

Quick, Timely Reads

Reading in the Time of Coronavirus
On the Waterfront

Bay Rat Athletics: Right Field Out

By David Frew
October 2020

Dr. David Frew, a prolific writer, author, and speaker, grew up on Erie's lower west side as a proud "Bay Rat," joining neighborhood kids playing and marauding along the west bayfront. He has written for years about his beloved Presque Isle and his adventures on the Great Lakes. In a new series of articles for the Jefferson, the retired professor takes note of life in and around the water.



This vintage image of Bello's includes a gasoline pump (United Oil was just across the street), a bicycle repair stand, and a large box of coal that was sold by the wooden case. West Third and Cascade streets was the original location of today's Bello's Markets. Note the Finnish Steam Baths in the left background. (Image from the Journal of Erie Studies)

Bay Rats were world-class athletes as well as adventurers. We played all sports

seasonally: football in the fall, basketball in the spring, and baseball all summer. Nothing esoteric like soccer, tennis, or hockey. We had heard of those sports but considered them un-American. Bay Rat Stadium was at the southeast corner of West Third and Cascade streets, on a hard-packed, dirt, and sand field. The baseball field was directly across the street from Bello's Portuguese Meat Market. Interestingly, Mr. Bello's store featured a large, north-facing, plate glass window that was a constant source of consternation for everyone. Especially Mr. Bello. The ballfield was positioned on the south end of an official city playground, which also had swings, a sliding board, and a children's sand box. Kids' swings were on the north end of the field, technically in right field with respect to the ballpark. The ballfield was oriented from east to west with home plate positioned up against a metal fence that separated it from the Finnish Steam Bath just to the east. The fence provided a handy backstop. The playground was one of several operated by the city's parks department and staffed by a hapless playground supervisor.

Unlike the manicured ballfields of our dreams, Bay Rat Stadium had a few glitches. Since right field contained a regular playground with a supervisor, swings, and little kids, we knew that we should not send screaming line drives in that direction. Therefore an imaginary line stretched out from second base and any ball hit to the right of it was an automatic out. Some of the worst arguments ever, and a few fist fights, erupted over nuanced calls regarding where a fly ball actually landed, in center or right field. Another slight issue had to do with the two basketball backboards and hoops positioned approximately in center field. Whoever played that position had to guide around them when chasing balls. Our best center fielders positioned themselves at the southern-most backboard, usually touching it so that they knew how to go after a fly ball without decapitating themselves. Once in a while, a ball would bounce off a backboard, leading to arguments. If it hit the backboard and the fielder caught it, was it an out? How would they call that in the majors?

Another contentious issue was the small matter of Cascade Street, which ran through the middle of left field. The outfielder was required to position himself on the west side of Cascade Street along a narrow strip of land next to the fence that surrounded United Oil on the other side of the road. The fielder had to play from a position above the road and near the United Oil fence so that he was at eye level with the pitcher and hitter. When a ball was hit to left field, the outfielder had to judge where it was going and then either run down onto Cascade Street, where he would try to spot it in mid-air and give chase, or sprint back and forth on the narrow strip of compressed dirt and weeds near the fence. The most exciting thing about the field was having an actual fence in left field. The fence encouraged players to wind up and try for home runs. The most exciting defensive play happened when a left fielder ran along the fence, jumped high in the air, and robbed a hitter of a home run. And there was another connected issue. If someone hit a home run (and it happened a lot), the left fielder had to locate the hole that we had cut into the metal fence with our parents' wire cutters and squeeze into the "no trespassing" oil tank area before being apprehended by security guys.

The biggest field-related issue was dealing with left-handed hitters. If they were to slam away, balls would surely have landed in the playground area where small children could have been killed or maimed. What to do? To accommodate the lefties, we adjusted the traditional playground right-field-out rule. The pitcher would move to third base so that they would hit into left field like the rest of the

“normal” kids. A related matter for left-handed hitters was Mr. Bello’s big window. On more than a few occasions a foul ball, usually propelled by a left-handed kid, would graze or hit the plate glass. A few times the window actually broke. That would usually end the game as Mr. Bello emerged from the front of the store yelling in Portuguese. We were not exactly sure of what he was saying during those moments but we “got the main idea.” The speed with which everyone could disappear after one of those foul balls was almost miraculous. Rain or shine, Bay Rat Stadium games went on all summer. There was a morning game, an afternoon game, and a night game. With the exception of a few nuances, they were exciting, and finally being allowed to play was a rite-of-passage for younger kids. We would break in by being the catcher. There was not an actual catcher in the sense of a regular baseball game. Instead, one of the younger kids who was hanging around would be appointed to the prestigious position of “official catcher.” He would stand behind the batter, pick up the ball after it bounced past home plate and toss it back to the pitcher. There were no called balls or strikes. The pitcher lobbed balls toward home plate until the hitter decided to swing. Because of Mr. Bello we always played softball instead of baseball. That alone probably saved him about 100 windows. There was no first baseman, either. Picher’s mound was out. And there were no extra balls. If one went too far into United Oil territory or one of their security guys grabbed the ball, it was gone and we were done until we could find a replacement.

