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Quick, Timely Reads

On the Waterfront

Air Raids and Bomb Shelters

'Wholesome' Childhood Images and Bad Dreams from the 1950s

By David Frew

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Editor's note: Following is an On the Waterfront Classic by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence David Frew. It was first published in March 2021.

Sometime around 1953, my family visited the Wattsburg-Erie County Fair in northwestern Pennsylvania. After wandering through cows, chickens, pigs, rabbits, and goats, we found ourselves at an outdoor home accessory display where vendors were selling all kinds of things. Among the most iterating items was an actual display of home bomb shelters, prefabricated and self-contained rooms designed to be buried in backyards. Depending upon the model, these "lifesaving" sanctuaries offered sleeping accommodations, food and water storage, chemical toilets, and other critical accessories. The more expensive the model, the bigger and better the accommodations. As a salesperson engaged my father in his pitch, he described the nuances of each model, directing us toward the larger and better-equipped models since there were two kids in our family.

1950s-era magazines regularly featured advertisements for bomb shelters

I was already well-versed in the concepts of nuclear war. Not only had I watched newsreels depicting the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki but my grade school classmates and I had learned all about "the bomb" and nuclear fallout. There were two distinctly different disaster drills at my Catholic school. Two bells signaled us to stand up and move in an orderly way without panicking as we filed from the classroom and walked quickly out of the building. It was important not to run. Two bells indicated a fire, and we usually had two of these drills each year. Most of us enjoyed them. They were a welcome opportunity to get out of the classroom and go outdoors.

The three-bell drills were much more serious. Three bells signaled the "Big One." And that only happened when Russia was about to drop a nuclear bomb on us poor little kids. We knew that this was a serious ongoing threat since there were also lots of after-school air raid alerts in Erie during the 1950s. On several evenings each year, a terrible screeching blast would emanate from somewhere south of the bayfront, signaling a mission in ordinary households like mine to turn off all the lights in the house. If there was a necessary emergency light, we were instructed to be sure that the window(s) in that room were shuttered so that it would not be visible from the air. Apparently, Russian bomber pilots were so stupid that if they did not see lights coming from houses, they would fly right over us and drop their bombs on unsuspecting farmers. Apparently, nobody cared about farmers.

We knew that the evening civil defense exercises were real because right after the air raid sirens began, dozens of uniformed men, wearing pith helmets, would descend upon the neighborhood, running from house to house to bludgeon people into turning their lights off. On weekends, the same guys stationed themselves at

the tops of towers and hills, watching for enemy aircraft. They carried cardboard cue cards that depicted the profiles of Russian airplanes, including fighter planes and bombers. I'm not sure what they were supposed to do if they saw one.

The three-bell exercise at school was similarly illogical. Three bells commanded us to crawl under our desks and wait for further instructions from Sister. As we got older and barely fit beneath the tiny grade school desks in our classrooms, we began to question the logic of this maneuver. "Wouldn't it be better to go to the school's basement?" we asked. "Or to run home to be with our families during the end times?" There were few if any acceptable answers to those urgent questions. In any event, we regularly endured several of these nuclear drills each year. Unlike the two-bell fire drills, they were not weather-related. Fire drills always seemed to occur on nice sunny days, but nuclear bombings could happen at any time.

The Sisters did not waste nuclear bombing opportunities. They used them to help instruct us in spiritual exercises of begging for forgiveness for our many sins. Every time we found ourselves cowering under our desks and waiting for the "inevitable giant yellow flash," teachers would lead us in prayer. Our Fathers and Hail Mary's were the standards. I now wonder if there might have been a dysfunctional conditioning process going on, "praying and nuclear bombs," "crawling on the floor and seeking forgiveness," and other psychological connections. But I hesitate to speculate after all these years, so I will leave the mind-plumbing to psychotherapy.

How cozy. It was almost like a regular living room.
Note the father of the family wearing a necktie.

Meanwhile, back at Wattsburg, the salesman had glommed onto the fact that my father was a veteran. "Do you have a weapon?" he asked. When my father

answered that he did not, the salesman continued. “You will need two,” he continued, handing us a gun catalog.

