

Jefferson Quick, Timely Reads

Chestnut Pool: *The Bay-Rat Country Club*

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.



Girl's Day at Chestnut Pool by John Baker

One of the most amazing neighborhood stopovers for us kids during the 1950s was Chestnut Pool. The popular, concrete swimming hole had its genesis during the early days of Erie's Water Authority, when it had seemed intent upon making up for the bad reputation that the City of Erie had earned.

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, the city had been less than judicious about ensuring the quality of local drinking water. After several cholera outbreaks, local officials finally figured out that having both a sewage discharge pipe emptying into Presque Isle Bay and a water supply tube in the bay taking in drinking water was less than prudent. The system worked well so long as prevailing winds and waves continued from the southwest. But the predictable nor'easters that have always turned Presque Isle's currents in the opposite direction pushed discharged sewage west and into the water intake tube.

After several logical but not quite successful attempts to adjust or lengthen the water supply tube, the City of Erie transferred the operation of the water system along to an autonomous body, the grandparent of today's water authority. These days, Erie's municipal water enjoys a world class reputation for purity. But more on that in another article.

The original Water Commission developed a lovely municipal park on the land surrounding the water treatment plant. The original park included stunning architecture, the world's tallest standpipe, a fountain, green space, picnic areas, and other facilities. The space included the early edition of the Erie Yacht Club as well as boat launching facilities. A swimming pool was added later.

During the dog days of summer, my friends and I often made the trek along the bayfront to the foot of Chestnut Street, wearing swimsuits beneath our dungarees. Towels? Not usually. Being Bay Rats, we wouldn't consider walking to Chestnut Pool in a rational way, via city streets. We could have traversed any of the streets between West Fourth and Front. But that would have been way too sensible. Instead, we wandered down Cascade Street to the railroad tracks and waited. Being early advocates of public transportation we were there watching for a slow-moving freight train heading east. Nimble athletes that we were, we would sprint along the tracks next to the rolling railroad cars and leap onto one. The best ride was always in an open hopper car so that we'd crawl inside and avoid the dangers of UV exposure. Sun block? Never heard of it. Somewhere near Chestnut Street we would hop off, being careful not to scuff up our impeccable clothing.

Once poolside we were free to enjoy changing rooms on the west side of the pool (not that we needed them), the benches that surrounded the pool, and the cool water, itself. But only if it was "Boys Day," which happened every other day. The others were "Girls Days." The pool was constructed of extra rough concrete so that bloody-foot-syndrome was a common side effect of elapsed pool time. The pool could be exited by grabbing a

metal wire that surrounded the angled outer walls. To leave the pool without using the steps, a kid had to grip the wire and launch himself up and out of the water. Add bruised hands to the bloody feet (cool kids never used the steps).

The most interesting artifact, however, was a strange wooden box located in the center of the pool. That structure was characterized by longitudinal boards so that climbing it required wedging one's toes between boards and climbing while trying not to slip on the slime that collected on the platform. Sometimes, just when a kid had almost accomplished the final step up to the top of the box, one of the mean kids who was already up there would kick or shove him back into the water. Who knew that the center box was part of a "king of the hill" game? There were supervising lifeguards at Chestnut Pool, but on crowded days there was only so much that they could watch.

Bay Rats would often hang out at the pool on Girls Days as well as Boys Days. We would ogle, loiter near changing rooms, and make incredibly cool comments to demonstrate our masculine interpersonal skills. We were chick magnets with farmer tans.

Getting home usually involved a repeat of our public transportation system. We would loiter near the tracks watching for a slow-moving train, pulling cars west. West-bound trains were less frequent and as a result we often had to walk all the way home along the tracks. This often incurred the wrath of the railroad cops who would spot us trespassing, blow whistles, threaten to arrest us, and sometimes chase us. When we spotted a plain-clothed "RR Dick" we usually taunted him. Probably not smart. When and if they gave chase in their dress pants and clumsy street shoes, we would immediately tack south, sprinting up into and through the paths that lined the bluffs.

