

Quick, Timely Reads On the Waterfront

The Bello Family, Sailors' Inn, and Spanish Flu

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.

Dave Bello, an old friend and fellow Erie, Pennsylvania Bay Rat, just filled me in on the history of his family and their time at both West Third and West Fourth and Cascade streets. My research into the Koehler Beer family and their German brewmaster Henry Herbst had led me in a circuitous manner back to my friend, so I called to gather details about the building that stood at the end of my street.

Dave's father was the onetime owner of the Bayview Tavern, and as a young boy, Dave lived in one of the building's apartments. I had previously written about Dave's uncle, Manuel Bello, who owned the store at the corner of Third and Cascade and told of his constant struggle to protect the huge plate glass window on the north side of his store from foul balls that regularly sprayed from our "stadium" on the opposite side of the street. In that article (["Bay Rat Athletics: Right Field Out"](#)), I indicated that the modern Bello's Market in the Colony Plaza had its roots at the Third Street Market and that family members had ultimately continued in the grocery and meat market business, creating the familiar West Eighth Street market. The owners of the contemporary Bello's Market were not Manuel Bello's children, however. They were Anthony and Richard Bello, the sons of his brother, Joe. Talking to Dave Bello revealed those details and much more.

The story begins with the building at the corner of Fourth and Cascade, today's Bayview Tavern and an iconic neighborhood monument. It was the largest building on the block and two of our friends, Joe and Ed Lander, lived in an apartment above the bar. We had heard rumors about the history of the place,

stories that included its time as a health clinic, its role in Prohibition, and its subsequent years as an after-work watering hole for neighborhood fathers. But it wasn't until I descended into the rabbit hole of Koehler Beer's brewmaster Henry Herbst and then spoke with Dave Bello that the best details began to unfold.



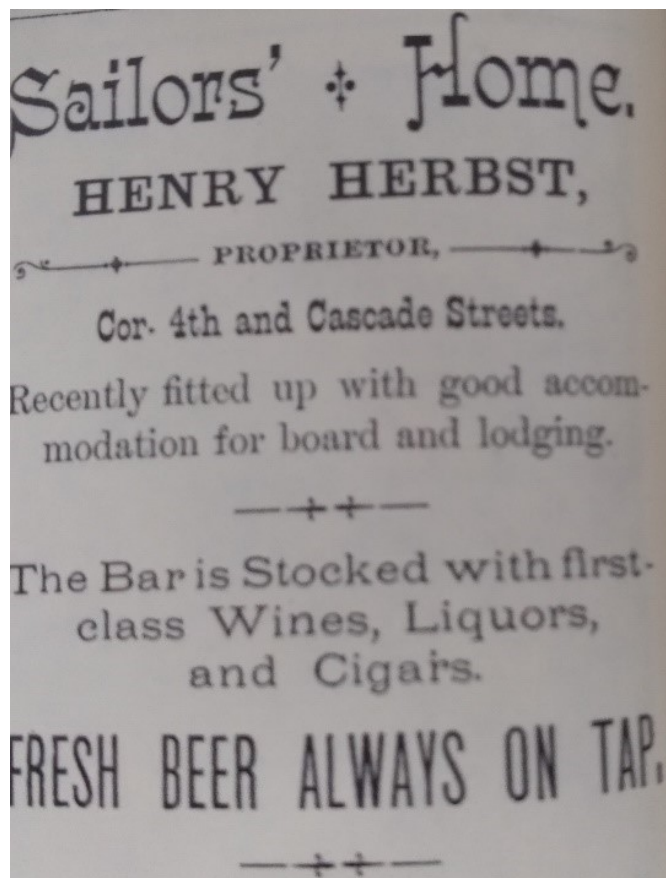
An Erie streetcar in the early 1900s (Jerry Skrypzak Collection)

The intersection of Fourth and Cascade was a major crossroad during the late 1800s and early 1900s. Cascade Street had evolved into Erie's most important westside thoroughfare, since it serviced the Cascade Docks, which were Erie's newest and most modern terminals. The docks were doing an enormous volume of business at the turn of the century and Cascade Street was the access road (It wasn't until the late 1950s that the dock access road was shifted west to Cranberry Street). Cascade Street, itself, was lined with businesses. There were grocery stores or meat markets on Third, Fourth, Fifth, Sixth, Seventh, and Eighth streets, and one of Erie's largest Lutheran Churches was at Seventh and Cascade. In addition to the retail stores, there were two barber shops on Cascade Street as well as the United Oil Company on the corner of Third Street.

