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Quick, Timely Reads
On the Waterfront

Discovering a Secret Submarine
Bay Rats Become International Sleuths

By David Frew
September 2022

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.



We could tell from the ship's profile and SS designation that it had to be a secret submarine.

It was a typical 1954 summer day. Four of us were making our way toward the water, following one of our traditional pathways. After crossing Second Field (West Second and Cascade streets) we deftly hopped across several rows of (hopefully) parked coal cars, continued to the edge of the docks and headed west

along Cascade Creek. Upon reaching Strong's Pond, we stepped along the cement causeway-waterfall that allowed excess pond water to drop down to the level of the creek and then continued along the well-worn pathway that followed the east side of the wall that guarded the Strong Estate. We were never quite sure about that path, but we assumed that it was OK to walk along it. We had seen lots of people walking along in both directions; mostly men who seemed to be commuting to and from the cottages and boathouses at the bay-end of the path.

We did know, however, that the area on the opposite side of the wall was strictly forbidden. So why would we walk on a path that may have been "legal" when there was a definite no trespassing zone just few feet away? That was why we always brought a large rag with us to facilitate the semi-military assaults that sometimes happened when we were heading in that direction. Halfway along the path, at a relatively low point on the cement wall, we carefully covered the barbed wire-topped wall with the old rag that we brought and then helped each other scale the formidable obstacle. Once we had dropped deftly to the ground on the west (illegal) side of the forbidden wall, we carefully made our way north and down the bank to the edge of the water. We had to be mindful of the sophisticated alarm system on the estate side of the wall: a pack of noisy crows that would caw loudly when they sensed intruders. The crow alarm sometimes led to one of two perilous outcomes. There was a caretaker who would scream if he saw us and threaten to release his pack of vicious dogs. We never saw the dogs and we seriously doubted that they existed. The more potentially dangerous possibility, however, was the police car (Cruiser #104) that periodically patrolled the roadways, honeycombing the old Strong Estate. Captured kid-intruders were delivered to their homes where parents were faced with a stiff fine, supposedly to help cover past vandalism. We were not as afraid of the police as we were of the "alleged" vicious dogs. We had encountered car #104 a few times and easily outran the officers, who for some reason seemed reluctant to chase us down the bluffs, through thorny underbrush and into the water at the north end of the estate.

The dangers always had us on edge as we crept along the west side of the wall. But when we reached the bluff, we knew we were safe. We could outrun the questionable dogs or the caretaker, and certainly evade the police. So, we usually stopped at the north end of the wall to congratulate ourselves on our assault skills. And from that elevated vantage point we could see the bay, Presque Isle, and the docks.

It was all routine that fateful 1954 day ... until we spotted something strange at the western Cascade Dock. We could barely believe our eyes as we absorbed the spectacle of what was obviously a submarine at the dock. A Lake Erie submarine? It had to be some sort of a stealth military mission. We headed east to get a better look. Someone had to investigate!

We followed the path that connected the boathouses and cottages to the base of the Cascade Docks and when we closed on the “submarine” we ducked behind trees so that we would not be seen. What if it was a Communist submarine? We would be able to warn someone. At such close range we could see the name of the submarine, S.S. Meteor. Our suspicions had been conformed. The S.S. must have been a designation that meant “secret submarine.” On close inspection it was easy to see what the submarine crew was up to. They were obviously refueling. They must have run low on fuel in the middle of Lake Erie and made an emergency run to the Cascade Docks to fill up. It all made sense since there were giant tanks filled with fuel oil at the top of the bluffs overlooking the Cascade Docks and hoses connecting the tanks to the sub. We later reported what we had seen to parents and friends who generally looked at us as if we were nuts. But we knew what we had seen!

On our way home we deduced what had happened. We were clever and had seen lots of World War II movies. The Secret Submarine Meteor had been patrolling the depths of Lake Erie, probably searching for invading Russian subs. We had learned about Russian submarines in school and teachers had warned us that they were probably out there, plying the Great Lakes. Watching us.

Every once in a while, we thought we had spotted periscopes from the beaches at Presque Isle. Obviously, the S.S. Meteor had run low on fuel and was at the Cascade Docks filling up. What other explanation could there have been?



What was happening was obvious given the smell of diesel permeating the area and men connecting fuel lines from the secret submarine to the United Oil storage tanks on the hill

The mystery of the secret submarine was ultimately revealed in the fullness of time. The SS designation was short for steamship, not secret submarine. And while our powers of observation with respect to the refueling operation had been keen, we had gotten it backwards. The Meteor was unloading diesel oil, not taking

it on. The apparent “submarine” was actually a type of lake freighter called a whaleback and featured the traditional rounded hull and low waterline look of a submarine. The whaleback ship was the innovation of Superior, Wisconsin inventor Alexander McDougal, who began building the type as barges (consorts) and eventually evolved the design to self-propelled ships. He built 43 of them, 19 steamships, 23 barges, and one passenger ship. All between 1889 and 1898. His whalebacks were primarily intended to deliver iron ore from the Mesabe Range in Minnesota to steel mills near Lake Erie ports. Because of their low profile and hydrodynamic (submarine-like) shape, McDougal pronounced his whalebacks unsinkable, an enormous benefit during the wild, post-Civil War days of Great Lakes shipwrecks.

