

Jefferson Quick, Timely Reads

Brebner and Beckman: Ship Chandlers, Engineers, and Provisioners

By David Frew
August 2020

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.

Erie was originally laid out in a symmetrical, rectangular grid with Presque Isle Bay defining its northern border. The southern boundary on the west side was West Ridge Road, which led out of town toward Ohio. On the east side, it was Buffalo Road, which was (as was the early road naming custom) named for its destination. Erie was eastern-centric during its early history since American development west of town was nearly non-existent (Cleveland was smaller than Erie in those days). Primary north-south streets included Parade and State in the center of town, East Avenue on the east side, and Cascade Street on the west side. Given the way the city has developed over the past decades it is almost impossible to imagine the historic importance of Cascade Street, but it was intended to be the westside equivalent of East Avenue, serving as a main artery to the water. While East Avenue led to Lake Erie east of the channel, Cascade led to Presque Isle Bay at Erie's remote western boundary.

Cascade Street was named for the major creek that entered Presque Isle Bay at the north end of the street. The road to the water first became important during the War of 1812 when the U.S. Brig Niagara, U.S. Brig Lawrence, and schooner Ariel were built at the mouth of the creek. Materials and supplies had to be transported west on Eighth Street and then north on Cascade to reach the shipbuilding site. After the war, the road remained relatively unimportant until the 1870s when the Cascade Docks were being developed. Then, as Erie's three new modern docks began to mature, a new railroad

entered town from the west side, and shipping traffic shifted from east to west, Cascade Street and its surrounding neighborhoods became important again. The city was growing toward the west. Businesses that specialized in serving the ships and the docks began moving west, and commercial establishments that served both the docks and the expanding neighborhood began to appear. Property was relatively inexpensive and, one by one, central downtown businesses that were serving shipping had to face the decision to either stay downtown or move west.

There were two important shipping-support businesses near Fourth and State streets, Brebner's and Beckman's. A.B. Brebner bought out Erie's first specialty chandler (Kessler) and advertised as a ship's chandler. He carried a complete line of the accessories and supplies that ships needed, including line, hardware, brass parts, portholes, dock equipment, and common engine parts. Brebner was at 426 State Street (the building that currently houses a Subway restaurant). For unknown reasons, Brebner did not move west when the Cascade Docks were developing. It is likely that he assumed his supplies and services were small and portable and that, regardless of the location of a ship that needed to be serviced, he would be able to deliver. Beckman, on the other hand, was a provisioner as well as a chandler and ship's engineer. His services included the delivery of large volumes of staple groceries and other bulk supplies, which is why he decided to move. Henry Beckman & Son was in the center of the block on the west side of State Street, between Fifth Street and North Park Row in a much larger building than Brebner's (the building currently occupied by Molly Brannigan's Irish pub).

Henry Beckman's son, William, decided to follow Erie's western dock development by adding a new location. He purchased a large tract of property at the corner of Fourth and Cascade streets, adjacent to the road that served the Cascade Docks. Once established at the new Cascade Street location, Beckman added a barn so that he could deliver wagon loads of supplies to the docks. Eventually, Beckman added regular groceries to the operation, a logical step since he was already provisioning and there were few grocers on the outskirts of town. Beckman built a large home immediately east of the ship provisioning and engineering operation, which was on the southeast corner of Fourth and Cascade streets. The Cascade Street operation had two entrances. The Fourth Street side of the building was dedicated to groceries and ship provisions while the Cascade Street entrance was for ship engineering.



This image of the original store building shows the store entrance, front left, as well as the original ships engineering entrance rear, right. The ships engineering sign disappeared sometime during the 1970s.

The barn, immediately south of the main building, housed the delivery wagon and horse used to transport provisions down Cascade Street to the docks. The large, stake-sided wagon in the barn could be switched from wheels to runners in the winter, when much of the ship-provisioning took place. Beckman added an apartment above the provisioning and engineering building, which was rented to employees.



The old barn is still there, behind the store. The massive wooden barn doors have been replaced by modern garage doors. Vinyl siding covers the original yellow-painted clapboard, but the overhead loading door is still there.

