

Quick, Timely Reads On the Waterfront

Bugging State Street: *An Erie Rite of Passage*

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.



The 1950 Mercury was a popular artist's pallet for the car crazies.

Erie, Pennsylvania was not the only city where it happened. Teenagers in other towns had similar car-related customs. But the unique geography of the city made the popular pastime of driving up and down State Street in cars a special experience. During the 1950s, especially in the summer, hundreds of carloads of teens would find their way to State Street and begin a seemingly strange (to adults) nightly passage. Choosing one of three traditional entry portals, the cars would turn onto State Street either at 12th, 18th, or 26th streets and slowly descend the city's main drag to the Public Dock (today's Dobbins Landing). Almost seeking red lights, the perpetual parade of automobiles would crawl along, welcoming the opportunity to pause at each stoplight to rev engines and pop clutches. It was cool to "peel out" as you pulled away from a red light, even if there were just a few feet of space between you and the car ahead of you. Why save

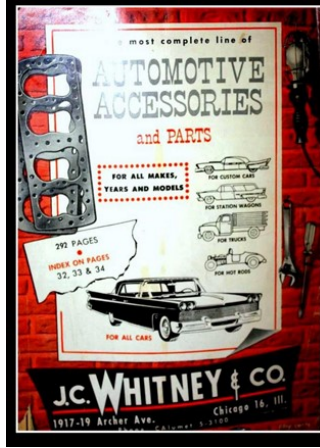
the tire treads and clutch linings for later?

When they reached the Public Dock, the northern terminus of the circuit, many of the participants found parking places so that they could exit their cars and stand around, socializing. Hoods were popped open so that the more technically proficient of the State Street “buggers” could examine the latest in engine accessories. Chrome additions such as air cleaners and brightly colored spark plug wires were extremely popular, and the best of the cars had engine compartments that were beautifully staged and decorated. Brightly painted engine walls and under-car fluorescent purple lights were common.



The 1950 Chevrolet was another popular car. Note the extra teeth in the grill and the molded headlights, a result of hundreds of hours of meticulous Bondo-shaping and sanding. We were talented sculptors, but not of statues.

Bugging State Street was a valued method for meeting girls. Very cool cars were (imagined to be) chick magnets and we all knew that if our rides were cutting edge, freshly washed and waxed with an air freshener card shaped like a tree, that every State Street girl would want to switch cars. Not that it ever happened. The secret of attracting chicks was, of course, having a highly customized car. That is why every guy had his very own copy of the “Bible of Car Customization,” the J.C. Whitney & Co. catalog. Most of us sat up nights thumbing through the “book,” searching for mail order accessories that would make otherwise ordinary cars cool. The reality of bugging State Street for many of us, sadly, was that we were driving in parents’ cars that we had conned our way into using for the evening after promising that we would not go anywhere near State Street. You could always spot a parent car as opposed one that a genuine State Street jockey owned. They were totally uncool, four-door sedans with blackwall tires and tiny hubcaps. They were also likely to be dysfunctional brands such as Packard, Studebaker, Hudson, Kaiser, or Frasier. Not much a guy could do with his parents’ 1948 Packard sedan to make it look like it belonged on State Street. The secret was having a car that was old enough to give the impression that it was not your parents’ Buick or Oldsmobile. It was yours!



The Bible



Even a 1950 Plymouth, generally not the best candidate for cool, could work if it had Moon hubcaps and a custom flamed paint job.

The State Street procession proceeded almost exclusively “south to north.” After reaching the Public Dock, participants usually made their way back to their favorite entry portal (12th, 18th, or 26th streets) by veering east or west and returning south on a side street. Then back onto State for a second, third, or fourth circuit. How many times did the average carload make the trip? There is no data. Why do social science researchers fail to focus on the most important phenomena? In addition to the excitement of the ride and its resultant interactions with the “coolest” kids and their customized rides, the trip down State Street helped highlight Erie’s iconic businesses. More than 50 years later, riders can still recall the Boston Store with its illuminated clock, the animated Koehler Beer sign, Pulakos Candies, the Warner Theatre, Clark’s Restaurant, Erie Sports Store, P.A. Meyer & Sons, Baker’s, Fishers, and Erie’s skyscrapers: the Commerce Building at 12th and State and the Baldwin Building (Renaissance Centre) at 10th and State.



The Milwaukee "Riverwalk" statue of the "Fonz"

One of the ways to understand the phenomena of teenagers, custom cars, and local customs was brought to television in the highly popular program, "Happy Days." For 11 seasons, from 1974 through 1984, the Milwaukee-based "Happy Days" gang reminded America of its post World War II car culture roots. During those years, American living rooms were alive with the 1950s and their intricacies. Interestingly, the idea for the "Happy Days" television show was not easily sold to television producers. It seemed too quirky to appeal to a mass audience and was resisted by executives for several years. But that preliminary opinion could not have been more incorrect. The show was a huge success. Of all the cast members, Henry Winkler as Arthur Fonzarelli (Fonz) was the actor whose role was to opine on "Cool." Thanks to the Fonz, who has been memorialized in downtown Milwaukee with a life-sized statue affectionately called the "Bronze Fonz," we know what was and wasn't cool. And according to the Fonz, the following principles of cool applied to bugging State Street.

Very Cool Car Stuff

- Whitewall tires
- Spinner hubcaps
- Two-door (not four-door) sedans
- Convertibles and hard-top convertibles
- Eight-cylinder engines
- Stick shifts, especially "four on the floor"
- Glass pack (loud) mufflers
- Flames or pinstripes painted on cars
- Removed and filled-in hood ornaments and door handles
- Chopped (lowered) tops
- Metallic paint jobs
- Pleated leather (usually Naugahyde) upholstery
- Large dice, hanging from the rearview mirror
- Moon hubcaps
- Chrome spotlights
- Dual exhaust pipes
- Fender skirts
- Continental wheels



Cool cars had this decal in a back window.

One of my grandsons graduated from Marquette University in downtown Milwaukee and I once asked if he had ever noticed the statue of the “Fonz” on the Riverwalk. He responded that he and his friends passed it several times per week, and they all wondered who it was. Hmm.



The classic 1950 Ford with custom chrome external exhaust pipes. Fords had V-8 engines.

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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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