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Quick, Timely Reads On the Waterfront

Old-Time Christmas Spirit: *Visiting Santa*

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 December 2023.

Christmas was a magical time in the old bayfront neighborhood. Christmas trees, decorations, holiday spirit, and happy visitors invaded everyone's life for a prolonged period. But most of all, the 1950s' holidays were times to go downtown to the Boston Store and see Santa. Lines of happy children formed on the toy floor of Erie's shopping Mecca where the jolly, bearded character entertained one youngster at a time, carefully listening to his or her wishes. I miss those times, including Santa in his big chair and the lines of delighted children.

When I moved back to Erie in 1970, my children were toddlers so, naturally, we took them to the Boston Store to see Santa. But the downtown deteriorated badly in the 1970s. The grand old store closed, the kids grew up, and the "Santa magic" slowly evaporated. We continued to celebrate Christmas, but it became a family gathering and the excitement of Santa slipped away. There were new "Santas," mostly skinny guys with straggly fake beards who appeared at various locations in the new mall. But it wasn't the same. My children were not interested.



The Erie Beach Hotel with its wonderful Christmas lights

Twenty years ago, a Port Dover friend asked if Mary Ann and I had ever been to the town's annual Christmas celebration. We had not, but not needing an excuse to visit the town that has become a second home, we decided to go. That fortunate visit began an annual tradition that we have enjoyed ever since. Port Dover Christmas Fest!

The person who makes the annual Christmas visit to Port Dover come to life for me, of course, is Mary Ann Frew. Somehow, she has never lost the Christmas Santa magic. She lights up when she sees him, always hugs him, and thanks him for being there. For Mary Ann, Santa and the Port Dover celebration are reminders of wonderful days gone by, and especially children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. He symbolizes the goodness of holidays, giving, and family. Best of all, the Port Dover celebration takes place in mid-November so that it never interferes with family holiday plans.



Mary Ann Frew waits for Santa's arrival at the pier.

This year was no exception. We drove around Lake Erie on a November Friday and checked into the Erie Beach Hotel, so that we could be at the pier the next day an hour early, waiting for Santa's mid-day arrival. Appropriately, Santa comes to Port Dover each year "by fish tug." What could be more fitting for a Great Lakes fishing town?

I'm not sure of the navigational nuances involved in Santa's getting to Port Dover from the North Pole, but the Canadian Coast Guard meets him halfway. Perhaps in the St. Lawrence River, somewhere near Montreal? And each year, a few moments before the appointed time of Santa's arrival, a Coast Guard cutter with lights and sirens blaring enters the Port Dover harbor, leading a fish tug.



The Canadian Coast Guard escorts Santa into town each year. Note the red Christmas hats.

With the assembled crowd cheering, the Coast Guard cutter swings around in a circle after which a fish tug with Santa and Mrs. Claus waving approaches the pier. Finally, the magic. Santa steps out of the fish tug and greets the crowd. Kids from 2 to 80 cheer wildly!



Santa is helped out of the tug by Port Dover's official town crier.

Santa quickly becomes the grand marshal of the annual holiday parade. He and Mrs. Claus climb into a horse-drawn carriage and join the festive assembly of floats, marching bands, and other delightful small-town attractions. It may not be the Macy's Thanksgiving celebration, but small-town parades have a special charm of their own.



Santa and Mrs. Claus in their carriage



The Port Dover Yacht Club "float"



Can't have a Canadian parade without pipers.

The parade is just the beginning of a wonderful daylong celebration, which includes the lighting of the Christmas tree in Powell Park, meeting Santa at the Lighthouse Theater, and tax-free shopping.



Another magical moment is the annual tree lighting in the park.

The very best part of the day's celebration, however, does not happen until dark. At 6 p.m., a huge bonfire is lit on the beach. Then a crowd gathers for Christmas carols, free hot chocolate, and horse-drawn carriage rides that accompany the caroling. The beach event concludes with a fireworks display over the lake. This year the moon appeared over the lake as the caroling began.



The amazing, but strange palm trees in front of the Beach House (Callahan's) Restaurant on the water. Somehow, they seem to survive there. Note the string of holiday lights.



Christmas hug

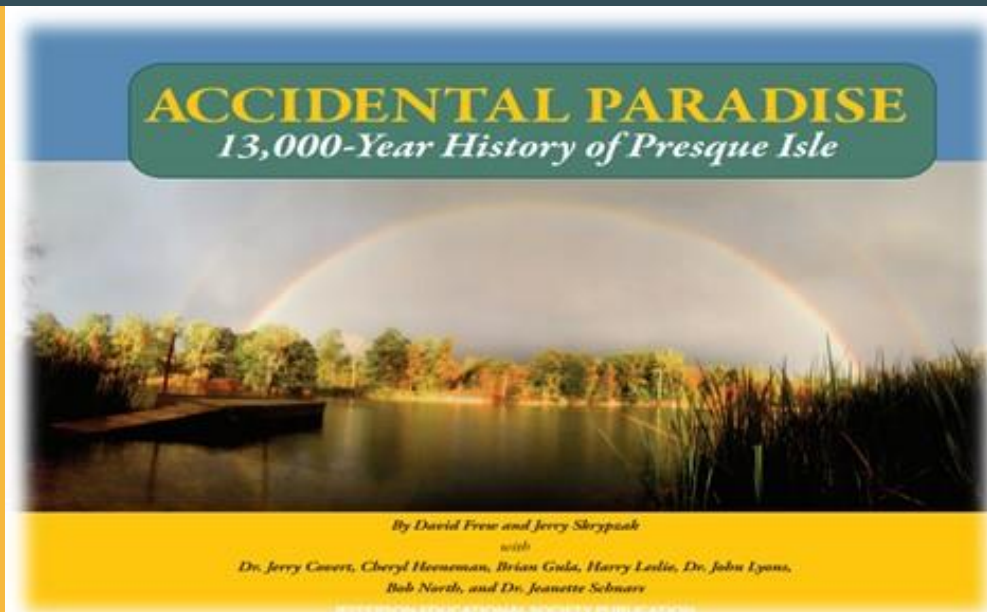
**Happy Holidays,
David**

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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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