

## Quick, Timely Reads On the Waterfront

### Boarders: A Bay-Rat Neighborhood Phenomenon

By David Frew  
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*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 this series, the JES Scholar-in-Residence takes note of life in and around the water.*

My 1950s neighborhood in Erie, Pennsylvania was developed during the late 1800s. Homes were of modest size and old-fashioned, with many having been built as flats to provide rental income. A gateway to homeownership for working-class families was to purchase a flat and use rental income to help make monthly mortgage payments. Some of the homes, including my own, had been converted from large, single-family houses into flats often in inelegant ways that would be illegal these days. In the case of my house, which was typical, a first-floor entrance had been added by building a side porch with an entry door into the original family dining room. The old main entrance, which was at the front of the house, became the second-floor entry and used a stairway that was designed as the primary connection between floors. To separate the first-floor unit, an interior door that connected the original front porch entry to the first-floor parlor (a traditional Victorian era, front-room sitting area) was retrofitted with a lock so that the two floors could be divided and secured.

With friends living in a few of these "conversions," I visited several as I was growing up and learned that most suffered from the same deficit. First-floor units did not have enough bedrooms, while upstairs apartments had plenty of bedrooms but inadequate living rooms, dining rooms, and kitchens. But hybrid unit rentals were inexpensive, and people were attracted to them. Our (first floor) rent was \$35 per month, including heat, but we were in charge of landscaping, snow removal, and the operation of a coal furnace that heated both places. Keeping the coal furnace lit, filled with coal, and regularly maintained was a lot of work with much of it centered on the "coal bin," a walled-off basement room that was topped off with coal two or three times per season.

I had two favorite neighborhood boarders. The first, Bud, was an ex-minor league baseball player who worked at Erie Forge and Steel. He was perennially perched on his upstairs porch during the summer with a baseball glove and ball, hoping to engage neighborhood kids in games of catch. I spent a lot of time with him, as he tried to teach me to pitch and to throw a curveball.

The second boarder whom I got to know quite well, Oscar, lived with the family of one of my best friends. He was an over-the-road trucker by occupation and often regaled us with stories that detailed adventures from “the open road.” He drove for a local company and did not own his own rig. Oscar’s stories described hijinks that took place as he and his colleagues avoided weigh stations and eluded the state police who were perpetually trying to give them traffic tickets. In hindsight, some of the stories may have been “enhanced,” but they were great fun for us kids.



*The 1935 Chevrolet was classic transportation. Note the single windshield wiper.*

Oscar’s trucking company was a mile away, so he needed a car to get back and forth. More than thrifty, his car was quite old, but he was adept at maintaining and repairing it, a skill that attracted the teenaged neighborhood boys who were all car-crazy. The only problem with working with him as he repaired and maintained his car was that it was nearly an antique and it was difficult to get parts: a 1935 Chevrolet sedan. I loved that car, even though it wasn’t cool like the 1950-era cars that my friends lusted over.

One day, Oscar told us that he had purchased a 1948 Chevrolet, an amazing 13-year upgrade. The Chevrolet Fleetline had been deteriorating in a neighborhood garage for more than 10 years. Its owner was killed in the Korean War and the widow who had “inherited” her husband’s car did not know how to drive. For years, she planned to get a driver’s license and use the car, but time dragged on, and she procrastinated. Finally, she decided to sell the 1948 Chevrolet but after sitting for more than a decade in a garage, it had deteriorated to the point where it would not start or run. Tires had rotted, wires had deteriorated, and it needed substantial work to return it to running condition.

Oscar purchased the car and used one of his trucks to haul it to a rented garage near my friend’s house. Then for several months, we neighborhood kids shared in the adventure of restoring the old Chevrolet to basic running condition (as opposed to pristine Barrett-Jackson television auction shape). All of this was happening in 1959 and the car that we were working on seemed much older at the time. We kids were smitten with cool 1950s-era cars: Ford, Chevrolet, and Mercury. But as Oscar worked away during evenings and weekends, we were there with him, watching and learning. It was a master class in low-priced automobile mechanics at a time when it was possible to open the hood of a car, visualize, and understand the components. While we were helping, we did such things as run new wires between electrical components, disassemble and clean

engine parts, and install ignition parts. The only thing Oscar did that may have been less than “kosher” was to buy one large, oversized spool of black wire and use it for everything, rather than color-coding different wires as had been the case when the Chevy was first assembled. But as Oscar assured us “bigger (wire gauge) is always better.”

Oscar replaced the rotten tires with a brand-new set of blackwalls (not cool), installing them himself. We helped (without proper tools) break the beads on the old rotten set, cut them away, and re-install new tires (with tubes). No easy feat. After mounting the set of blackwalls, we inflated each of them with a hand pump. With new spark plugs, wires, a rebuilt distributor and new ignition points that we set using a match cover instead of feeler gauges (they were expensive), we fired up the old Chevy and its engine roared to life. To celebrate, we all jumped in and took it for a ride, without license plates. We were badass when we were with Oscar!

But then Oscar did something horrible. The black, factory paint job had become discolored and stained over years of careless storage, so he decided to have the car painted. After we all sanded, he drove the 1948 Chevrolet to Earl Scheib’s downtown shop and had it painted during a \$19.95 sale. Always interested in economizing, he selected one of the “available sale colors.” Putrid green.

