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Quick, Timely Reads
On the Waterfront

Parenting Then and Now
Change is inevitable but not always good

By David Frew
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Editor's note: Following is an On the Waterfront Classic by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence David Frew. The Jefferson first published it in September 2022.

Before Mr. Spock made "the sacrifice of the one for the needs of the many," Great-Grandmother Frew did almost the same thing at a family picnic near Frewsburg, New York.

Decades before Mr. Spock (actor Leonard Nimoy) sacrificed himself for the sake of the rest of the crew of the Enterprise in the 1982 film "Wrath of Kahn," one of my great-grandmothers performed a similar but slightly different act of valor. She sacrificed someone else.

To the chagrin of Captain James Kirk (William Shatner), who watched in horror as his first officer and friend made the ultimate sacrifice, Spock jettisoned himself into space. The crew of the USS Enterprise was saved. Fast forward (or backward?) in the Wayback Machine to 1950 and my grandmother's house. I am sitting at her piano banging away at the keys making more noise than music.

Mr. Peabody's famous WABAC machine could propel his student, Sherman, through time and space.

One of my favorite items at the home of my paternal grandmother was a dog-eared, old book about the Frew family. It sat in a privileged spot on top of Grandma's piano between two ceramic Scotty-dog book ends. Once I had mastered the skill of reading, I would extract that book every time I visited and pore over the stories. I wish I could recall the title or publisher, but I cannot. It was a source of great pride for my grandmother that a book had been written about the Frew family, and she encouraged me to read it when I visited, even though it was fragile. Published in the late 1800s, the book narrated the years before the Civil War and was set in nearby Frewsburg, New York. It did not seem

to have been a popular success probably because the stories were dull, even by 1950s standards.

One story that stood out described a family picnic during which the husband and older boys had wandered off into the woods to do something while the wife and younger children remained at the picnic with the food. All was well until a large bear approached the women, children, and food. That was when Great-Grandmother Frew (not sure how many generations back) made the incredibly brilliant decision to quickly move all of the children away from the leftover picnic and have them run to safety. All of the children but one! Great-Grandma Frew made the painful decision to leave the youngest child, a baby, on a blanket next to the food while older children helped younger siblings escape. The biggest kids picked up younger brothers and sisters and ran for their lives.

At a safe distance, the family stood watching; hoping that the marauding bear would be content with finishing off the food that had been remaining on the blanket. Unfortunately, the bear had other ideas. After toying with leftovers for a few moments, the bear decided that the baby would be the most attractive meal that day.

Public reaction to that decision was puzzling. After the requisite sadness required to eulogize the baby, Great-Grandmother Frew was celebrated as a heroine who had saved her family, according to the book. Clearly the sacrifice of a single baby was regarded as having been well worth the "price."

Did that event really happen or was it a stylized way of saying that children of the middle-1800s may not have been regarded with the same value as today's kids or even the children of the era during which the book was written. Or was it a story message intended to convince children to accept the fact that they were not quite as important as they might otherwise think? Could the story have been a literary inoculation against narcissism? A combination warning and parenting lesson?

My own introduction to parenting, not counting the time I spent as a kid watching how I was supervised, happened in the late 1960s, a time when the theoretical field was exploding. Instead of the one or two classic books on being a parent that were available to new moms and dads during the 1950s, the 1960s delivered dozens of tomes on the topic. And since my wife Mary Ann and I cleverly had three children within the space of 18 months (including twins), it seemed that we were prime candidates for learning (buying books).

Like everyone else who we spoke to, we knew what we had liked and disliked as children, and we knew what we were seeing among friends who were becoming parents. So, we worked hard to distill all of the information that we found in books and to develop a consistent strategy. Since we were both academics, we searched for answers in books and journal articles. Three children, all about the same age

and moving through stages rapidly, present challenges. And sadly, by the time we were beginning to figure one stage out, all three kids had graduated to the next stage, rendering much of what we were learning useless.

We read books (many of them), consulted academic journals, talked with friends and colleagues, including "experts," and processed information. We wanted to do a good job. Then one day all three kids moved out to go to college and it was (theoretically) over. Lately, even though it is far too late, we have been performing a meta-analytic study of parenting and here is the chief finding. It was (and still is) possible to find anything one is looking for within the parenting "literature" and most people seem drawn to parenting advice and philosophies that agree with their own personality predilections.

They usually manage to find what they hope to find. Most interesting, if not frightening, the primary impact of the avalanche of parenting information, especially in the last 50 years, has been to suggest that parents are chiefly responsible for the success or failure of children. Good parenting will propel a child toward success and happiness. Therefore, nonsuccessful children must be the outcome of inferior parenting. Hmm.

