

JEFFERSON

EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

Quick, Timely Reads
On the Waterfront

Home Expectations:
From the 1950s to Now

By David Frew, Scholar in Residence
July 2025



Trendy walk-in closets, like the one pictured above, are larger than the entire bedroom that my brother and I shared during the 1950s. We had a walk-on closet instead.

Like most bay rats in Erie, Pennsylvania, I grew up in a house built at the turn of the century. It was a flat, inelegantly converted from a two-story family home. Each of the individual floors (rented independently) contained two small bedrooms. That living space was not unusual for the neighborhood. Most of my friends lived in similar circumstances: a kitchen, living room, dining room, and two bedrooms crammed into 900 square feet. Considered amazing by today's standards, most homes held large families with as many as five kids. And often, it included a rent-paying border who helped families to make ends meet. How did families accommodate so many in such small spaces? Creativity and financial duress inspired solutions.

Sometimes an extra room was carved out of a closet, a porch, or a living room space. Other times, expanding the number of children inspired wild new solutions. One family that I knew fit five boys and one girl in their modest two-bedroom flat. Their ultimate solution was to carve sleeping quarters for the boys out of an unheated attic. One by one the boys, using his own creative skills, fashioned mattresses that they placed in the attic, and each evening, they wandered up and into the uninsulated space where they endured freezing cold in the winter and brutal heat in the summer. It was all worth it just to have their own small, private spots. That family also lived without a refrigerator, and, as they explained during later years, their mother went shopping every day, cooked a nice supper, and watched as each morsel was consumed. No need for a refrigerator. There were never any leftovers.

If the sleeping accommodations and/or lack of refrigeration seemed Spartan, the idea of seven people sharing one tiny bathroom may have been even more remarkable. But that was life during the "wonderful" 1950s. My own circumstances were much more opulent. We had two bedrooms and only two boys who shared one of them.

When I returned to Erie in 1970 after a graduate-school absence, I intended to find a home that would provide each of our children with their own bedroom — a luxury that seemed important. I wanted our three children to have privacy as well as their own place to keep books, hobby materials, and more. To that end, I purchased a two-and-a-half story house in the Frontier area. Our new home, boasting more than 2,000 square feet, seemed like a mansion to me, especially after being crammed into a tiny apartment with three kids for almost three years during my graduate-school days.

Our new Erie neighborhood was filled with similar homes, all inhabited by families. While 1930s neighborhood developers had done their best to make them look different, the basic architectural styles were all similar. Some had second floors that contained three bedrooms and one bathroom. Others had four smaller bedrooms in the same space. The bedrooms were small but private with closets. Two or more kids shared each of the homes on our 1970s street. The homes were

newer and more modern than the 1900-era houses that I had endured as a boy but relatively small by modern standards. My college professor's daughter, for example, lives in a 4,000-square-foot home with five bedrooms. More than one for each family member with rooms left over for guests and a "media room." The modern way.



A typical home from my neighborhood: 1,500 square feet and three bedrooms

More than 50 years have passed since we moved into our first and only Erie house. The kids have grown up and left, leaving us to rattle around in four bedrooms (one of which has become an office), wondering if we are taking up too much space. But a remarkable thing happened in 1970 when we moved to our new "upscale" neighborhood. The two-block stretch that once was home to 30 or 40 small children now has less than 10. The cute little gang of children that used to wander the sidewalks every day, heading for Harding School each morning, just a short walk from here, has disappeared. Small kids have become an endangered neighborhood species.

Dozens of 2,000-square-foot houses are now inhabited by childless couples, and in some cases, single individuals. One home was purchased by a Cleveland Clinic nurse who works three 12-hour shifts per week. Three days on and three days off. She told me that houses here are so inexpensive, as compared to Cleveland, that the 200-mile round trip commute plus a few overnight motel stays near her job (sometimes shared) are well worth the effort. The ease and simplicity of small-town Erie serves as a bonus.

Lately, I have had a chance to see what some couples have done to their once-three-bedroom 1930s-era family homes. Naturally, these young professionals have had the creative advantage of watching countless hours of home improvement television to gather ideas. Beginning with the good bones that accompany neighborhood houses built in the 1930s with solid frames and hardwood floors made of oak, modern residents have made astonishing adjustments.



