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EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

Quick, Timely Reads  
On the Waterfront

**Port Dover Blues:  
Gentrification Catches Up with My Favorite  
Town**

**By David Frew, Scholar in Residence  
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*Third Generation Erie Beach Hotel owner Andrew Schneider poses in front of the hotel that his family has owned and operated for more than 80 years.*

A few weeks ago, I opened my email to find shocking messages from Port Dover friends. The messages suggested that the Erie Beach Hotel was about to be sold and could be bulldozed and turned into condominiums. I was crushed. The Erie Beach has become a second home to me – a place that has welcomed me and my family for more than 50 years. It is hard to imagine life without it. But I should begin at the beginning.

**June 1971:** Summertime. During the previous year I completed my doctorate (December 1970), took a job at Gannon, and completed my first year as a faculty member. I have turned down offers to teach summer school and with a contract for the following year, a few months off, and a regular income assured, summer vacation with Mary Ann and our three kids is beckoning. The family sacrificed for me to go to school for three years and I want to repay their kindness with “something big.” We have been planning a month-long escape, but where to go? New Gannon professors were not exactly overpaid, so it had to be something modest but fun.

After a youth spent gazing across Lake Erie and wondering what could possibly be “over there” across the pond, I had an inspiring idea. What if we acquired a tent (camping was cheap) and took a slow ride around Lake Erie? We could begin at Niagara Falls and continue along the north side of the lake. At last, my curiosity would be satisfied. A quick visit to AAA (remember TripTiks?) provided a pile of research material. And the more we read, the better the idea seemed. There were amusement parks, provincial parks (Long Point, Turkey Point, and Rondeau), animal preserves, and a national park (Pelee) to be explored. Departing in late June, we were whisked along a laid-back trip that now seems like it was a magical tour. And more than 50 years later, that simple trip seems to be the best family vacation that we ever took. Famous national parks, Disneyland, ocean cruises, and other more glitzy vacations have come and gone since then, but our month-long Lake Erie trip still stands out.

More than a week into the expedition and more than a bit grimy from camping, we rolled into Port Dover on June 30 and found the beach. The kids were in the water and frolicking on the sand within minutes. After an hour or so we dried them off and began to look for a place to eat lunch and that was the first time we laid eyes on the Erie Beach Hotel. It seemed a bit high-end at the time, but we were tired and decided to treat ourselves.

Even though we were raggedy, sand-stained, and weathered, we were ushered into the most amazing old style dining room and welcomed. There we were presented with one of the best meals we had ever eaten. Family-style dishes of every imaginable food were placed onto the table, and servers took care to learn about our family and what we were up to. We apologized for our bedraggled state, but owners Tony Schneider and his wife visited our table and told us that if we needed a break from camping, they would make us a special deal on adjoining

rooms with hot showers, and comfortable beds. We thanked him for his hospitality and said yes.

The next morning, we learned that it was Canada Day and there was going to be a big parade. It was the annual July 1 celebration. We stayed at the Erie Beach for an additional day, enjoyed an amazing small-town parade, and we ate again in the hotel dining room. That was my first but certainly not my last stay at the hotel that I have come to think of as a second home.

**June 1973:** If we learned anything during our first Port Dover visit, it was that we needed to return by boat. Port Dover and its surrounding area is defined by its relationship with Lake Erie and Long Point. The next year we purchased a small sailboat and set off for Port Dover several times, but usually we chose discretion over adventure and turned back, deciding that we needed a bigger boat to reliably and safely cross cantankerous Lake Erie. We did so in 1976, beginning a long family history of taking annual month-long sailing vacations, which always included Port Dover. Even though our boat had sleeping accommodations, we would always treat ourselves to a few hotel nights while we were on the other side of the lake, returning to the Erie Beach and its dining room often.