There is (always) an imbedded Bay Rat lesson. While modern parenting "lessons" seem to have spread through almost every economic and social strata, thanks to television and social media, such was not the case in the 1950s. During those "primitive" times, active parenting seemed to have been driven economically with only upper middle-class people buying into the notion that children had to be "helped." For Bay Rats, the active parenting boundary line was the West Sixth Street Bridge (noted in previous articles).

Kids on the west side of this socio-economic dividing line had parents who were convinced that their children should be "assisted." Those kids attended high-end summer camps, had tutors when they experienced school difficulties, and saw doctors and dentists regularly. When they graduated from high school, they were likely to go to college as opposed to getting jobs. And they did not attend inexpensive local commuter colleges. They went off to great schools; places we only knew about from television like Michigan, Purdue, and Colgate. But an important question remains: "Were those children really helped by orchestration that they did not actively pursue, themselves?" Did their parents do them a favor by shaping their lives or were they making them less than self-reliant?

Back in the 1950s, active (west side-of-the-bridge) parenting was driven by economic status. Kids whose parents were from the working class, like us Bay Rats, did not receive such active parenting "benefits." By the late 1960s, however, much of that economically driven "style choice" was changing for Americans and in today's world the trend toward life-design for children has accelerated. The gospel of active parenting has reached almost every economic level, thanks to

mass media. Modern parents are increasingly burdened by the notion that it is their job to "make a difference." Many parents have been convinced that it is their duty to design lives for children that will result in their kids doing well in the world. It has become the responsibility of the parents (or parent) to make children competent in every dimension of life, from sports to social skills (friends) and academics.

Regardless of the veracity of the supposition that parents can make children successful, the hypothesis that active parenting leads to successful outcomes ignores two important factors: (1) research suggesting that at least 50 percent of the ultimate outcomes of a child's life are driven by genetics, and (2) the possibility that outcomes during the long period of development between childhood and young adulthood are powerfully driven by choices that are made by individual kids, themselves. But what if either or both contradictions to active parenting is true? Would it influence parenting styles? Could the notion that parents have and continue to hold the key to unlocking great futures for children be an undue pressure? Are parents really responsible for making their children happy and successful? And most threatening of all: what if parents who take on the responsibility of designing children's lives are making things worse?

Much has changed for parents since the days when my great-grandmother supposedly sacrificed a baby for the good of the rest of her children. Or from the Bay Rat times when kids were left to fend for themselves. Granted, the modern world seems to be a more dangerous place and I would never have allowed my own children or grandchildren to wander the edges of the bayfront, hop over parked railroad cars, or go fishing by themselves at the Cascade Docks.

Sometimes this reality is brought home when I tell "campfire stories" to grandchildren. Their parents (my children) cringe when I tell them about hopping freight cars to get to Chestnut Pool or hitchhiking to the other side of town to play in a Boys Baseball game when I was 12. "Why didn't your parents drive you," the grandchildren ask. "We didn't have a car," I tell them. "No television, no car, no parental supervision?" they ask. They simply can't believe it and put it off to a crazy grandfather tale told over roasted hot dogs in the backyard. But they are not entirely sure.

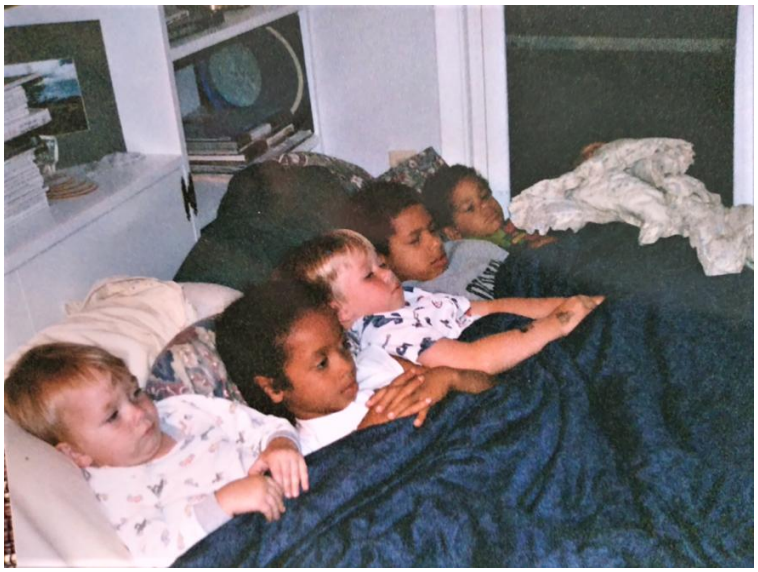
Bustling downtown Frewsburg at the turn of the century when the mysterious book was written

