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View-Master: Lots of Local Connections

By David Frew, Scholar in Residence
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It was one of the best Christmas gifts of all time. December 1954, and the top item on my Christmas list was a View-Master. I was the only kid I knew who did not have one, and my argument for acquiring a View-Master was entirely educational. Our fifth-grade teacher happened to have an official View-Master projector at her desk, which she used occasionally to augment classroom history or geography lessons. She would conspire with several of the girls from class to gather View-

Master reels that fit into classroom lessons that she would project for the class. And it seemed that the girls had thousands of reels, including whatever our teacher needed at the time. In retrospect, it is much more likely that after our teacher had dropped hints, regarding the reels that were needed, after which the girls' parents acquired them to contribute to the quality of our education, not to mention putting their daughters in favored positions.

Those projected images were magical, and they helped bring otherwise dry lessons to life. Projected images on classroom walls served to quiet a lot of otherwise noisy kids and add spark to otherwise dull academic lessons. They also made all of us kids want to get our own View-Masters as well as the infinite number of reels available at places like the Boston Store in downtown Erie. Once I had my very own View-Master, my favorite reels mostly included cowboys and Indians. I still recall my favorites: Roy Rogers, Gene Autry, Hopalong Cassidy, and the Cisco Kid. Not exactly the intellectual fare that was being shown in class, but lots of fun.

View-Master images were colorful, three-dimensional, and vivid. The process of creating them, including the invention of the viewer, has been credited to a Portland, Oregon pharmacist, Edwin Mayer, who was an avid photographer. Mimicking and improving upon the Victorian Era photographic technology used to create stereoscope images, he invented an inexpensive Bakelite (an early version of plastic) viewer as well as a system for "adjusting" pairs of high-resolution photographs so that they would appear to be three-dimensional. Like so many similar hardware and software systems, the viewer's expense was insignificant compared to the typical costs of the reels that most people purchased.

There is an interesting regional connection between View-Master, 3D images, and earlier stereoscopic photography. The first stereoscopic images were created with a special camera that took two simultaneous photographs of an image. The dual images were separated by the average distance between a person's eyes. The resultant two images effectively tricked the viewer into perceiving a three-dimensional field. Stereoscopic images, like View-Master reels, had to be purchased individually and viewed through a stereoscope. The stereoscopic viewers were expensive and cumbersome. Most were made of fine-crafted hardwood with an eyepiece situated on a long bar that held the image at a variable distance from the viewer's eyepiece. The person using a stereoscope was required to manipulate the distance between the eyepiece and the image until it came into focus. The process was slow and cumbersome. The typical early 1900s stereoscope owner was wealthy and, like later View-Master users, had to collect a series of stereoscopic images.

Victorian Era image of a woman with a stereoscope

Amazingly, the world's largest producer of stereoscopic images and companion stereoscopes was the Keystone View Company in nearby Meadville, Pennsylvania. They marketed their images as educational and historical, arguing that viewing and discussing the images would enhance customers' lives. When View-Master appeared in the post-World War II era, it was said to have "democratized" three-dimensional imaging by making images better, easier to view, and available to middle class people and their children. View-Master offered the additional advantage of reels that contained seven rather than just one image as well as the ease of automatic focusing. In addition, most View-Master reels were produced in color as opposed to the sepia tones or black and white images available with astroscopic images.

The popularity and user-friendly nature of View-Master eventually put Meadville's Keystone View Company out of business. Fortunately for students of this chapter of American history, however, a museum in Meadville has acquired the assets of the Keystone View Company and dedicated itself to celebrating the history of stereoscopic imagery. The Johnson-Shaw Museum has cataloged the world's largest collection of stereoscopic images, acquired a variety of antique viewers, and currently offers visitors the opportunity to examine the rich associated history as they enjoy the image collection.

My friend, Ian Bell, from Ontario, first alerted me to the Johnson Museum several years ago when he made a special trip to Erie, stayed at my house, and enjoyed a day-long visit to Meadville. Ian, who was a museum director (Port Dover Harbour

Museum), declared the Johnson Museum one of North America's greatest unknown treasures and wrote about his day-long visit to Meadville. Ian was so smitten with the Meadville museum that he purchased dozens of images as well as a viewer so that he could set up an interactive exhibit at his museum in Ontario.

The Johnson-Shaw Museum

If you plan a visit to the Johnson-Shaw Museum, be sure to check the hours of operation. It is open on a limited basis.

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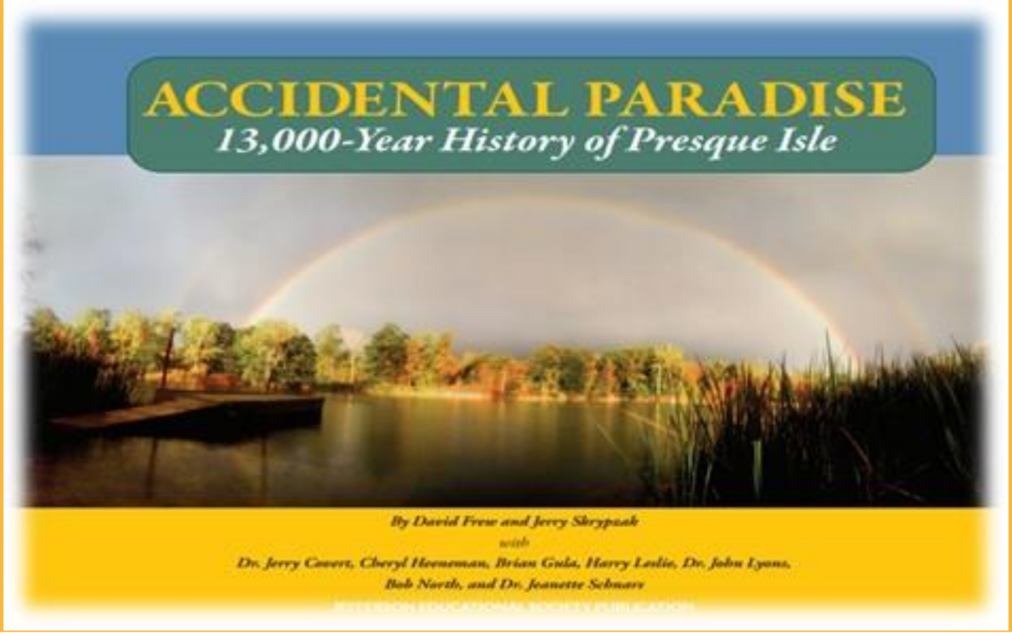
Accidental Paradise

by Dr. David Frew and Jerry Skrypzak



The beautiful book on Presque Isle published by authors David Frew and Jerry Skrypzak – “**Accidental Paradise: 13,000-Year History of Presque Isle**” – is on sale at the Tom Ridge Environmental Center’s gift shop and through a special website, AccidentalParadise.com.

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@TRECF.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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