On those month-long sailing adventures my kids fell in love with the Ontario town just across the lake. As soon as we arrived at Port Dover Yacht Club, I would pass out \$20 bills and the kids would disappear. The girls loved shopping at the quaint little jewelry and trinket stores that populated the waterfront, and my son, the avid fisherman, would disappear, making his way to the town pier and its bait shops. Extended Port Dover stays reinforced our love of the town, especially when we discovered a downtown professional theater (Lighthouse Festival Theater) and The Arbor with its foot-long hot dogs and ice cream.

**May 1990:** During the academic year I applied for and won a grant from the Canadian federal government to establish a “Canadian Studies Program” at Gannon. The most important component of the grant program was a two-week graduate class in Canadian Studies that took Gannon students to Port Dover for a week to learn the nuances of the regional economy. While there was some resistance by the Canadian government to using Port Dover as a study site, the reality of the unique regional economy soon dispelled those concerns. At the time the Port Dover region was home to North America’s largest greenfield industrial park, which included STELCO (steel), Ontario Hydro (the world’s largest coal-fired electric power plant at Nanticoke), and a major petroleum refinery. In addition, the region was home to a thriving commercial fishing industry, a huge tobacco industry, professional theater (Stratford, and the Lighthouse), and an interesting national medical system, which was outperforming American healthcare.

The Canadian Ministry of Education had established Canadian Studies sites at American universities along the border, including Michigan, University of Buffalo, and Toledo, and Gannon provided one more location in the ongoing system. The grant paid stipends to students, which made the trip an affordable and convenient international business experience. Gannon's program thrived for more than 10 years.

Selfishly, the Canadian Studies program provided an all-expenses-paid opportunity for me to visit Port Dover and stay at the Erie Beach Hotel, and during those years I resided at the hotel for 30 or more nights each year. I was there, making arrangements during the off season, meeting people, and staying with students and faculty on our scheduled May visits. One of the industries that we examined while in Port Dover was the hospitality business, and the Schneider family took care to host Gannon students and faculty each year. By the time that Gannon students were visiting Port Dover, the Erie Beach had acquired Arbor and built a downtown miniature golf course. Amazingly, the operation of those three entities required a staff of approximately 250, making the hotel the largest local employer. One obvious product of the ongoing labor was the stunningly attractive front lawn that somehow thrives in a hostile sand environment. The front lawn, which is a major component of the hotel's brand, requires a full-time landscaper.

Gannon students learned much about human resources management and operations flexibility from Andrew Schneider, who took time to lecture the students each year.



*The lawn and tulips at the Erie Beach Hotel*

**Recently:** Canadian Studies ended when I left Gannon but my relationship with Port Dover and the Erie Beach continued. At the Erie County Historical Society (just after I left Gannon), I became even more involved with the town and especially with its incredibly talented museum director, Ian Bell. Thanks to Ian's

creativity and hard work, Port Dover's Harbour Museum won an award for being Ontario's best small museum.

My first instinct when watching what he had done to shift an innocuous small building filled with fishing artifacts into a sensationally attractive museum was to imagine that his work could be a model for what we could be doing in Erie. We were not running a major institution like the Smithsonian, rather a regional place like Bell had been doing. Ian's approach was to grow membership by inviting community involvement and planning exhibit openings that appealed to broad new segments of his community.

I began to organize "learning trips" to Port Dover for staff and board members who used the Harbour Museum model to create new exhibits and programming, especially at the State Street History Center. Bell was happy to help as we organized joint exhibits, which were moved from Port Dover to Erie or vice versa. I also sponsored and led several tours to Port Dover for historical society members, while hosting reciprocal bus trips from Port Dover. All of the trips centered on the Erie Beach Hotel, which gracefully hosted us when we were in town and provided group dinners.

My Port Dover affiliations moved to Mercyhurst when I left the museums to become a visiting professor. At the urging of the Canadian Ministry of Education, which was disappointed that the old Gannon program had ended, I re-launched Canadian Studies. Later, when I left Mercyhurst and began to focus on programming at the Jefferson, Port Dover came with me again. I organized and led several Port Dover-Long Point tours during the early Jefferson years, all of which were well received. In addition, I brought Ian Bell to the Jefferson several times for programs and concerts.

