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Quick, Timely Reads
On the Waterfront

The Ragman
A Bay Rat Salvage Business

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 January 2021.



The neighborhood Ragman and his trusty horse

Every few days the “Ragman” and his horse would trundle along West Fourth Street. As he passed through the neighborhood, he would yell the word “rags,” alternating his sing-song pronunciation, which extended the length of the syllable to a longer and familiar sound seemed more like “**Aawraks!**” The Ragman seemed to be speaking in a different language, but we had no idea what language it might have been. The rumor was that the Ragman was Jewish and that he was speaking Yiddish. But the Yiddish word for rags was (is) “schmatta,” so a best guess is that he was using a stylized version of the word rags.

The Ragman was a scrap dealer and he paid cash for anything of value. As he made his way down the street, people ran out to offer a variety of items, ranging from bundles of old clothing to household hardware, including steel pipe, wire, and electrical components. He would carefully examine each item and offer a cash value. If the person accepted, the Ragman would dip into a zippered bag that was tucked into his trousers, carefully extract quarters, dimes, nickels, and pennies, and pay for the item in cash.

The kids caught on to the possibilities of doing business with the Ragman at an early age. We had already learned the wisdom of hunting returnable pop bottles, which had either a 2 cent or 5 cent return value, depending upon size. A fortune for a kid in those days. Consequently, we began to plan to do business by staging potential Ragman salvage items. Most of us began by making “stealth” withdrawals at home. Small caches of old clothing or hardware were sequestered in secret places, only to be carried to the Ragman the next time his trusty horse passed by our houses.

Later we learned that some really big bucks could be made by recycling valuable stuff from the neighborhood dump. As amazing as it may seem these days, people in our neighborhood regularly drove to the foot of Liberty Street, backed cars up to the top of the bluffs, and pitched their accumulated junk down the hill. Lawn and garden waste was the best of the stuff that was discarded there. In addition, people regularly threw old appliances, car fenders, refrigerators, and other household items over the edge of the bluffs (decades before Mike Batchelor and the Erie Community Foundation launched its Bayfront Bluffs Beautification Program).

Several times per week my colleagues and I (the Bay Rat Brigade) left home with simple tools, including wire cutters, pliers, and screwdrivers, and made our way to the dump. It was best to go during the day so that we did not have to compete with huge, resident rats for the best of the stuff. After a few trips, we became adept at relieving discarded items of copper wire, pipe fittings, and other salvageable materials. Armed with supplies of valuable bits and pieces from the dump, we waited for the Ragman and sold them to him. We thought we were making the deal of a lifetime by negotiating the 20 or 30 cents that he usually paid us, but I now realize that he was laughing all the way to his ultimate buyer who probably

gave him 10 or 20 times what he gave us. When he and his horse disappeared, he slowly made his way to a barn on the lower eastside of Erie, catalogued the day's take, bedded down his horse, and drove home in a big black Cadillac.

By high school I had stopped counting on the Ragman for the cash needed to operate my life. A grade school paper route followed by a steady job sticking pins at the Cascade Park Club provided all the cash needed. I saw the Ragman from time to time and laughed when I recalled the way my friends and I had hustled scrap to sell him, but it seemed that I had moved on to a more important chapter of life. Little did I know that I was to have one more life-changing interaction with the Ragman.

Fast forward to 1961. I am a sophomore at Gannon University and a proud ROTC honor-guard member. Friends who recall my days of protesting the Vietnam War during the 1970s will be shocked to hear this, but as a freshman at a college where everyone was mandated to take ROTC, I actually loved it. Military tactics, weapons maintenance (I could disassemble an M-1 faster than anyone in my class), and war history were interesting and fun. I could use a compass, plot a course through difficult terrain, shoot at targets, rappel from the roofs of tall buildings, and complete close-order drills with the best of the student-cadets. After excelling in the academics of ROTC as a freshman, I answered the call for volunteers to try out for the prestigious "honor-guard." The PMS (Professor of Military Science) was looking for four sophomore cadets to lead the troops on regular Tuesday and Thursday marches from the ROTC Building at East Sixth and French streets, to Bayview Park where the cadets practiced close-order drills, marching, and other maneuvers. The announcement asked for sophomore cadets between 5-feet-10-inches tall and 6 feet and weighing between 180 and 200 pounds. The idea was for color guard members to be about the same size.

Tryouts were competitive and I was selected, even though I was found to be a "few pounds" over the weight limit. Not only did I make the Thursday, four-man color guard (plus one back-up) unit, but I was the overall winner of the competition and appointed commander of the unit. I chose "Thursdays" instead of "Tuesdays" to dress up in army woolies and take ROTC Lab, which meant marching from Gannon to Bayview Field (now Pontiac Field) at West Second and Cherry streets. The Thursday selection was motivated by the fact that on that day the ROTC Band marched with the cadets. Nothing quite like marching with an actual band.

My attraction to ROTC was somewhat inspired by my father having served in World War II. He was a member of Erie's famed 28th Division "Bloody Bucket Brigade," which landed at Normandy and continued to the Battle of the Bulge. When I was a youngster, he took me to the Armory at East Sixth and Parade streets to watch his military maneuvers after the war and I still recall the thrill of seeing him march in July Fourth parades. I had no understanding of the awful

experiences that he had endured; just the pride and prestige that accompanied his status as a veteran.

I entered Gannon in 1960, thinking that I would do four years of ROTC, earn a commission and become an Army-lifer. It was quasi-peacetime and I thought what could be a more stable career? I was well on my way to this goal, having been promoted to “cadet corporal” and given several patches and ribbons for bravery after trying out for the color guard. Amazingly, there were junior and senior ROTC cadets at Gannon who wore more ribbons and badges than General Colin Powell at the end of his long career.

