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On the Waterfront

**Hunting Grounds: Bay Rat Big Game**

By David Frew, Scholar in Residence  
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*A 1950s-era Daisy BB Rifle advertisement*

Most of my friends were armed. As in the holiday film classic, “A Christmas Story,” most of them began with kids badgering their parents for BB guns in about fifth grade and continued their relentless, whining assaults on “better judgment” until mom or dad finally gave up. Each of us used two critical arguments in favor of BB guns: (1) “Every single one of my friends already has one,” and (2) “Red Ryder says that having a BB rifle is OK!” Further, according to Red Ryder and his Indian sidekick Little Beaver, having a BB rifle was better than just OK.

Red Ryder was a strange, B-movie cowboy hero who had a vague comic strip and radio presence. He did not measure up to the general prestige of traditional cowboy heroes, Hoppy, Roy, and Gene, or even the Lone Ranger. Instead, he was a preachy, authoritarian character who never held back on telling “us kids” what was right versus wrong. More importantly, he had somehow managed to become the brand spokesman for Daisy BB guns, appearing on every advertisement and sometimes having his name painted on individual guns. Note: it was not cool to have a BB gun with Red Ryder’s name on it. As spokesman for Daisy, he preached a constant litany of important theological truths regarding the benefits of BB rifle ownership. Having a BB rifle would make kids better citizens, more disciplined, and hard-working. A BB rifle could teach an infinite number of life lessons. “But

remember kids,” Red Ryder preached, “never point your BB rifle at another person.”



*A 1950s-era Red Ryder comic strip*

Ammo for our weapons was almost always ordinary BBs, which could be poured into the guns 50 or more at a time. The downtown sports store and other outlets sold both Daisy and Crosman BBs. As an alternative to BBs, some kids purchased pellets, which were far more expensive. While BBs could be fired in rapid succession, pellets had to be individually loaded, and it was important to be sure that there was not one chambered and ready to fire when a pellet was placed in the firing chamber.



*A container of Daisy BBs*



*Crosman marketed its own style of BBs*

My friends did not all have the same guns. Daisy, which was the most popular choice, had a major competitor — Crosman, an upstate New York company (near Rochester), which marketed several BB guns. Most Crosmans were significantly more powerful than the popular, entry-level Daisy models. Crosman guns and a few of the high-end Daisy models fired pellets, in addition to BBs.



*The classic, entry-level Daisy BB Rifle. Note the “Red Ryder” mark.*

While most Daisys and low-end Crosman rifles were spring-loaded, there was a much more impressive alternative, the pneumatic rifle. Adjustable pneumatic models were far more powerful, and the combination of the power of the Crosman pneumatic models with the use of pellets in place of standard, inexpensive BBs, significantly improved range, and accuracy.



*Air gun pellets came in a variety of styles. They were much more expensive than BBs and had to be chambered individually*

The entry-level, inexpensive, “Red Rider” rifles that most of us had were inadequate. Spring-loaded and “safe,” they were wimpy in comparison to the pumpable guns, which could be pneumatically “enhanced” to the power of a 22-caliber rifle or beyond. The broad array of weapons owned by my friends created a significant hierarchy based upon rifle power. Kids with the most powerful rifles became leaders because they were the best at all aspects of shooting, from target practice with cans to actual big game hunting. We gathered regularly in select backyards to practice “plinking,” which consisted of shooting at paper targets or tin cans.

Our most exciting BB rifle adventures, however, involved “big game” hunting. And the wild game that we regularly stocked through neighborhood wilds was the common dump rat, a fearsome creature that could grow, as legend had it, to the size of a dog. Rats were endemic to the bayfront bluffs, attracted to the scruffy, junk-cluttered terrain as well as the nutritional contents of the neighborhood dump. During the 1950s, it was common practice for neighbors to back cars up to

the edge of the bluffs and then pitch whatever they had that was no longer wanted over the rim and into the abyss. Theoretically, discarded waste was supposed to be limited to lawn scraps, including grass clippings, branches, and leaves. But the reality of this common 1950s household disposal system was that it included a lot of traditional garbage. Households were limited to two containers (cans) of garbage per week and more than a few people regularly solved overage issues by tossing old rotting food, table scraps, and fish cleaning detritus over the bluffs with their lawn scraps. The resulting volume was enough to feed thousands of rats, as it allowed them to grow to astonishing sizes.

The average person who disposed of “stuff” never wandered down into the abyss to see what was going on. But we did. It was “out of sight out of mind,” or in modern terms NIMBY (not in my backyard). Ordinary people were polluting, without understanding what they were actually doing.