“A shotgun for close range, and a rifle. And several hundred rounds of ammunition.” Then he explained that neighbors will see us burying the fallout shelter and know that we have one (I couldn’t imagine how we would dig the hole or where we would put the dirt). “Then, when the inevitable finally happens and the Russians drop the bomb,” he continued, “dozens of panic-stricken neighbors will be in your backyard clamoring to be allowed into your bomb shelter.” That was when the salesman pointed out the small inspection slot in the main doorway, through which a shotgun or rifle could be positioned and fired. “A few dead bodies at the doorway of your bomb shelter will send a signal that the neighbors should leave you alone.”

That was a strange juxtaposition of images to contemplate on the ride home: fairground cows, pigs, bunnies and chickens, award-winning apple pies, and dead bodies stacked in front of the doors of backyard bomb shelters. “But what if we like the neighbors who are trying to get into our bomb shelter?” I asked. My mother stared straight ahead, silently. My father turned the car radio on.

Eventually, there were several experiments by social psychologists regarding the psychological impact of fallout shelters. The early study designs included actual small-sample, simulated confinements in fallout shelters that had been constructed on university campuses. These were followed by several large sample, questionnaire studies. In the most famous of the early live simulation studies, Princeton psychologist Jack Verner paid a New Jersey high school teacher and his family (including three children) $500 to live in a simulated fallout shelter built on the campus. The study, titled “Private Hideaway,” is reported in several journals as well as the book, “Electrified Sheep, Glass Eating Scientists, Nuking the Moon and More Bizarre Experiments.”

For three weeks, the subject family lived in a Princeton psychology laboratory fallout shelter while psychologists secretly watched and listened 24 hours per day and made notes unbeknownst to the participants. Pre- and post-experimental measures of depression and anxiety found that each family member suffered significantly increased measures of neurotic depression over the three-week period. Even more disturbing was the parents’ overuse of whiskey, bedwetting by the children, and episodic verbal fighting. The major living problem in the shelter was a general misuse of the chemical toilet, which resulted in a terrible odor that the family slowly became accustomed to. When researchers finally opened the door to the shelter at the end of three weeks, several psychologists were overcome by the noxious fumes and became sick. During much of the experiment, the wife of the family begged her husband to end the terrible ordeal, but he was determined to stick it out and get the $500 (1959 dollars). By conventional

standards, the Princeton experiment would be ruled unethical today, given its disregard for human subjects.

University of Pittsburgh psychologists attempted to replicate the Princeton study a year later but had to suspend observations after a few days when the male subject, a man in his 30s, became psychotic and violent. After that experience, several follow-up ethical questions were raised and most researchers switched to questionnaire studies. In the questionnaire studies, which seemed safer than the simulated confinement design pioneered by Princeton, the most troublesome questions were the ones that probed potential issues involving friends and neighbors trying to gain access to a family's already-too-small bomb shelter. Respondents reported that they would be terribly conflicted about not allowing others access to the safety of their shelters. Younger respondents, in particular, questioned the morality of denying access to others, particularly friends and family.

When I became executive director of the former Erie County Historical Society, my first behind- the-scenes tour of the Watson-Curtze Mansion revealed a huge public fallout shelter. It was one of several components of the National Civil Defense Program. There were several other shelters in Erie and thousands of them in cities across the United States. They began to appear in public buildings during the late 1950s and early 1960s and were made famous by a Life Magazine article that quoted President John F. Kennedy about Russia's entry into the nuclear age. Counterintuitively, large public shelters began to lose popularity after the Cuban Missile Crisis. Public funding for shelters disappeared, and articles that questioned the viability of life in such dark and dismal circumstances began to appear. Slowly, the public fallout shelters disappeared as critics began to challenge the likelihood that such shelters would survive a nearby bomb strike, much less provide adequate living spaces.

This universal symbol marked public fallout shelters.

