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Quick, Timely Reads  
On the Waterfront

**The Tinker**  
*Our Regular Neighborhood Visitor*

By David Frew, Scholar in Residence  
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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 April 2021.*



*The “grinder” was a regular neighborhood visitor during the 1950s.*

My wife Mary Ann and I looked forward to every episode of Stanley Tucci’s recent six-part CNN special, “Finding Italy.” We have followed Tucci’s career for years since learning that he is related to a local friend. Our interest in the CNN special went beyond the opportunity to see Tucci, however. It was also a chance to revisit favorite places in Italy, my wife’s home. While Tucci is not and has never claimed to be a chef, I watched in amazement as he chopped vegetables during several episodes.

In one episode set in Florence, he and his parents were revisiting a neighborhood where he lived temporarily as a boy. His father had taken a leave from his job as an art teacher to take his family to Italy when Stanley Tucci was a grade-schooler. As a result, Stanley Tucci became fluent in Italian, a social skill that helped to make his television special come alive. With a focus on regional foods, Tucci’s episodes regularly included meeting locals and visiting kitchens, both private and commercial. The Florence episode with his parents was one of many where he wielded a cutting-chopping knife with amazing speed and dexterity.



*Stanley Tucci in the “Cuchina”*

I aspire to those skills. Serving as a regular sous-chef for Mary Ann, who is a talented cook, I am often assigned the task of chopping stuff – usually veggies and often mysterious things that I don’t recognize. But they all have to be chopped, and into relatively small pieces. I have knives, lots of them, and cutting boards, both large and small, but no skill. Compared to Tucci and the chefs who I have seen on television cooking shows chopping at warp speed, I am a total klutz. I have asked many people about this shortcoming and am usually told that the problem is either bad knives, or knives that are not sharp, or both.



*Warp-speed chopping*

To combat these deficits, I have tried to purchase “good knives.” Lots of them! In fact, I have an entire kitchen drawer filled with “guaranteed to be the best knife you ever owned” knives. Some worked well at first but failed after continued use. Others were awful from the beginning. “Not expensive enough,” I was told, so I

bought others. But there seems to be a theme to my shopping, regardless of whether it is in-person or online. It begins with a resolve to spend whatever it takes. But then I find a knife, selling for more than \$100, after which I buy the next-best version. One more for the already-cluttered drawer. Moving on to sharpening, I have acquired many knife sharpeners. After purchasing several “guaranteed sharpeners,” ranging from the typical \$9.95 model available at chain stores, to the ultra-sophisticated ones demonstrated by magician-sharpener people on television infomercials, I have added a shelf full of them in the kitchen. I once purchased an electric can opener with a free, added knife-sharpening feature. What is it that they say about getting what you pay for?

Finally, it dawned on me. When I was a kid, during the 1950s, a knife-sharpening man visited the neighborhood several times each summer. He pushed a hand cart to the middle of the block and anchored it in place for the day. Almost before he had set up, neighborhood phones began to ring. Within minutes there would be a line of people, waiting with knives, scissors, garden tools, and lawn mowers. The “grinder,” as everyone called him, was welcomed when he arrived.

As the oldest kid in my family, I was often assigned the task of standing in line with one or more family tools, usually a knife or scissors. I have no idea how the pricing structure worked. You handed him the dull artifact, he looked it over slowly, and then held it at a carefully determined angle to a stone wheel that he controlled with a foot pedal below his work chair. With the offensive dull edge deftly placed next to the grinding wheel, sparks flew, and he worked. He used oil both before and after he held the dull surface next to the wheel, carefully edging one side and then the other. When he was finished, he wiped the sharp steel edge gently with an oily rag and named his price; usually less than \$1.

The grinder spoke with a heavy accent that I did not recognize from the neighborhood. I suspect it was Eastern European. But the most interesting part of his portable work cart, aside from the maze of pedals and belts that ran the grinding wheels (there were several), was a sign that read: “Grinder and Tinker.” I asked what “tinker” meant and learned that in addition to sharpening almost anything, the neighborhood visitor regularly fixed stuff. Lamps with separated electrical cords, loose lightbulb sockets, toasters, radios. Almost anything. To facilitate many of these repairs, the Grinder-Tinker had a pot of solder bubbling away in a metal container at the front of his cart. The molten solder was heated by glowing-red lumps of coal that burned underneath the solder container. Solder was used to make repairs to switches and wiring during the “tinker” portions of the neighborhood work.

The historical meaning of the word “tinker” seems to have two distantly different ethnic roots: Romanian-Gypsy, and Scottish. In both ethnic cases, the roots of the meaning of the title “tinker” were metal working, as well as a person who was itinerant and not local. The Gypsy roots of the occupation seemed connected to

Northern Asia in places like Romania or Turkey. Tinkers were travelers, visitors without regular homes and, as such, were regarded with distrust. But they were needed for repairing metal implements and were reluctantly accepted as they traveled. For Scottish Highlanders, tinkers seemed to have come from the Lowlands, and they arrived regularly, generally during the summer season. Regardless of the origins or biases toward tinkers, Scottish Highlanders apparently adopted the tinker ethic as a proclivity toward engineering solutions to process problems, and that ethic may have been responsible for the generalized cultural connection between Scotsmen and all kinds of engineering: Scotty on “Star Trek,” for example. The Scottish apparently out-tinkered the tinkers.

