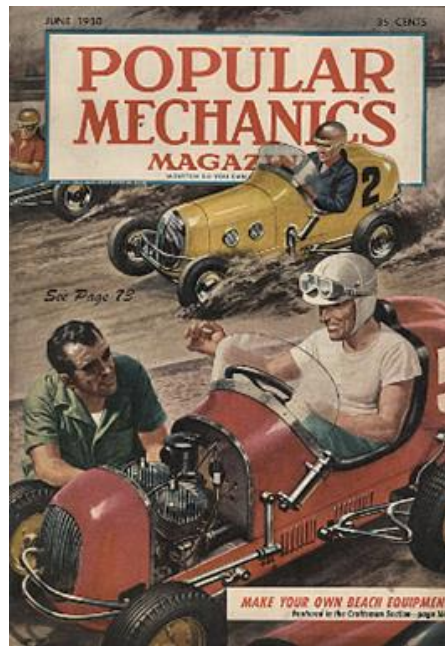


JEFFERSON EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

Quick, Timely Reads
On the Waterfront

**Our Neighbor Was a Yacht:
*Popular Mechanics Dreams***

By David Frew, Scholar in Residence
March 2024

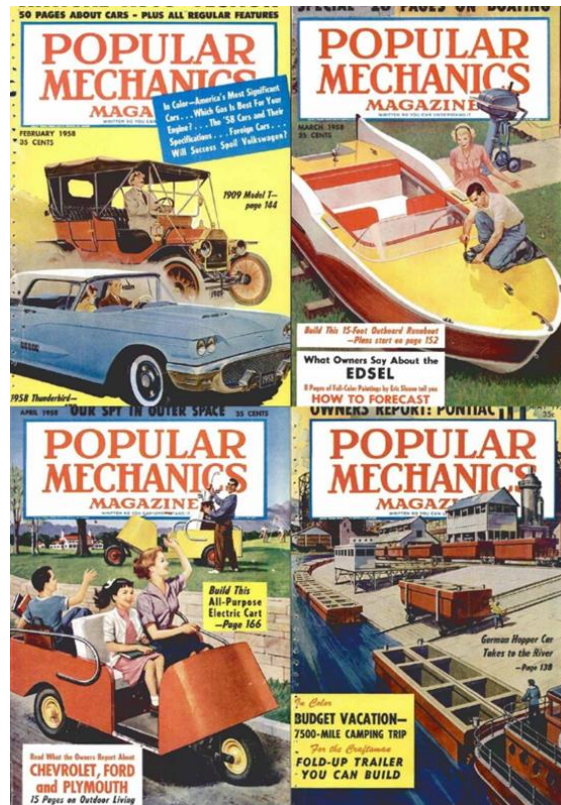


Popular Mechanics Magazine offered the promise of being able to build

“almost anything for almost nothing.”

One of the “coolest” neighbors in our West Fourth Street village was a guy that we kids called “Jack the Mechanic.” He moved into one of the double-home lots on our street. There were several similar lots where two houses were built, one on the street and a second structure, usually a smaller place, behind it in the area where most neighbors had backyards. At Jack’s place, a driveway on the east side of the lot passed the front home and was connected to a large garage that had been built between the two houses. That garage was Jack’s pride and joy. It was filled with every imaginable tool, and all his stuff was neatly arranged either on pegboards attached to the wall, over his work bench, or in a vast collection of carefully labeled glass jars. His screwdrivers, for example, were arranged in order of size and type as were wenchers and other tools.

Jack’s garage became an episodic hangout for some of us, especially when we learned that he was happy to tweak and to fix our bicycles when they needed attention. He could dismount a tire in a jiffy, patch a hole in a tube, or tune the spokes on a wheel. Jack could do anything. His garage also had a folding table and chairs in a corner, and most importantly a stack of Popular Mechanics Magazines that we were encouraged to peruse. Popular Mechanics was a dreamscape for us kids. Brightly colored covers of the monthly magazine featured seemingly simple plans and kits that could be used to create vaunted items like periscopes, powerful hunting slingshots, or small cars with actual motors. The editors of that magazine knew how to appeal to the dreamers who bought it.



Readers would be able to build almost anything, even a boat.

