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On the Waterfront

**Lifeguards:  
*Times Have Changed As Presque Isle Copes  
with Shortage***

By David Frew, Scholar in Residence  
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*Bob North, Presque Isle State Park lifeguard manager*

I ran into old friend and former MBA student advisee Bob North while walking with wife Mary Ann at Presque Isle a few weeks ago. When Bob stopped to talk, we asked how things were going with lifeguarding at the park and he shared some surprising new realities. He was philosophical in describing recent problems at the park, all of which revolve around a severe shortage of beach lifeguards. North is one of the three lifeguard managers at Presque Isle and since their tenure began decades ago, they have revolutionized park approaches to that critical summer job.

As a youngster I thought that lifeguarding was the most exciting and glamorous job that a young boy could get. I imagined long days at the beach being surrounded by glamorous people in swimsuits, punctuated by the occasional heroic rescue. During my high school years, I signed up for a lifeguarding certification class at the YMCA and made my way through the preliminary steps. I was a big kid and a good swimmer and loved the athletic challenge of the classes. I was easily able to rescue a building block from the bottom of a swimming pool before learning the grim realities of an actual rescue when it was my turn to pass one of the final steps: saving an actual distressed swimmer. My first attempt was a total failure. The distressed swimmer, a big older kid who was a much better swimmer than me, dragged me to the bottom of the pool in a choke hold and was subsequently required to save me. Very embarrassing.

Eventually I was able to pass, but when I finally had a chance to be a “replacement” guard, during an era where there were dozens of applicants for each position, I quickly learned about another lurking danger. The sun. Red-headed kids with “fish belly white” skin like me were probably not destined to be beach lifeguards. I also tried a few gigs at protected swimming pools, but it eventually became apparent that my future was not going to involve a glamour job like lifeguarding and moved on to more traditional lines of work. There would be no “Baywatch” moments in my occupational life when I was a kid.

If I was a “good” swimmer, Bob North was a “superstar.” He had the physical gift of being able to move through the water with an apparent minimum of effort. He was not just blessed with speed but with stamina. North could swim forever, which was the physical skill that helped him to swim across Lake Erie in 1989 in record time.



*Typical 1950s lifeguard beach scene from Presque Isle*

During that same year, Presque Isle added North to a new Lake Erie administrator lifeguard manager position to work with longtime Chief Lifeguard Frank Pettinato. North, who was also a gifted graduate student with research skills, began investigating ways to improve safety issues for park visitors as well as training for lifeguards. This improvement plan began with Bob traveling to Long Beach, California, where he imbedded himself in their sophisticated, state of the art, lifeguarding organization. It was there that he learned the principles of modern open water lifeguarding. Armed with permission to use the California organizational system as well as training approaches in Erie, he returned to Presque Isle where he and Pettinato started implementing these improvements. As time went on, the park expanded the lifeguard management roles to include John Dahlstrand and more recently Steve Dunsmore.

In the “old days,” lifeguards were simply assigned a beach, where they showed up each day with their whistles and positioned themselves on lifeguard chairs. Individual guards oversaw a select section of beach, where he (emphasis on male gender) effectively stood guard. By qualifying as a lifesaver, it was assumed that he was totally capable of being in charge. The guard counted on a whistle and a jar of white paste to protect his nose from the sun. Nothing else!



*The now-familiar, orange lifeguard Rescue Can was not a part of 1950s Presque Isle guarding.*

The new three-manager system changed all of that. The United States Lifeguarding Association-approach included recruitment of male and female guards as well as rigorous and ongoing training focused not only on fitness but also on preventive lifeguarding, CPR, first aid, bleeding prevention, and other lifesaving techniques. All new guards began to go through 80 hours of training before they sat on a lifeguard chair. The new guards work in teams and are provided with a communication system so they can contact each other and/or send for rescue assistance if there is a problem. Under the revised system, guards never enter the water or attempt a rescue without letting nearby team members know. This provision is as much for the safety of individual guards as it is for swimmers. All guards now carry the now familiar orange safety buoys that can be used to assist in rescues.



*Beaches and guards are now connected via four-wheel beach vehicles.*



*Beaches are now patrolled using jet skis.*



*Modern, covered guard stations have replaced the old style, white chairs.*



*Competitions such as this race are provided to encourage fitness and to build team spirit.*



*Presque Isle lifeguards attend a "stop the bleed" training seminar.*

Dr. Jonn "Con" Lyons, a longtime leader of the Presque Isle Lifeguard Alumni Association, has added significantly to efforts to provide a safe environment for contemporary lifeguards. Lyons understood the health risks of sun exposure for lifeguards and found disturbing data to suggest the large number of guards from the old days who had suffered from skin cancer. Using both local and national data from academic medical journals, Lyons developed training programs designed to inform new lifeguards of the risks and help them to protect themselves using sun block and protective clothing.

Lyons was also instrumental in driving efforts to provide modern lifeguard station buildings, which not only helped protect guards from sun exposure but improved the view of the water. The new structures also provide space for safety equipment and house communications platforms so that guards will always be in touch with each other as well as headquarters.



*Dr. John Lyons*

As a longtime educator-coach with an MBA, Bob North understood exactly how to build a modern lifeguarding organization anchored by sophisticated training, team spirit, and performance incentives. He did so for more than a decade with exceptional results. But recent years have created a challenge. He and Presque Isle, like so many other organizations, have been impacted by demographic shifts. These changes have resulted in a severe lifeguard shortage. The problem has reached such proportions recently that there have been beach closures because there were not enough lifeguards.

