

JEFFERSON EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

Quick, Timely Reads On the Waterfront

Thanksgiving 1956 *The Most Money We Ever Made*

By David Frew
May 2023



Headlines from the 1956 storm

November 1956. As we settled in for a welcomed Thanksgiving school break with a traditional turkey dinner plus a black and white televised college football game, we gazed through our windows while a blizzard slowly but steadily filled the neighborhood with snow. At first it was fun; like being inside of a snow globe. But then as parents observed and worried, the level of the snow on the front sidewalks began to rise. And continued to rise. Official snowfall reports, which were probably not as accurate as they are these days, variously placed the 24-hour snow totals between 24 and 38 inches, depending upon regional locations. The event was driven by high winds crossing a wide open, warm Lake Erie. It was a classic lake effect, snowstorm.

Our “responsible” parents eventually inspired us to dress up in woolies and shovel the front sidewalks. So, there we were in front of our homes in the early

afternoon, shoveling and waving to each other. “Why waste an entrepreneurial opportunity?” we eventually asked each other. With a neighborhood filled with old people and shovels in our hands we quickly organized a shoveling team and began roaming from house to house to house, bidding on shoveling jobs. With new and relatively warm, wet snow on the ground it was not too difficult for us to attack a sidewalk job (front walk as well as the pathways leading to porches and back doors) and make it look like very professional work.

As we wound our way through the neighborhood, we learned to divide our efforts. Like the members of the Lewis and Clark “Voyage of Discovery” team, we soon figured out which of us was best at each of the required tasks and organized accordingly. The most persuasive and business-oriented Bay Rat went ahead of the rest of us to contact prospective homeowners and bid the shoveling jobs. That lead agent was followed by the rest of us who would make short work of the actual shoveling. We did an impressive job of each sidewalk. Clever marketers, we made sure that our prices were low enough to inspire lots of customers. With the advance man out ahead, quoting jobs at bargain prices and a team of Bay Rats with shovels and brooms, moving quickly from one home to the next, we were continuing from house to house and block to block, clearing snow for satisfied people.

And then, quite by accident, we struck upon an amazing opportunity that had been alluding us. A little old widow-lady chased us down, asking if we would return to her place. We had cleared her entire sidewalk a few moments earlier and dug neat paths to both her front and back doors. Pointing to her side porch and its obviously sagging roof she asked if we might be able to move the wet, heavy snow from the roof before it collapsed.

“No problem!” we responded. We immediately sent one of our shoveling technicians home to “borrow” his father’s ladder. Then, within minutes of his return, we had propped the ladder up against her sagging porch roof, scaled the structure, and pushed all of the snow away. Presto: a very happy customer. She paid us more than we would have dared charge her and as a bonus passed out homemade cookies to the entire Bay Rat restoration squad. Why had that opportunity escaped us? Just as we were running out of neighborhood sidewalks to shovel, we had a new and much more profitable gig.

Within minutes we were backtracking among customers whose walks we had already shoveled, calling attention to porch roofs, garages and other easy-to-climb house extensions. Our advance man shifted his approach, knocking on doors and calling attention to wet snow buildups and potential roof collapses. He offered to scale the “dangerous” heights and assured folks that the dangerous, wet snow would quickly be removed. Over the next few hours, we retraced earlier steps, re-contacting customers who had been happy with our snow shoveling and calling their attention to the snow that was in danger of bringing their porch roofs down. Amazingly, we were able to earn far more on the roof-shoveling jobs than we had on the sidewalks. Fearless Bay Rats, risking life and limb by scaling low-level porches and garage roofs to push snowdrifts away.

To demonstrate our business “integrity” we generally touched up the sidewalks that had managed to accumulate a few new inches of snow ... for free. Happy customers overpaid us for our work and offered to feed us sandwiches and Thanksgiving snacks since they were so happy with our roof work. By the time we had reversed our way through several blocks of previous sidewalk customers, pushing snow off roofs and touching up sidewalks, it was dark, and we were

cold. Lacking the sophisticated, waterproof outdoor gear that today's premier winter outfitters offer, we were all suffering from wet socks and gloves, so we decided to call it a day. We trudged to the snack bar at the corner of Sixth and Cascade where we sat down and ordered cherry cokes to celebrate. We counted and split up our cash and congratulated each other on having made so much money. We were rich!

The next day we learned that we could have walked to the train station and gone to work for the National Guard, which was activated and sent to clear railroad tracks. Dozens of local men were recruited, reported to the commandant that evening, and they earned money shoveling snow and liberating abandoned cars in the downtown area. We also learned that Erie Mayor Art Gardner and several other regional leaders had declared a state of emergency. West of Erie, military helicopters were used to drop food in communities where people were hungry and stores could not open. Army tanks were deployed in the west county to open closed roads and to move stranded cars and trucks.



An army reserve tank works to open roads in western Erie County.

In retrospect, the Thanksgiving storm was much more serious than we had understood at the time. As we were wandering the neighborhood with shovels, brooms, and a ladder, thinking about making money, people were suffering all around the outskirts of Erie. County residents simply did not have access to the emergency services that were available in the city. It was an experience that none of us will ever forget.

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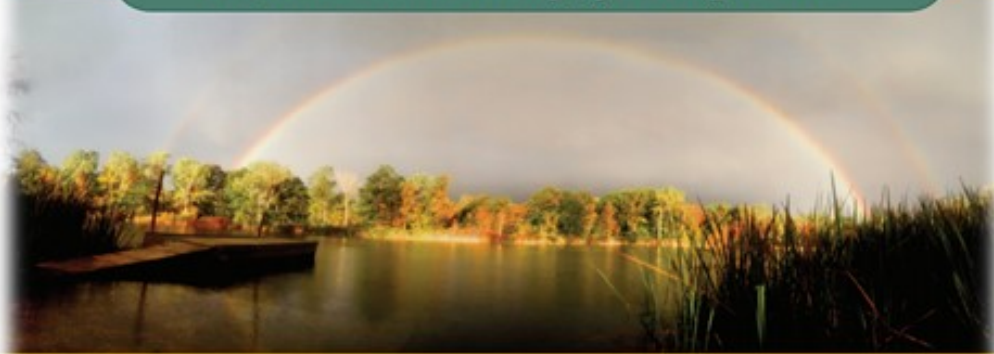
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The beautiful book on Presque Isle published by authors David Frew and Jerry Skrypzak – “**Accidental Paradise: 13,000-Year History of Presque Isle**” – is on sale at the Tom Ridge Environmental Center’s gift shop and through a special website, AccidentalParadise.com.

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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