My oldest grandson, Noah, who earned both an undergraduate degree and a Ph.D. in physics, has taken a decidedly different career path from my own. I have often kidded him about his interests in theoretical physics as opposed to engineering (my original career), where I “suggested” that he could solve real-world problems. He, in turn, has generally responded to this joshing by calling me a “tinker,” for him a derisive term aimed at non-theoretical engineers like me who have often been guilty of fixing things (or trying to do so) without fully understanding why they were broken in the first place. For my grandson and his theoretical physics colleagues, tinker-engineers are the opposite of theory-based problem solvers. The Gypsy tinker from my neighborhood, for example, often dropped a blob of hot solder on an offensive problem, creating a short-term solution. Those repairs rarely lasted. And I stand guilty as charged!

This dichotomy was posed in an amusing way in the popular television show, “The Big Bang Theory,” which I watched because of my grandson. The show’s plot revolved around two physicists (Leonard and Sheldon), one theoretical and the other experimental, and the amusing conflicts that they had with friends and roommates. One of the show’s foils was Howard, an engineer who had graduated from Yale with a master’s degree but did not have a Ph.D. or a theoretical physics background. Leonard and Sheldon often spar with Howard during episodes over his “practical” approaches to things.

Inspired by old visions of the neighborhood tinker and determined to show my grandson that an engineer, even one who has not done much engineering in decades, can solve problems, I extracted two of many failed knives from a kitchen drawer and headed for the basement workbench. With every imaginable tool at my disposal, I set up two grinding wheels, one coarse and another fine. Goggles in place, I spread a thin coat of cutting oil on the first knife and deftly positioned it against the grinding wheel. Just like the neighborhood tinker. Sparks flew as the knife moved slowly along the wheel with a steady pressure and at just the right angle. After a few moments I turned the knife 180 degrees and repeated the process. Inspecting the finished work, I could see that the once-straight knife edge was curved in several different directions. The center of the blade had major

divots. No problem. I dropped that knife in the metal recycling box, turned on my laptop, and consulted YouTube, the epicenter of all civilized information.



*Some neighborhoods still have a “grinder” but now he comes in a van.*

After watching a half dozen instructional episodes, it became obvious that the first grinding wheel had been too coarse. Switching to a finer grit, I carefully repeated the exercise. Cutting oil, steady touch, correct angle. Sparks flew, as I was transported back in time to the Grinder-Tinker from the 1950s for the second time that day. Finally, I was done. With great satisfaction I inspected my work, only to find that my grandson was correct. Non-theoretical metal sharpening does not work. The second knife looked almost exactly like the first: wobbly edge, divots, and uneven sharpness. Dropping the second knife into the metal recycling tub, I resolved to go knife shopping again and to pay more.

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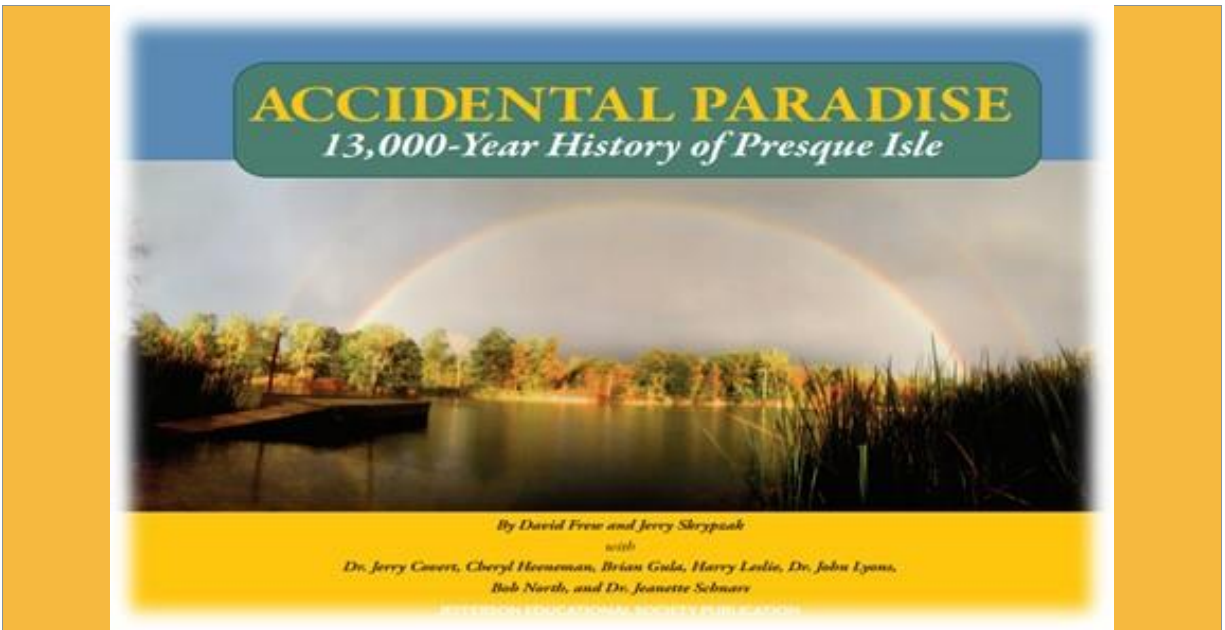
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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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