

Quick, Timely Reads

Reading in the Time of Coronavirus
On the Waterfront

How Ozzie and Harriet Became My Academic Advisers

By David Frew
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Dr. David Frew, a prolific writer, author, and speaker, grew up on Erie's lower west side as a proud "Bay Rat," joining neighborhood kids playing and marauding along the west bayfront. He has written for years about his beloved Presque Isle and his adventures on the Great Lakes. In a new series of articles for the Jefferson, the retired professor takes note of life in and around the water.



Ozzie and Harriet Nelson with the boys, Ricky (left) and David

By the time I was finishing high school and wondering what to do next, I had

started watching the popular “Ozzie and Harriet Show” on television. In my naiveté, the Nelsons seemed to be a regular family, the kind of people who might have been neighbors on West Fourth Street in Erie, Pennsylvania. Ozzie had a job, though I have no idea what kind of work he did. But each day at suppertime, he could be seen walking home with a giant smile on his face apparently anticipating the lovely meal that his dear wife, Harriet, was placing on the Nelson table. Ozzie and Harriet had the typical “American” two-child family. Their boys, David and Ricky, were always home for supper and seemed stuck in time somewhere between grade school and high school when I first became

interested. By the late 1950s, when I was watching, our family television set had grown into a “massive” 19-inch model and my preference for radio programs was slowly being displaced by such amazing shows as “Ed Sullivan,” “Jackie Gleason,” “What’s My Line,” and “Groucho Marx.”

The “Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet” played on television from 1952 until 1966, a remarkable run. During those 14 years, David, the older son, grew from a boy of 16 to a man of 30. Younger brother, Ricky, was only 12 when the series began, but he matured to a 26-year-old national rock ‘n’ roll icon. Both boys got married during the end years of the show and somehow their wives were written into the television drama, joining the regular cast. They simply moved into the boys’ old rooms after they were married and the audience accepted the logic of married children living with parents. From the beginning of the show, both boys were made to seem younger than their actual ages.

Ozzie Nelson, the father of the family, was the architect of the television phenomenon. He began as a New Jersey saxophone player and big band leader and his wife Harriet was the band’s female vocalist. Ozzie had graduated with bachelor’s and a law degree from Rutgers, where he played football, but it was the Great Depression and the only way that he could make money was by playing his sax. Playing venues on the East Coast, his engaging personality and work ethic helped him achieve remarkable success, and he jumped at the chance when he had the opportunity to perform on radio. His first big break came when he was hired as the house band for the popular “Red Skelton Radio Show,” which was produced in Los Angeles. Harriett was an Iowa-born Broadway and film star when she joined the band, and many observers commented that connecting with Ozzie and his band was well beneath her talents.



Harriett Hilliard (Nelson) was described as a 1930s-era bombshell.

The Nelsons' next major break came in 1944 while they were living in Hollywood. Red Skelton was drafted into World War II and the Radio network, desperate to replace his show, asked Ozzie to create a weekly program. Ozzie jumped at the offer and intuitively knew that a family, situation drama loosely based on the ordinary lives of lowans or New Jerseyites would have broad appeal. The program that he wrote and introduced in 1944 proved him correct as it ran for 10 years and 405 episodes. Ozzie crafted the show, writing episodes, producing, and directing. Both of the Nelson boys were born by that time, David in 1936 and Ricky in 1940, and while the radio show featured their roles in the family, their parts were played by stock actors.

By the 1950s, Ozzie knew that television was destined to replace radio and he began to position himself to make the move. The boys were asking to be a part of the show that they listened to on the radio, but Ozzie was not sure if the American audience would be ready to accept an entire television family. Recruiting film star Rock Hudson as a co-star, Ozzie wrote directed and produced a full-length movie called "Here Come the Nelsons," which was released successfully in 1952, making Ozzie believe that his dream would be possible. The television version of "Adventives of Ozzie and Harriett" began on television in 1952, overlapping with the radio program for two years, and ran for an astonishing 435 episodes. To put that into context, the recent wildly popular series, "Seinfeld," ran for 180 episodes, or about two and a half times fewer.

