

Quick, Timely Reads
On the Waterfront

Bay Rat Road Trips:
Take Me Out to the Ball Game

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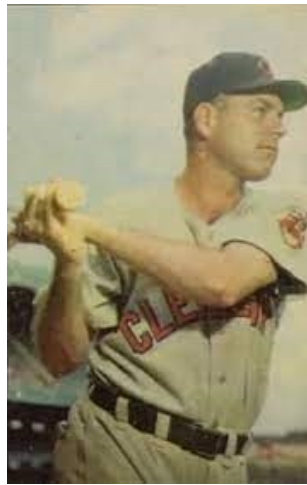
Dr. David Frew, a prolific writer, author, and speaker, grew up on Erie's lower west side as a proud "Bay Rat," joining neighborhood kids playing and marauding along the west bayfront. He has written for years about his beloved Presque Isle and his adventures on the Great Lakes. In this series, the JES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

There were two kinds of kids in my neighborhood, Indians fans and Yankees fans. I'm not sure if the differences could be explained with modern DNA scoring. There were no Pittsburgh fans and I suspect that was because of the difficulty of getting there by car from Erie, Pennsylvania. Cleveland was a manageable road trip, even during those pre-Eisenhower Thruway days. But driving to Pittsburgh was way more difficult. That rationalization fails to explain Yankees fans, however, and there were lots of them. Driving to New York City? I did not know anyone who had done it when I was a kid, but lots of us had been to Cleveland Municipal Stadium. Families, including my own, made the trip from time to time, but my Yankee fan buddies had to be satisfied with seeing their team when they played the Indians.

The 1954 Indians were awesome, and they played at the peak of my own baseball career. The summer of '54 was the year I finally tried out for and made a Little League team. I was Mister Baseball that summer, practicing or playing every day, and faithfully listening to radio broadcasts of the Cleveland Indian games each evening. On warm August nights, the din of the nightly baseball broadcast was endemic in my West Fourth Street neighborhood. You didn't have to have your own radio; just be outdoors on a warm night. Cleveland had the best record in baseball that year, and even today, 67 years later, I can rattle off the starting lineup and list the starting pitchers: Bob Feller, Mike Garcia, Early Wynn, and Bob Lemon.

My personal favorite and hero was leftfielder Dale Mitchell, number 3. He was a contact hitter with one of the highest on-base percentages in the big leagues and

I tried to pattern my own style of play after him. When I was at bat, I would do anything to get on base, even though I was one of the biggest kids on my team and my coach was always trying to get me to hit for power. I would crowd the plate, like my hero Dale Mitchell, get hit by pitched balls (I led the league when I was 11), walk, and try to punch hits to the opposite field. That batting style made my coach crazy, but I considered it a huge defeat to end up on the bench after an at-bat.



Dale Mitchell, Number 3

Oklahoma-native Dale Mitchell had a .302 lifetime batting average and during an 11-year career struck out only 119 times, an astonishing record. He was a master at drawing bases-on-balls, walking 346 times, as he created baseball's seventh-best strikeout-to-walk ratio of all time. He was reputed to be the toughest out in the big leagues, a record that I hoped to emulate during my Boys Baseball league days. His goal, every time he came to bat, was to get on base in any way possible.



Cleveland Municipal Stadium, 1954

At my house, the biggest event of the year was an annual trek to Cleveland Municipal Stadium to see a game. In retrospect, Cleveland was a terrible place to watch baseball, largely because it was both a baseball and a football stadium. Many of the seats were so far away from the field that it was almost impossible to see game details. But there was something that was worse. My father once won two tickets to a Cleveland Browns football game (same stadium) that we traveled to by train. It was some kind of an Erie group expedition that included snacks on the train and transportation to

the stadium from Cleveland's station. It was my first train ride and that was fun. But if watching baseball in Cleveland was difficult, football games were terrible. The 100-yard field was laid out across right and left field in such a way that second base protruded into the middle of the football field. Our game was early in the season, before baseball had ended, and efforts to place sod over the parts of the infield that protruded into the football field were less than perfect. After just a few plays, the sod had been destroyed and the resulting rupture near the 50-yard line was more than obvious. The worst part of watching football was the distance between most of the seats and the field. It was like following outfielders at baseball games. Players were so far from the seats that we could barely read the uniform numbers.

The most daunting aspect of the trip to Cleveland, however, was not the seating or restricted far-away stadium views. It was the car trip. We always went on a Sunday, which meant that we would have to plan a stop to go to Mass. Since our objective was to get to the stadium for batting practice at 1 p.m. (Game time was at 2 p.m.) we would leave before 6 a.m. My father was a used-car salesman, but not at one of the new car lots with quality vehicles. He worked at a low-end lot where he was in charge of an inventory of elderly cars. But his job had an amazing perk. He could choose any car from the lot and drive it home after work. When we were planning our trip to Cleveland, he would select one of the bigger and newer models, which was not saying much, and bring it home on Saturday before game day. We always packed the car Saturday night so that we could "hit the road" quickly the next morning. Preparations included car snacks, a big jar in case "anyone" had to go to the bathroom (there was no time to stop), and several emergency automobile supplies. Given the quirky nature of the cars that we used and the prevailing automobile technology of the time, we always stashed extra water for when (not if) the car overheated, a few quarts of motor oil since most of the car-lot automobiles that we borrowed seemed to burn oil, and a few spare tires. The tires on those cars were often without treads or they sometimes had "treadettes" that had recently been added with a hot-gun.