There were usually big crowds, especially at the night games – grown men from the neighborhood, younger kids like myself hoping to be asked to play, and random spectators from other neighborhoods. We imagined that there were major league scouts there, as well, looking for the next Mickey Mantle, Al Rosen, or Yogi Berra.

Soon after school began each year, the softball games would be replaced by football. Mr. Bello looked forward to the transition. Since we were really tough guys, we played tackle, not two-hand tag, and converted the field just like they did at Cleveland in those days. Football was played with the field oriented from north to south so that the only small problem (again) was the set of backboards. But little matter, we always figured out how to guide around the barriers in exactly the same way the old NFL guys worked around having goal posts right on the goal-line. Barriers made pass patterns interesting! Finally, when the weather turned cold, we switched to basketball. No nets, of course. Bent steel rims and shaky backboards. It made us tough.

I have always been a huge fan of David McCullough and especially his classic book, *Brooklyn Bridge*. Some years ago, on an anniversary of the building of the bridge, Mary Ann and I went to New York to celebrate the bridge and learn more about Brooklyn. We had been to New York dozens of times but had never taken time to get to know Brooklyn. On our first day we booked a special Brooklyn tour designed to help celebrate the bridge and provide an entire day of traversing the nooks and crannies of Manhattan’s borough neighbor. Toward the end of the tour our bus driver pulled up to a huge modern, low-income housing development and announced that he was about to share with us (bus people) the worst thing that had ever happened in the history of Brooklyn.

“Do you see these terrible housing units?” he asked. “Do you know what used to be right here? On this sacred ground?”

With emotion bleeding through a previously cheerful, narrator voice, he finally

worked up the courage to utter some words: “Ebbets Field, home of the Brooklyn Dodgers. The field that made Duke Snyder, Jackie Robinson, Pee Wee Reese, and Roy Campanella. A dream palace stolen from the people of Brooklyn and moved to Los Angeles in 1957.” From the tone of his voice it seemed like it had happened just a few weeks earlier.



Ebbets Field was reminiscent of Wrigley Field in Chicago

As our tour guide continued, my mind flashed back to the 1950s and Bay Rat Stadium. I could see Don Polagyi launching massive home runs over the left field fence before he went to Cincinnati on a Football scholarship, Johnny Modica playing left field decades before he became the all-time greatest football coach in the state of Delaware, and Bungo Trucilla. Bungo, the father of Erie County Judge John Trucilla, was my favorite player. Perennially wearing aviator’s sunglasses, he graced center field, dodging backboards, sprinting down the drop-offs that made fielding treacherous, and hitting home runs. His baseball DNA was passed along to his son who became a star catcher at Dayton University before returning to Erie with a law degree.

Where did our old stadium and its memories go? Bello’s building is still there but Mr. Bello’s sons moved the store to more up-scale surroundings, including the Colony Plaza. And beyond the left field fence? While Ebbets Field became a low-income housing development, Bay Rat Stadium’s home run deck morphed onto the Bluffs Condominiums after United Oil moved away. They were so high-end that they had to change the name of West Third Street to Lookout Drive. In 1985, the playground was rededicated, named Barbara Nitkiewicz Field, hydroseeded with a nice lawn, and equipped with a new plastic playground.



Dapper Don Polagyi was inducted into the Metro Erie Sports Hall of Fame in 1989, partially as a highly accomplished three-sport athlete, but primarily for his 20 years of local softball championships.



Manicured lawns at the Bluffs Condominium development now grace the former left field deck.

Photos:

Ebbets Field: <https://stuffnobodycaresabout.com/2016/01/12/domed-stadium-kept-dodgers-brooklyn/>

Don Polagyi: <https://eriesportshalloffame.org/sport/softball/page/4/>

Bluffs Condominium: [https://www.realtor.com/realestateandhomes-detail/1028-Lookout-](https://www.realtor.com/realestateandhomes-detail/1028-Lookout-Dr_Erie_PA_16507_M43897-57301)

[Dr_Erie_PA_16507_M43897-57301](https://www.realtor.com/realestateandhomes-detail/1028-Lookout-Dr_Erie_PA_16507_M43897-57301)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Historian and author David Frew, Ph.D., is an emeritus professor at Gannon University, where 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,



In Case You Missed It

[Foreign policy: The point is not just to compromise, but to appreciate others Part Two](#) written by Director of the Brock Institute for Mega Issues Education Rev. Charles Brock

[Women, Baseball & Poetry](#) written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence Dr. Andrew Roth

[Women's Political Strength Grows in Three Movements](#) written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence Dr. Judith Lynch

[Cascade Creek: Stream of Dreams](#) written by prolific writer and researcher Dr. David Frew