Adding a huge load-bearing beam to open an interior space

It seems like the first thing that often happens on first floors that once contained a living room, dining room, parlor, and sunroom, is a transition to one huge room instead of four small ones. These modern great rooms are created by adding massive composite or steel beams to anchor the bearing walls. Modern folks prefer a connected living area and kitchen area with an island and stools for informal eating. Naturally, there should be a small bathroom tucked into a first-floor corner, a rare luxury in the 1930s.



The familiar PBS This Old House crew inspires

The next step in modernizing a typical 1930 house is to attack the second floor. Three or four bedrooms have been replaced by a large, second floor open space, again using a sturdy added support beam to span the area. The result is one giant bedroom with an ensuite bath, hot tub, and ultra-modern walk-in closet: a space that has the look of a high-end clothing store with drawers, shelves, and hooks that can hold a massive wardrobe, including dozens of pairs of shoes in a dedicated rack. Wow!

Step three in the ultimate transition is to demolish the original garage, which was designed to barely hold a 1931 Buick. The modern new double-car edifices that have been replacing old broken down 1930s garages boat automatic garage door openers. No more straining to swing old clumsy wooden doors open. And the space for expanding garage homes for the neighborhood's modern fleet of BMWs (never had those in the old days) is liberated from former backyards with grass and vegetable gardens. No more fresh tomatoes. I wonder if this is real improvement or change?

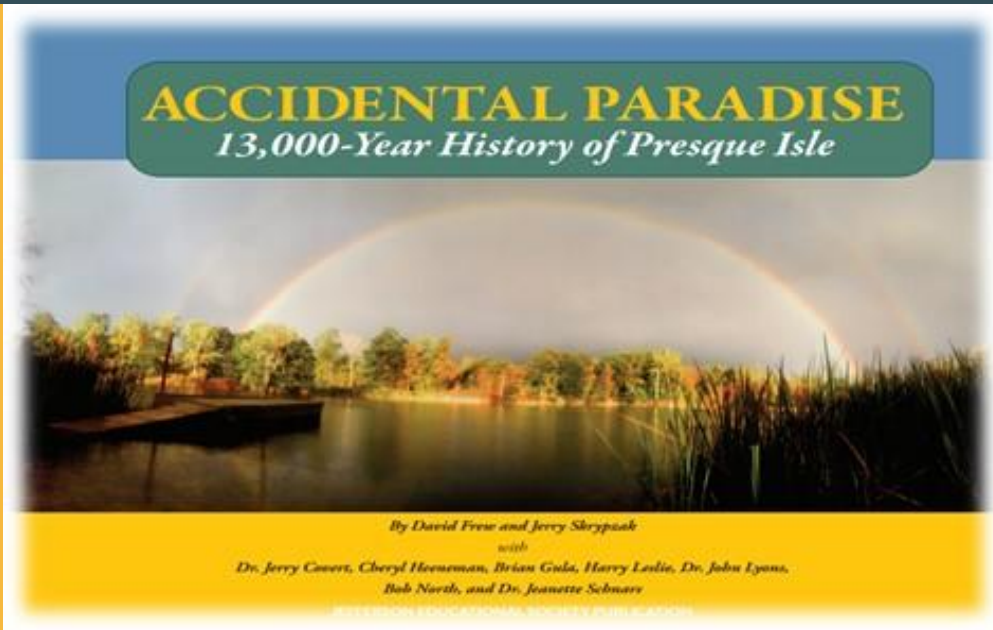
As impressive as the new homes are, I miss the packs of laughing kids.

[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@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.



In Case You Missed It

[Book Notes #204 | A “Mini” Note: Two Poems by Louise Glück](#) written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence **Dr. Andrew Roth**

[Death of the Daily Newspaper | Read between the lines: How local journalism addresses loneliness and polarization](#) written by **Chloe Forbes**

[Men in Crisis | Can Manufacturing Revive Men’s Search for Meaning?](#) written by **Jeff Bloodworth**

[On the Waterfront | Neighborhood Theology Lessons: Those Pesky Lutherans](#) written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence **Dr. David Frew**

[‘I’ve Seen This Before’ | What Failed Democratization Can Teach Us About Democratic Erosion](#) written by **Lena Surzhko-Harned**

[The Wider World | Power – Hard, Soft, Smart?](#) written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence **Diane Chido**

[Truth in Love | Rosa Parks: Resolute Leader America Needed](#) written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence **Dr. Parris Baker**