**Gentrification:** While the general definition of gentrification is simple, "a process by which affluence overwhelms, and changes a neighborhood or region," the specifics of how it takes place are widely varied. In the case of Port Dover, the process of gentrification began in two of Ontario's largest and thriving cities to the east. The Greater Toronto Area has experienced astonishing growth, becoming the sixth largest metropolitan area in North America. And Hamilton, Ontario, a connected city, has been a part of that growth. As the 2000s unfolded, middle-income Torontonians and Hamiltonians suddenly found that homes, which they had paid \$50,000 for 20 years earlier, were suddenly valued at \$2 million to \$3 million. While escalating equity was comforting, it came with a new burden: wildly increasing property taxes.

More than a few of those new millionaires cashed out, retired, and began to look for new and less expensive places to live. Port Dover was one of the most attractive targets. Generations of Ontarians had visited the popular Lake Erie beach town, sometimes nicknamed Lake Erie's Cape Cod, and fallen in love with it. And during



the early 2000s, property was a bargain. The first wave of gentry purchases primarily involved existing homes, in particular lakeshore houses with incredible views. Some of the big-city arrivals purchased two homes, bulldozed them and replaced modest houses with huge mansions.

Eventually, opportunities to find purchasable lakeshore homes dried up. The next step was condominiums and townhouses. Developers, sensing the new opportunity, began to tear down old bits of Port Dover and replace them with condominiums. They purchased land on the undeveloped east side of town and built townhouses. The large fish processing company on the dock was leveled and replaced by a high-end condo complex, featuring units that sold for almost a million dollars. Scores of new townhouses were built on the outskirts of town, and a planned golf-townhouse community appeared.



*Luxury condos have replaced the former fish processing company at the town pier.  
A waterside place here sells for almost \$1 million.*



*Townhouses have filled the east suburbs.*



*A final step: the Dover Coast Golf & Resort Community on the east side of town*

With one Port Dover icon after another disappearing, locals have begun to wonder where the changes might end. A year ago, the 200-year-old Norfolk Tavern came down, leading town pundits to wonder what could be next? The Norfolk was the town's most famous watering hole, the place where folk singer San Rogers famously wrote the Canadian ballad about commercial fishing, "Tiny Fish for Japan." The first lines of that song follow:

"At the Norfolk Hotel over far too much beer,  
old guys recall when the water ran clear.  
No poisons with names that we can't understand,  
and no tiny fish for Japan.



*Demolition of the Norfolk*

Plans are to replace the venerable Norfolk with condominiums, and it is amazing how many condominiums can be squeezed into a footprint as small as the one formerly occupied by Port Dover's oldest tavern.

What's next? Could it be the Erie Beach Hotel? And if it is, it will be a final blow to Port Dover and to my heart. More than 50 years of Frew family memories are imbedded in that Port Dover landmark, and I wonder if I will ever be able to think of Port Dover in the same way if the hotel that has been a second home disappears.



*Lovely and gentle may be the best adjectives to the two formal dining areas.*

Shortly after news of the Erie Beach Hotel reached me, I called Andrew Schneider. It was then that I understood. He explained that it was time for him and his brother to retire. They are both weary from the demands of the business, which I can certainly understand. Lacking a fourth generation waiting in the



wings and eager to take over, and with limited options, selling the business seemed to be the only viable alternative. As Andrew approaches his mid-60s, it is time for him to slow down but his children, who grew up in the business, are not interested in taking over. The overwhelming responsibility of running the hotel and restaurant operations is beyond daunting. On one recent Mother's Day holiday, for example, the Erie Beach served more than 1,000 meals in its cove room, terrace, and rooftop restaurants. The complexities of serving such a volume of food in different atmospheres while maintaining quality are enormous.



*The upstairs eating area, the Terrace, is a bit less formal.*

Andrew assured me that his intention is to find new owners who will continue to operate the Erie Beach (and the Arbor) as it has been known since Andrew's grandparents took the business over in 1946. But I could sense in his voice that retirement is a higher priority than finding "the perfect new owner." And I don't blame him, considering current offers are in the range of \$16 million.

