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Quick, Timely Reads On the Waterfront

Turtles: Weathermen with the Most to Lose

By David Frew, Scholar in Residence
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Basking turtles sun themselves on a log.

Spring! This first reliable sign of each new summer season at Presque Isle appears at the park's Lilly Pond near the police station. There, on the north edge of the

pond, is a log that serves as a warming (sunning) station for basking turtles. Each spring, when pond ice breaks up and the water warms, resident turtles make their way up and onto the log to warm themselves after a long winter hibernation. The protruding Lilly Pond log also serves as a harbinger of winter. In the fall, when days have grown short, the sun has become a rare visitor, and the pond is about to freeze, turtles who used the log as a sunning station disappear for the season, sinking into the mud at the bottom and going into a protracted period of hibernation.



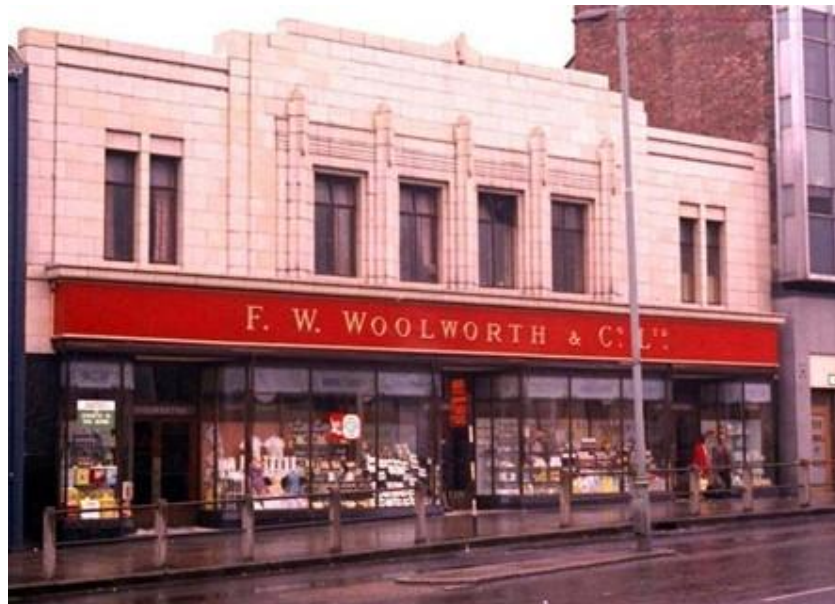
Erie's NOSCO Plastics at East Fifth and Wayne streets made a version of this traditional turtle habitat.

How do turtles know when to abandon their summer station for the season? And how do they know when to come back in the spring? These are ongoing mysteries that were a part of life on the 1950s' Erie bayfront, as well. Cascade Creek and its tributaries were filled with turtles and as kids, we captured them and made them into pets. Downtown dime stores, particularly Woolworths, sold pet turtles as well as accessories, including food. One of the most popular turtle accessories for us kids was a plastic habitat that was made in Erie by NOSCO Plastics on Erie's east side. These tiny turtle terrariums featured a tank that could be filled with water and a ramp that pet turtles could use to climb up and onto a platform where he or she could warm up. NOSCO turtle habitats came complete with a very cool, green plastic palm tree that could be inserted into the top of the ramp.

Daring outdoorsmen that we were, we did not buy turtles at the 10 cent stores. Too expensive and too easy for us. We captured them, instead. Then we put them in store-bought habitats and made them into pets. With great patience, a turtle

could be conditioned to eat from your hand. Their favorite treat seemed to be white grubs, which were easy to dig from neighborhood lawns, although I am not sure how the neighbors felt about the episodic grub mining.

There were lots of negatives associated with turtle-raising, not the least of which were problems associated with overstimulating and overfeeding the little guys. This led to them growing too big for their habitats, escaping, and getting lost in our homes. More than one beloved pet turtle ended his days under a refrigerator or in some other terrible place.



Woolworth had the very best downtown pet department.

One problematic issue with captured, northern pet turtles is that they maintained their instinct to hibernate, even when we were trying to convert them into year-round household friends. Part of their genetics included a powerful urge to shut their metabolisms down for the winter, stop eating, and slip into sleep mode. That is probably why we should not have been trying to domesticate captured wild turtles. The alternative, buying a turtle at a downtown dime store, would have provided a creature who had been harvested from a southerly geographic location (mostly Louisiana), where there was no such hibernation instinct. As it turned out, however, there may have been a bigger problem with the store turtles. They inadvertently came with potentially dangerous diseases, including Salmonella, and were eventually banned. After 1975, the FDA made it illegal to sell pet turtles smaller than four inches long.