One day, Jack announced that he had sent to get the plans for a boat he planned to build inside the garage the following winter. It was a fairly large vessel, as I recall, the biggest that he could possibly fit into the garage workspace, where he would be assembling it. We were beyond excited with anticipation. When the plans arrived, he shared them with us, spreading them across the table so we could inspect them. Detailed plans included every item that would be needed: screws, nuts, bolts, glue, wooden boards, and more. As Jack explained, it would be no more complicated than building the model airplanes that many of us had completed. Just a lot bigger. One of the interesting life lessons that Jack always shared with us kids was the importance of having a detailed plan and carefully reviewing it before beginning any project. Even a simple project would begin in Jack's garage with sitting around his table and making a detailed plan. It was a valuable lesson. Real engineering!

“Jack the Mechanic” carefully gathered all the materials needed to complete his project during the fall and then, shortly after Thanksgiving, he went to work. He began by laying out several long timbers that were to become the assembly and storage cradle for his new yacht. After connecting them, he fashioned axles and attached tires so he would be able to move the completed boat to Presque Isle Bay when it was finished. As he explained it, the moving cradle did not have to be

sophisticated since Presque Isle Bay was only a few blocks away. In his characteristic style, transporting the completed boat was one part of the “big plan.”

The boat that Jack built that winter seemed enormous. It wasn't a small runabout. It was a yacht with bunks and a galley. A mega yacht, by Bay Rat standards. My guess in researching available published plans from that era was that it was the popular, 25-foot model. To contain the project in the garage, Jack had to angle the cradle that he used as a construction base and remove sections of one side of the structure. We were all invited to help with some of the small, mindless tasks like driving screws. Although he could have done it faster himself, Jack kindly encouraged us to work with him on several of the tedious tasks.

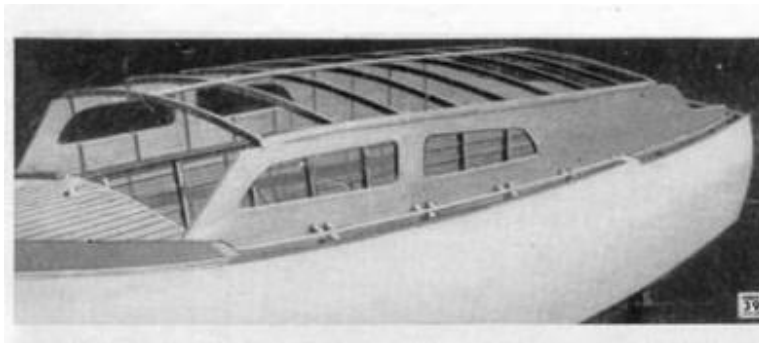


A contemporary photograph of the two-building lot shows Jack's garage between the homes.

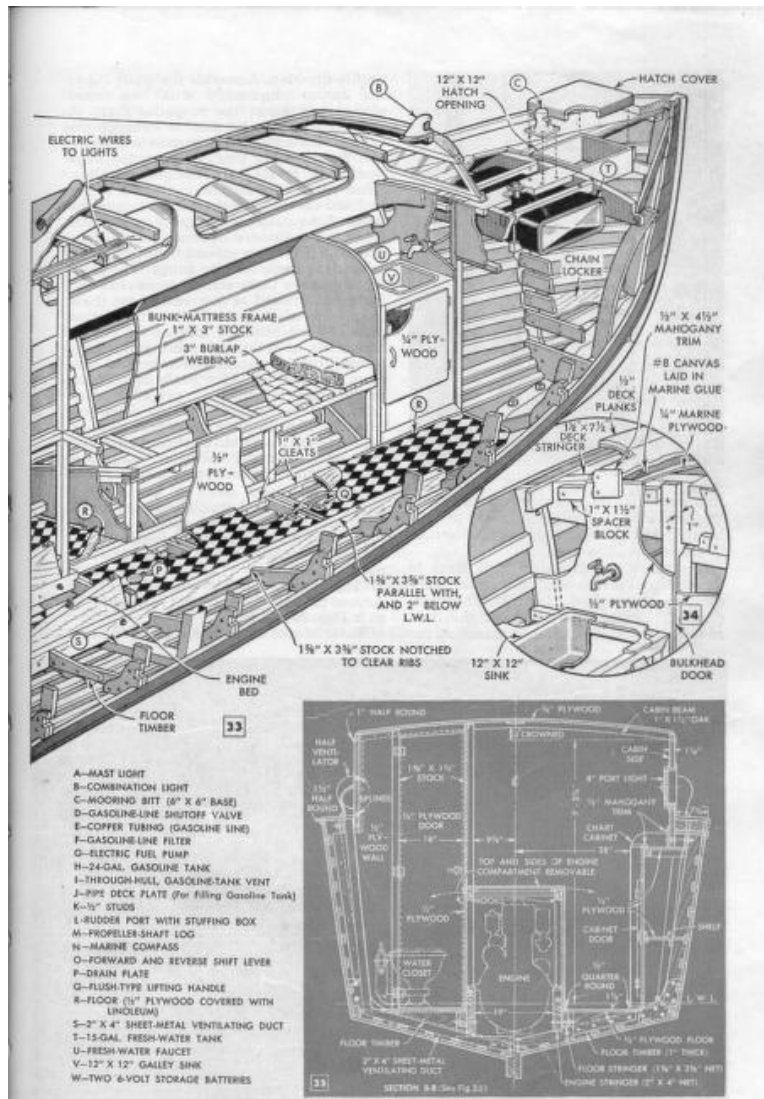
As the project continued, neighborhood observers and skeptics began to speculate about the prospect that the completed yacht might not fit out of the garage. It was amazing how the construction filled the garage, consuming most of the seemingly available inside space. But Jack continued to build, and we kids maintained absolute confidence that he would know how to move the finished boat out and get it to Presque Isle Bay. The skeptics were just being jealous.



