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Jefferson Quick, Timely Reads

ON THE WATERFRONT:
Pymatuning State Park: Where the Ducks Walk on the Fish

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 a new series of articles for the Jefferson, the retired professor takes note of life in and around the water.



I have taken children and grandchildren to witness the spectacle of the carp on the spillway at Pymatuning State Park. Watching delighted groups of children toss bits of old bread to crazed fish that rush to the surface when anyone approaches the viewing area has always been more than worth the drive. They often gather so densely that ducks can walk atop them, hunting for bread themselves.

My wife, Mary Ann, pretends to be grossed-out by the spectacle, but she must secretly love it since she insists on having her own bread to toss.

Between children and grandchildren, I have learned a lot about carp. Unbelievable as it may seem, the species was introduced to North America in a flawed attempt to make up

for the obscene overfishing that took place on the Great Lakes during the mid to late 1800s. There were no carp in North America prior to 1877. This makes the carp, like its modern water-colleagues, zebra mussels and round gobies, an invasive species. The only difference is that the modern invasive species arrived by accident while carp were "cleverly" introduced.

The United States' post-Civil War economy was driven by resource extraction. Coal, iron ore, lumber, wild game, petroleum, and fish were harvested without regard for sustainability and the terrible price that we all continue to pay for the unchecked greed of the Gilded Age is incalculable. A prevailing frontier ethic in the United States at the time was that American resources were infinite.

In Erie, the most obvious mismanagement of resources was connected to commercial fishing. As in other extraction industries, geometric improvements in technology, such as gill nets and steam-powered fish tugs, made it possible to harvest huge quantities of fish from Lake Erie – such vast quantities that several native species were pushed to the point of extinction.

The fact that two countries and eight American states claimed jurisdiction over portions of the Great Lakes made it impossible for sensible treaties or regulations to be developed. Individual jurisdictions were pressured by fishermen and commercial processors to ignore the most obvious solution: limitations and or restraints on commercial fishing. The most damaging commercial fishing practices were related to harvesting during spawning seasons, which eventually made it impossible for species to sustain themselves.

The most popular Lake Erie fish of the post-Civil War era were whitefish and herring (a smaller whitefish relative) and, as harvest totals began to decline, the federal governments of both the United States and Canada announced they were going to solve the problem of shrinking harvests by developing hatchery programs that would replace native fish. Sadly, the hatchery programs failed and embarrassed federal agencies were left scrambling for an alternative.

In the United States, President Ulysses S. Grant established a new agency, the U.S. Fish Commission, and charged it with the task of solving the problem of collapsing Great Lakes fish catches. After a multi-disciplinary team had studied the problem, a "magical solution" was identified. Borrowing from the experiences of international commercial fishing, it was recommended that a favorite European species could easily be introduced to the waters of North America: the carp!

A large, meaty fish, carp was both a favorite game fish that was exciting to catch and an easily-raised farm fish, which readily adapted itself to corn or grain as a feed. European carp, which were being raised on specialty fish farms and by farmers in small ponds, had managed to become a delicacy as well as an ethnic holiday favorite. Bigger than

whitefish, easy to raise, and adaptable to almost any environment, carp were touted as the solution to problems of shrinking native fish stocks in the Great Lakes.

The United States Fish Commission imported its first carp eggs in 1877 and began an eight-year distribution program in which more than 10,000 state, county, local, and private organizations applied for eggs, raised fry or fingerlings, and released them. In 1896, the U.S. Fish Commission declared that it had completed its work of "saving" Great Lakes commercial fishing and that state and local agencies would be taking over the programs. Hundreds of hatcheries that had been struggling to raise and release native species were suddenly having great success with carp.

Pennsylvania's neighboring State, Ohio, was the national leader in the new program, releasing millions of fingerling and adult carp in rivers and streams as well as Lake Erie. And by 1898, carp had managed to spread from coast to coast, into every American state and Canada, and as far south as Central America.

The incredible adaptability of the new fish was the undoing of the program. Once introduced, carp expanded far beyond the vision of the original planners, managing to destroy the delicate environments of the rivers, streams, and lakes where they had been introduced, and to spread geometrically in all directions from intended introduction sites. Canada was an accidental "beneficiary" of United States programs since carp could not be trained to respect international boundaries.

In 1899, John Brice, newly appointed Secretary of the U.S. Fish Commission, publicly announced that the carp introduction program had been "the single biggest mistake in the history of the commission." He apologized, adding that, "There will be no more federal distribution of carp while I am in charge." His Canadian counterpart followed with a seething press release of his own. Pointing to the United States misstep, he characterized carp as "marauding hogs, which multiply like vermin, taste like dirt, displace valuable native species, and destroy habitat."

But what of the alleged nutritional value and exceptional taste of the European import? The taste of carp, like all other fish, tends to be related to the food that they eat, and it was impossible to control what the invasive marauders were eating in the wild. Huge schools of carp, looking and behaving quite like the fish at Pymatuning, instantly clogged North America's lakes and streams.

It had inaccurately been assumed that they would simply co-exist with native species, but in actuality, they overwhelmed their adopted homes. By the early 1900s, commercial fishermen on Lake Erie were catching them but, with the exception of specialty holiday and ethnic markets, they were difficult to sell and did not fetch a premium price like other Great Lakes species. As the carp catch increased, harvests of desirable species continued to decline. Great Lakes whitefish totals, for example, fell from 24 million pounds in 1880, to 8 million pounds in 1900.

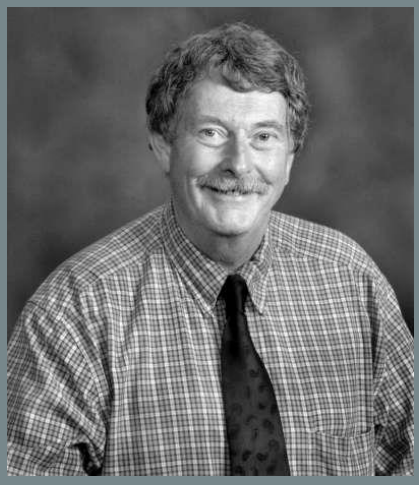
Lake Erie carp continue to be harvested commercially, especially in Ontario (commercial fishing has almost disappeared in the United States) where they show up as an incidental catch while smelt trawling. During the 2000 season, for example, Ontario commercial fishermen reported catching 1.3 million pounds of carp.

Sadly, the lucrative ethnic and holiday carp market is now served by imported, farm-raised carp from Europe. This reality presents Lake Erie's commercial fishermen with a marketing quandary: where to sell the fish? Most Lake Erie carp is categorized as "rough fish" and finds its way into fish sticks, frozen fish patties, and smoked fish products. It is usually emulsified and then injected as a paste to expand the content of other, more desirable (fresh and salt water) species. Read the labels when you are shopping for bargains at the fish counter.

And one more thing. The cute little, pet goldfish in the bowl on your mantel is a carp. Please don't throw him in the bay when you get tired of him.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Historian and author David Frew, Ph.D., is an emeritus professor at Gannon University, where 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.