

Quick, Timely Reads On the Waterfront

Erie's Iconic Downtown Retailer: *Cheap Gasoline, Sunday Motoring, and Boston Store Waypoints*

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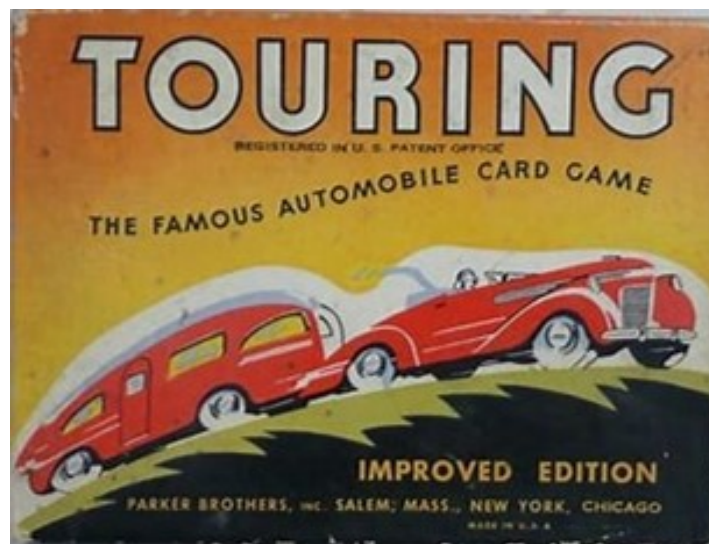
Dr. David Frew, a prolific writer, author, and speaker, grew up on Erie's lower west side as a proud "Bay Rat," joining neighborhood kids playing and marauding along the west bayfront. He has written for years about his beloved Presque Isle and his adventures on the Great Lakes. In this series, the JES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



Boston Store signs graced almost every obscure rural roadway during the 1940s and 1950s.

During the post-World War II era, the number of automobiles in the United States exploded. Suddenly, almost every family had a car, and a favorite weekend activity was “motoring.” Families would load up in automobiles, pack snacks, and meander country roads with no particular destination in mind. Most cars were less than fuel-efficient, but with prices at the pump floating in the low 20 cents per gallon range, no one seemed to care. My family was typical. When the war ended, my father came home from Europe and dedicate himself to the challenge of finding a used car.

Automobile production had ended during the war and cars were scarce. We finally found a serviceable 1937 Hudson sedan, an enormous and unreliable model, but it had a cavernous back seat. Perfect for a pack of kids. Wonderful for going to the drive-in theater.



The 1947 edition of Parker Brothers' "Touring".

On Sunday afternoons we often took family rides. My father called them “adventures.” We usually started by heading south from Erie, Pennsylvania, always on secondary roads, or worse. If a road had a route marker, my father considered it too tame. Although my mother worried that we could get lost, he secured a suction-cup compass to the dashboard and assured her that all we had to do was turn north and we would eventually find our way back to the lake. Car ownership had shifted from being an elite activity, mostly for the wealthy, to a working-man’s pastime. Motoring was entertainment and the “freedom of the road” was suddenly available to everyone. Motoring was such a notable pastime that Parker Brothers sold a popular board game called “Touring,” which revolved about successfully completing an automobile trip and avoiding such pitfalls as flat tires, traffic tickets, and overheated radiators. And that was exactly what we were doing: driving through farm country and enjoying the scenery with no objective in mind.

Oddly, as we drove about, we began to notice that no matter the direction or

distance of the ride, we would inevitably see signs announcing the number of “Miles to the Boston Store.” It was apparently a genius pre-social media, marketing program. A forerunner of Facebook. I had been to Erie’s downtown Boston Store many times by then. Usually via the West Fourth Street bus. And I understood that it was a huge retail center that sold everything from clothing to shoes, furniture, toys, and appliances, but to see Boston Store waypoint signs all over the countryside gave new appreciation to Erie’s downtown anchor retailer.

