

Jefferson Quick, Timely Reads

Erie's Finnish Community: The Water People

By David Frew
September 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.



The flag of Finland

While the largest ethnic enclaves on Erie's west bayfront were Italian and Portuguese, there were several smaller but distinct groups, as well. Swedish, Hungarian, and Finnish people were interspersed throughout the neighborhood and became known for their customs and activities.

Erie's Finnish people were clearly connected to the water with a number of the men serving as boat captains, commercial fish tug owners, dock workers, and maritime workers. During the 1950s, there was a Finnish steam bath near West

Third and Cascade streets, a small Finnish Church on West 2nd Street, a Finn social hall on lower Plum Street, and a Finnish Boat club west of the Cascade Docks.

The cohesiveness of the Finns made them seem mysterious. With little understanding of Northern European geography, neighborhood kids suspected they were related to Swedish and Russian people, but we were not sure of the details. The Finns did not shop at the neighborhood Swedish grocer (Westerdahl's Store at West Fourth and Poplar) or attend the eastside Russian Church, so we realized that they were, somehow, distinct and autonomous people. But we had lots of questions.

Most of the Finns lived on the lower numbered streets, between Second and Fifth, with others living on the north-south cross streets: Liberty, Plum, Cascade, and Raspberry. But they were so spread out that their did not seem to have their own "neighborhood," like the Italians and Portuguese.

A number of Finns lived part time in the shantytown west of the Cascade Docks where they ran small businesses that served fishermen. They sold bait, new and used fishing tackle, food, and soft drinks during the summer. They also repaired rods and reels, offering one-day service, which included putting new line on fishing poles. The first time that I recall hearing the wise fishing adage "They bites the best when it blows from the west and they bites the least when it blows from the east," was from one of the Finns at the Cascade Docks.

Much of what I have learned recently about Erie's Finnish people was gifted by Virginia Andersen, who was a mainstay at the Erie County Historical Society (Hagen History Center) during the time that I was executive director. Born in 1925, she was directly involved in the Finnish community and in the church. One of the most important initiatives during my tenure at ECHS was a series of ethnic Erie celebrations, honoring the city's ethnic communities.

Ginny Andersen was excited about the program and worked diligently to help with all of the individual celebrations, especially the Scandinavian Exhibit. Her stories made oral history come alive as we celebrated her Finnish roots. Sadly, Andersen passed away in March 2020 at age 94. This article is dedicated to her memory.



Virginia June Forsman Andersen

Finnish emigration was driven by economic and political distress as 10 percent of the country's population (2.6 million in 1900) left between 1866 and 1930. Sandwiched between Sweden and Russia, Finland was a target for political domination by both countries, although Russian attempts to dominate were most disturbing.

The United States was a favorite destination and, like other ethnic groups, arriving Finns were likely to go to places where there were already friends and relatives. The men who came to this country were skilled at sailing, fishing and mining, and found Erie to be a familiar and comforting home since Lake Erie reminded them of their Old World location on the Baltic Sea.

By 1870, there were more than 40 Finnish men working on Erie's docks, a number that increased to 75 by 1890. New arrivals often found work because of the recommendations and support of the men who were already employed there, but opportunities in Erie were limited by the growth of the local docks. As a result, many new immigrants stopped here to become acclimated and then moved on.

Erie's Finns joined with Ohio groups to become a gateway for newly arriving Finnish people. They would come from Ellis Island, be taken in by established families, and stay for several months until their sponsors found jobs for them. Eventually, locals would make connections and direct new arrivals to job opportunities. Dock and port growth was accelerating faster in the port towns west of Erie and there were opportunities for hardworking and reliable men. The movement of Finnish immigrants could have been used to define the late 19th and early 20th Century evolution of Great Lakes railroads.

Finnish immigrants followed the rails west from Erie into and through Ohio, and then to Michigan. At first, they settled in Conneaut, Ashtabula, and Fairport, harbor towns with rapidly growing docks as well as railroad connections. They took jobs on the docks, worked in commercial fishing, became boat captains, and labored for the railroads. Informal local church groups from Erie to Ashtabula became a Finnish immigration agency long before the actual churches, themselves, had been built. Finnish churches began as informal house gatherings in Erie, Conneaut, and Ashtabula, but they were destined to become Finnish Lutheran churches.

The Finns who moved west were welcomed because of their fierce work ethic. They were known for determination, loyalty, and the ability to quickly master any job. When the copper mines and iron fields of Lake Superior opened, Finns flooded into the port towns of Duluth and Superior and then to Michigan's Upper Peninsula, where they worked in the mines. Finnish Great Lakes immigration worked like a funnel with increasing numbers pouring into the west and the largest concentrations accumulating the farthest west.

Eventually, Michigan's Upper Peninsula boasted the single largest American population of Finns, many of whom had moved through Erie, Conneaut or Ashtabula on their way to final destinations. Even today, several Michigan Upper Peninsula towns are known for street signs, which are written in both English and Finnish.

