

Quick, Timely Reads  
On the Waterfront

Field of American Dreams  
*From Italy to Baseball*

By David Frew  
May 2021

*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.*



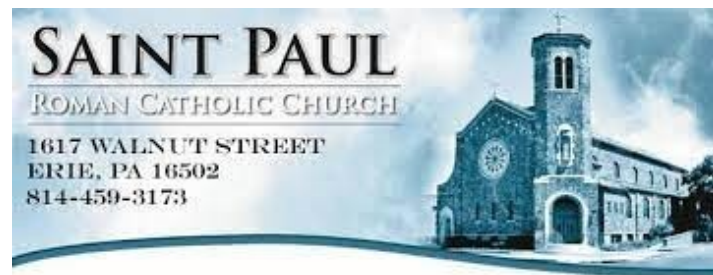
*Joseph Nathal, opera and baseball fan*

Wonderful neighbors. Their home was directly across the street from mine, where they regularly defined the old-school, Italian experience. Seven children shared a modest, four-bedroom house whose exterior was stucco, typical of Italy but unique for 1950s Erie. Each year, without fail, the boys would gather ladders, buckets, and long brushes, then whitewash the home's exterior, making the Nathal home shine. This ritual annual whitewashing always took place the weekend before the opening day of baseball season. Days later, a massive Detroit Tigers banner appeared on the front of the house, draping down from

upstairs windows to the first floor.

There were two ritual family activities at the Nathal home: opera and baseball. Blaring a radio broadcast of the New York Metropolitan Opera was a regular Saturday event. Neighbors could hear the music and see that the Saturday opera was an important family event. Seven Nathal children (Aldric, Coletta, David, Dolores, Gloria, Ventrina, and Victor) sat at the dining room table with parents, Joseph and Adelia, every week, enjoying pasta, talking with each other and listening. But opera was just one of the two sacred Nathal Family rituals. The other was Detroit Tigers baseball. The Nathals were rare, but rabid, Tigers fans in Erie, and each member of the family was as crazed as the next. Any conversation with a Nathal quickly devolved into baseball trivia.

Joseph Nathal, the father of the family, was born in Polumbero, Italy (east of Rome) in 1889 and immigrated to the United States in 1907. Born Giuseppe DiNatale, Mr. Nathal was the beneficiary of an apparently well-intentioned Ellis Island immigration officer who had “helped him out” by Americanizing his name. Giuseppe instantly became Joe Nathal. Living on West Fourth Street, Mr. Nathal worked at General Electric and built a rich life for his growing Italian-Catholic family before he became an independent electrician. His family regularly attended St. Andrew Church but Joseph Nathal, himself, did not accompany them. Over the years he had decided that the neighborhood Roman Catholic Church was not “Italian enough.” St. Andrew had Italian parishioners but if there was a dominant ethnic identity it was Portuguese, not Italian. To combat this deficiency, Joseph Nathal walked to St. Paul’s Church on West 16th Street each Sunday. It was Erie’s Italian parish, where he stationed himself at the corner of the park opposite the church and sang familiar operas while parishioners entered and left. Italian Operas, of course: Bellini, Donizetti, Puccini, Rozetti, Verdi, and more. He knew them all. Rain or shine he was there each week, singing in a brilliant tenor voice. Listeners commented that he should have been a professional singer, and each year he was invited to perform at St. Paul’s annual Italian Festival. This was one of Mr. Nathal’s ways of living the opera.



Italians and opera are a predictable combination, but baseball. Why? A best guess by family members and friends is that in his attempts to find quality opera broadcasts on the family radio, Joseph Nathal identified two Detroit area superstations. One was broadcast from downtown Detroit and the second, the Canadian Broadcasting Company (CBC), emanated from neighboring Windsor, Ontario, just across the river. Both carried the New York Metropolitan Opera’s Saturday broadcasts and were easily received in Erie since the radio signals were unobstructed as they crossed the open waters of Lake Erie. There were other superstations that carried to Erie, namely Pittsburgh and Nashville stations, but neither carried opera. Live opera season began in the winter and ended in early May at about the time that baseball began. And the same two stations that carried the opera featured baseball. The Detroit Tigers. How convenient.

