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## Quick, Timely Reads On the Waterfront

### Lent: *The Agony of Deprivation*

By David Frew  
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*The venerable Miter Box*

One of the strangest experiences of the 1950s for those of us who attended Catholic schools was the Lenten period. Beginning with Ash Wednesday, all the kids were thrust (shoved) into a spirit of sacrifice. We were encouraged to give something up, usually a thing that we dearly loved like eating candy or teasing girls. Lent was all about spiritual rebirth and we learned that sacrifices would help us to become better people.

Perhaps the most interesting of all Lenten customs was the infamous miter box, a small cardboard coin receptacle into which we were encouraged to place a portion of our spending money. It was supposed to be cash that we were to be sacrificing as opposed to spending on the frivolities that we regularly consumed, including baseball cards, penny candy, and other foolishness.

Nun-teachers passed the miter boxes out just before the beginning of the season of sacrifice and told us that on Good Friday we would be expected to return them so that the proceeds could be directed toward some wonderful cause. We were to learn of the exact “holy cause” at some later date. Like other Catholic school traditions, we were also told that the annual miter box system would have a competitive aspect. The kid who managed to stuff his or her (a girl always won) cardboard holy box with the most cash was to win an amazing prize, not to mention one of several “indulgences” that had been identified by famous bishops and popes. We were highly motivated!

The most important benefits of our miter box donations, or so we were told, were the indulgences. These were special spiritual perks that were associated with “doing good deeds.” There were two generic categories of indulgences: (1) partial and (2) plenary, and both were related to “Purgatory.” We had learned in religion classes that Purgatory was a place where people were sent to “serve time” while they were waiting to be allowed to enter heaven. In a way it was a good place since it was not Hell. Inmates were not eternally damned and sooner or later they would get to heaven. But while they were waiting, Purgatory was a terrible place, filled with suffering, and the only way to reduce one’s sentence was through indulgences. And that was where the miter boxes came into play.



*Painter Ludovico Carracci's rendition of Purgatory with suffering souls at the bottom of the terrible pit, being supervised by an angel and watched over by saints.*

Plenary indulgences were the biggest and best and generally unavailable to kids like us through miter box donations. A plenary indulgence provided immediate and total absolution for sin but could only be granted in very special circumstances. Alternatively, we were advised to consider partial indulgences. Those were the less important ones that we were eligible to earn. A miter box kid could earn partial indulgences, either for himself or a dead relative through a variety of good works. It was important to know that temporary indulgences could not be given to live friends or relatives. And so it was that each Lent we were charged with the important mission of filling miter boxes. We were told that the nature of the indulgences and or the methods by which we would be able to distribute them would be “revealed in the fullness of time.” Like many other theological matters, it was a great mystery.

Most of the guys took their miter boxes home, assembled them (they came etched into a flat piece of cardboard and had to be punched out, folded and connected with tabs), then tossed them in an innocuous corner of our bedrooms. For most of the season the boys’ miter boxes sat on shelves gathering dust. Inevitably, however, as Lent progressed teachers would issue stern reminders. The girls nodded and acted like they had been meticulously filling their miter boxes on a routine basis. And they probably were. The boys swallowed and felt guilty (another artifact of 1950s Catholic education). Somewhere near the third week of Lent most of my friends became semi-serious about filling their miter boxes. Realizing that “the end was near,” we began to scrounge about, hunting for loose change in easy chairs, couches and other places to add to our boxes. Finally, during the final week of Lent there was a mad rush to “find” money to put into miter boxes.

On Holy Thursday, we dutifully carried miter boxes to school, signed our names and presented them to teachers. At the end of the next day (Good Friday), each teacher passed out a finalized list of both the individual and class totals. And that was when the all-important indulgence prayer was repeated in class. As teachers led us in the recitation of the words of the indulgence prayer each of us closed our eyes, mouthed the words and then offered a silent dedication to the “lucky person” who was about to have his or her Purgatory time reduced. As the prayer came to a solemn conclusion, we could almost hear the crowds of souls ascending from Purgatory to heaven.

Although we never discussed the theological mysteries that Lent, sacrifice, and miter boxes had revealed, I still ponder them:

1. Was it selfish to apply the miter box indulgence to myself as opposed to a dead relative?

2. Did the sincerity with which a person saved have as much to do with the size of the indulgence as the actual amount?
3. If a person were to have “borrowed” loose change that he found in his mother’s purse to put into the miter box did that really count or was it a sin?
4. Did the person who had been “busted out of Purgatory” know who had done it?
5. Why were the girls always able to save more money than the boys?
6. Did I manage to “bank” enough Purgatory time reductions for myself at some future time when I will need it?

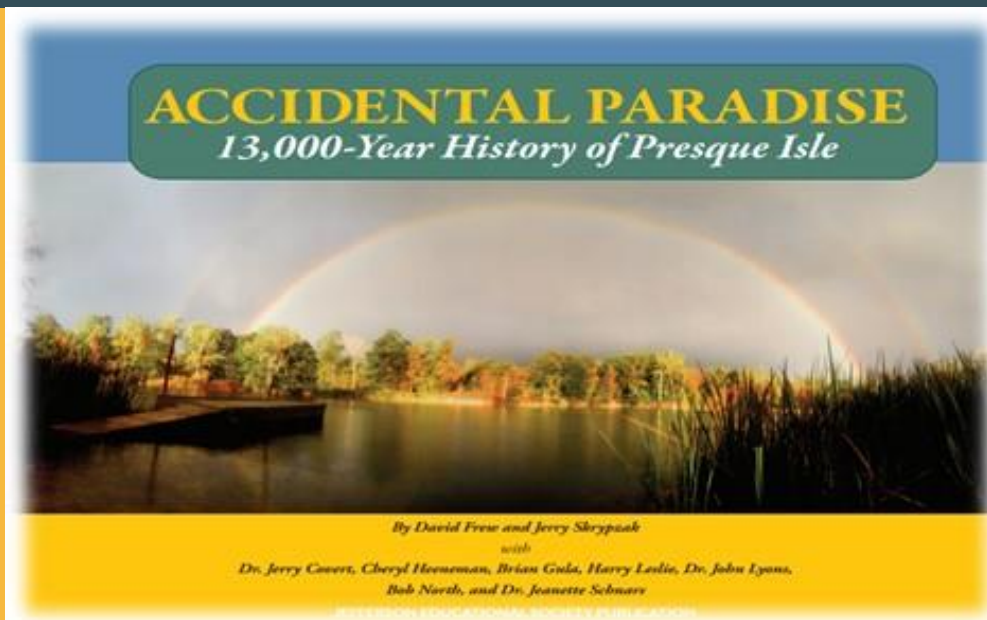
When we told our Protestant (public) school friends about miter boxes and Purgatory they were astonished. One of them even muttered something about Martin Luther and the Reformation. Did they have religion classes, too?

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



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#### 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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