

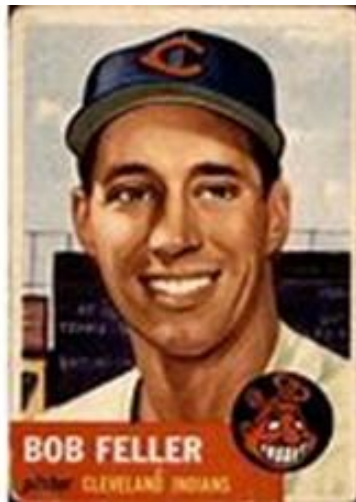
# JEFFERSON

EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

Quick, Timely Reads  
On the Waterfront

**Trading Cards**  
*We Should Have Been More Careful*

**By David Frew**  
**March 2023**



*This 1954 Topps baseball card is now worth about \$250.*

Each spring, during the weeks before opening day of Major League Baseball, neighborhood stores would begin to sell baseball cards. Each pack came with a large slab of chewing gum, usually a nasty tasting substance that many of us

simply threw away. Since most of us were Cleveland Indians fans, we eagerly ripped our packs of cards open hoping to find Bob Feller, Jim Hegan, Dale Mitchell, Al Rosen, or Larry Doby. Sadly, we were usually disappointed. Instead of finding one of our Cleveland Indian heroes, we usually opened each pack of cards only to find players from other teams, and usually not the most popular players.

We were being duped by the baseball card companies. To keep us coming back for more, they produced fewer star player cards and many more of the unknown player cards. The companies were later criticized for this and other unfair business practices, not the least of which was encouraging kids to chew sugary gum that put teeth at risk. It should not have been shocking that the most popular card company of the 1950s, Topps, featured bubble gum in packs of baseball cards. By the time we were buying baseball cards, Topps had essentially become a bubble gum company, famously marketing Bazooka Bubble Gum as one of its earliest and most successful products. Topps began as a chewing tobacco company but when cigarettes replaced chewing gum as the most popular tobacco product during the 1940s, the company shifted its focus to chewing gum. To accelerate sales, the company initiated a cartoon character, Bazooka Joe. Each piece of Bazooka gum came wrapped in a colorful comic strip.

The logo for Bazooka Bubble Gum features the word "Bazooka" in a large, stylized font where the "B" is red, "a" is blue, "z" is red, "o" is blue, "o" is red, "k" is blue, and "a" is red. Below it, the words "BUBBLE GUM" are written in a smaller, blue, sans-serif font.

*Bazooka bubble gum appeared just after World War II.*



*Bazooka Joe, a cartoon character, appeared in 1954 as a companion to its chewing gum. Topps was learning to target kids.*

Baseball cards first appeared in the late 1800s almost as an accidental integration between photography and sports marketing. There were originally several companies competing for a relatively small, niche market. Industry competition as well as distractions created by two world wars drove the early producers out of the market and the baseball card business was not revived until the post World War II era. Then suddenly during the wild economic growth era of the early 1950s, both baseball and baseball trading cards “took off.” There were only a few companies and Topps was well positioned since it was already in the bubble gum business and knew how to market to kids.

By the late 1950s, Topps had become the industry giant by buying out its competitors. Its only serious competitor in the industry was Bowman. Established in 1927, Bowman was once bigger and more important to the market than Topps, but in its early days it failed to specialize, producing films stars, war heroes, and other themed cards. Like Topps, Bowman was essentially a gum company.

In 1965, Topps acquired Bowman for \$200,000 but instead of merging its business model with its own company, Topps eventually used its new acquisition to specialize. Bowman cards are still being produced by Topps and are now known for marketing entire sets of cards, including rookie players.



*Bowman's current mark*



*The earliest baseball cards appeared in the late 1800s, but production ended during the war years.*

**TOPPS**

*As baseball cards became prized collectibles Topps evolved into the market leader.*



*Select Mickey Mantle baseball cards have sold for millions of dollars.*

Most of my friends collected cards. In addition to baseball cards, which were the perennial favorite, they also collected football cards, especially Cleveland Browns players. Like “dumb kids,” we did not take the very best care of our cards. We lugged them around in dirty pockets, left them lying about to become dirty and stained, and often gave or traded them away. Eventually when we left home for college, military service, or to start our own families, card collections were tucked into obscure drawers or attic corners to languish unattended. And then one day we learned that a baseball card had been sold for thousands of dollars (or more) and began to wonder about the rubber-banded packs of cards that we had carelessly left behind.

Our mother-son conversations then went something like this:

“Hi Mom, how are you?”

“I was wondering. Do you remember my old baseball card collection?”

“What ever happened to it?”

“Oh. Those old things that you left in your room with dirty socks when you went off to college.”

“Threw them out years ago when we remodeled your old bedroom!”

“That room has become a knitting area.”

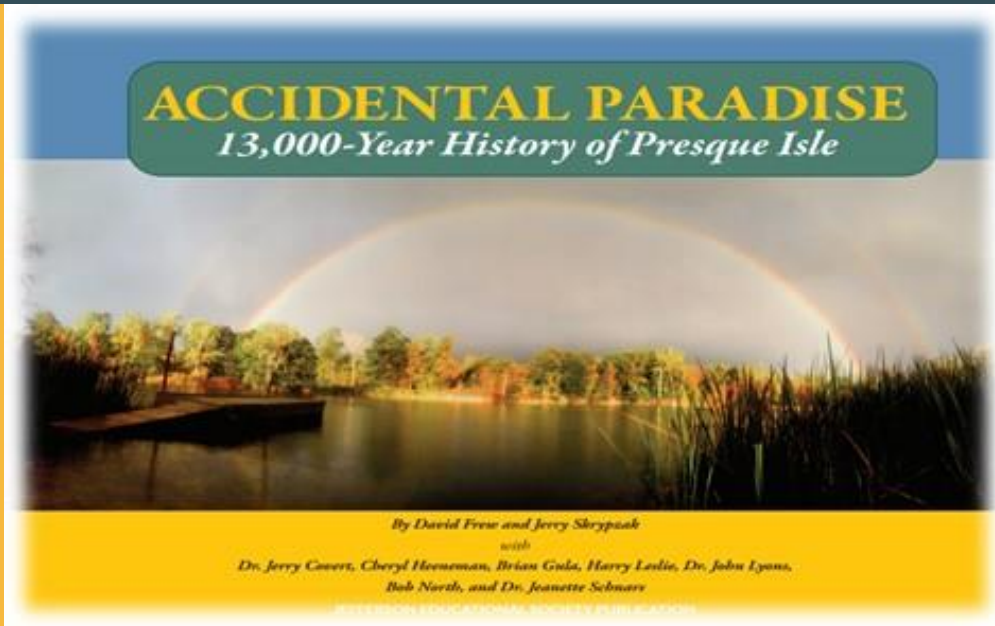
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***Accidental Paradise***  
*by Dr. David Frew and Jerry Skrypzak*



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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).

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](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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