St. Joseph RC Church, Ashtabula, Ohio

These days Cleveland trips take less than two hours, but during the 1950s they were longer. Much longer. We followed Route 5 and then Route 20, which took us through small towns. Stop signs, red lights, and local traffic made expeditions to Cleveland last forever. If we managed to get away before 6 a.m., we would arrive at Ashtabula's St. Joseph Church just in time to be

late for 7 a.m. Mass. My mother always accused my father of doing it on purpose (which he vehemently denied), but we usually managed to pull into the church parking lot at about 7:10, just in time to schlep into the back of the church for the gospel. That made it “official,” according to my father.

During Mass, we were instructed to pray for a very special intention: “That the car would not screw up, until at least the trip home, so we would be on time for the game.” My mother usually objected, noting that using the word “screw” in a prayer intention was sacrilegious. But my father, who claimed to be the superior theologian since he had once been a Methodist and had the benefit of two different kinds of religious training, said that God was OK with any words. It was the intention that mattered.

Right after communion, we would gracefully exit church and run for the car, hoping that there would be no flat tires. From there, we were off toward a second, critical intermediate stop. Breakfast. We were always on the lookout for places that were cheap and fast. Had to hurry! Breakfast specials all around, of course, since that was the quickest thing. And cheap. Finally, with church and breakfast completed, we were on our way. Destination: Municipal Stadium.

Batting practice was magical. Kids, who often brought ball gloves to the stadium, would run around like lunatics, trying to catch any ball that carried into the stands. With pitchers lobbing fat pitches to Cleveland’s best power hitters, Larry Doby, Luke Easter, Al Rosen, and others, dozens of balls were invariably launched into the left field stands, providing lots of chances to grab one. Cleveland went first and when they were done, the visiting team had batting practice, but it was turned 180 degrees so that long balls would land in right field instead of left. That meant that the kids had to race all the way around the field to get into position. The very best game souvenir was a baseball, but there was almost no chance of snagging one during the actual game. I went to games and batting practices every year but never got a ball. Too slow, I guess.

To discourage me from constantly begging for snacks, my parents would peel four one-dollar bills from a cash stash and announce that it was my job to make that generous stipend last for the entire game. Combining financial responsibility lessons with baseball: genius stuff! Game snacks were cheaper back then. I could have purchased a box of crackerjacks plus a soft drink, but I was way too smart for that. Instead, I brought a few extra dollars to add to the \$4 gift and visited the clubhouse store. Most years I invested in a navy blue, Chief Wahoo ball cap so that I would have something to wear for the rest of the season. Decked out in a brand-new Indians hat, I would be able to brag when I ran into the kids who were Yankee fans during sandlot games.



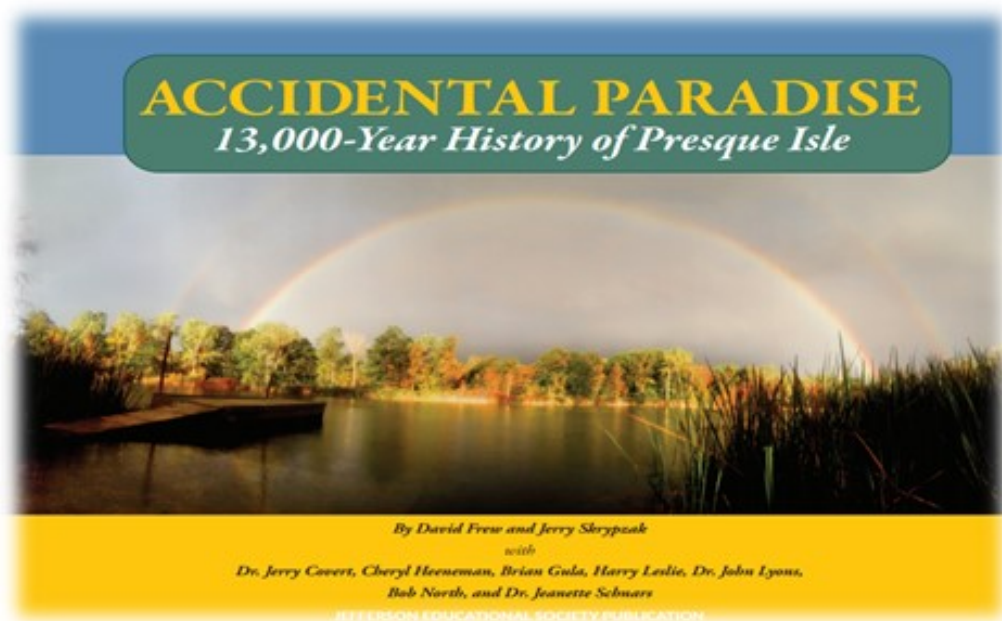
A classic Chief Wahoo baseball cap, with apologies for being

Full disclosure. There was one rabid Detroit Tigers family in the neighborhood, the Nathals (Americanized from the Italian Nathale), who lived in the middle of our block. Each year, in advance of opening day they unfurled an enormous Detroit banner that covered much of the front of their home. Neighbors wondered: Detroit? But only until they engaged any Nathal family member in a baseball discussion. That was when we learned about Al Kaline, Hoot Evers, and Harvey Kuenn, with details that could boggle the mind. The Nathal family had a son, David, who was a few years older than me. Interestingly, David Nathal was a “baseball savant.” While he was a special-education student with limited traditional capabilities, David could produce any statistic, even the micros, regarding a Detroit player. Lifetime batting or fielding averages, yearly statistics, and errors made during a given year, or switch-hitting statistics (righthanded versus lefthanded averages). But he was only able to do that for Detroit players. We would sit with him for hours and then wonder how the same kid who knew all of those numbers could have been having difficulty with traditional arithmetic or spelling. David Nathal opened doors of intellectual wonderment for all of us baseball-fan kids. He and I reconnected years later when he was living at L’Arche. Sadly, David passed away and I miss him.

Accidental Paradise Available at TREC

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 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 *Wednesday through Sunday 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](#).

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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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