To create an accurate and detailed reflection of the Nelsons' home life, Ozzie used stock footage of the exterior of their actual home to open each episode. Scenes of Ozzie walking home from work were filmed on the streets and sidewalks near their actual Colonial built in 1902. A stickler for detail, Ozzie used photographs of the home's interior rooms to recreate them inside the Hollywood TV studio where the show was filmed. There were episodic shots of the boys playing in the real front yard or climbing into the family station wagon. The story line that developed over the first few years was that the Nelson house was within walking distance of downtown Warfield, their fictional hometown. To provide an on-set acting coach for the entire family, Ozzie hired veteran Broadway stage actor Don DeFore to play the role of next-door neighbor Thorny Thornberry. DeFore, who was in most episodes for the first several years, studied the scripts and coached the boys in their acting roles.



Ozzie and Harriet moved into this Hollywood house at 1822 Camino Palmero Street with their

boys in 1941. It was purchased later by actor Christopher Meloni ("Law & Order SVU").

In 1955, during the show's 11th season, David went off to college. In real life, he had already begun classes at the University of Southern California, where he pledged Kappa Sigma Fraternity. Ozzie encouraged David to go to college, and to continue the show's realism, his college and fraternity experiences were written into the television scripts. On the show, David walked to the "downtown college" and returned to the Nelson home each day, sometimes arriving with Ozzie. At home, David faithfully recounted his academic experiences to the family. David was 19 during the season he began going to college on television and his little brother Ricky was 15. Ozzie, who was a proponent of higher education, often counseled David and Ricky at the supper table, combining forces with Harriet to help solve every imaginable college problem, from academics, including tests and term papers, to social matters. Younger brother Ricky's role during serious conversations was to provide comic relief by making snappy remarks.

When problems became intense, Ozzie or Harriet (or both) would visit campus to do on-site problem-solving. The issues escalated during the 1956 and 1957 seasons when David pledged a fraternity and his college issues morphed into the general theme of "Ozzie and Harriet," which was a family dealing with the simple, mundane issues of daily life. There were no complex modern problems such as drug use, binge drinking, mental illness, or unwanted pregnancies. How refreshing. An example of a major issue emerged in an episode when young Ricky, who was trying to emulate the older boys, swallowed a goldfish and wondered if it was still alive in his stomach. David and his college friends would inevitably make a mess of fraternity social gatherings, which would require that Ozzie and Harriet show up to rectify matters by cooking, cleaning, or otherwise helping to guide the all-American fraternity boys.



David Nelson during his college days

Ozzie and Harriet's dinner-table counseling made it seem like college

was possible. Beyond the fact that it was “just down the street,” it didn’t seem separated from the ordinary life at home and it was affordable. In fact, for Californians during the 1950s, state schools were practically free. Ozzie’s impetus and David’s experiences made it seem to many of my friends that college was a good thing. Over the years that David was commuting to college on foot and then living in a frat house, at least part time, Ricky became more involved. He repeatedly showed up at fraternity events, working in the kitchen and chatting with beautiful college girls who seemed to love him because he was so cute. Ricky

ran errands for his mother and father as they worked to make David’s college experience successful. In the show, Ricky eventually went to the same college that was “just down the street.” He even joined the same fraternity that David had pledged a few years earlier. After the boys met girls at fraternity parties, they eventually became engaged, got married, and moved back home to their old bedrooms. Like Ozzie, there was no mention of jobs that the boys got after graduation.

In real life, David never graduated, even though he took classes for more than four years. Ricky had no interest in college. During a 1957 late-season episode, Ricky appeared on camera, singing the popular Fats Domino song “I’m Walking.” When Ozzie saw the audience response, he decided to exploit it. He took Ricky to a sound studio and cut a single record, which went viral almost immediately, ascending to No. 4 on the nation’s pop charts. While the front side of the record was not mentioned in year-end reviews because it was a cover tune, the flip side, “A Teenaged Romance,” finished the 1957 year in 25th place. When the 1958 season began, Ricky’s singing was written into the television script and he regularly performed rock ‘n’ roll songs during each episode. He and his band were shown performing at David’s fraternity and other venues. Ricky was becoming a musical sensation. By the end of the 1959 television season, Ricky Nelson was making almost \$500,000 a year and questioned the logic of diverting his attention to college, especially after having disliked high school. Ozzie placed the royalty money in a trust for Ricky and provided him with a weekly allowance of \$50, which according to later interviews was not enough for Ricky to live on given the growing expenses of his musical career.