We knew our way through those trails, around the terrible piles of rusty junk, and into gullies and culverts that were lined with the kind of brush that could really mess up a pair of good pants. No self-respecting Bay Rat was ever captured by a Railroad Dick. There were a few close calls, when smarter-than-average security guys used automobiles to intercept us as we emerged from the jungles that grew along the bluffs. But that was where a secondary Bay Rat skill became essential. Bay Rats could travel for many city blocks without using a traditional sidewalk or street. We could literally disappear between select houses, dance our way across garage roofs, climb trees, vault fences, and magically re-appear blocks from where we had begun our journeys.

The only close call that we ever had with our transportation scheme occurred on a summer afternoon on our way home. The anticipated train came by. It was moving a bit too fast that day but we jumped on anyway. As it picked up speed near Liberty Street we began to realize that we might have made a mistake. For all we knew we could have been heading for Cleveland or points west. By Plum Street we were panic-jumping off the train and not gracefully. The train was going fast and most of us crashed when we jumped. Almost all of us got off. Almost. After we had leaped for safety, one colleague stood on the train car paralyzed with fear and looking at us. We

waved goodbye as the train disappeared around a bend, heading west. It was 4:30 p.m. when we walked up Cascade Street toward his home, a second-floor apartment. We wondered as we walked. Speculated. Would he be whisked away to a distant city? Cleveland or Pittsburgh? We had no idea where the tracks actually went. Only that they crossed West Eighth Street near the southernmost border of our regular territory near Cascade Creek.

By 5 p.m., we were sitting on the steps that led to his home. As we mulled over the options, we could hear his mother and father preparing dinner and talking. They were wondering aloud why their son was not home yet. More option mulling. We could tell his parents what had happened. Truth would have been followed by phone calls to all of our parents, which surely would have placed us all in serious difficulty. “Whose idea was it to hop a train?” would have been the first question. Alternatively, and if we could be assured that he would never return, we could either (1) go home and say nothing or (2) when pressed, blame our missing friend for the idea to take the train from Chestnut Pool. “What were you thinking?” would be the next question, followed by, “Kids lose legs doing that!” Since we all went to Catholic school we were experienced at both torture and interrogation techniques: “Good nun, bad nun” never phased us.

It was looking grim until we spotted our friend sprinting along Cascade Street from the direction of West Sixth. Sweaty and disheveled, but it was him! Moments later he was having dinner “almost” on schedule while the rest of us were heading home. One more Bay Rat close call.

The next day he shared the details of his adventure. The train began to slow near Fairview. He jumped for safety, crossed a farm field, found West Lake Road, and started running toward Erie. Fortunately for us, a man in a car slowed and asked if he needed a ride. He drove our friend to Sixth and Cascade. Otherwise we might all have suffered the ultimate Bay Rat indignity. Grounded by parents for the rest of our lives.

In 1970, I purchased a sailboat and berthed it at a small marina behind Chestnut Pool. The pool was still operating then and my kids loved the fact that our marina had its own swimming pool. Ed Sparaga ran the marina, but his regular job was operating an east-side, off-brand, bottling company. Ed’s soft drinks came in strange flavors like orange-lime, very-cola, and black cherry. The drinks were bottled in undersized, seven-ounce bottles and delighted kids (like mine) before they had grown old enough to be influenced by Pepsi and Coke marketing. Ed regularly stopped at the marina on summer days to pass out free, ice-cold bottles of soda. An added bonus was the poolside “Worthy Kid Free Lunch Program” on weekdays. My kids would walk to the pool after sailing and get box lunches. Sailing, swimming, box lunches, and free soft drinks. Halcyon days.

A few years later, we moved our sailboat to Presque Isle and lost touch with both Chestnut Pool and the Chestnut Street Marina. As Bayfront development continued, both the pool and marina disappeared. The marina became a trailer launching site, and

the pool morphed into a parking lot. Finally, the bluffs were cleaned up in a campaign to improve the aesthetics of the Bayfront Parkway. Corporate sponsors provided the funds needed to clear out scrub trees, bushes and other detritus in exchange for the opportunity to place logos on the newly cleaned up hillside. Logo sites were enhanced with lovely flower plantings.

These days I drive along the Parkway, thinking that while it has been improved aesthetically, there is something missing. I still see the old paths, piles of junk, and thickets. But most of all, I see my Bay Rat friends.

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.