Much has changed since the late 19th century days when Great-Grandmother Frew was celebrated for sacrificing one baby for the sake of the rest of her children. And much has also changed since Bay Rat times of the 1950s. Perhaps our experience of parenting as "feral" kids during the 1950s represented an intermediate stage between the large families of the 19th century and today. Those old families were raised by much younger and very much busier parents. Modern people who do get married or choose to be partners are waiting longer to have fewer children. A larger proportion choose not to have children at all. And those who do often raise a single child while they continue careers. This means nannies and daycare, the first of many issues that must be negotiated in an effort to successfully engineer children; decisions that will seemingly shape success.

Perhaps the 1950s were unique in the sense that parenting was a function of neighborhoods. While my friends were generally "on their own," wandering neighborhoods, streets, and the bayfront and left to make fundamental decisions about important matters such as going to college versus getting a job, we knew friends who were the opposite. While the first reaction to Great-Grandmother Frew's decision to sacrifice her baby for the sake of the rest of the children was horror and grief over the loss of the baby, public opinion later celebrated her quick thinking. Her sacrifice of "the one for the many" was celebrated as heroism. Clearly each individual child was not held in the same esteem as the children of today's typical marriage. Could that have been good for us? At least for those of us who were lucky enough to have survived.

About the old book. During her declining years, my grandmother gave up her Millcreek home and moved to an assisted living facility near Meadville, where she eventually passed away. Years later, I asked my aunt, her daughter who had emptied her room at the assisted living home and packed up all of the remaining belongings, if she had found the book. She clearly recalled the book but reported

that it had not been among the things that she had packed up. The precious book had disappeared. Sometime later when I had begun doing family genealogy research and visited Frewsburg, I spent time at the town library, where the staff seemed excited to have an actual Frew visiting the library. They opened the archives and shared their entire collection, but they did not have a copy of "the book." They knew of it but since it did not have the name "Frew" in its title, it was not a part of the collection, and they were unable to track it down. The book and its title remain a mystery.



Grandchildren were the first victims of my stories about Bay Rat days.

After most of my campfire or bedtime stories, the grandkids would race to their parents to check. Black and white television with only one channel? Gramps would ride his bike across town to play little league baseball when he was only 11? He went fishing by himself when he was only 10? My world seemed preposterous to them. And perhaps it really was.

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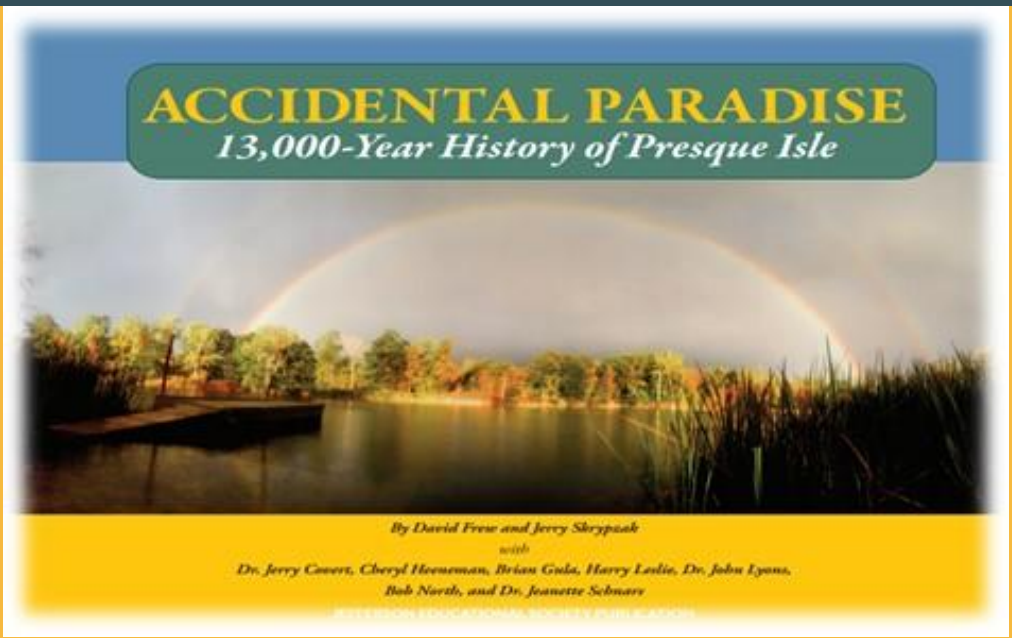
by Dr. David Frew and Jerry Skrypzak



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.

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