

Jefferson Quick, Timely Reads

Dreamer: A Sailmaker's Gift

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.

As a young boy who could not possibly have been more culturally removed from yachting, I often stood on the bluffs overlooking Presque Isle Bay, watching sailboats. It was the 1950s and the wooden sailing vessels were painted white and trimmed in gleaming wood. My imagination went wild when I watched them sail through the bay, exit the channel, and disappear. I knew they were headed for some magical port in Canada on the mysterious north side of Lake Erie.

One of those boats stood out, even to my untrained eye. It had two masts and a stunning array of sails, including an enormous spinnaker. It was clearly the most beautiful local boat. I later learned that the name of this mystical boyhood vision was Enigma, owned by local drug store owner Kennedy Eckerd.

Eventually, Mr. Eckerd tired of the complications of commissioning Enigma. It was the 1970s, fiberglass boats had become the norm, and the problems associated with maintaining a large wooden boat had begun to feel like a chore. Enigma was sold to a Port Dover couple and Presque Isle Bay was eventually left with a fleet of modern Clorox bottles instead of varnished wooden sailing ships.

The new fiberglass sailboats were inexpensive and easy to maintain, and during the 1970s and 1980s, sailing grew in Erie. Several marinas and a new yacht club (Commodore Perry) popped up along the bayfront but, except for a few old-time

wooden boats, the “residents” of these new boating homes were almost exclusively modern fiberglass boats so that the 1950s vision of gleaming white paint, varnish, and wooden sailing yachts seemed to have disappeared forever.

Out of the closet! In 1971, my family purchased a sailboat. Not a classic wooden beauty, but a plastic boat. Pretty and traditionally designed, as compared to most modern plastic boats, but made of fiberglass. I did not think that I had the skills or the time required to maintain a wooden boat. But I was determined to introduce my children to sailing.

Sailboats need sails and sail-repairs, and I was heartened to know that an old neighborhood friend was the local sailmaker. So soon after we acquired our first boat, I was leading my children along the unimproved bayfront to Dave Bierig’s sail loft.

A trip to his place at the outlet of Cascade Creek was an adventure. Especially for my kids. It wasn’t easy to get there during the 1970s. Access was via scruffy pathway that led from the base of the Cascade Docks (pre-condominium) over a rickety wooden bridge that spanned the creek, and through a thicket of sumac and other brush. Approaching the sail loft, we were often greeted by Dave’s Dad, Harry Bierig, who remembered me from the Fourth Street neighborhood, where we had all grown up. Harry was a kind and gentle man and always doted over my children.

Dave Bierig, the Sailmaker, is an underappreciated community treasure. Growing up just a few houses from me in “Bay Rat Land,” he somehow managed to avoid the pressure to be a lunatic that seemed to have infected my friends. He would never have wasted his time or abused his body by playing tackle football in the street, baseball with an ancient string-core, wrapped with black electrical tape, or basketball on a gravel playground bounded by bent steel rims with no nets. While my friends and I were doing those things and dreaming of “the majors,” he was at his grandfather’s boathouse on the bay (part of his current sail-loft complex), learning the art and science of sailing.

Unbeknownst to me, as a youngster he had earned his way aboard Enigma as a crewmember. We had graduated from high school the same year and Dave went off to the University of Michigan to major in Nautical Architecture. I went to Gannon University in Erie and lost touch with him – that was until I returned to Erie and bought a sailboat.

Somehow, and not surprisingly, corporate life was not interesting to Dave Bierig, so he took over his father’s waterfront cottage and built an amazing business in an obscure bayfront corner. At first, he made sails for everyone, but as time marched along, he became more interested in tall ships and traditional sail making. And that is what led to Dreamer.

Bierig was in Buffalo, New York putting a new set of sails on a tall ship that was headed from Albany back to Michigan when he noticed an old wooden sailboat sitting alone in a back corner of the boatyard. Unable to help himself, he wandered - to the orphaned “woodie,” walked around its deteriorating hull, and fell in love. He knew the designer and quickly learned the story of the seemingly abandoned sailboat.

It was Dreamer, a 1929 John Alden design that had sailed from the Port of Buffalo for several years but was caught up in a nasty divorce settlement. Legal custody battles usually center on children, but in this particular case, it was a classic sailboat that was suffering. Dreamer had become a boatyard orphan and was in serious danger of deteriorating from neglect to the point it would eventually become chainsaw scrap.

John Alden, Dreamer’s designer, was one of a very few American rock-star sailboat designers. Born in upstate New York in 1884, he studied nautical architecture at MIT and established his own design firm in 1908. After achieving moderate success, he was propelled to sailing prominence when one of his sailboats, Malibar X, won the 1932 Bermuda Race. His designs (he is credited with more than 1,000) featured interior ballast, sawn rather than steamed construction, and heavy-weather proficiency.