Bob told us that, at first, he was puzzled by his inability to attract prospective lifeguards, but that in recent years he has begun to understand. There are simply not enough potential candidates to provide the required number of replacement guards each year. He noted that there had been more than 500 in his Strong Vincent graduating class. The once huge and perpetually growing numbers of kids in high schools led to huge swim teams at Strong Vincent and other regional schools. The sheer number of kids on swim teams created the opportunity to recruit potential lifeguards.

These days the closing of urban schools (Strong Vincent, East High, and the former Academy) has severely impacted the availability of swimmers. The remaining schools that have swimming teams are reporting that they do not have enough kids to fill all of the individual events in swim meets. Given that the minimum requirements for lifeguards are proven swimming capabilities, most competitive swimmers would easily qualify, making swim teams a high potential source for lifeguard recruits.

All potential guards have a battery of tests that they must pass to qualify and, typically, competitive swimmers have been better prepared to meet those requirements. While there are fewer applicants, the qualification standards have continued to remain as selective as they have always been. There has been some hope that recruiting young women for lifeguarding positions could help with the shortage of candidates. As women's team sports grew in Erie, specifically swimming, girls started taking an interest in lifeguarding at Presque Isle and fortunately a large number of female candidates have been added to the lifeguard staff at the park.

In recent years Presque Isle State Park has adopted a sophisticated recruiting campaign to attract lifeguard candidates. Their efforts have focused on the importance of providing service while receiving valuable training and enjoying an attractive job opportunity that pays quite well. North has continued to advocate for the power of belonging to a team while providing a critical public service. Current recruiting efforts include an active incentive program that features large colorful job billboards near Presque Isle, increased starting salaries, and a recruitment bonus for existing lifeguards who reach out to friends and relatives to encourage them to investigate the opportunities at Presque Isle.

The park administration has also helped to manage the lifeguard shortage by redesigning and rebranding beaches to shift visitors toward fewer, select swimming areas so that a smaller number of guards will be able to provide coverage. Part of this effort was a radical redesign of Beach 8, which has been expanded and equipped with beach-friendly infrastructure, including changing rooms.





*Current lifeguard application advertisement*

Readers interested in assisting Bob North and Presque Isle should consider reaching out to friends and family who might be interested in lifeguarding positions. If you do, you can be confident that young people who go to work as lifeguards will have a life-enriching experience at Presque Isle.

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*Author's note: Bob North grew up in Erie's northwest bayfront area and attended Strong Vincent High School, making him an official Bay Rat.*

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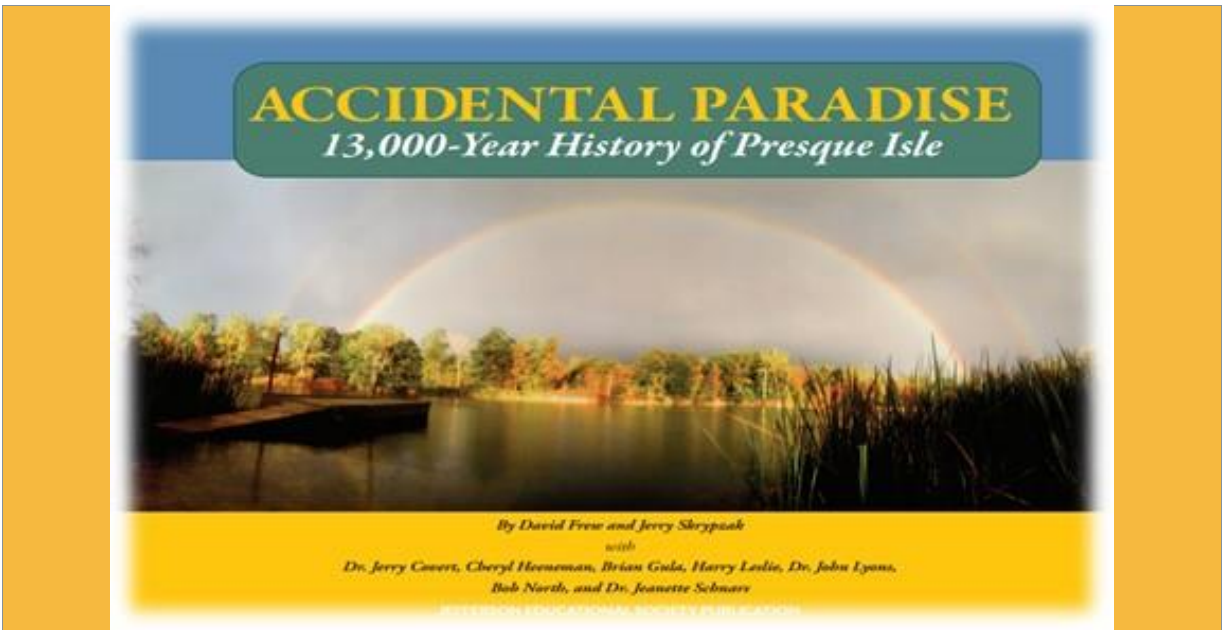
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***Accidental Paradise***  
*by Dr. David Frew and Jerry Skrypzak*



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](http://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](http://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](mailto: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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