There were a couple of problems with McDougal’s design, however. First, one of McDougal’s unsinkable whalebacks, the Thomas Wilson, sunk in 1902 after a collision just outside the busy Lake Superior port of Duluth. McDougal shrugged that accident off, blaming it on a combination of bad seamanship by the captain and confusing port rules. Observers of the collision and its subsequent sinking noted that while the whaleback’s shape may have made it ride easily through waves, its low profile exposed the waterline to potential damage even during a low-speed collision with a traditional steamship as in the case of the Thomas Wilson.

A much more serious problem presented itself in 1913. Captain Walter Grashaw from Cleveland, Ohio, defiantly left Buffalo in a whaleback ship and sailed into the teeth of one of Lake Erie’s all-time worst storms: the infamous Black Friday Gale. The storm that greeted Grashaw was much worse than could have been predicted. It was already blowing more than 25 knots when Grashaw departed in the James B. Colgate. Several other ships remained in the harbor as their captains observed the wind and waves, but Grashaw was a loyal company man and presumed that his whaleback ship was impervious to the weather. It proved not to be. By the time Grashaw had reached Long Point, the Colgate was slowly being blown apart. Eventually, the ship simply slipped below the massive waves that were estimated to be 30 to 40 feet near Long Point and disappeared.

Miraculously, Walter Grashaw survived to tell the story. He was the only survivor. Grashaw was swept off the deck of the ship and into the water, where he was able to climb aboard the ship’s flat-bottomed maintenance raft. Two crew members who had taken refuge on the wooden raft moments earlier grabbed their captain and pulled him aboard. Sadly, the two crew members were not able to hold onto the raft as it pitched and rolled during the night and were lost. Somehow Grashaw did, however, and early the next morning he was spotted and rescued by the crew of another ship.

The widely publicized fates of the Wilson and the Colgate ended general enthusiasm about whalebacks after which the once-popular steamship style

gradually disappeared. The Meteor, which we had seen at the Cascade Docks, was originally named Rockefeller. It worked Lake Erie, delivering both iron ore and coal to Detroit, Cleveland, and Buffalo. In 1943, it was converted to an oil tanker and continued on the lakes until 1969. In deference to its unique style as well as its inventor, Alexander McDougal, who was from Superior, Wisconsin, the Meteor was rescued from the scrapyard and taken to the town of Superior (adjacent to Duluth), Wisconsin where it has been made into a museum. At least one of the old Bay Rats has visited it there on several occasions.



High and dry in Superior, Wisconsin, the SS Meteor is now a museum.

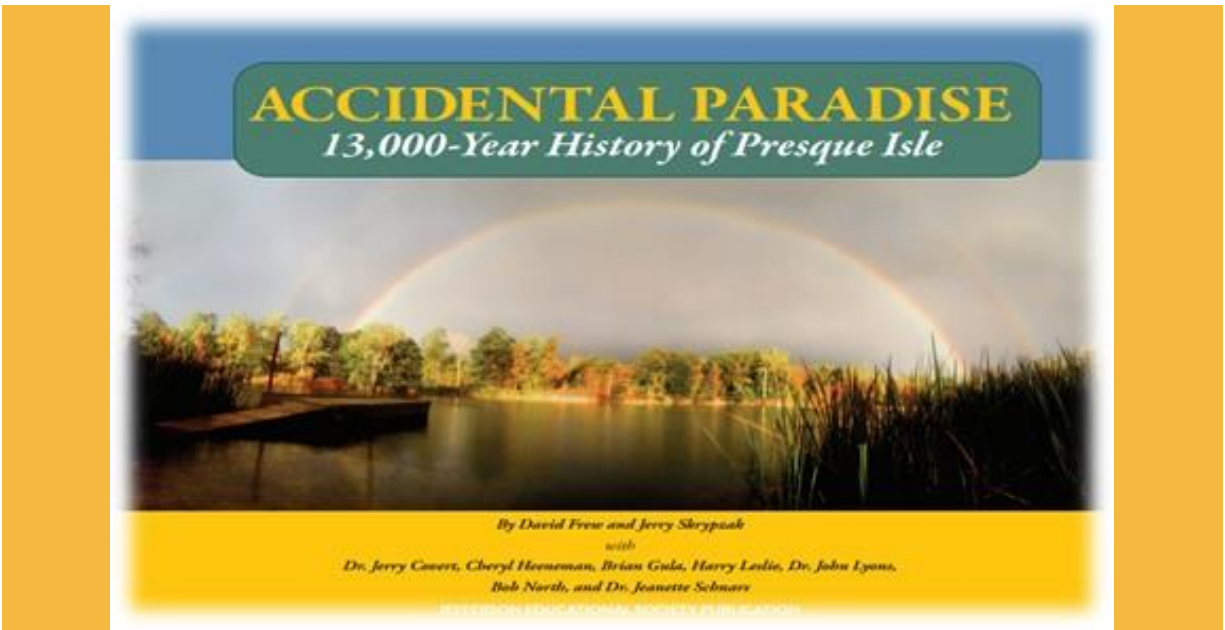
Note: The SS Meteor Museum is an exciting and worthwhile destination for maritime history buffs. In addition to the ship, Duluth harbor is just a few minutes away with its world-class maritime museum. Be sure to order whitefish while you are there.

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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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