Between all of these service business and commercial activities at the Cascade Docks, which included a concrete company, there was a constant flow of traffic. In addition to Cascade Street's large volume of traffic, east-west traffic on Fourth Street was also busy. During the late 1800s, one of Erie's busiest streetcar lines serviced the intersection, running along Fourth Street to its final stop at Cascade Street. That was where the trolley driver moved from one end of the car to the other, switched electrical connections, and reversed directions, driving the streetcar back to the east. The Fourth Street Trolley ran back and forth continuously, from State Street to Cascade.



The original Bayview Tavern building was a typical sailor bar, serving bar snacks and low-level drinks to neighborhood people. The business never quite worked, however, and the original owner sold it to Henry Herbst in 1897. Herbst had established himself, locally, as Koehler Beer's brewmaster and had built a grand Victorian home at West Sixth and Plum streets near Gridley Park, a few blocks away. Sensing an opportunity to better serve the Cascade Docks, Herbst changed the business model, re-introducing the old business as the "Sailors' Home." According to his advertising, the Sailors' Home was a full-service boarding house for sailors while becoming a neighborhood pub that featured high-end alcohol, Koehler Lager, food, and expensive cigars. The boarding house portion of the operation provided accommodations for sailors and other maritimers, including shipowners and their guests with the option to add meals to the price of a room. Herbst expanded the original building with an extension that provided individual sleeping rooms. Over the years, the name changed from Sailors' Home to Sailors' Inn.



Newspaper advertisement for the Sailors' Home (Inn)

Things went well at the Sailors' Inn until 1918 when the Spanish Flu pandemic reached Erie. In September of that year, a decision was made to (inadvertently) host an event downtown, which became an enormous super-spreader of the virus. Prior to that time, Erie's media had been focused on World War I and ignored national concerns about the Spanish Flu. Somehow imagining Erie to be immune, the mayor, with the cooperation of county officials, decided to stage a huge parade to encourage the sale of war bonds: the Liberty Loan Parade. The city of Corry was invited since it was the county's second-largest metropolitan area. Unbeknownst to locals, however, the Spanish Flu had already arrived there at epidemic levels.

The resultant parade featured an astonishing 20,000 marchers and an additional 50,000 people gathered to watch. Imagine 70,000 people crammed into Erie's downtown in 1918 with several marching units and thousands of parade watchers from the infected town of Corry. Within one month, there were 100 "official" Spanish Flu deaths in Erie and both major hospitals were filled to capacity (actual totals were probably much higher). By Christmas, the local death toll had risen to 500.

Stricken patients often developed pneumonia, after which many simply drowned in their own fluids as their lungs filled. It was a gruesome disease. Many seriously ill people realized that it was of no use to go to the hospital, so they stayed home, got progressively sicker, and passed away. Under pressure to do something to combat the flu, the Department of Health closed local bars and clubs, including the Sailors' Inn. They also opened an emergency triage hospital in the downtown Elks Club, with the sickest being transferred to St. Vincent and Hamot hospitals.

One of the most pressing local issues as the wave of illness ripped through places of employment was that General Electric, American Brake & Foundry, and Erie Forge and Steel (Erie's three largest employers, in that order) were unable to keep up with critical wartime production because so many of their employees were ill. In Lawrence Park, GE set up a temporary clinic in one of its buildings. At American Brake & Foundry, which was operating as a wartime munitions factory, wives of the managers decided to do something to help. It seemed like a patriotic duty. They organized and then reached out to other women while asking local companies for financial and political support. At the time, the hospitals were begging for community women to help care for patients, offering to train anyone to be a nurse-assistant. More than 30 percent of the hospitals' doctors and nurses were sick from Spanish Flu.

