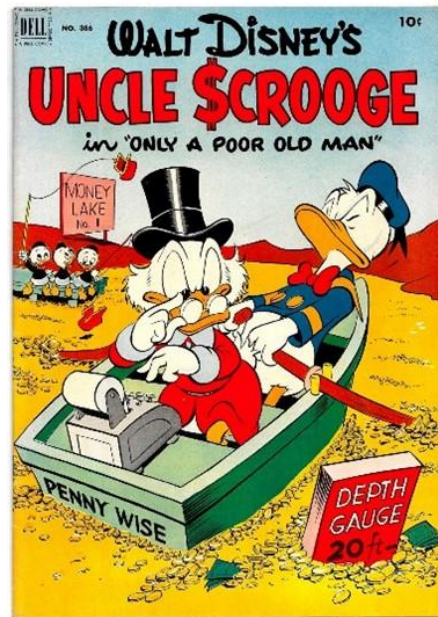


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Duped: Some Cruel Comic Book Capers

By David Frew, Scholar in Residence
January 2024



Uncle Scrooge was a favorite since the comic book often featured wonderful travel adventures.

With a set of these X-ray glasses, we would be able to see through walls.

Perhaps the most tempting of all the comic book offers were the advertisements for sets of hundreds of plastic figures. Offers ranged from cowboys and Indians to medieval knights, circus performers, and soldiers. We imagined hours of happy times, arranging and rearranging these “lifelike sets” of figures. Our visions of the toy soldiers were influenced by recollections of the older neighborhood kids who had used molten lead and molds to make metal, toy soldiers.

While the common practice of melting lead and pouring it into molds now seems really dangerous to health, the homemade toy soldiers that were common during the 1940s and 1950s were beautiful. They were amazingly detailed, and their creators often painted them in a variety of realistic colors. Dioramas that were often created for school events, using these classic painted lead soldiers, were inspirational. They probably influenced us younger kid to place orders for the less-satisfactory “official plastic soldier sets.”

The actual plastic toys that we received, however, were disappointing. Small, badly formed soldiers, posing in just a few different positions, and so lightweight that it was nearly impossible to stand them up much less create realistic dioramas. And the colors: putrid shades of gray, green, and brown.



1940s era homemade lead soldiers



Unbelievable, 100 soldiers for only \$1.75 and in a padded footlocker!

The 100-figure toy sets were made possible by a miracle new material, plastic, which was just beginning to be used to make toys in the 1950s. Unlike the painstaking craftsmanship that accompanied the production of old fashioned wooden or metal toys, the new plastic figures could be stamped out by the hundreds of thousands using injection presses and produced at unimaginably low prices. Amazing as it may seem, many of these plastic toys were produced right here in Erie before being sent off to the retailers who were placing the comic book advertisements.

Erie has a rich plastics history. It is generally acknowledged that the first plastics injection press used in the United States was acquired by Erie Resistor Company on West 12th Street. It was used to add electrical insulating material to electronic components. That historic innovation happened just before World War II and led to Erie becoming a leader in plastic injection molding. It was injection technology that made the production of inexpensive plastic parts, like toy soldiers, possible.



By the 1950s, toys had become one of the most popular and profitable plastic markets. Amazingly, the Cracker Jack Company emerged during that period as the largest toy retailer in the United States, even though they did not produce any of their own products. Instead, they contracted with specialty molders who, in turn, produced the massive numbers of toys that were produced with injection molding press tooling capable of stamping out 30 or more parts per machine cycle. The local company responsible for sending the very most Cracker Jack premiums to the company during the 1950s was NOSCO Plastics.

NOSCO opened in Erie at 17th and Gaskell as a satellite operation of the National Organ Supply Company. The mission of the Erie works was originally to produce molded plastic parts for organs. As the toy industry literally blew up during the 1950s, NOSCO grew and thrived not only by producing small, cheap Cracker Jack premium for the slum market (as it was called), but also by developing a broad line of other plastic toys. Gradually, NOSCO evolved from an organ parts producer to a toy company adding several larger toys to smaller slum market pieces.



Typical array of injection molded, plastic NOCSCO products made for Cracker Jack

Of all the comic book offers, however, the strangest and most deceptive was the advertisement for “sea monkeys.” I personally fell for it more than once – first as a kid and then later when I sent away for my own children, fully realizing what we would be receiving. The advertisement promised a set of exciting and fun water pets, who had faces and personalities and would spend hours cavorting in the water after they were released from their “shipping envelope.” The reality was a bit less exciting. Tiny brine shrimp, which were almost impossible to see without a microscope. Did I learn a lesson about advertising? Did my kids?



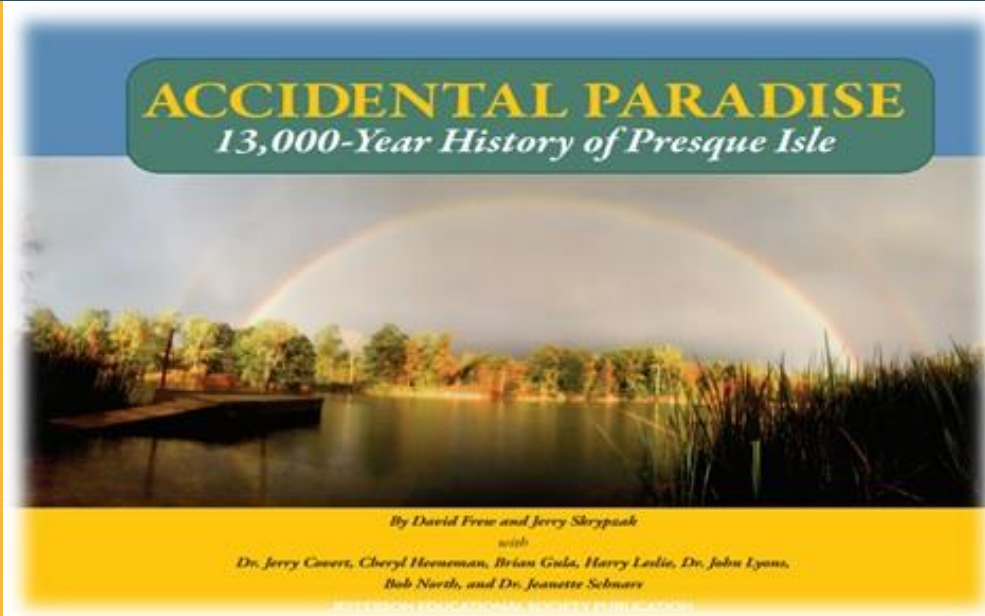
In a strange bit of irony, Cracker Jack prizes became valuable collectibles during the 2000s with some relatively rare colors and styles accelerating wildly in value. Dedicated collectors often have their best plastic bits framed and proudly display them in their homes. NOSCO Plastics was purchased by two different investors, and finally went out of business in 1977 – a victim of the maturing plastics market.

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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.

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@TREC.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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