigan. Friends described her as quiet, intelligent, and hardworking. And no one was surprised when she entered university as a pre-med major. She had the intellect and work ethic, as well as the academic skills, to become a physician. Ann Davis had an identical twin sister, as well as an older brother and sister.

When longtime Erie Playhouse Director Newell Tarrant moved to town in 1946, he purchased a home close to Ann's family. The proximity of a playhouse director was a wonderful opportunity for Ann's older brother, Evans, who was already interested in acting and had been spending time at Erie's downtown playhouse. Evans Davis, who was five years older than Ann, was enrolled at the University of Michigan, where he majored in fine arts and acted regularly in productions at the campus theater. During summer breaks when he was home, Evans continued his relationship with the Erie Playhouse on West Seventh Street, by acting and working backstage.

Ann had little interest in theater during her high school years but when she followed her older brother to the University of Michigan, things changed suddenly. When she went to see her brother perform in the student production of "Oklahoma," her life was transformed. She was so "taken" with the excitement of the play and her brother's acting that she switched majors from pre-med to fine arts and began a three-year involvement with Michigan's campus theater. And when she came home during summers, brother Evans helped her connect with the Erie Playhouse, where their neighbor, Newell Tarrant, mentored her. By the time she had graduated in 1948 with a degree in fine arts, Ann Davis knew that she was going to pursue a career in acting.

After graduation and a summer in Erie, during which she appeared on the Erie Playhouse stage, Ann went to California and moved in with a former roommate from the University of Michigan who was from Los Angeles. She made a living, working in every imaginable entertainment venue. Ann Davis did comedy, worked in a series of cabarets, became a puppeteer, and did odd jobs to make ends meet.

In 1954, the brother (who was an agent) of the young woman that she was rooming with arranged for her to go to a television show tryout. The tryout was for the role of “Shultzy,” Bob Cummings’ secretary on “The Bob Cummings Show.” Amazingly, she won the part and continued on “The Bob Cummings Show” for five seasons, from 1954 to 1959. She was nominated for an Emmy as “best supporting actress” four times and won twice. One of the arguments in support of the nominations was her relative youth. She began playing the part at only 28, despite the older role. When Hollywood agents suggested that she change her name, she resisted, but recognizing the “ordinary” nature of her given name, she added her middle initial, becoming Ann B. Davis.



*Ann B. Davis, upper left, with the cast from “The Bob Cummings Show”*

When the Cummings show ended, Ann B. Davis returned to her original love, the stage. For more than a decade she acted in numerous theatrical productions, including a stint on Broadway. She traveled the country doing summer stock in towns from Florida to Minnesota and even returned to Erie twice to make special appearances in downtown playhouse productions. Then, in 1969, she earned the role that made her famous: “Alice” in television’s “Brady Bunch.” That role continued for six regular seasons and even after it ended, she returned after a hiatus to reprise Alice in several additional specials.

The most significant shift in the life of Ann B. Davis came in 1976 when she sold her Los Angeles home and joined a small Episcopal faith community in Denver, Colorado. Led by an Episcopal bishop, the group lived a quiet communal life of

prayer and contemplation. Even though she traveled occasionally to do television commercials and theater productions, Davis increasingly found herself immersed in the daily life of the 18-person religious community. Her prayer community moved from Colorado to Beaver County, Pennsylvania and then to Texas, always remaining intact and being led by the Episcopal bishop who founded it.



*Ann B. Davis as Alice in the Brady Bunch*

When she was 88 in 2014, Ann B. Davis fell in the shower, striking her head. She ignored the injury and went to bed, but she was found unresponsive the next day. A subdural hematoma. It was a sad way for a long and rich life to come to an end. She had been in perfect health up to the day of the accident.



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*Author's note: During the years when I served as executive director of the Erie County Historical Society, one of my responsibilities was to find a major guest*

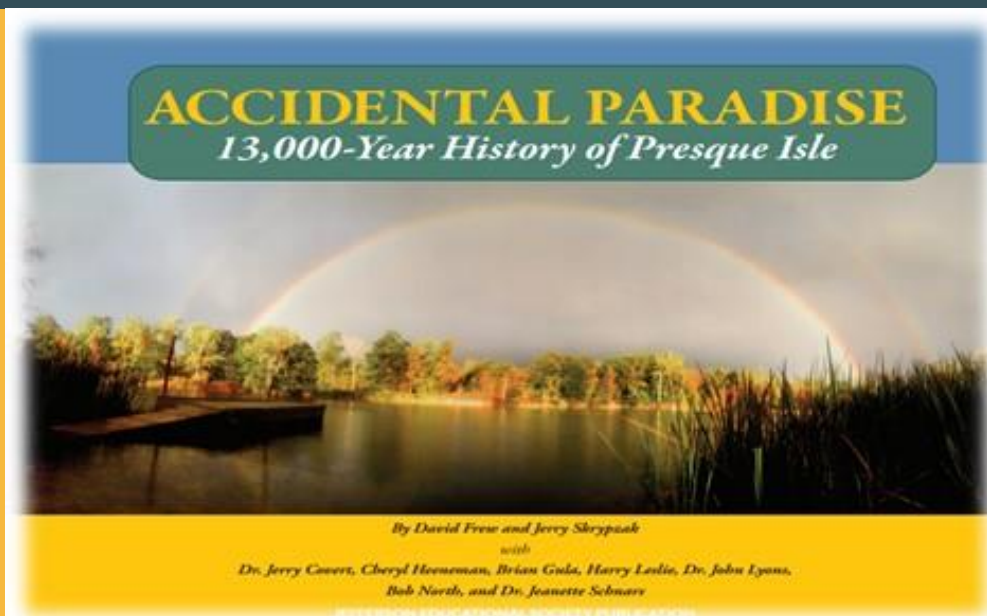
speaker for our annual fall member celebration event. After bringing Bob Ballard (Titanic) and Ken Burns to Erie, I thought that it would be appropriate to engage a woman speaker. I reached out to Ann B. Davis, and she seriously considered it. She had remained loyal to Erie and returned on many occasions. Finally, and after several telephone conversations, she declined, saying that a public appearance would be a distraction from her life of prayer and that her media celebrity days were in the past. Though disappointed, I felt lucky to have chatted with her.

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by Dr. David Frew and Jerry Skrypzak



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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).

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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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