Finnish people were both intensely religious and loyal to their homeland. More than 98 percent were Lutherans and most emigrants fully intended to return to Finland as soon as they were able to earn enough money in the United States (although less than 1 percent actually returned to the Old Country). Those two cultural characteristics help explain their lives in Erie. They insisted on teaching Finnish to their children and on being true to their religious roots. Their Finnish loyalties dissuaded them from joining any of Erie's established and mixed-ethnic Lutheran Churches, including St. Matthew's, which was almost in the center of their West Bayfront neighborhood.

They created their own church, "St. John's Finnish American Evangelical Church," which was established in 1905. The new church was at 935 West Second Street where, in characteristically practical Finn style, they purchased (or had built) a late-1800s flat and converted it to a church. The men of the parish retained the autonomous apartment on the second floor, then opened the first floor by removing interior walls and adding structural beams to replace bearing walls. The resultant space was large but not fancy. Instead of having pews, the room was full of donated, non-matching chairs that were used for services. A pump organ was added so that services could be accompanied by traditional Finnish music, and a small altar with a picture of Jesus was situated at the front of the room. Enough of the original kitchen was retained so that coffee and snacks could be served.



St. John's Finnish Lutheran Church building still stands on West 2nd Street. The official records are unclear regarding its origins. Some believe it was built to be a church several years before it was inaugurated as a church while others insist that the building began as a flat and was converted later. (Photograph by Mary Ann Frew)

Erie's Finnish church was organized as an extension of the established church in Conneaut, Ohio, where the growth of the harbor had allowed more Finns to settle. The Conneaut church, which opened in 1897, shared its only ordained minister with Erie. Recognizing the likelihood that their newly developing American Midwestern churches would be small, the American Finnish Church joined a Finnish Lutheran theological division called the Suomi Synod. Their select theological approach encouraged lay ministry so that the need for actual ordained ministers would be minimized. Conneaut's ordained minister traveled to Erie twice a month, but his time was dedicated to Finnish religious instruction for parish children rather than church services. The men of the parish carried out the liturgical services except for special occasions. Services were in both English and Finnish and, as a result, they were long and arduous, often to the discomfort of younger members.

One parish family was selected to live in the upstairs apartment at a reduced rent and took on the responsibilities of building maintenance. Rent revenue was just enough to pay the ongoing expenses of the church, including heat and electricity. Interestingly, the development of Finnish American Evangelical Lutheran churches in the Great Lakes region was the reverse of the original westward flow of immigrants. The first parish began in Michigan in 1895 where the largest number of immigrants had settled and spread back to the east through Ohio (1897) and toward Erie (1905).

Two adjunct Finnish organizations emerged in Erie during the pre-World War II years: a temperance society and a socialist labor club. Since the temperance society was non-controversial it was invited to use the church building for meetings. The socialist organization, which was informally called the Red Finn Club, met regularly to promote pro-labor and anti-capitalism agendas. Understanding that such a club could seem anti-American, church leaders discouraged any obvious connections with the main parish. The Red Finn Club had more members than the actual parish and was able to purchase a house around the corner from the church at 315 Plum Street.

Unlike many of the staunch parishioners who supported the Finn Temperance Society, Socialist Club members drank alcohol, even during Prohibition. The most important initiative to emerge from the men who were actively involved in the Socialist Club was the establishment of a Finnish Sauna. Dry steam baths were an important part of Finnish culture and members of both the Socialist Club and the main church missed that traditional element of Old World Finnish culture.

During the late 1930s, the men created a neighborhood sauna behind one of the member's homes at 1140 West Fifth St. That sauna was open only to the Finnish men of the neighborhood and it had limited hours, primarily on weekends. The operation was small and cramped and continued in a garage-barn behind the main house for a few years. Eventually, however, the sauna became a source of consternation for neighbors and, in 1940, it moved to West Third Street, where it was opened to the public and

operated most days, rather than just on weekends. The Finnish Sauna continued on West Third Street just east of the ballfield until the late 1970s.

Several of the Finns who were interested in boats and sailing purchased a water lot on the bayfront between Cranberry Street and Raspberry Street, where there was an existing small building. This first clubhouse was immediately west of the Bierig boathouse near the foot of Cranberry Street and on the water west of the Cascade Docks. Dave Bierig's father, Harry, had been in that location for several years and the Finn's invited him to join their club as he helped them settle in. As a bit of a self-deprecating joke, the Finns called their boat club the Finnish Yacht Club (FYC). The Finnish Yacht Club included sailing, rowing, fishing, and ice-boating in the winter and grew in popularity, adding several German members who were friends from the lower westside neighborhood. Eventually, the club outgrew its new headquarters and moved to the east side of the Bierig boathouse, where there was more room.

Meanwhile back on top of the hill, the Finnish Church was slowly growing during the years between the world wars. During the late 1940s and early 1950s, however, it began to shrink. Primary issues for the younger people leaving included the austere nature of the church as well as the extreme length of the services.

Another was the requirement that after years of Finnish language instruction and religious studies, the teen-aged children were required to take time off school and travel to the church in Conneaut during Easter week to prepare to be confirmed. Actual confirmations took place on Easter Sunday.

