

Jefferson Quick, Timely Reads

Erie Was Once Freshwater Fishing Capital of the World

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.



The fish tug Earl Bess, 1918

Whatever happened to the herring dinners? The short answer is illustrated in the picture above. The single largest catch in the history of Lake Erie is shown here. The gillnet tug Earl Bess brought 30 tons of herring to port in Toledo in November 1918.

Herring? Does anyone recall the Lake Erie herring, or cisco, as most people called it? For decades it was Lake Erie's favorite commercial catch, but it was fished to near extinction. Old timers said that herring tasted like a combination of whitefish and blue pike. Of special note is the fact that the catch in the picture above was only possible because it was herring spawning season. Can anyone say "Pig?"

In a recent NBC Television episode of Andrew Zimmern's "What's Eating America," one of the nation's leading chefs predicted the top 10 food traditions that are likely to disappear over the next few years. First on the list was the perch dinner. During the episode, Zimmern attended several perch dinners and interviewed happy diners at clubs, bars, and special events. As he asked them what they remembered of traditional Friday night perch dinners, they described the near sanctity of the experiences they recalled from their childhoods. They told him how the tradition, especially in largely Catholic, Great Lakes towns where eating meat on Friday was forbidden, had been indelibly etched into their memories. Those perch dinners were tasty, inexpensive, and fun.

But how did this simple fish rise to its historic role as a junk, or "rough" fish, to its status as an iconic Post World War II era food? And why is it facing extinction now?

Modern observers are surprised to learn that Lake Erie was the most productive fishery of the five Great Lakes. In the early 1900s, Erie was known as the "Freshwater Fishing Capital of the World," with more than 140 tugs headquartered at the port as late as 1923. Considering the immense size of Lake Superior, it is shocking to learn that Lake Erie has had thousands of times more fish. Biologists cite "The 70 to 2 Ratio" in describing Great Lakes fisheries. Lake Superior has 70 percent of the water but only 2 percent of the fish, while Lake Erie is the opposite with 2 percent of the water and 70 percent of the fish. Of all the Lake Erie commercial fishing ports, Erie was the most productive, largely because of structure provided by the two enormous sand-spit peninsulas that bordered the local fishing grounds: Presque Isle and Long Point. Fish need rich, diverse environments for spawning and growth, and the wetlands, bays, lagoons, and tiered-bottom structures of both Presque Isle and Long Point provided them all: the structure, the insects, and various water depths needed to create one of the greatest fisheries on Earth.

At one time, 20 percent of the regional GDP could be traced directly or indirectly to fishing. Whitefish and herring dinners were a regular part of the culture, and almost anyone with ambition and a fishing pole could catch all of the protein that a family needed in a few hours of angling. Dozens of local fish markets featured fresh whitefish, herring, and pickerel, and the Friday night fish dinner was a staple of existence in neighborhood bars and restaurants. There were more than 100 officially registered fish tugs in the harbor and more from other ports when the fishing was good. There were 16 fish processing houses, hundreds of thousands of miles of fish netting that needed constant repair, and several full-time fish tug builders. Railroad trains left Erie daily, carrying refrigerated loads of sweet-tasting Lake Erie fish to big-city markets, including Chicago and New York City.

And then one day it was all gone. More amazing was the fact that species that are most prized today – perch and yellow pike (walleye) – did not become desirable until

others – whitefish, herring (cisco), and blue pike (pickerel) – had disappeared. Whitefish were large and relatively expensive. They were usually baked and presented as a family centerpiece meal for Sundays or special occasions. Blue pike and herring were smaller, milder tasting, and often fried, which made them an informal or fun food. Lots of bars and restaurants featured them as dinner specials. Perch were considered a “rough fish,” in much the same way that crappie or other small fish are today.

After herring were overfished to near extinction, restaurants and bars shifted their branding toward [blue pike](#). Downtown Erie’s prestigious Lawrence Hotel, for example, began to advertise its “Blue Plate Blue Pike Dinner” as its signature dish. In [Port Dover, Ontario](#), just across the lake from Erie, the popular beach town’s most desirable food became blue pickerel (Canadian for blue pike) at both the walk-up food stands and the more traditional Erie Beach Hotel. When the blues disappeared, entrepreneurs on both sides of Lake Erie struggled to find a replacement. Gill-netters had always caught yellow perch with blue pike. The net mesh sizes that worked to capture blue pike were the correct size for the largest yellow perch. So commercial fishermen and processing houses began to pitch the former junk fish as a worthy replacement.

Within a few years, slightly reduced gill net openings allowed yellow perch to be harvested in almost the same numbers as blue pike had been. They were smaller and harder to fillet, but tasty and mild, and within a few years they had become an accepted staple fish.

Andrew Schneider, third generation owner of the Erie Beach Hotel in Port Dover, recalls his grandfather’s stories about the transition. During winter (off season), the town’s restaurateurs met to craft a plan for rebranding and shifted their emphasis from blue pickerel to perch, touting the fresh and sweet taste of the “yellows.”

The rebranding in Port Dover was made smoother by the relatively confined space, small number of entrepreneurs, and a general spirit of cooperation. It took longer in Erie, but it finally happened. For several decades, yellow perch were elevated to the role of “most tasty and desired local fish,” on both sides of Lake Erie, but eventually they began to decline, as well. These days the once “rough fish” that became a local favorite seems to be following the herring and blue pike into obscurity. If a persistent shopper can find authentic Lake Erie yellow perch, which is not always possible, the price is about \$20 per pound, retail. Aquatic gold.