Moving quickly, the newly organized women's group decided to create and staff (with volunteers) a spill-over clinic for people who could not get into the overwhelmed hospitals. With the company located at West 12th and Greengarden, the most promising location for a new clinic was the vacant Sailors' Inn. By November, they had leased the shuttered building and begun expanding it, using government and local funding. As the women began rearranging their new facility, however, they had a new idea. By the time they were ready to open in December, Erie's epidemic was slowing but in the wake of the sickness hundreds of local children had been orphaned. So shortly after the clinic opened, it shifted its mission to the care of Spanish Flu orphans. The women named their new operation the "General Pershing Emergency Orphanage," hanging large signs on both the Cascade and Fourth Street sides of the building (Pershing was a celebrated World War I military hero). By the first months of 1919, there were more than 150 children at the old Sailors' Inn. In addition to the Sailors' Inn, the nearby Cascade Park Club was used for a short time as a temporary clinic.

In the United States, at a time when the population was only 105 million (compared to today's 335 million), between 600,000 and 850,000 people died from the Spanish Flu, making it deadlier than today's COVID-19 pandemic. By Christmas 1918, an estimated total of 500 Erie people had died. In Corry, the probable source of Erie's original infections, there were more than 1,000 fatalities. Since the population of Corry was only 7,000, compared to Erie's 93,000 residents, the Spanish Flu was far more devastating there. Epidemiologists speculate that Corry's role as a railroad transportation hub was responsible for the outbreak there. Worldwide, more than 500 million people were infected. There

were few if any reliable data sources in those days, so it is likely that most statistics were significantly underreported.



One of thousands of temporary clinics set up in 1918

Meanwhile, a block away at Third and Cascade, brothers Manuel and Joseph De Teresa (de Viello) had arrived from Mainland Portugal in 1920. They were born in 1889 and 1893, respectively, in the small town of Palhaca, near Porto in the north. Both came at the urging of friends who wrote to describe Erie's large Portuguese community, abundant fishing, and dedicated Catholic parish (St. Andrew). Both men had their names "Americanized" at New York's Ellis Island, where "helpful" immigration agents simplified their apparent last names. The name de Viello (actually their street address in Portugal) was changed from de Viello to Bello (without the de). Joseph's first name had been "Jose" before arriving in the United States.



Manuel Bello (left) and Joe Bello (center) at their Third Street store during the 1920s

In 1924, the Bello brothers opened a grocery store and meat market and began serving the neighborhood. They purchased the building from Koehler Beer for \$7,000. Apparently, the beer company had been holding the mortgage for brewmaster Herbst, who had been expanding his property investments in the thriving neighborhood. It is likely that Koehler had fronted the money for the purchase of the Sailors' Inn, as well. Bello Brothers Grocery continued from 1924 until 1933. The store was a success, specializing in meat and becoming known for its butcher shop. Eventually, the brothers expanded the business, opening a satellite store in nearby Albion, which they stocked with groceries and meats from their own shop. Surprisingly, Albion had a large Portuguese community, mostly composed of Azoreans who had moved there to take advantage of inexpensive farmland. Many of Albion's Portuguese traveled all the way into Erie and St. Andrew to attend church, especially on Portuguese holidays like Trinity Sunday.

Bellos' customers often commented on the bickering between the brothers, who seemed conflicted about almost everything: what to stock, how to price products, store placements, and advertising. Customers also seemed to like Joe Bello more than his older brother, Manuel. Joe was outgoing, friendly, and engaging, while Manuel was gruff and businesslike. Meanwhile, Prohibition was continuing and Joe Bello, who had made friends with Joe Semple, was taking delivery of cases of smuggled alcohol and selling bottles "quietly" from the store. Only to customers that he knew, of course. Semple lived less than a block from the store. Manuel Bello disagreed with Joe's inclination to sell discreetly to friends and neighbors, and that was one of the final business conflicts between the brothers.



Joe Bello, at left, is behind the bar at Fourth and Cascade.

During the late 1920s, they purchased the vacant Sailors' Inn-General Pershing Orphanage building at Fourth and Cascade. The huge place was available at a bargain price since it was empty and there did not seem to be an "end in sight" for Prohibition. They bought it, held on, and waited. In 1933, with Prohibition ending, Joe Bello decided that it was time for him to move on and the brothers ended their business partnership. As a part of the deal, Joe Bello took the building at Fourth and Cascade. Just before that time, Joe Bello had met and married a neighborhood girl who was 15 years younger than he was. His wife, Anna, had emigrated from an area of Austria that would ultimately become Slovakia.