Speculation is that the old and physically tired property will be bulldozed and that the Arbor, an iconic summer fast food outlet, will also be leveled. The Arbor is most likely to be converted to a paid parking lot.



*The rooftop dining space is the Erie Beach's newest addition.*

Port Dover has been categorized as a summer “daytrip” tourist destination (one of several technical tourism designations). It begins to fill with people by mid-morning, and each evening it empties. There are few overnight accommodations. That reality increases the probability that a new entrepreneur would not be interested in operating the hotel portion of the Erie Beach, which consists only 19 rooms. The loss of the hotel would probably not affect the tourist trade. But the end of the restaurant would represent a huge social loss for the thousands who have enjoyed meals there, many of whom are locals who have counted on dining at the Erie Beach for family events and holidays.

I am hoping for, but not counting on, a miracle. If the miracle does not happen and the hotel disappears, I will be crushed. Readers who have been putting off a trip to Port Dover and a stay at the iconic Erie Beach should not wait too much longer.

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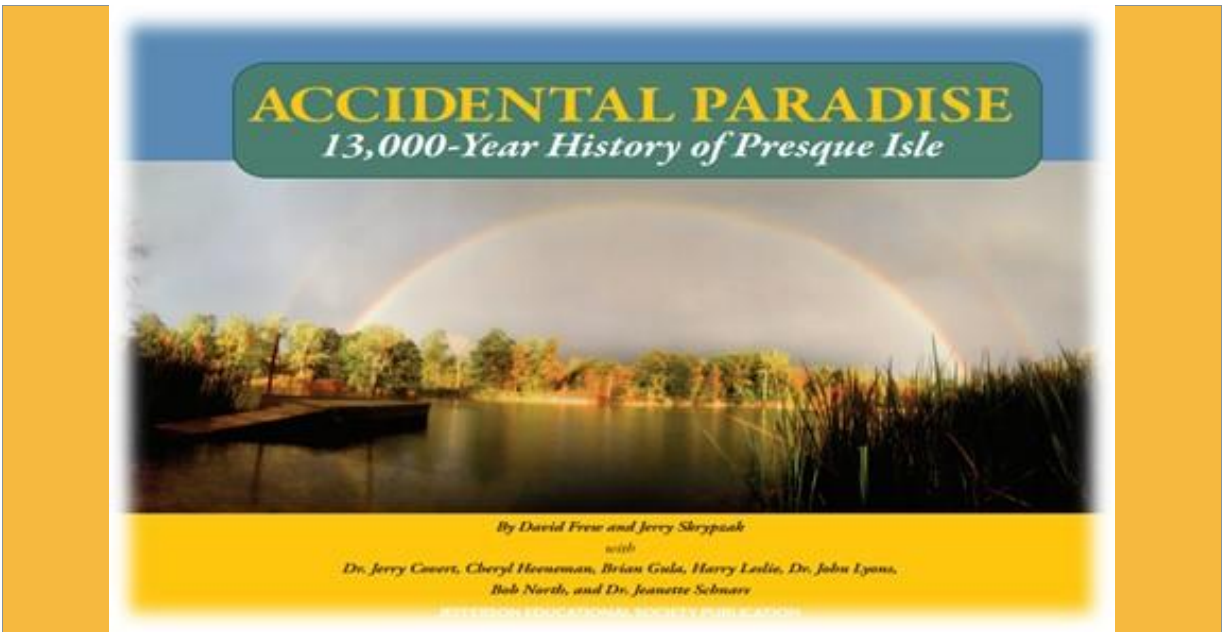
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***Accidental Paradise***  
*by Dr. David Frew and Jerry Skrypzak*



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For more information, send an email to [aperino@TRECf.org](mailto:aperino@TRECf.org).

To watch "Accidental Paradise: Stories Behind The Stories" click [here](#).

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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