The Watson-Curtze shelter at the Hagen History Center is located in a basement addition in the area east of the building, where its 18-inch concrete roof serves as an informal "patio" adjacent to the mansion. From inside the mansion, the large fallout shelter area contains a ventilation system, a walled-off bathroom, and other artifacts that were supposed to create viable emergency living space for a large number of people. An inspection of the ventilation and drainage systems within the fallout shelter suggested several problems. Notably, radioactive water would have been discharged from the ventilation system and drained directly into the city's stormwater drainage tubes and into Presque Isle Bay.

There would seem to be parallels between the 1950s-era fallout shelter research and today's Covid-19 quarantine experiences. Psychologists are currently reporting a disturbing rise in depression, anxiety, insomnia, suicide, substance abuse, and other illnesses that are being linked with social isolation. Another disturbing problem that has accompanied Covid-19 is the reported acceleration dementia, especially among elderly residents of assisted living organizations. Is Covid-19 a modern return to the days of the Cold War?

One more thing. There was not a single backyard bomb shelter in my neighborhood!

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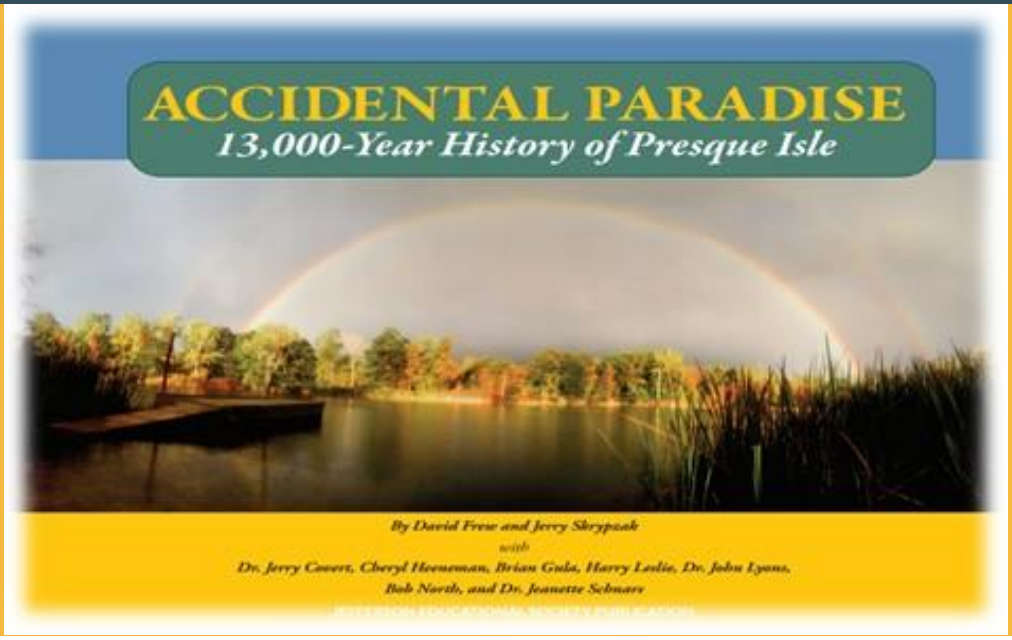
Accidental Paradise
by Dr. David Frew and Jerry Skrypzak



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@TRECF.org**.

To watch "Accidental Paradise: Stories Behind The Stories" click here.

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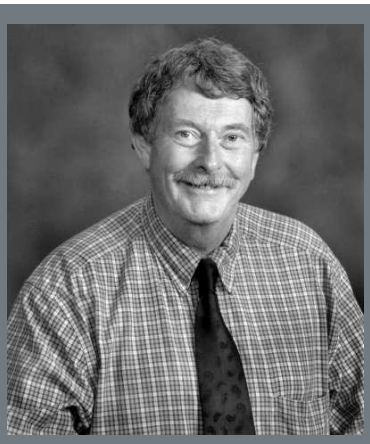

Historian and author David Frew, Ph.D., is a Scholar-in-Residence at the JES. An emeritus professor at Gannon University, he held a variety of administrative positions during a 33-year career. He is also emeritus director of the Erie County Historical Society/Hagen History Center and is president of 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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