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Quick, Timely Reads
On the Waterfront

Bay Rat Warfare: Wax Paper Cap Bombs

By David Frew, Scholar in Residence
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Gone but not forgotten: St. Andrew School and its concrete-like floors

The architecture of St. Andrew School, where Catholic Bay Rats were educated during the 1950s, was typical pre-World War II institutional -- wide stairwells and hallways, and institutional cement-like floors. With a building stuffed to the max with unruly boys who were always looking for ways to break free and or cause mayhem, the "Sisters" used hallways and stairwells as staging areas for controlling us any time there was a need to make a mass movement of kids. Like to Mass, lunch, or dismissal.

We would be released from classrooms in alphabetical lines to file into hallways and then onto the stairwells, where we would be staged for what seemed like hours, waiting to be moved to events. With mischievous and creative minds running at more than idle speed, most of us boys were focused on potentially bad stuff. And one favorite activity was the design and launch of "waxed paper cap bombs."



Random gathering of 1950s neighborhood kids with one wearing a holster and cap gun

For kids during the era, a favorite toy was the venerable cap gun. Television and radio cowboys were enormously popular at the time, and little boys were often gifted with Roy Rogers, Gene Autry, or Hopalong Cassidy cap gun sets. The most expensive and desirable cap gun ensembles featured gun belts, leather holsters, and, of course, the cap guns, which could be just as fancy and exciting as the sidearms that our heroes carried. Some, like the Roy Rogers sets, featured two guns, so the lucky kid who wore them would have not one, but two ominous pearl-handled beauties strapped to his hips while he practiced "Doc Holiday type" fast-draws.



Wyatt Earp, gunfight at the OK Corral, cap guns

The most important bit of hardware, of course, was the cap gun itself. These amazing quasi- weapons were realistic and smooth-operating mechanisms, which could be fired so smoothly that a feather touch of the trigger would result in a loud bang. The more expensive models had an easy trigger action as well as a hammer that could be cocked so that a light touch would make the firing pin engage. How exciting.



A Gene Autry two-gun set

The “ammo” needed for 1950s-era cap guns was a roll of caps, and most new guns came with several sample rolls. Rolls of caps were threaded into place inside a cap gun so that everytime the trigger was pulled, a new cap was indexed into place and positioned so that the trigger mechanism struck it dead center. Naturally, the better cap guns performed this mechanical function almost flawlessly, so that as a little buckaroo continued squeezing off rounds, the trigger action would result in a loud bang as well as a small burst of smoke.



Standard rolls of commercially available caps

What could be more exciting than quick-drawing two pearl-handled cowboy revolvers and firing off a burst of 20 or more rounds that included loud gunshot noises and a cloud of actual gunsmoke?

Some caps were better than others. Of popular brands available at the time, the better (more expensive) brands always indexed into place properly and never misfired. The cheap brands were unreliable. Naturally, it was all a marketing trick designed to convince parents and kids to buy more and better caps. The guns were once-buy hardware, and caps were the software.

By age 11 or 12, however, the excitement of holsters, gun belts, and cap guns began to wear off for most of my friends. We were way too cool to pretend to be cowboys. But we had not forgotten about how caps worked!

Meanwhile, back at St Andrew School, where we often found ourselves stuffed into never-moving lines for “hours at a time” while waiting to be allowed to proceed somewhere, our brains were actively and creatively engaged. What to do to fill the idle time? Hmm.

One day at school, one of the kids who was standing on an upper floor of the stairwell dropped a small object carefully between the railing and wall. The magic missile fell to the floor on the first floor, landing within a few feet of a teacher,

where it exploded with a resounding boom, causing shrieks of terror from kids and teachers alike. Amazing!

I did not invent the cap bomb but the first time I saw one, I knew what to do. I would have to try making one. It was a moral imperative. The parts list was simple and inexpensive.

1. A small square of thin waxed-paper (about three inches on each side)
2. One BB (of the type used in Red Ryder BB Rifles)
3. A single cap, removed from its stock roll (preferably a high-end rather than low-end brand)

The assembly instructions were simple. Position BB on top of cap and place near the center of the waxed paper. Then, being sure to keep the BB-Cap sub-assembly centered on the paper, carefully twist it into the shape of a small bomb with the heavy end pointed down.

Launching could be at any time, but the results were far more satisfying if there were crowds of kids on the stairwell. There was a complication, however. Apparently, the payment of Catholic school tuition, which was not very much at the time, automatically canceled a kid's constitutional rights. At any time, a teacher could demand that a citizen-student empty his pockets. (For some reason it was always us boys and never a girl.) To be apprehended with a wax paper cap bomb was not good. It could result in a sentence of 30 or more minutes kneeling on a marble floor in front of a statue of a saint while praying for forgiveness.

The solution to this repressive "search and seizure" policy was to limit yourself to one cap bomb. And on a day when one had been successfully launched (actually exploded), it was imperative to move any cap bomb from a pants pocket to the inside of a shoe. They never thought to look inside there.

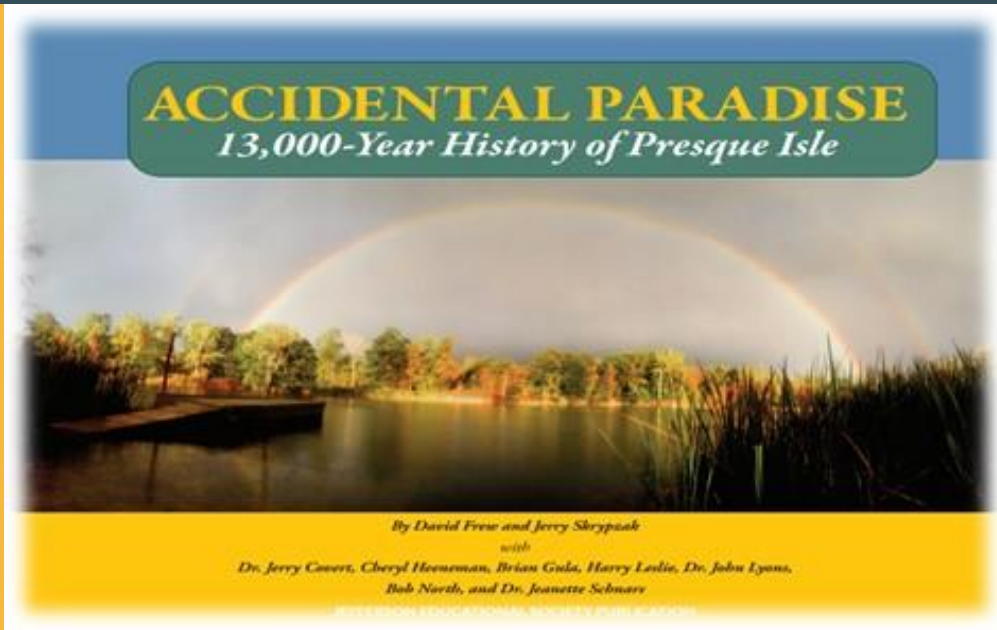
Waxed-paper cap bombs were an ongoing and exciting event at St. Andrew School. They went on until I graduated and long beyond. In fact, I was compelled to teach my own children about them during their grade school years. I never imagined that they would make or use them at their school (it was all on one floor) but one day I gathered the kids and assembled several, which we happily threw out of an upstairs window. It was an essential part of their liberal education.

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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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