But none of those issues made it to the television screen. As far as viewers were concerned, Ricky had walked down the street to college like his older brother and joined the same fraternity. Episodes increasingly involved David and Ricky and their fraternity friends, including Wally Plumstead, who became a foil for Ricky as the show continued. Dinners at the Nelsons were not as likely to feature academic counseling as they had when David was first attending college, but the seeds of “possibility” had been planted, especially for boys in my neighborhood who knew that Gannon College was only eight blocks away. It was our “college down the street.” Those of us who actually went to Gannon have “Ozzie and Harriet” to thank for their inspiration.

My friends and I watched and became convinced, after the gentle coaxing of Ozzie and Harriet as well as our analyses of the apparent averageness of both David and Ricky who were continually flummoxed over the simplest of everyday matters, that we could succeed at college. If they could do it, why not us? And Gannon, our “just down the street college” was charging only \$12 per credit. That meant that, for a full load of 15 credits, tuition was just \$180 per semester or \$360 per year. Combining that with living at home like the Nelson

boys, almost anyone could earn enough to go to college.



Actor Skip Young played Wally Plumstead, fraternity friend of David and Ricky Nelson.

Sadly for the Nelsons, trouble and tragedy lie ahead. Both of the boys' marriages ended in divorce, and then Ricky struggled to launch a new musical career when he turned 21. Ricky wanted to break away from the show and use his real name, Eric, but his agent told him that doing so would be a disaster. Reluctantly, he settled on "Rick," but almost everyone persisted in calling him Ricky. Creatively, he disliked the music that had been orchestrated by his father and he struggled to shift to a more complex, rock 'n' roll-country style. But playing the music that he liked usually resulted in disastrous audience responses. Fans wanted the old, simplistic three-cord favorites like "Hello Mary Lou," or "Traveling Man." His struggle is best told in the hit single "Garden Party," which was his most successful post-television release.



Rick's new image was definitely not "Ricky." Here he poses with his Stone Canyon Band – an idea beyond disturbing to most fans of the "Ozzie and Harriet" show.

Ricky and David's experiences while growing up on screen were wildly different, perhaps a textbook example of birth-order divergence. From Ricky's perspective, fictional life had been horrible. Modern observers have compared the world of the Nelsons, which was meticulously controlled by Ozzie, as the kind of Orwellian nightmare presented in the 1998 film, "The Truman Show." Ricky hated his orchestrated television life and especially the name "Ricky." David Nelson's experience was entirely different. He credits his father's controlling influence with protecting the family while nurturing a creative

environment for everyone associated with the show. David often discussed his father's unbelievable work ethic. According to him, Ozzie would come home after a long day at the studio and go to his office, where he often worked all night, typing future screenplays. He would make notes of the events of the day and use them to inspire subsequent episodes in which the family grappled with mundane, day-to-day problems. He also credits his father with introducing him to producing and directing, which was where David's career led him.

Ozzie invited David to take over directing many of the show's later episodes. After the show had ended and Ozzie decided on a comeback, David became the director of "Ozzie's Girls," a failed show that revolved around the Nelsons renting the boys' old bedrooms to two college girls, and then dealing with the struggles of two females instead of their boys. Ozzie was stuck at the old Nelson house and trying to think of a way to continue the old story line. But the viewing audience had moved on, the ratings were not good, and the show was canceled. Rick was long gone by that time and wanted nothing to do with a new project.

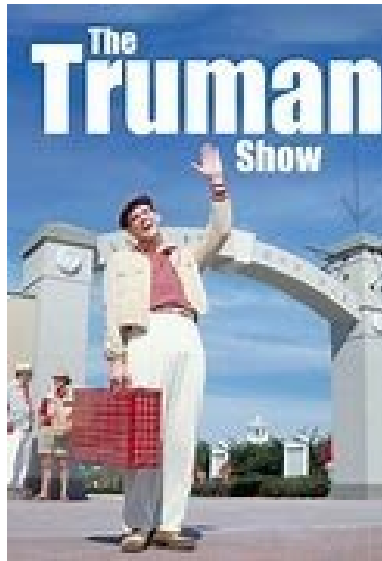
Shortly after "Ozzie's Girls" was cancelled, Ozzie died at age 69. Harriet took a few acting roles after that but she became withdrawn after Rick died in 1985 in an airplane crash. David went on to enjoy a successful career with his own production company, crafting commercials, short programs, and corporate film projects in Hollywood. His career was productive enough to earn him a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. David Nelson was the last remaining family member when he passed away in 2011. Harriet had died in 1994 after moving from the family home to a cottage that she and Ozzie had built in Laguna Beach.