Another problem was that most of the parish girls decided to be married at St. Matthew's Lutheran Church on West Seventh Street because it was a much more beautiful and traditional venue. Once they had gone there to marry, many of them (and their families) remained at St. Matthew's. Slowly but surely, the younger Finns were becoming "Americanized," a typical issue for many New World ethnic groups.

By the late 1960s, there were only 20 remaining church members, not enough to continue St. John's Church's legal status as a church. The social club on Plum Street was also failing as their former socialist agenda had become increasingly unpopular after World War II. The social hall members gave up and merged with the church. After both organizations began using the same building it became known as the Finnish Social Hall.

Back on the waterfront and west of the Cascade Docks, the older generation of Finnish men, who had established two editions of the Finn Yacht Club and purchased several water lots, were beginning to disappear. They eventually turned their beloved clubhouse over to their children who did not treat it as carefully and, by the late 1950s, the building had fallen into disrepair and burned. During the early 1960s, the Bierigs (Dave and his father) and several other boathouse owners from the

Cascade Creek compound tore the remains of the old clubhouse down. As demolition proceeded and remaining Finn boats found their way into different boathouses, the official club records found their way to the Bierig boathouse.

Decades of meticulously maintained monthly meeting minutes, repair budgets and membership lists with appended photographs and other materials, the kind of primary research data that historians dream of, are currently housed at Dave Bierig's sail-making shop. Dave generously allowed me to peruse these primary documents as I was researching this article and also helped to interpret them. And they are amazing.

The birth and early years of the Finn Yacht Club corresponded with the Great Depression, causing members to be even thriftier than their legendary ethnic predilections would have suggested. Dues were \$1 per year, collected quarterly and recorded in the club log books. If a member missed his quarterly payment, the other members excused the omission and carried on discussions of why and how the club should wait until the person was able to "catch up." The log books, themselves, are historical artifacts, having been purchased from Erie's Ashby Printing. The records celebrate club officers and document the families that perennially provided the club officers in the club: Karhu, Mettala, Voss, and Krashneski.

The club officers guided the Finn Yacht Club and carefully continued the financial stability of the operation for three generations. In one interesting log entry, for example, members carried on a protracted and documented discussion of a decision to purchase a new (\$1.25) broom. In a 1930 entry it was noted that there was cash-on-hand of \$23. Regular documented purchases included pounds of coffee (at 50 cents), bags of sugar, flour, and other basic club supplies.

By the early 1970s, there were only 17 church members, none of whom were interested in living in the upstairs apartment. It had become clear that it would be impossible to continue and the building was offered for sale. On October 10, 1972, St. John's Finnish American Evangelical Lutheran Church held its final traditional service in Finnish, after which the West Second Street building was turned over to new owners.

In 1973, St. John's officially merged with St. Matthew's and, a few days later, Walter Mettala was heard to have said that "God had died." On September 18, 2018, 45 years later, St. Matthew's suffered the same fate that the Finnish church had endured. Shrinking parish size made it impossible for the West Seventh Street church to continue and St. Matthew's merged with Luther Memorial, a downtown church that shares its evangelical theological roots and has been serving Erie since 1861.



Men fill the porch of the second Finn Yacht Club (FYC) on the waterfront west of the Cascade Docks and below the location of today's Niagara Pointe Development in about 1932. Harry Bierig is second from the left. (Photograph contributed by Dave Bierig)



This ten-year old view of Dave Bierig's sail-making shop shows modern homes on his right under construction and a small cottage on the left, all at the outflow of Cascade Creek. Bierig's Sail Making Loft, designed by his architect wife, Susan Sprague, is in the center. The original Finn Yacht Club was in his current parking lot to the right of his buildings, and the second club was on the left just beyond where the cottage is now. (Photo by Jerry Skrypzak from a plane piloted by Tom Zawistoski)

Research for this article was made possible by Dave Bierig, who called my attention to the Finn Yacht Club and provided pictures, records, and important memories. Other key researchers were Melinda Meyer, whose Erie County Historical Society research was the backbone of a former "Scandinavians Exhibit," as well as David A. Laakso, whose "Finnish of Erie" essay provided important data, and the late ECHS member Virginia (Forsman) Andersen, who shared many stories of Erie's Finns.

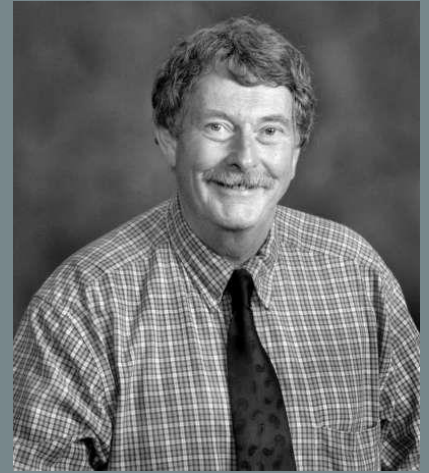
Photos:

Flag: <https://pxhere.com/en/photo/1124576>

Virginia June Forsman Andersen: <https://www.legacy.com/obituaries/erietimesnews/obituary.aspx?n=virginia-june-forsman-andersen&pid=195697906&fhid=31461>

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.



Jefferson Educational Society

www.JSErie.org