Prime time for Bay Rat hunting parties was dusk. And the best locations were everywhere, especially at places that we had “baited.” Not quite fair for modern hunters, but we often collected juicy food scrap leftovers and dropped them in a select location along any of the trails that dotted the bluffs. “Baiting” happened in the late afternoon, anticipating that by early evening there would be dozens of rats taking advantage. The only other hunting party tool needed was a flashlight, the same kind that we typically used to hunt night crawlers on neighborhood lawns.

On planned expedition evenings, we would collectively make excuses for being out late. Visiting church, going to school for extra credit, gathering to play baseball, and other astonishingly unbelievable stories were the organized “white lies” we used to excuse early evening absences. But the most important and difficult planning step was figuring out how to sneak the weapons out of our houses. Parents may have been distracted and busy, but they would not have accepted all of us leaving home in the early evening with rifles, even if they were “just BB guns.” The trick was to stage armaments and ammo at the home of one of the kids where we could make a discrete escape on the night of the hunt.



*Junkyard rats*

Amazingly, the rats were always waiting for us when we arrived. We were not exactly quiet as we approached; just a few digits noisier than the Native American hunters we were trying to emulate. Crashing through brush, with guns and flashlights, we rounded the last bend in the trail and always found several of the gray critters chomping away on the bait. They barely acknowledged our presence as we developed a shooting strategy. Usually, we would spread out so that we could all shoot at once. Then, on a signal, we opened fire. Sometimes the first barrage would send them running, but not always. A direct hit from one of the entry-level BB rifles would usually not deter them. But then it was difficult to tell if there was a direct hit. It seemed that hitting a rat with a Red Ryder BB Rifle would only irritate them. Sometimes after one of those questionable volleys, we would be the ones who ran, fearing that they would attack us.

In all of the times that we staged hunts, there were just a few times when one of the shots would seriously wound or kill a rat. And those were shots made with pellets, instead of BBs. But failure never deterred us. We continued the hunts regardless of the outcomes. Telling ourselves that we were performing an important service by eliminating rats, we carried on, always worrying that the rat pack would someday turn on us.

These days, I ride along the Bayfront Parkway, glance up at the once-overgrown bluffs, and marvel at the transformation of that one-time dump. Today's "Bayfront Bluffs" have become a beautification focal point thanks to the Erie Community Foundation and its corporate-sponsored cleanup and flower planting efforts a few years ago. I love the new look but miss the old "Adventureland," including its resident rats.

*Author's cautionary note: There is a current discussion stream regarding possible connections between early exposure to guns of any sort, including*

*BB guns, and school shootings. Some concerned observers argue that youngsters should never be exposed to guns and that the glorification of shooting that has accompanied the marketing of BB guns to youngsters could be harmful.*

*Casting note: Red Ryder had a young “Indian” companion and sidekick, “Lil Beaver.” One of the longest standing child actors in that role was Robert Blake, who later played “Baretta” on television.*

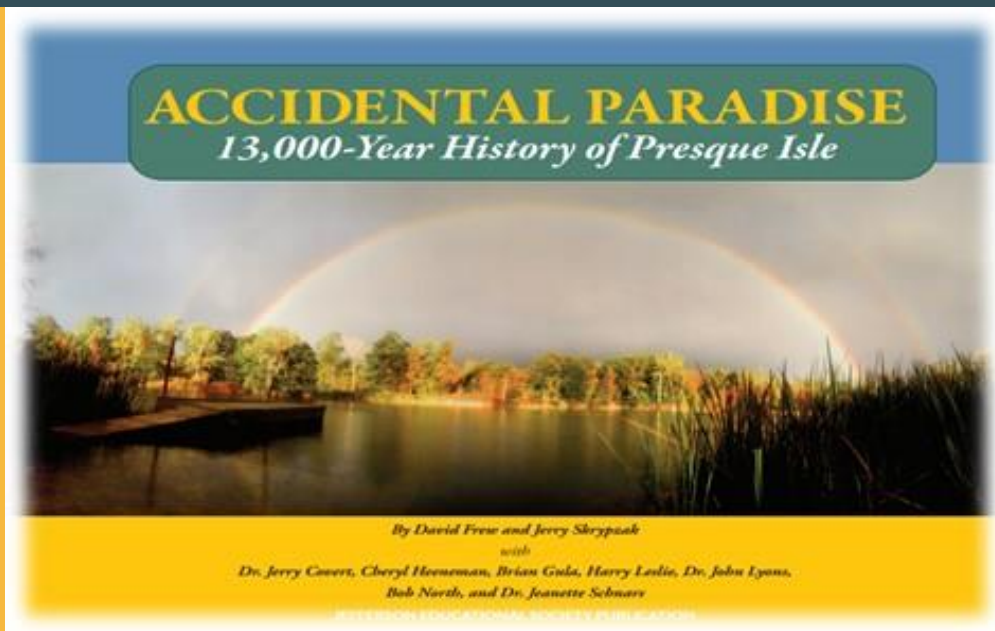
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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*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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