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Quick, Timely Reads
On the Waterfront

The Hardy Boys: Bay Rat Literature

By David Frew, Scholar in Residence
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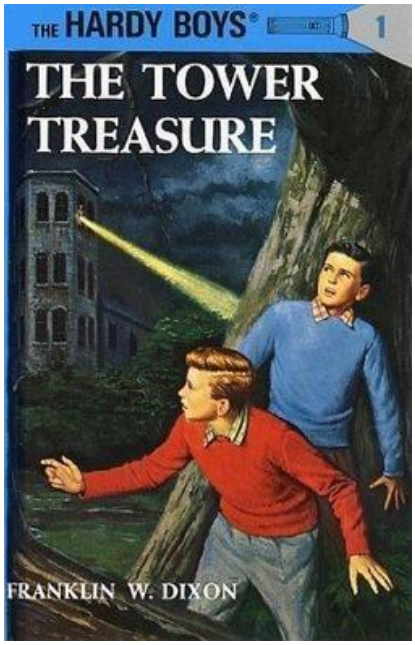
Editor's note: Following is a "classic" On the Waterfront article by Dr. David Frew. It was published originally by the Jefferson in February 2021.

Here is the typical 1950s era Bay Rat bookshelf. Who says we weren't intellectuals?

During the early 1950s, one of my traditional Christmas gifts from Santa was a "Hardy Boys" book. I read them ravenously and had a large collection. Some were better than others, with personal favorites that I read over and over being the "Secret Tower Mystery" and the "Secret of the Old Mill." By the time that I became interested in them, they were obviously dated, having been written in the late 1920s. But I was able to overlook the obviously stuffy and too-old references to things like "automobiles instead of cars," and "trousers instead of pants." I still have my collection, although it is packed away in boxes.

One of the most positive aspects of my Hardy Boys reading habit was a discovery of the Erie Book Store on French Street and its basement used book department. I became a regular customer, visiting often to hunt for used Hardy Boys books. Sometimes, when I was unable to find one, I was drawn to other inexpensive offerings and often purchased them.

The apparent author of the Hardy Boys series was Franklin W. Dixon, and it was my assumption that it was he who had written the series. In later years I learned that Hardy Boys books were ghostwritten and that there was no Franklin W. Dixon. The series was originally conceptualized by Edward Stratemeyer, a publishing executive who developed outlines for individual books, invented characters, and controlled the character descriptions. He pitched and sold the concept to Grosset & Dunlop and hired writers to follow outlines as they created individual titles. Stratemeyer also developed Nancy Drew books and several other series.



A modern, colorized version of one of my personal favorites

While the apparent author was Franklin W. Dixon, the actual writer of most of the earliest books was a Canadian journalist from Ontario (Haileybury, Whitby, Sudbury, and Toronto) named Charles Leslie McFarlane. He wrote on contract, often during summer vacations at a cottage on the Georgian Bay. He often joked that the money that he received for writing did not quite cover the cottage rental, but that he could take his family on summer holiday. He was originally paid $125 for each book, with half of the money upfront. The remainder of his stipend was paid upon receipt of completed manuscripts, but it was reduced if he made errors in following prescribed outlines or character details. During the Great Depression years, his stipend was reduced to $100 and then to $85 per book. McFarlane never received royalties for the books, which sold more than a million copies per year during his lifetime. He usually wrote the books during time away from his regular jobs as a reporter and later said that the average book took about a week to complete.

McFarlane, the son of a high school principal, was born in a small Northern Ontario town in 1902, north of the Georgian Bay. He became a free-lance writer shortly after graduating from high school and enjoyed a long journalism career working at newspapers. He moved to Massachusetts, where he wrote for the Springfield Republic. One day he answered a wanted ad, seeking ghost writers for the Stratemeyer Publishing Syndicate. Before writing Hardy Boys books, he contributed as a ghostwriter to several other series for boys and girls. His success with those books led him to the Hardy Boys. McFarlane was a longtime friend of Lorne Green, the Canadian actor and star of the television series, “Bonanza.”

McFarlane generally regarded Hardy Boys writing assignments as a nuisance, essentially hating the books that he was producing. By contract, he was not allowed to reveal that he was the author. But, as he said to his family, the stipend often paid bills that would otherwise have gone unpaid, and he was never resentful. Once he handed the manuscripts over to Edward Stratemeyer, he never looked at them again.

From a pure, writing quality perspective, McFarlane has always been regarded as the best of the half-dozen writers who ghosted the original Hardy Boys series. According to his children, McFarlane often found himself in conflict with his boss over his approach to creating authority figures. McFarlane developed flawed authority figures, including the Hardy Boys’ own father, Fenton Hardy. He did that purposefully to suggest to young readers that while most authority figures were well intentioned, they were human and exhibited foibles that young people could understand and counteract. This theme was a hallmark of his writing. It is interesting that in so many of the early books, Frank and Joe Hardy (the Hardy Boys) were able to solve mysteries that their father, famous detective Fenton Hardy, had failed to solve.

Stratemeyer was generally disturbed by this writing strategy, but McFarlane refused to budge. He later explained that it was the one gift that he could provide his readers. Since the books were in such high demand, otherwise so well written, and generally behind schedule, manuscripts went forward over Stratemeyer's objections and into production.