Manuel Bello remained at Third and Cascade where he ran the grocery store and meat market until 1956. His brother, Joe, reopened the old Sailors' Inn a block away and named the new business Bello's Café. The new location allowed Joe and his wife to work together, and Anna Bello, who was a talented cook, brought her kitchen skills to the new business venture. In its newest iteration, Bello's Café became a traditional neighborhood tavern, featuring several additional entrepreneurial initiatives. Given the size of the expanded building, Joe Bello was able to add a dance hall that featured live bands each weekend. There was a beauty shop in one end of the building, a barbershop and several apartments for rent. For years, Bello's was well known for serving delicious Portuguese-style Friday night fish dinners, catering to the neighborhood Catholic population. On Saturdays, they served Anna's signature Austrian chicken dinner.

Joe Bello did well at the new location. The business thrived from 1933 through World War II. He later told friends that his very best customers were the workers from Perry Shipbuilding. Perry operated from the western Cascade Dock, building YF-Class Boats for the United States Navy during the war. Workmen stopped early each morning for a shot and a beer plus breakfast – the "breakfast of champions!" The same guys came back for lunch (another shot and a beer, but

with a sandwich), and most made a third trip after work. Shot, beer, supper. Joe Bello moved his family into the tavern building, taking over a three-bedroom apartment where they lived until the late 1940s when he bought the house next door on Cascade Street. After World War II, when shipbuilding ended and business declined, Joe Bello sold the building and moved on to other ventures. After several businesses, including a tavern on Parade Street, his final entrepreneurial venture was Bello's Motel on West 12th Street.



Joe Bello's sons learned hands-on lessons from their father and two of them (Anthony and Richard) decided to enter the grocery business. They began with a store near Eighth Street and Powell Avenue in 1964 and eventually moved to today's Bello's Sur-Fine in the Colony Plaza as well as Bello's Deli on 32nd Street. Joe and Manuel Bello both passed away in 1959, within months of each other.

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Many thanks are owed to Dave Bello, who generously shared family stories and pictures to make much of this article possible.

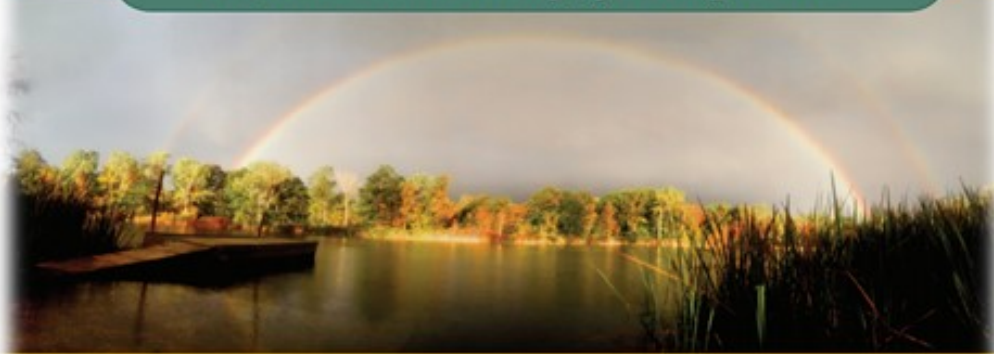
I always look for volunteers to read these stories, check on details, and add insights. In addition to Dave Bello, I asked my friend, Dave Bierig, to read this one. Dave grew up on West Fourth Street and experienced the Bayview Tavern as a kid. Amazingly, Dave told me that Henry Herbst was the person who sponsored the application for citizenship in 1896 for Dave's grandfather, Louis Bierig. Herbst and Bierig were both German and belonged to the same Lutheran Church, St. Mathew. Herbst's son, John, purchased a pair of ice skates in 1920 and, since his father-in-law was a member of the Finn Yacht Club next door to the Bierig boathouse, he stored them there. Dave Bierig was invited to use the skates, which he did until they eventually wore out in 1992 (skates that last 72 years?). Small world!

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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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