On a bright fall day with the ROTC Band blasting “Bridge over the River Kwai,” I was leading the color guard along West Second Street toward Bayview. Setting the scene there was the four-man color guard with a U.S. Flag, the Gannon ROTC flag, and two cadets carrying white M-1s. The cadet leader (me) had to be fit enough to carry an M-1 rifle in his left rather than right hand so that weapons (without firing pins, of course) would be positioned on the outside of the formation. The color guard was followed by the band, after which came the cadet brigade of 200 or more soldiers. I knew I had reached the apex of my military career at that moment (and I was correct). With brass pieces polished so exquisitely that the bright September sun made them sparkle, shoes spit-shined to the point that they could have been used as mirrors, and my first two ribbons neatly sewn on a wool jacket, I was the epitome of “military style.”

All was going well until a scan of the street ahead revealed an enormous pile of horse dung. It was a time before the Ragman would have been obliged to clean up after his horse. The center of the street, just a few steps away, contained more than just a few bits of horse poop. There was enough to fertilize a 10-acre cornfield. Fortunately, I knew exactly what to do. I had been prepared for this and other dangerous eventualities. Noting the obstacles ahead, I cleverly issued the command, “Guide left, guide,” and as we approached the poop minefield all four color guards slowly shifted positions to the left. Success. We managed to avoid stepping in the worst of it. But then several tragic events, leading to the end of a briefly successful military career, began to unfold.

The American flag was always held higher than any other flag (or flags) in a color guard, so that the cadet next to me was carrying his pole in an almost upright position. Distracted by efforts to avoid stepping in dung, the American flag bearer somehow caught the top of his pole in a low-hanging tree branch. As it turned out, it had been my responsibility to command him to temporarily lower the flag. Oops! Not only did he catch his flag pole in a branch, but try as he might, he could not extract it.

Meanwhile, the band was bearing down on us from the rear and they had become aware of the swath of manure that had consumed the color guard. Not knowing

what else to do, I raced to the curb, leaned my M-1 against a tree, and returned to help untangle the flag. In the chaos that ensued, the band marched around us, with members alternatively stepping in poop and cursing. Meanwhile, the four-person color guard was swallowed up and ultimately passed by the band as well as most of the 200 troops. My decision, flawed as it turned out to be, was to re-assemble the color guard and follow the brigade the rest of the way to Bayview, taking up the rear.



Gannon ROTC was so big during the early 1960s that the department had its own building on South Park Row.

The very last unit in the march was an old military truck carrying several regular army officers who were serving as ROTC instructors. When the plight of the color guard had finally become obvious to them, they stopped and motioned us to the back of the truck. Then they loaded us aboard and began a very long string of nasty tirades. Who was in charge of that CF, they demanded.

I raised my hand.

At Bayview Field we were relieved of our duties. One of the regular army officers just happened to have a small razor blade, which he deftly used to cut the brand new ribbons from my chest. Busted! Strange that the Ragman, who had provided me with much of the cash needed to live a swashbuckling life as an 11-year-old, would have ended such a promising army career in such an ugly way. In addition to a ride back to the ROTC building later that day, I was gifted with enough demerits to keep me working part time at the ROTC offices for the rest of the year. When my junior year arrived, I did not apply to continue as a ROTC cadet.

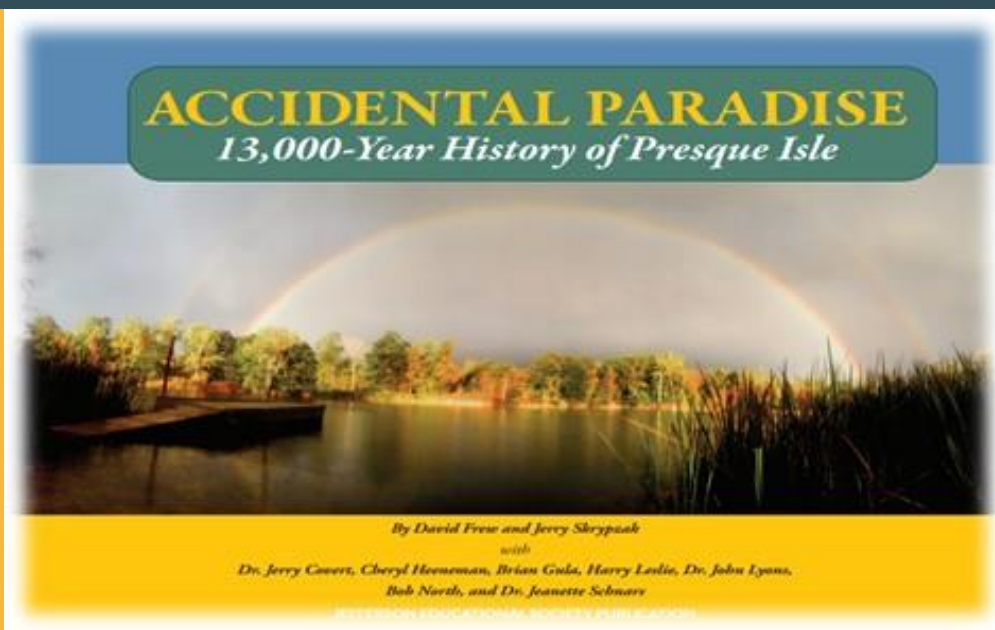
Perhaps the Ragman had done me a favor. By the time I graduated in 1964, the slowly festering Vietnam War, which had seemed to be a back-burner conflict in the early 1960s, had escalated into a major American offensive. A Gannon ROTC classmate, Pat Brophy, was killed in Vietnam a few years after we graduated, and several high school friends were severely injured during the same time period.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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