By the 1950s, when I became aware of the Beckmans, the two boys who had moved west with their family in the late 1800s, Charles and William, had become the owners. The ship provisioning and engineering businesses had ended and Beckman's had evolved into a full-service neighborhood grocer. There were no large supermarkets in the neighborhood at the time and Beckman's only competition was from small specialty shops: a meat market, a bakery, and a number of ethnic (Portuguese, Italian, and Swedish) grocers. Beckman's offered customers the opportunity to place purchases on a "tab," which would be paid once a week, usually on Friday (payday). Many store items were sold in bulk and by the pound (rice, potatoes, flour, etc.), and stored in barrels. Bulk products were scooped into a bag and tallied on a huge, central weigh scale.

There were barrels of pickles, crates of fresh eggs, hanging bunches of bananas, and boxes of fruits and vegetables. The front of the store was guarded by enormous, wooden ice boxes that were used to store perishable items, and the store also offered ice for sale. For neighborhood kids, Beckman's offered an enticing display case filled with penny candy. Beckman's always presented a "gift bag of penny candy" to customers who paid their accumulated weekly bill. One of the most interesting features of the store was the huge roll of heavy brown paper and ball of heavy twine behind the

counter. When a customer purchased perishable items, like meat or cheese, it was wrapped in paper and neatly tied with twine.

The oldest son, Charles “Charlie” Beckman, lived in a separate home that he built several lots to the east. Charlie died in the early 1950s leaving his brother, Bill, as sole proprietor. William “Bill” Beckman was an herbalist as well as a grocer. If a customer came to him with almost any malady, such as a sprained ankle, rheumatism, or a serious cold, Bill would concoct a natural cure, often leaving the store to dig up plants and weeds in the yard next door.



The Beckman homestead just east of the store, currently looks like any other neighborhood flat, even though it dates to the late 1800s, along with the store and barn.

Toward the end of his days at the store, when it was far less than busy, I loved to sit with Bill in front of the store and listen to his stories. I was in high school when the stories began to resonate with me and Bill seemed to love having someone to listen. I imagined him to be an old-timer then, but he was only in his early 70s. A tall, thin man, Bill always wore heavy gabardine pants, wide leather suspenders, a wool cap, and sweater. Even in the summer. If he was in the middle of a story when a customer approached, he would tell him to go into the store and help himself while he finished talking. More often than not, the customer would stop to listen with me.

One of the most memorable Bill Beckman stories was his colorful description of the day that he “saved the life” of Presque Isle hermit Joe Root. Bill and his brother, Charlie, were out on the bay ice in March one year, delivering provisions to a ship that was frozen-in and waiting to leave in the spring, when they spotted Joe Root hunched over and walking toward the docks. They motioned to him and, when he approached, they could see he was shivering badly. According to Bill, Joe Root had moved out of the

County poor house too early that year and, without adequate supplies, found himself caught in a terribly difficult cold snap.

Joe Root was shaking and had a high fever when he finally caught up to the Beckman wagon. Bill wrapped him in a blanket, took him to his home on West Fourth Street, and ministered to him until he was well. Beckman later explained that the treatment he always used in such circumstances was a “mustard plaster.” I’m not sure exactly what that was, but I recall having a Bill Beckman mustard plaster applied to my chest as a youngster once when I had a cold. Bill had given the recipe and several of its “secret ingredients” to my mother, at least one of which was freshly picked from the lawn next to the store. I am still not sure what was worse, the cold or the mustard plaster. Beckman’s treatments apparently worked because, according to him, Joe Root recovered and left after a few days, carrying a bag of food from the store to help him through the remaining cold weather.

Bill used a tonic that he vigorously recommended for everyone. He took it daily and pointed to his own health and vitality as proof that it worked. Each morning just before he drank a cup of boiled coffee with eggshells, Bill Beckman consumed a tablespoon of kerosene (sold in bulk at the store) with a teaspoon of sand mixed into it. Not just any old sand, but pure sand from Presque Isle (they sold that by the pound, as well). I tried it once, but never again.