Edward Stratemeyer

In 1959, the entire series was rebuilt. Individual books were rewritten to make the language and descriptions more modern, and there was a limited attempt to rewrite flawed adult authority figures. By that time, however, there were more pressing issues with the books than flawed adults. A stream of complaints regarding racist, misogynistic, and homophobic content had become more urgent issues in need of editing. There were few, if any, African American, Asian, Hispanic, or Native American characters in the books and when they did appear, they were written in decidedly negative ways, helping contribute to ugly stereotypes that publishers were just beginning to address.

Hardy Boys scholar Dr. Marilyn Greenwald from Ohio University (who knew that there could be a Hardy Boys scholar?) points to a particularly cringe worthy line in 1935's "Hidden Harbor Mystery," in which a Black man utters the following line: "Luke Jones don't stand for no nonsense from white folk. Ah pays Mah full fare and Ah puts Mah shoes where Ah please." As a part of 1959's modernization

and redesign efforts, racial stereotypes such as this were removed. By that time, even close associates of the Hardy Boys were coming under scrutiny and criticism. Chet Morton, for example, had been written as an "overweight but fun-loving, affable friend," perpetuating stereotypes about overweight people. Frank and Joe's Italian friend, Tony (what else), was introduced as a "dark-skinned, and wiry boy who worked at a Pizza parlor."

Leslie McFarlane, the real Franklin W. Dixon

Racial and ethnic stereotypes notwithstanding, McFarlane's writing continues to represent a high-quality standard in the field of young children's literature. In recent years, several universities have revisited and celebrated his early writing. McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario is currently engaged in collecting all of McFarlane's notes, journals, and original manuscripts, which have been placed in a special reading room. The original 1927 to 1945 era books are still heralded as the best of the extensive catalogue of Hardy Boys adventures, which eventually expanded into paperbacks, comic books, and television shows. Several contemporary academics have credited McFarlane with inspiring young boys to read. They argue that reading Hardy Boys books encouraged young people to stretch toward more serious writing.

Leslie McFarlane returned to Canada for the final portions of his career and became a successful screenwriter, contributing several important pieces to the National Film Board of Canada and the Canadian Broadcast Company. One of his pieces received an Emmy nomination. After he died in 1977, his daughter tried unsuccessfully to sue the Hardy Boys publisher for royalties.

In the end, the town where McFarlane was born, Haileybury, Ontario, celebrated its famous son. The town added prominent signs and banners as it branded itself the “Birthplace of the Hardy Boys.”

This sign graces the Haileybury, Ontario town marina.

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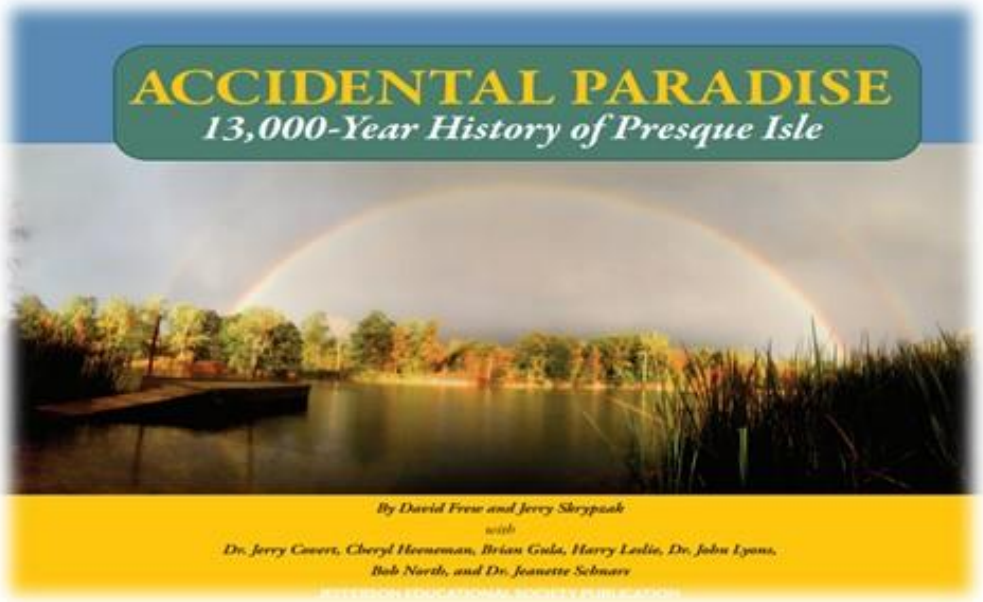


The beautiful book on Presque Isle published by authors David Frew and Jerry Skrypzak – "**Accidental Paradise: 13,000-Year History of Presque Isle**" – is on sale at the Tom Ridge Environmental Center's gift shop and through a special website, AccidentalParadise.com.

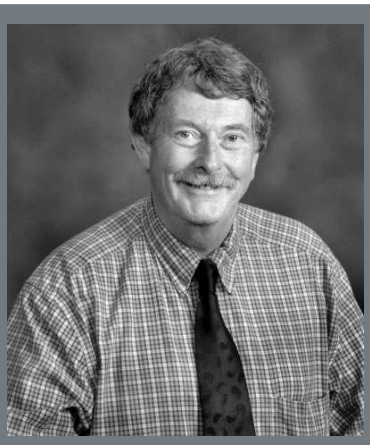
The book, priced at **$35 plus tax and shipping**, can be ordered now through the website sponsored by the TREC Foundation, AccidentalParadise.com.

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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