Erie was not the only American city to have a Boston Store. There were Boston Stores in Milwaukee and Los Angeles. Although they were all department stores, the three distinct sets of Boston Stores were unrelated in business or ownership terms. Both the Milwaukee and Los Angeles stores expanded into multiple locations, but they were owned by different individuals or groups. Retail historians have hypothesized that the popularity of the Boston Store name emerged during the post-Civil War years when trading posts and dry goods emporiums were evolving into department stores (large urban buildings, containing individual departments). Since Boston was seen at the time as America’s epicenter of fashion and merchandising, the name suggested both quality and fashion.

Erie’s Boston Store began as “Erie Dry Goods Company,” a bankrupt dry goods store located on Peach Street and on the same city block that contains today’s Boston Store building. Erie’s Boston Store business name was born in 1885 when Elisha Mack purchased the bankrupt store, re-opened it, and began to expand. Between 1885 and 1925, Mack acquired 10 more buildings and/or lots, all on the city block that currently houses the Boston Store building. Eventually, he controlled all the frontage on State and Peach streets between Seventh and Eighth streets as well as frontage on the numbered streets. Two of his stores were housed in large multi-story buildings. As the individual businesses grew, Mack combined them all under the name “Boston Store” and specialized within individual locations. Eventually, Mack created support departments to provide functions such as advertising and marketing for all his locations. But he resisted suggestions to combine all the businesses in one location.

In 1925, Mack’s network of businesses was taken over by Peter Fries (former long-time overall business operations director), and two investors, A.E. Seidel and Robert Sutherland. In 1927, the new owners announced a plan to build a single large department store building that would house all 11 individual businesses. They hired a local architect whose design was to become a companion to the newly planned Warner Theatre that would be built on the same block. According to the new Boston Store owners’ group, the combination of their grand new store and the Warner Theatre would provide modern post-Victorian elegance to Erie’s growing downtown. Construction began in 1929.

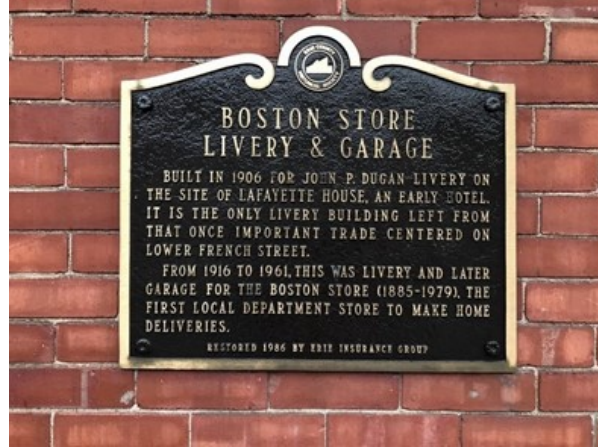
In 1931, the six-story, Art Deco building that is now associated with the Boston Store was completed and opened. The most visually striking external feature of the building was its 40-foot clock tower, a towering edifice that dominated State Street. In keeping with the theme of the external clock tower, the architects added a huge interior clock in the center of the first-floor shopping space, which featured high ceilings so that it could contain a short Mezzanine floor. The interior clock and Mezzanine lounge space led to the store’s famous shopping tagline, “Meet You under the Clock.”



“Meet you under the clock” was a common refrain in Erie. Here is a view of the Boston Store interior with its famous clock as well as the Mezzanine floor in the background. (Image from Jerry Skrypzak collection) .

As former individual businesses became departments within the new structure, the original plan was for the first floor to contain men’s clothing, seasonally changing impulse items, a bookstore, and a post office. This arrangement was typical of most big-city department stores. The second floor was entirely dedicated to women’s clothing and the third and fourth floors to furniture and alliances. The fifth floor eventually became a massive toy department. The top floor housed an enormous restaurant that could be expanded into a large meeting space. At the time it was Erie’s largest gathering place and immediately was in demand for meetings and talks. The Sixth-Floor restaurant was “high-end” at the time that it was opened. Company administrative offices were also located on the top floor. The mid-floor Mezzanine was furnished with stuffed lounge chairs and occasional tables, encouraging people to gather and meet. The Boston Store also had a full basement floor that contained a cafeteria as well as various lines of discounted clothing and merchandise.