Don Brebner (A.B. Brebner’s son), who was about the same age as Bill Beckman, carried on at his State Street location into the 1970s. Long past the best days for ship chandleries. When I returned to Erie and purchased a sailboat, I was advised to go there for dock lines. To my amazement on the morning that I stopped to explain what I needed, Mr. Brebner announced that we would have to go and see the boat at the Chestnut Street Marina where I had done my best to secure it with clothes line (a terrible idea). He locked his front door, jumped in my car, and drove with me to the boat. Carefully measuring boat cleats and stall dimensions, he led me back to his store, where he unspooled five measured lengths of the correct line and then braided it into loops that would fit over the cleats on my sailboat. Brebner’s stored its line in the basement from where it was led up through the floor, into the main level and to a worktable. As he whipped and braided the lines for my boat, Mr. Brebner was also teaching me to braid line and helping me to understand the importance of braiding rather than tying knots, which weaken the rope.

As he worked for more than an hour, he insisted on giving me a tour of the store, showing me stocks of brasswork and other goods. Mr. Brebner proudly explained how he had needed all of these things in the store during the old days. Armed with five brand new dock lines (bow lines, stern lines, and the all-important spring line), which had been waxed and whipped so that they would not fray, I stood at the oversized cash register terrified by the prospect of what the bill was going to be. Don Brebner took out a scrap of paper, wrote down the total length of line that he had pulled upstairs from

the main spool in the basement, multiplied by the cost per foot, and handed me an invoice for \$4.50.

“But what about your time? The labor to braid the loops, and whip the ends?” I asked.

“It was my pleasure,” he replied. “Go tie her up.”

The Brebner Chandlery closed not long after that introduction. I returned several times to purchase stainless steel hardware and several metal cleats that had been cast by Don Brebner, himself. I still have the cleats. In a bit of circular irony, his stock was purchased by and transferred to Purcell Hardware, the business that took over the Henry Beckman & Son building on State Street. Small world. Long after Brebner had disappeared, the bank that moved into the building on the corner of Fourth and State streets celebrated the chandlery heritage of the neighborhood, declaring it “Chandlery Square.” They found vintage photographs of Brebner’s at the Historical Society (next door at the time), enlarged and framed them, and displayed them in the main lobby.

Meanwhile, back at Fourth and Cascade, Bill Beckman’s daughter, Jean, who lived in the upstairs flat over the old homestead, watched over Bill as he continued to run the store, albeit at a reduced level. During my college years at Gannon, he moved out of the large family home, where he had raised his three daughters, and into the smaller apartment above the store. His wife, Florence, had passed away years earlier, so he was by himself. I left town and moved away for several years and, while I was gone, I learned the sad news that Bill had finally closed the store. When I returned to Erie in 1970, I drove past the shuttered store, wondering if Bill would still be there. And there he was! The store was dark, but Bill Beckman was sitting outside, as always. When I stopped, he was happy to see an old protégé and still telling Cascade Dock stories. I went to see Bill a few more times, but sadly I was busy with a young family and did not get there as often as now I wish that I had.

William “Bill” August Beckman passed away in 1973 at the age of 94.



Bill Beckman was never without his wool cap, or shy about advocating for the advantages of woolen clothing.

These days, I drive by the old store and wish that I could stop just one more time to listen to stories and get a bag of penny candy. I still see Bill sitting there. Sweater, wool cap, leather suspenders. Waiting to tell a story.

Before writing the final draft of this story, I stopped on the bayfront to visit with sailmaker Dave Bierig. Dave grew up next door to the Beckman homestead and his family went to St. Mathew Lutheran Church at West Seventh and Cascade streets with the Beckmans. After Dave had filled in several missing bits of information and I was about to leave, he walked to his work bench and extracted a single sewing needle from the special block of tools that he uses for sewing. “Bill gave this to me when I told him that I had opened my sail loft in 1964,” he told me. Taking it carefully from its place of honor in the middle of the sewing tools, he proudly noted its 1910 vintage and heritage. “This is how a needle should be made,” he added. An authentic Bill Beckman relic. --
David Frew

Photos:

Fourth and Cascade Street: taken by Mary Ann Frew

Barn: taken by Mary Ann Frew

Beckman Homestead: taken by Mary Ann Frew

Wool Hat: https://www.typeparticular.top/hats-c-27_28_30/

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.