According to Popular Mechanics plans, the completed yacht would look like this.



Semi-completed shape of the hull and topsides



Plan details

The dream came true the following summer. Jack had to move a few garage door parts to get the completed boat out and into the driveway. But as he later told us, he had always planned to do so.

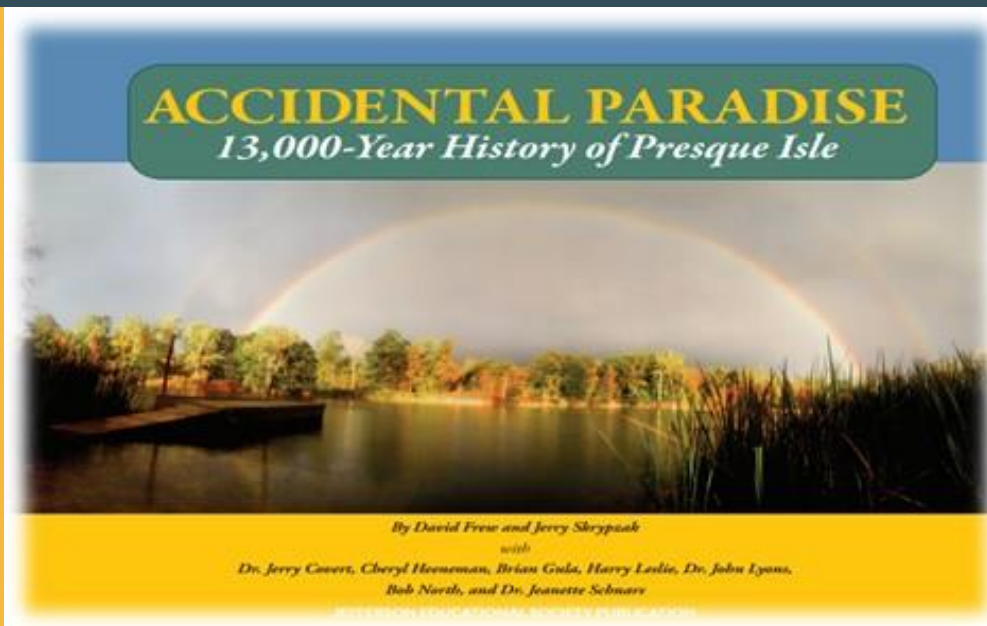
I will always remember the patience of "Jack the Mechanic," and the time he took to teach lessons to us kids. Lessons in planning and patience. Years later, when the popular television show, "Mr. Wizard," appeared, I often thought of Jack and the lessons he shared. Did he know that he was inspiring a generation of young engineers?

[Subscribe to JES Publications Mailing List!](#)

[Support JES | Donate](#)

Accidental Paradise Available at TREC!

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.

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.



In Case You Missed It

["Childcare Experts Present High Stakes, Make Case for Growing Erie, Pennsylvania's Economy by Nurturing Our Children"](#) written by **Court Gould**

[The Wider World | Competition vs Conflict in a Complex World](#) written by President of DC Analytics **Diane Chido**

[Truth in Love | Cognitive Conception: When Men Become Fathers](#) written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence **Dr. Parris J. Baker**

[Be Well | Supercharge Brown Fat to Burn Calories](#) written by health and wellness expert **Debbie DeAngelo**

[Classic Book Notes #95 | Several 'Amazing' 19th Century Women Lost to History](#) written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence **Dr. Andrew Roth**

[Classic On the Waterfront | Crystal Set Creates a Monster: Radio Nights](#) written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence **Dr. David Frew**