Store turtles came home in one of these specialized transport boxes.

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Other stores sold baby turtles, as well. Above is a 1955 Kmart advertisement featuring turtles for less than 25 cents each.

Perhaps the most remarkable thing about wild turtles is their ability to know exactly when to depart each fall and return to the pond surface in spring. Unlike warm-blooded humans, turtles, which are cold-blooded creatures, need to

capture and store heat energy from the sun. That is why they “bask” in the sun. They also have the remarkable ability to almost stop their metabolisms in the winter, sinking into the mud at the bottom of ponds and creeks, where they wait patiently for the warmth of spring. But they have a limited time in hibernation mode before they perish. If a turtle waits too long to disappear in fall and the water temperature falls low enough to ice its blood, he or she will die. Conversely, if a turtle slips into hibernation mode too soon, he or she will expire while sleeping at the bottom of the water. The timing of going into winter hibernation mode is a life-threatening decision. Likewise, the decision to return is critical. If a turtle attempts to come back to the surface before winter ice has cleared away, it can also be trapped and die.

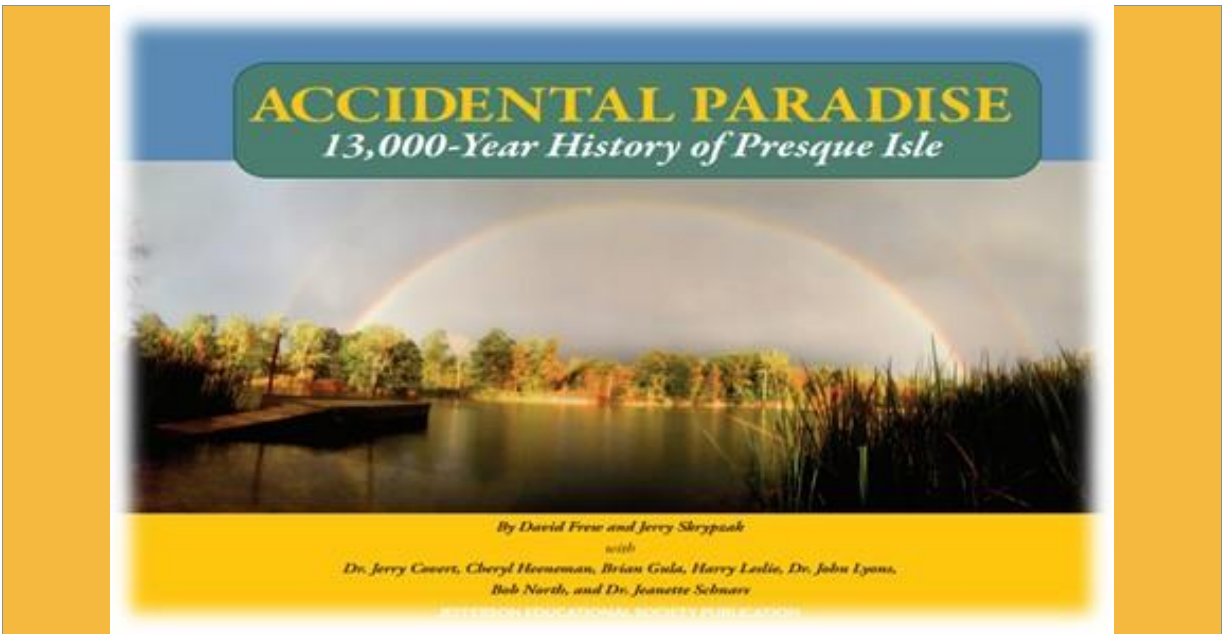
There are other places on Presque Isle to spot turtles. Horseshoe Pond (the houseboats) and the lagoon parking lot, where the park has built an elevated turtle spotting deck, are among the best. With so much to lose, it is amazing to see turtles returning each season. A miracle! Visit Presque Isle often and watch the turtles. When they disappear each fall, it is time to put snow tires on your car and service the furnace. Television weather forecasters make mistakes. Turtles do not.

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by Dr. David Frew and Jerry Skrypzak



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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@TREC.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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