When available, wild caught yellow perch fillets from Lake Erie that were processed at Leamington, Ontario, and marketed as organic, are sold for \$20 per pound retail.

There are still a few local sport fisherman who find and catch yellow perch but, as the commercial industry declined and anglers became more interested in catching large game fish, the experience of eating fresh yellow perch slowly became a distant memory. They are occasionally caught by bucket fishermen from piers and shorelines, but the only reliable way to catch them these days is with a boat. And even fishermen with large, lake-worthy boats are reporting that they are increasingly difficult to find.

But what of the “perch” commonly offered at local eateries: the \$9.95 perch sandwich, or \$14.95 perch dinner? If perch is selling for \$20 per pound how can a restaurant offer perch at such low prices?

The short answer, of course, is that it is impossible. The inexpensive perch on those menus are probably Lake Erie “white perch,” instead of yellow perch. To be fair to the restaurant and server the product arrived in a box that said “Lake Erie perch,” but instead of wholesaling for \$20 per pound it (if it is a Lake Erie white perch), it sold for \$1.50 per pound.

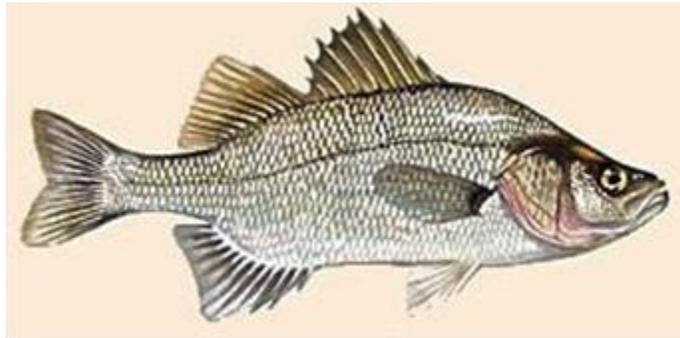
Quite a difference, both in price and in taste.

White “perch” is an invasive species that arrived in Lake Erie courtesy of the St. Lawrence Seaway and thrived. It is easily confused with the silver (or white) bass that has always been a part of the Lake Erie fish biomass. Technically, the white perch is a member of the bass family, and oilier and fattier than a yellow perch. Decades ago, commercial fishermen, facing a decline in yellow perch, were able to rebrand the newcomer as a Lake Erie perch (sometimes white perch are mixed and processed with silver bass by wholesalers). As a local chef explained, once a fillet is thickly breaded and deep fried, it is almost impossible to distinguish one species from another.

As American commercial fishing slowly disappeared, farmers in Ohio, Michigan, and Wisconsin began to raise perch in outdoor ponds or recirculating tanks. Using eggs from brood stock or government agencies in their respective states, aquaculturists learned to raise harvestable-sized (6- to 9-inch) perch in two or three years. Feed from agricultural supply houses was used to nourish the fish. Given the high price and shrinking supply of traditionally caught yellow perch, farm-raised perch filled a market void and, by the early 2000s, midwestern, farm-raised perch had taken over a substantial portion of the market.

Afficionados of taste have complained that farm-raised yellow perch are not as tasty as their traditional wild-caught, Lake Erie counterparts. Nutritionists have analyzed them and concluded that farm-raised perch are higher in fat and lower in protein. The best arguments for artificially raised perch is that they are less expensive (averaging about \$13 per pound) and more sustainable.

Regardless of the details, they continue to sell well. Wholesale suppliers who deliver cases of frozen perch to restaurants may provide one of three products that are always clearly marked, (1) "Lake Erie Yellow Perch," which are prohibitively expensive, (2) "Lake Erie Perch," which are, in reality, inexpensive white perch, and (3) "Yellow Perch," which are farm- or tank-raised.



The white perch is an invasive species and a member of the bass family.

My favorite perch dinner is served at the Erie Beach Hotel in Port Dover near the docks where commercial fishermen continue to gillnet for the Lake Erie delicacy. Erie Beach perch are very lightly breaded and gently pan fried, using a recipe that has been carefully followed for almost 50 years. The perch there are small by contrast with the slabs of deep fried "perch" served locally, but they are real yellow perch, and fresh. The current menu price for a five-ounce perch dinner at the Erie Beach is \$20. Expensive but well worth the experience, which returns taste buds to 1950s Erie. The only way that the Erie Beach can offer that price is by buying in bulk, and directly from commercial fishermen. I have eaten at the Erie Beach with American sailor friends who inspect the perch dinner as it is served and complain about the size of the portions and the price, muttering about how they were given bigger portions in Erie for less money. They don't understand.



Erie's last commercial fishermen will sell you fresh yellow perch. Find the boat in the East Slip and give them a call.

What is left of commercial fishing in Erie? There is one trap net boat working the lake and selling fresh fish at the East Basin behind Blasco Library. The owners go out as often as they can and sell their catch reasonably from the boat when they return, usually in the early afternoon. It's a far cry from the glory days of the early 1900s, but it is fresh fish, usually including real yellow perch, and a chance to meet two guys who absolutely love what they do. Just one thing ... you will have to learn how to clean your own!

Photos:

Earl Bess: https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/0,4570,7-350-79136_79236_80538_80541-424724--,00.html

Fried Perch Fillets: <https://www.goerie.com/entertainmentlife/20170906/lake-erie-fishermen-sell-feast-of-glory>

White Perch: <https://www.ontario.ca/page/white-perch>

Erie's last commercial fisherman: <https://www.goerie.com/entertainmentlife/20170905/erie-commercial-fishermen-sell-catch-right-off-their-boat>

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.