The Boston Store’s first and second floors as well as its basement shopping areas were equipped with an overhead vacuum tube system so that purchases could be written up and sent for processing via portable carriers. The system of tubes led to a central location for processing – a highly secured area in the basement where the tubes “landed” after they had been sent by individual department clerks. The Boston Store was a leader in the creation of a dedicated charge account system so that purchasers could put transactions on credit. The store featured uniformed elevator operators and later, in 1953, became the first local business to have an escalator. At its peak, there were 700 full-time employees and an additional 300 seasonal employees who worked the Christmas rush. The Boston Store became known as a place where a hard-working person could make a job into a career.



The livery on French Street later served as Erie's original Children's Museum.

The Boston Store's rural mile-marker program was an artifact of the company's Livery Division, which was located on lower French Street. During the late 1920s, the store became the first local department store to offer home deliveries. To do so, it purchased a late 1800s era livery building on lower French Street and later modernized it so that it could house delivery trucks. The service began with large items such as furniture and appliances but soon spread to clothing, shoes, and other departments. The home delivery business was added to the mail-order system that the new (1931) store had originally incorporated to add convenience for customers. That aspect of the business began in the store's first-floor post office, but it soon became apparent that a traditional post office would not be able to handle the volume of large or bulky delivery items that were being sold. As the delivery business grew, however, it became a major profit center that was growing faster than the core retail business. Customers were charged according to the size of delivery items as well as distances to destinations. Rural deliveries grew rapidly as customers from small towns as well as the suburbs placed more and more orders. For rural customers the cost of a Boston Store shirt or kitchen accessory, including delivery, was lower than the same product would have been in a small-town store, even if it was available.

It was the delivery business that led to the famous Boston Store mile markers. At the time of each order, the distance was estimated, and an estimated delivery price was added to the total invoice. But in those early days, knowing the distance from the Boston Store garage on French Street to a single out-of-the-way customer destination was an inexact science, at best. To improve their ability to predict delivery mileages to rural locations, dispatchers at the garage began to record the driver's actual mileages and, as record-keeping expanded, they began to notice that clusters of rural customers were emerging. This suggested that word-of-mouth advertising was creating distinct pockets of customers in select locations.

One of the many advantages of having combined all the former business locations into one large building was that support departments could be created and housed within the new retail center. And one of the Boston Store's most powerful new groups was its advertising department." In addition to designing and administrating regular newspaper ads and coordinating merchandising efforts for all the departments, its most visually obvious efforts were displayed in the store's long bank of State Street windows. The opportunity to orchestrate ongoing window shows of new or seasonal and or profitable merchandise was certainly not lost on the Boston Store's advertising department and, during the 1930s, they

curated stunningly beautiful displays of seasonal merchandise. Locals began to look forward to seasonal window changes, especially those that celebrated the Christmas season.

The advertising department grew to be the region's biggest and most comprehensive marketing group, sometimes contracting to do advertising work for other (non-competing) organizations. In addition to employing display artists who decorated the famous store windows as well as important interior spaces, the department had its own electrical, carpentry, and painting technicians. Understanding that their primary role was to enhance profits and recognizing the importance of the store's visual impact the advertising department eventually combined forces with the delivery (garage) department to extend the store's image into the "hinterlands."

The logical way to do that was to use delivery records to identify rural centers of focused interest (pockets of customers). Interestingly, the 1930s, a time when the advertising department was growing and maturing, corresponded with America's new rural billboard advertising period, and eventually, the advertising staff came up with a unique way to participate. Instead of sponsoring a few major highway billboards or barn paintings, which was the trend at the time, it was determined that a large number of smaller but visually unique rural advertisements might work better. And that was how the "Miles to the Boston Store" sign program was born. The advertising department's artists designed a visually simple logo, the carpenters built the signs, and then the rural delivery drivers offered discounts to the best customers throughout their routes in exchange for planting mile markers in front of their homes.



Barn advertisements became popular during the 1930s and 1940s. In exchange for using the barn as a billboard, advertisers would paint a farmer's barn.