The Chevy returned after a few days. Running perfectly but beyond ugly. With his “new” car ready for service, Oscar announced that he would be selling the trusty 1935 model for \$50 and offered it to my friend, whose family was hosting him as a boarder. My friend hoped to buy it and save it for a year when he was to turn 16. Sadly, his family said no. They didn’t trust the ’35 Chevy, because it was so old. What a terrible mistake!

Years later in 1963, Oscar announced that he was selling the 1948 Chevrolet. It was running well, but he had found another “deal” and was planning to upgrade to the modern era. I asked what he wanted for the car and after mulling it over, he said \$60. It was ugly, but I knew it well after having worked on it, so I agreed to buy it. In late September, during my senior year of college, Oscar delivered the car and parked it in the garage of a careless neighbor. I closed the garage door, knowing that it would be months before I would be able to afford to insure and drive it, but I had a car! Meanwhile, I began to think about improving the aesthetics. It was going to be “cool.”



*The 1948 Chevrolet Fleetline, a two-door sedan in original black*

Between September and April, I accomplished several major upgrades. After discovering Keystone Auto Supply on Parade Street, I began to make regular parts runs with “excess” cash from my part-time job. I still recall the very first upgrade: chrome door lock knobs. They cost less than a dollar, but they really spruced up the interior. Then I bought a set of four “PortaWalls,” add-on whitewalls that had to be stretched and tucked into the car rims. It was a lot of work, but I jacked up the car, removed the tires one –by one, and carried them to my basement, where I broke each bead and stretched the portawalls into place. While I had the tires in the basement, I scrubbed them and added white paint to the raised letters and numbers on the sidewalls.



*Who would do this?*

Next, I removed the door sills, took them into the house and repainted them original black with cans of spray paint (The previous \$19.95, putrid green paint job had included door sills). As I was progressing, I made friends with the counter guys at Keystone Auto Supply and one of them suggested painting the ugly old cloth headliner and door panels. At first it seemed like a crazy idea but one of the guys showed me what he had done with his Ford, so I tried it. Interior door panels were removed and taken to the basement as an experiment. Soon I learned that three light coats of latex white resulted in an amazing, leather-like finish. Cheap. After I was done with the door panels, I carefully did the headliner without removing it while the car was parked in the garage.

Something had to be done about the terrible green color, so I began with hand-sanding in the garage. After hours of rubbing, I purchased spray cans of gray primer, taped off the chrome trim, and managed to apply several coats of primer to the entire car. I wet-sanded as I continued and while the primer surface looked good, I could see that I should leave the job of finish painting to a professional as opposed to continuing with spray cans. Following Oscar’s lead, I drove the car without plates to Earl Scheib’s and paid a premium price to have it redone in “factory-originalish” black: \$29.95. Since I had already masked the entire car and wet-sanded it, there was a \$5 discount.

Last but not least, I added a spiffy set of Keystone Auto seat covers that I installed myself. About \$12, if I recall. In April, I purchased insurance, which cost about as much as the car, and rolled my very own first automobile out onto the street in time to drive to school for the final month of class and travel to job interviews. It was totally cool with one glaring exception. The car came with a factory-equipped vacuum shift, a very strange transmission accessory that hissed when the three-speed transmission was being shifted. Instead of being able to slam shift my car like the really cool guys who were bugging State Street, the vacuum shift system had a mind of its own and took many seconds to move semi-automatically between gears. On a positive note, the old Chevy had several unique and wonderful features. In addition to a starter button on the floor, it had a manual choke that almost assured starting even on cold mornings, and a lever on

the shifting column that allowed the flow of gasoline to be “set” at any RPM level (Naturally, I had added a J.C. Whitney tachometer to the dashboard). The set-lever was an early (and totally unsafe) version of cruise control.

I drove that car for several years, finally selling it just before getting married, even after it had become a bit of a standing joke in the parking lot at my engineering job. Reluctantly, I sold it for \$125, making a cool \$65 (not counting the hundreds of hours dedicated to restoration). I often wish that I had hung onto that car and had a tear in my eye while watching a Barret-Jackson Auto Auction on television a few weeks ago when the very same car, with vacuum shift, fetched an astonishing \$45,000. The famous television auctioneers had two 1948 Chevy Fleetlines to sell. One had been modified with an automatic transmission, modern eight-cylinder engine, and a completely redesigned dashboard\steering wheel combination. The other was stock, just as it had originally been sold. The redesigned version fetched almost \$10,000 less than the original one.



*The Fleetline was Chevrolet's most popular automobile line. It came in several body styles and trim levels, including several aerodynamic fastback models. The four-door shown above features optional high-end chrome trim.*



*This rare 1948 Chevrolet Fleetline fastback came with an optional \$149 dealer-installed, country club wood trim package. It recently sold for \$50,000.*

*Several years ago, one of my grandchildren proudly showed me a new pair of shoes that he had just purchased for \$100. When I responded that that was \$40 more than I had paid for my first car, he laughed and walked away, obviously thinking that I had just told another crazy “Grampa and the Old Days” story!*

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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