Baseball was wildly popular among Italian-Americans during the 1920s and

1930s. It was both “America’s Game” and a great social leveler in which players succeeded according to hard work, dedication, and skill as opposed to ethnic privilege. At a time when Italians were treated badly and often subjected to racist, anti-immigrant remarks, baseball allowed them to demonstrate competence and skills on the playing field. According to professor Lawrence Baldassero, there were dozens of Italian superstars in the major leagues long before familiar modern names like DiMaggio, Berra, Rizzuto, and Lasorda became a part of sports vernacular.

Joseph Nathal fell in love with American baseball and managed to infect his entire family with the “baseball virus.” Sons, daughters, and grandchildren all became fans. Some became players; a lasting tribute to the Tigers culture of the Nathal home. I wonder how many of the children became opera aficionados. Mike Nathal’s recollection of the Detroit Tigers obsession suggests that it was his father, Victor, who may have been the real culprit, more than his grandfather. Victor apparently found a Tigers baseball card when he was a boy after which he became obsessed, spreading the “crazy” to brothers and sisters and then his four children. The Tigers obsession soon spread to all of the other professional teams in Detroit and then to Michigan and Michigan State. For Victor, being a sports fan was much more than just a baseball fan.

Victor Nathal had two sons who became exceptional baseball players. The baseball virus had jumped generations from to Mike and Matt Nathal. By 1974, Mike Nathal was playing for Cathedral Prep and Matt Nathal was playing Little League Baseball in Erie’s Gridley League, one of 12 leagues in the city. There were more than 1,500 boys playing on 17 regional baseball fields at the time with an umbrella organization called “Boys Baseball.” Boys Baseball differed from traditional Little League in that it required that each player participate in a minimum of three innings per game. Matt played for Martucci’s Tavern, one of six teams that played on Gridley Field at West 21st near Greengarden. That league was composed of players who were 11 and 12 years old. Martucci’s was led by a team of four coaches: Dave DiSantis, Joe Talarico, Sam Talarico, and Rick Tome. Rather than having a head coach the four young men coached democratically, sharing duties equally.

According to Matt Nathal’s coach, Rick Tome, he was the best player in the league, and quite likely the best in the entire region. Matt was the league’s ace pitcher and he was an exceptional contact hitter who rarely struck out and sprayed line drives to all fields. His coach recalled that he had hit six home runs during the season but he was more focused on getting on base instead of hitting for power. He almost never struck out. More importantly, Matt Nathal was an accomplished student of the game and understood baseball nuances even before he was coached. He wasn’t the fastest runner on the team, for example, but he was the very best, pure base runner. Because he was baseball smart. Matt had grown up in a family whose members were not just baseball fans, but accomplished students of the game. Nathals fully understood the nuances of the game.



*Ten-year-old Matt Nathal in his backyard on Washington Avenue*

Martucci's was having a great season during Matt's 12-year-old year and found themselves in the league's championship game, playing against First National Bank. It was a close game and Matt was at bat in the fifth inning, facing First National's ace pitcher, Bruce Kosko. Standing at the plate and trying to punch a hit through an infield opening, lefthanded hitter Matt Nathal was struck by an inside fastball. The fastball did not hit a relatively benign part of Matt's body. It smashed into his left thumb, the very most important part of the body for a southpaw contact hitter. Matt had to leave the game and Martucci's lost. Matt's injury did not turn out to be a broken bone, but it was a nasty bruise and the thumb turned black, blue, and purple. He was required to wear a large wrap to control the swelling.



*Martuccis Tavern team in 1974: Matt Nathal, front row center, behind the sign and in front of the three young coaches in the back row: Rick Tome ( center), Sam Talarico ( left), and Dave DiSantis ( right). Coach Joe Talarico was missing.*

A short week after the injury, Matt was selected to the all-star team and arrived in uniform to be in the dugout supporting friends and coaches. The game was close until the fifth inning when Matt's father, Vic Nathal, approached Coach Tome and told him that his son was available to play if needed. Peeling the wrap off his still swollen thumb, Matt entered the game as a pitcher and struck out the last six opposing players in succession. And then in the bottom half of the seventh and final inning, with the game tied, it was Matt Nathal's time to be at bat. Coach Tome asked if he could do it and in response, Matt Nathal not only said yes, but he looked directly into an 8-MM camera that coach Dave DiSantis was holding and said that he was going to hit a home run. He was doing a "Babe Ruth!"



