

JEFFERSON EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

Quick, Timely Reads On the Waterfront

Smoking: It Wasn't Just for the Adults

By David Frew
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Almost everyone seemed to smoke during the 1950s. Parents, teachers, and other adults were often lighting up when we saw them out and about. Movie stars, professional athletes, and other role models were often pictured smoking. NFL football players and Major League Baseball stars smoked in locker rooms and on the benches during games. It seemed so adult, so romantic, and so cool. To add to the mystique, newspapers and magazines featured colorful full-page advertisements touting the benefits of smoking. Some of the media promotions

argued for the “best brands,” according to trusted doctors. So how else could us kids interpret the activity? And how could we participate?

Like all other Bay Rat initiatives, smoking required a plan. While it seemed that our parents would probably be OK with us smoking, some day we knew that their permission would require that we be a bit older. Somewhere north of 11. But we were eager to get started so we hatched a plan. Based upon a sophisticated literature review done by several of us we understood that pipe smoking would probably be the best way to get started. Such a strategy would prevent us from stealing cigarettes from our parents or trying to buy packs at the store. In our case, the general store owner, Bill Beckman, at West Fourth and Cascade, served as the neighborhood adjunct parent. Anything that Bill noticed you doing would be reported to parents (who all bought groceries at his store) within the week that he saw it.



Eventually, we learned that corncob pipes, smoking appliances that were readily available at the corner store, cost less than a dollar. Affordable, even for a Bay Rat. So, we identified a day and time when we would all show up at Second Field and try smoking. It was a rite of passage. I acquired my corncob pipe by telling a white lie. I went to Beckman’s Store and asked to purchase a pipe, noting that was to be a Father’s Day gift for my dad. When Mr. Beckman called to my attention the fact that Father’s Day had been more than a month earlier, I muttered something stupid but knew that I had been busted. I purchased it anyway.



Corncob pipes were actually made from corn cobs. They had to be healthy.

At last, and for the weighty sum of about 69 cents, I had my very own pipe. How adult! I was going to be like parents, TV stars, and famous athletes. It was not difficult to hide the beautiful, new acquisition from my parents. I squirreled it away inside a stack of comic books.



If film star Clark Gable smoked, it had to be good.



Sex goddess Marilyn Monroe, every young boy's fantasy, made smoking seem sexy.



Brooklyn Dodgers baseball star Gil Hodges smokes in the locker room.

When “S-Day” finally arrived in July 1955, we gathered after supper at our central location on the field where we went when we were about to launch most of our adventures. The gathering seemed, on the surface, to be just another of our regular evening meetings. But it was actually much more sinister and complicated. It was a highly organized meeting. Each of us brought a pipe. Most were corncobs, but a few smoking devices had been “borrowed” from at-home smoking stands. In addition, we had matches and smoking material. We had discussed the problem of finding something to smoke but generally concluded that we would smoke almost anything that we might find growing in the field. The wisdom of this strategy, while questionable in hindsight, had come to us from older kids, our mentors. When we had serious questions, we often consulted the older neighborhood kids rather than our parents, particularly with respect to semi-legal matters such as under-age smoking. Was 11 really underage?

One of the guys had brought a few ounces of actual pipe tobacco that had been liberated from his father’s smoking cabinet but that was clearly not going to be enough for all of us. So, we enhanced the supply of traditional pipe tobacco by gathering a variety of weeds and small branches, which we meticulously trimmed into tiny fragments using jackknives. After blending it all together we had a big pile of stuff that was loaded into the pipes. Then the actual smoking began. One by one we lit up, sucked on the stems of various pipes, and began to generate a cloud of smoke. Within a few moments we smelled like a trash fire, but we persisted. We were having big fun.

As we continued, we all commented on the aroma and taste of the wonderful blend that we had created. We commented and we smoked. Some of us even tried to inhale ... at the urging of others. But eventually something strange began to happen. The jovial, fun atmosphere that had been present at the launch of the smoking festival began to fade. Little by little, merriment was replaced by a sullen atmosphere. First everyone became quiet, and then the coughing began. And the coughing and hacking increased. Then quite suddenly and without warning, one of the guys began to retch. Followed by a second. Soon the “pleasant” trash fire

odor (which was billowing from our lungs) was invaded by the stench of vomit. Were we still having fun?

That summer event was the last time that we gathered to smoke pipes. In discussing this momentous occasion, we generally concluded that pipe smoking was awful. Mouths burned, throats were sore, and stomachs churned for hours. Did we learn anything from our first smoking experience? Apparently not, because by the time we were in high school most of us had begun smoking cigarettes. The worst outcome for me, however, was connected to Bill Beckman's self-appointed duty as neighborhood adjunct parent. Weeks later, when my mother was shopping for groceries, Mr. Beckman asked how my father had liked his "Father's Day gift." She came home from that encounter and grilled me about smoking. Did I tell my mother another "white lie?"

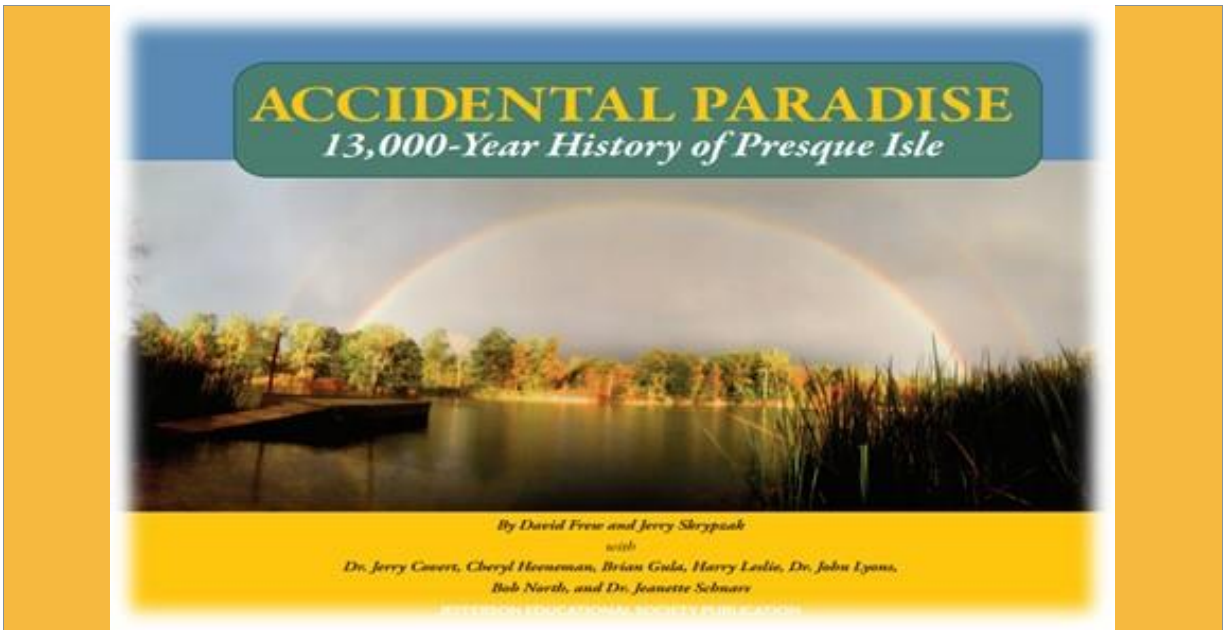
*'Oh, what a tangled web we weave
When first we practice to deceive.'*
-- Sir Walter Scott, **Marmion**

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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