Alden believed that in cases in which crew might be sick, his designs should be easily sailed by one or two people. He semi-retired in 1955 but his design firm continued into the 2000s. Alden continued to race regularly, well into his 70s, and passed away in Florida in 1962. His papers and working designs have been preserved in MIT’s Library Collections Department.

Dreamer is typical of Alden’s late 1920s designs. Built in Maine, it is 55 feet long (on deck), planked with yellow pine, and displaces more than 55,000 pounds. It was one of 10 in an Alden design series. Dreamer has crossed the Atlantic Ocean twice.

Bierig already owned a wooden sailboat, another Alden design that had been built in Erie by Ted Pasch. But that ship, Anemone, while serviceable and beautiful, could not compare to Bierig’s vision of what Dreamer could become.

So, he returned to Erie, organized a group of sailing colleagues, who each had significant skills to bring to the project, and went to work.

At the onset, the most important partner was John Cooder, who worked with Bierig to release Dreamer from her divorce-driven bondage. Bierig and Cooder were able to convince Dreamer’s warring “parents” that unless they could reach a timely agreement regarding the boat that it would rot and become a liability. They were able to work “mediation magic” that resulted in Dreamer being sold to the Bierig group.

The next critical player in the Dreamer drama was Bob Arlet, the U.S. Brig Niagara shipwright. Those who know Arlet generally regard him as the most talented boat restoration expert in the region. He is a magician with wood as well as with mechanical systems. With those members aboard, Bierig made an offer and became a majority owner of Dreamer (with Cooder, Arlet, and the Klaber Family, Erie Yacht Club sailors).



Dreamer, parked along the back fence at Erie Yacht Club, waits to be restored.

On an exciting day at the Erie Yacht Club, Dreamer came via transport truck. Word of its impending arrival had spread and, an unexpected crowd was there to watch the travel-lift pick Dreamer up and place it along a back fence.

The event was made festive by bagpipe music supplied by Gib Loessel, who gifted the occasion with appropriate maritime tunes as he “piped Dreamer into position.” “Amazing Grace” was the crowd favorite that day.

Meanwhile, the mood among observers was mixed. While most outwardly cheered and smiled, there was a minor undercurrent of skepticism.

“He’s nuts,” one observer muttered to no one in particular. “Just delaying the chainsaw,” another added. But I never had a doubt. I knew Bierig and Arlet and, while the project may have seemed impractical to some, Bierig and Arlet would not fail.

In the final analysis, Dreamer was not about practical. It was about beauty, aesthetics, and truth. As I watched that day, I could not stop thinking about a favorite book, “Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance.” In the words of its author, Robert Pirsig, I was watching the unfolding of “quality.” That book had a powerful impact on me. I still recall my first time reading it while sitting on my boat in Port Dover 45 years ago. I recall that moment as though it just happened yesterday. As I turned pages decades ago, I knew that Dave Bierig was the perfect example of what Pirsig was talking about when he described a “scientific realist.” The author presented a thematic

dichotomy regarding modern people. Defining them as either “gestalt types” who romanticize things but fail to understand the essence of how they work, or “scientific realists.”

Pirsig defined the philosophical essence of the scientific realist as a person who saw a problem (motorcycle maintenance, for example) as an opportunity to embrace the process of understanding. Rather than being irritated and impatient, or finding a required task dull and boring, Pirsig’s scientific realist would become Zen-like as he or she carefully dissected a problem into small components and solved each of them iteratively.

In the world of sailing, gestalt types would find varnishing to be boring. Bierig, on the other hand, has often said that varnishing is a philosophical exercise. I’m not sure how much philosophy a nautical engineering student takes at the University of Michigan, but I do know this: wooden boats require lots of varnishing, while their modern fiberglass counterparts are often advertised as “requiring little or no maintenance and having a minimum amount of ‘troublesome’ exterior wood to be sanded and varnished!”

Dreamer became an organic Erie Yacht Club event that season. A maritime “Stone Soup Party.”

People wandered by, brought things, and volunteered to help. There was often such a line of “helpful” spectators that the visitors interrupted progress. But Bierig and Arlet, the resident Zen masters, happily narrated progress as they cut, sanded, and glued new bits of wood into position.

Volunteers helped with menial stuff. They sanded, hauled materials, and did odd jobs. Instead of taking years, the Dreamer project took months, until finally on the one amazing fall day, she was lifted from her cradle and placed in the water. Resurrection. John Alden’s 1929 creation was alive again.

More than one old-timer wandered by, glanced at her and asked, “Is that Enigma? Where has she been?” Dreamer was returning Erie to the halcyon days of wooden boats and sailing.



Dreamer, races in mid-Lake Erie, spinnakers up and filled. Note the bow wake. Slow boats do not make a huge bow wake!