Things began to unravel for the Boston Store during the 1960s and early 1970s. Alternative local shopping centers, like the West Erie Plaza, began to appear and siphon off downtown business. Then as State Street, traffic declined through the period, the advantage of having well-curated store windows evaporated. With respect to the marker sign system, automobile traffic shifted to the Eisenhower Interstate system so that the best rural sites changed from individual rural customer locations to select sites along busy thruways. And then the Millcreek Mall happened. Suddenly there was a convenient central location (near a thruway exit) where customers could find an incredible diversity of merchandise. The mall

also offered free parking as well as a protected indoor environment. Rural customers who had depended on the Boston Store's delivery service could suddenly travel to the mall, park cars for free, and shop for almost everything that they needed. The Boston Store's sales revenues declined, and its mile-marker program became redundant.

Meanwhile, in downtown Erie, the large and expensive building that had once proved to be a strategic advantage had quickly become a major financial burden. The local owners sold to out-of-town interests, which were later taken over by Halle's Stores of Pittsburgh (1965) in a desperate attempt to rescue that business. Eventually, the business failed, and the familiar Boston Store closed in 1979, leaving downtown with only Carlisle's as its anchor retailer.

As the Boston Store building has changed its identity over the years, it is important to note that the creativity and generosity of its original owner, Elisha Mack, is still benefiting Erie. Mack left a generous endowment to Erie, which became the financial anchor for the modern Erie Community Foundation.



Boston Store's Elisha Mack.

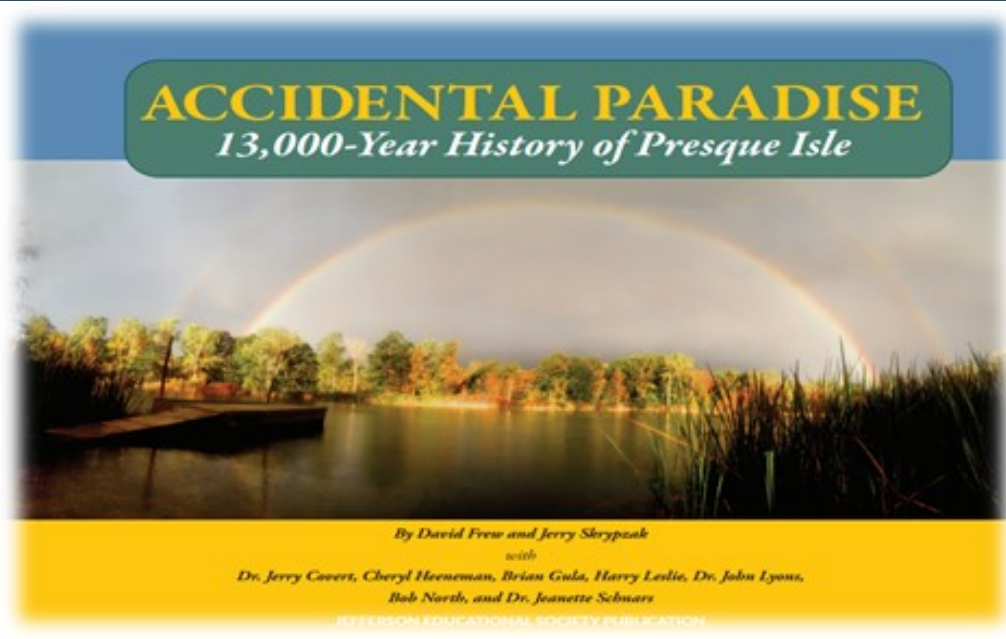
Robert Beers, who served as operations manager and buyer for P.A. Meyer & Sons men's clothing store of Erie for 30 years and worked at the Boston Store prior to that job, shared stories of the Boston Store when I was a salesperson and worked for him during the 1960s while attending college. Ken Konz, who worked both at the Boston Store's advertising department and at P.A. Meyer's as a display and window artist, provided additional information. Illustrations were provided by Jerry Skrypzak.

Boston Store by the Numbers

- 700 – full-time employees
- 300 – employees added at Christmas
- 1931 – new downtown high-rise store opened
- 1959 – purchased by Associated Dry Goods
- 1965 – purchased by Horne's of Pittsburgh
- 1979 – downtown store closed

Accidental Paradise Available at TRECF

Accidental Paradise
by Dr. David Frew and Jerry Skrypzak



The beautiful book on Presque Isle recently 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](#).

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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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