While the Nelsons are gone, their legacy continues, especially in modern-day criticisms of the scripted television life that Rick complained about, as well as contemporary comparisons to the 1998 film, "The Truman Show." One of several modern-day criticisms of the 1950s culture, the Truman Show's main character, Truman Burbank (Jim Carey), did not realize that he was living in an enormous and lifelike stage set. Or that his life was being broadcast worldwide 24-7, and had become the most popular situational comedy of all time. Truman's daily life was filled with precisely the kinds of mundane problems that had been written into the "Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet." Contemporary media theorists who have plumbed the depths of this analogy have also drawn comparisons to the 1960s British cult television favorite, "The Prisoner." One popular hypothesis is that Ozzie had inadvertently invented "reality television" and that while son David had accepted his life as a scripted character, Ricky had become a prisoner as the show was doing him harm.

From a 1950s, bay-rat perspective, these nuances had escaped us. We had not yet seen a Fellini film and failed to comprehend the power of media. But then why would we have, since we had not yet gone to college? Or taken a class in film criticism. In our simplistic ways we thought of Ozzie and Harriet as parent figures who were telling us that it was possible to go to college; a powerful message for hopeful, first-generation college kids.

Sadly, the days of working-class kids paying their own way to college are probably behind us, both in Erie and Southern California. These days, the price per year is measured in the many thousands, not hundreds. While private schools

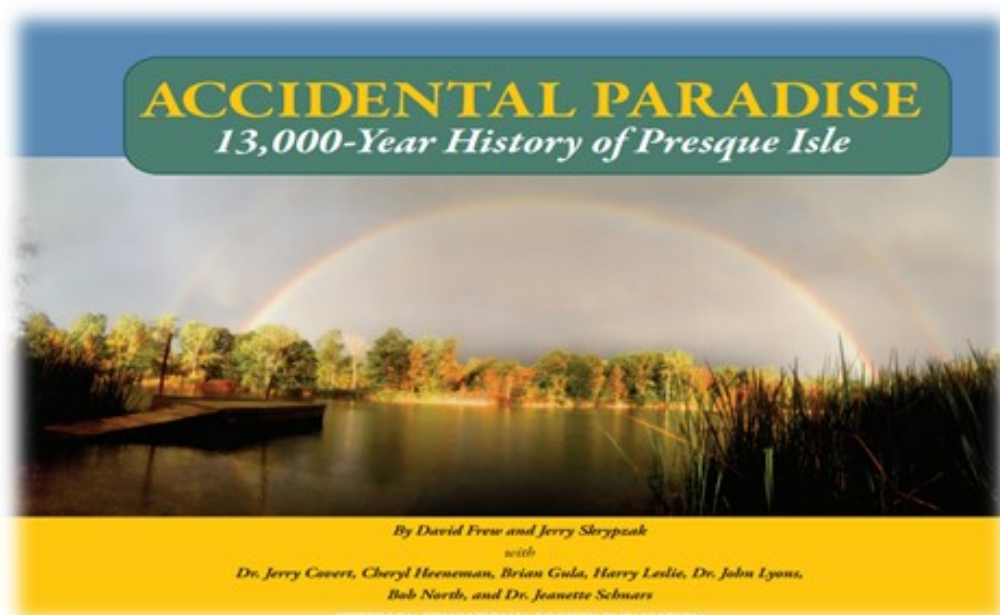
often cost more, public schools still cost more than they once did. How would a kid today be able to earn that kind of money? The times since Ozzie and Harriet, they have a-changed.



Jim Carrey as Truman Burbank

Newly Published JES Book Available Now!

Accidental Paradise
by Dr. David Frew and Jerry Skrypzak



The much-anticipated new book on Presque Isle by authors David Frew and Jerry Skrypzak – “**Accidental Paradise: 13,000-Year History of Presque Isle**” is on sale exclusively through the end of the year 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 *Monday through Friday from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.*

Books also will be available in January at other locations, including the Jefferson Educational Society. 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 an emeritus professor at Gannon University, where 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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