When racing began the next spring, skeptics turned out once more to opine on Dreamer's likely inability to keep up with modern lightweight plastic boats. They were wrong. In race after race, Dreamer has proved more than competitive. Often a flat-out winner given the "right conditions," it is heavier than modern boats, a reassuring characteristic in heavy weather, but also smooth and fast. And thanks to Bierig's sailing ability, skills honed on Enigma as well as myriad tall ships he has sailed after equipping them with sails, Dreamer is surprisingly adept.

Additionally, it is always the most photographed boat in the races and the clear crowd favorite during after-race festivities dockside. Who cares about examining the details of one more Clorox bottle with a mast, boom, and stainless-steel trim where there should be varnished wood, when there is a beautiful, classic to inspect?



Dave Bierig stands on Dreamer.

On any given day, from very early spring to very late fall, the visual gift of Dreamer is often present on Presque Isle Bay, where shore observers can capture the essence of beauty under sail without traveling to one of the world's wooden-boat Meccas such as, Port Townsend, Washington or Newport, Rhode Island.

During the last Tall Ships Erie Festival, Dreamer was in the bay, sailing with the demonstration ships that were taking passengers for rides. It was also in the lake waiting as the tall ships arrived and tagging along with the parade into the harbor. A lifelong student of tall ships, Bierig was interested in seeing them as they arrived. And as a world-renowned, tall ship sailmaker, he and Dreamer were known to almost all tall ship captains. Several were carrying Bierig sails.

Finally, when the event was over and follow-up survey information was being collected about festival attendees' favorite tall ships, the information gatherers were perplexed by one of the perennial voting favorites. Tabulators, who knew the names and home ports of all "official" participants in Erie's maritime drama, were confused by the many write-in nominations for Dreamer. "What is this Dreamer?" they asked, "and why can't we find it on the official list?"

It is also worthy of note that many of the official tall ships on the circuit are not exactly as they seem. One “star of the show” was a 1980s-era, molded-fiberglass representation of a Spanish galleon. A fiberglass galleon? Really?

I happened to be in St. Augustine, Florida several years ago when the “Spanish galleon” arrived after crossing the Atlantic. At the docks the next morning, I was greeted by a departing swath of crew that had made the delivery transit across the ocean. Behaving quite like a pack of rats abandoning ship, they were complaining about a vessel that was less than competent as a sailing machine. One young man, using broken English, complained that without engines they would have been stuck in the middle of the ocean forever where they were stuck once waiting for a delivery of fuel after running low.

Erie’s tall ship entry, the U.S. Brig Niagara, as beautiful and important as she has been to the community, is a 1980s “representation” of a ship that fought against the British in the War of 1812. Meanwhile, Dreamer is the “real thing” – a living, breathing ship that has been sailing, and sailing well, since her New England launch more than 90 years ago. It is a gift to Erie of performance art provided by the hard work and generosity of Dave Bierig and friends.



Robert Pirsig

On a related note, author Pirsig spent a few weeks in Erie after he had written his first book and before Bierig launched Dreamer. He was anchored at Presque Isle’s Marina Lake in a sailboat where he was writing his second book, “Lila: An Inquiry into Morals.” My son was dock master at the marina and learned the identity of the mysterious, long-term visitor when he (Pirsig) was supplying his boat. Pirsig shared that he was using the boat as an office, where he had been working on a follow-up book.

Knowing my love of “Zen,” my son told me about the “famous” visitor and I drove my boat to Marina Lake to strike up a conversation. Mr. Pirsig was polite but standoffish as one of his lunatic admirers (me) circled his anchored boat, babbling unwanted accolades. A few days later, he was gone and heading toward New York, either driven away by a writing deadline or by me.

I bought his new book shortly after it was published but had a hard time following it. Not enough philosophy in my academic background, I guess. “Lila” seemed to have the exact opposite impact as his first book. While “Zen” was a runaway bestseller that earned mixed critical reviews, “Lila” did not sell well but was very well-received by critics. While “Zen” was a philosophical treatise that emerged from a motorcycle odyssey, “Lila” was a continuation of the same story about the quest for “quality” based on a sailboat trip through the Great Lakes. Robert Pirsig received several writing accolades after “Lila” was published. He was honored by the University of Minnesota, his undergraduate alma mater, and Montana State University, where he taught. Robert Pirsig passed away quietly in 2017 after an extended illness.

Photos:

Dreamer: <http://coletech.net/coltrek/Dreamer.htm>

Dreamer in Lake Erie: <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/162833342750341322/?autologin=true>

David Bierig: <http://www.erieyachtclub.org/images/LOG/2012/janfeb2012log.pdf>

Robert Pirsig: <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-4441446/Robert-M-Pirsig-million-selling-Zen-author-dead-88.html>

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.

