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On the Waterfront

The Backwards-Forward Car Was Cooler Than We Knew

By David Frew
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The rear of the 1950 Studebaker almost looked like the front.

When it came to cars, Bay Rats knew "cool." Fords, Chevys, and Mercuries were very cool, especially if they were two-door models and painted a great solid (never two-toned) color. Like black! Our favorite cars could be extra cool if they had whitewall tires, fancy hub caps, and pinstripes. The uncool cars of the 1950s were the off brands – cars that elderly grandparents or conservative aunts and uncles

might have owned. These were often Hudsons, Kaisers, Frasers, DeSotos, and other odd models that became the targets of criticism by most of my friends. We often made fun of them when they rolled through the neighborhood. Naturally, the really uncool owners of these strange automobiles that seemed designed for the elderly often selected weird colors, blackwall tires, and tiny, cheap hubcaps.

The least cool of all cars, as far as we were concerned, was the Studebaker. It was a very strange vehicle, seemingly trapped between radically different design concepts. Our parents called Studebakers "backwards-forward cars" because of an odd aesthetic glitch that made the rear of the automobile almost look like it was the front. The strange design feature was marketed as being aerodynamic and contributing to vehicle stability.

The Budweiser Clydesdales are pulling a Studebaker carriage.

The Studebaker Company began as a traditional wagon and coach builder. It produced beautiful, ornate coaches that were to be pulled by teams of horses. One lasting example of its work is the familiar Budweiser beer wagon that is often depicted with Clydesdale horses during the holiday season. Given Studebaker's "furniture level" approach to wagon building, it is not surprising that its entry into the "horseless carriage" market was characterized by a high-quality woodwork design strategy. Their first automobiles were created for the apex of the luxury market. The 1920s and 1930s saw Studebaker's emergence as one of America's absolute premium brands. Some of its automobiles were produced in the grand European tradition featuring a chauffer's drive station in the uncovered front seat (old carriage style) while the "owners" rode in a luxurious rear passenger compartment. Their cars were as popular in Europe as they were in the United States.

The company emerged from the World War II hiatus in automobile production with a decidedly new market strategy. Company directors realized that their future would not lie in the production of a small number of high-quality vehicles oriented toward elites. Instead, they decided to reimagine Studebaker as a practical and efficient car that would appeal to the "working man." To that end

they created a brand new line of cars touted as fuel efficient, mechanically reliable, and safe. The odd design of the Studebaker line, which was emulated by the infamous Tucker brand, was intended to create road stability and fuel efficiency by sending the flow of air that passed over the car at highway speeds onto the rear deck to hold it to the road.

Unfortunately for Studebaker, the company was never able to create enough sales volume to help match the profits and associated design capabilities of the "Big Three" – General Motors, Ford and Chrysler. One advantage that the larger companies enjoyed was the ability to produce and sell a wider range of models. General Motors' customers, for example, could purchase inexpensive and plain Chevrolets, as well as Buicks, Oldsmobiles, and Cadillacs. It was a range that stretched from the very low to the very high end of the market. Studebaker's lineup was limited, centering on the low end, low profit market range.

This 1930 Studebaker reflects the brand's tradition as a luxury automobile.

Studebaker struggled to survive through the 1950s and into the 1960s, finally realizing that a new business strategy would be needed if it were to survive. In a last minute, desperate initiative, it announced two new products: (1) a fuel-efficient car called the Lark as well as (2) a series of high-powered sports models that included the Golden Hawk and the Avanti. In a competitive maneuver that was later identified as collusion, the "Big Three" met the challenge of the Lark initiative with their own fuel-efficient models. And the Golden Hawk and Avanti, while well-received by car aficionados, were not able to outcompete new sport models marketed by General Motors and Ford. They were perceived as too quirky by the average high-end car buyer.

The Studebaker Lark was a last-ditch effort to market an economy car.

The Studebaker Avanti, a true sports car

During the mid-1950s, my cousin, Phil, who lived in Warren, Pennsylvania and was an upperclassman at the University of Michigan, decided that he needed a car. Hoping for a convertible, his search brought him to Erie, where he found an affordable model at Rhodes, the Studebaker dealer in our neighborhood on West 10th Street. He had located several Chevrolet and Ford convertibles, but they were well out of his price range.