*A lefty, Matt Nathal, swings for the fences at the all-star game.*

The third pitch to Matt Nathal was high and hard. Matt swung and crushed it. It was the kind of hit that left no doubt from the point of contact. The ball exploded off the bat, rising so high and so fast that the outfielders barely moved. They just turned and watched the ball sail over their heads in stunned silence. It was the longest home run that anyone had seen at Gridley (later Brabender\_ Field). ([Click here to see the play](#)).



*Matt Nathal, in the red batting helmet, is mobbed at home plate after the home run.*

For most young players such a dramatic hit would have signaled the beginning of a long and prosperous baseball career. Sadly, fate was to hold a much different

future for Matt Nathal. That all-star game hit turned out to be Matt Nathal's final at bat. A few months after the 1974 baseball season had ended, Matt was diagnosed with a rare form of bone cancer. He and his family fought with the same determination that they brought to baseball. They battled for more than a year. Matt was far too weak the following season to try out for or play 3B baseball (ages 13 and 14), the next older level for boys. Instead, he faithfully attended Martucci's practices and games (his old team), acting as an assistant coach. Coach Rick Tome reported that Matt was as good a coach as he had been a player. The boys on the team readily accepted his help and looked forward to Matt's mentoring



*Matt Nathal's gravesite*



*Joseph Nathal's gravesite*



*Detroit Tigers logo*

Matt Nathal passed away quietly in November 1975 joining his grandfather, Joseph, who died in 1957. His story, like others from my neighborhood, is testament to the positive impact of American immigration. It is just one of countless examples of the ways that immigrant families made powerful contributions to the American experience.

End Notes

**Rick Tome**, little league (2B) coach for Matt Nathal, was the inspiration for this story, providing details and illustrations.

**Mike Nathal**, Matt Nathal's older brother, helped with family stories.

**John DeSante**, a member of St. Paul's as a boy, supplied the opera singing story.

**Melinda Meyer** provided the genealogy research.

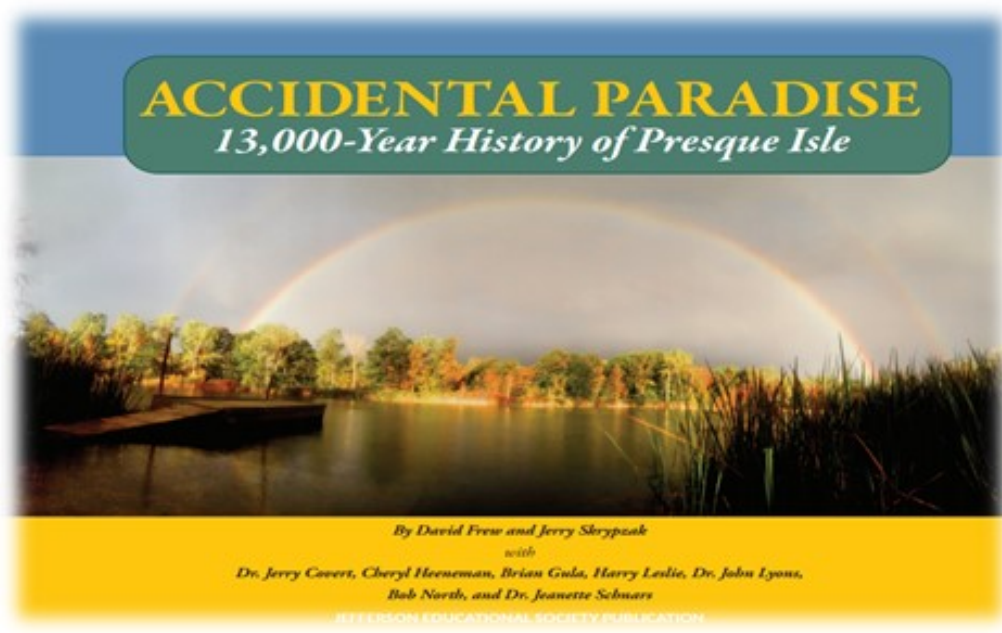
**Baldassero, Lawrence** (2011) "Beyond DiMaggio: Italian Americans in Baseball," Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press

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## Accidental Paradise Available at TREC

### *Accidental Paradise*

*by Dr. David Frew and Jerry Skrypzak*



The much-anticipated new book on Presque Isle 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](http://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](http://AccidentalParadise.com).

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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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