I still recall the day that he picked up his 1952, yellow Studebaker convertible and brought it to my house. It was newer and much less expensive than any of the more popular Fords and Chevrolets that he had looked at. And for the next few years when I visited Phil and his family in Warren, he would always put the top down and take me for thrilling rides from his home up and into the mountains to look for rattlesnakes. Our favorite destination those days was Jakes Rocks. Phil's car may not have been "totally cool" by Bay Rat aesthetic standards but what a thrill. A convertible with the top down trumped cool!

Years later, after Phil had become a prominent Florida anesthesiologist, he told me that the biggest error that he had ever made was selling the yellow Studebaker while he was in medical school. Even though it was quirky, he loved that car and later came to recognize that it was one of the low volume, oddball cars that became valuable later as collector's items. At the car shows that we visit these days, the biggest crowds do not accumulate at the Fords and Chevrolets. Instead, they gravitate toward the Packards, Hudsons, and Studebakers.

The 1952 Studebaker convertible

Astonishing as it may seem now, this small building in the 1000 block or West 10th Street was once Erie's Studebaker dealership. The place has been re-purposed as an auto repair shop.

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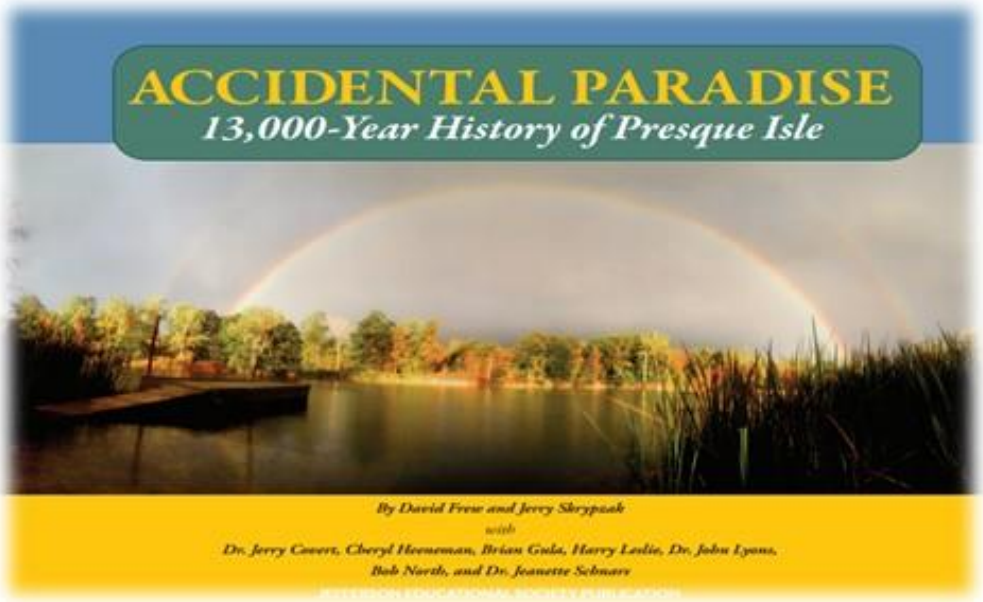
by Dr. David Frew and Jerry Skrypzak



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**.

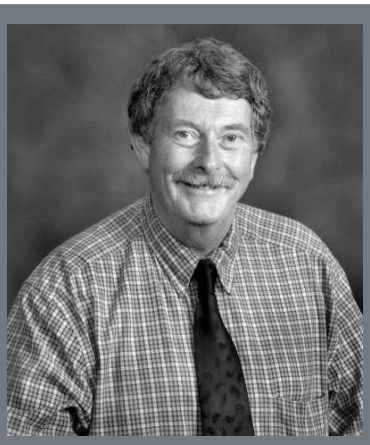
The book, priced at **$35 plus tax and shipping**, can be ordered now through the website sponsored by the TREC Foundation, **AccidentalParadise.com**.

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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