

Jefferson Quick, Timely Reads

Strong Estate: *Bayfront Adventureland of the 1950s*

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.

I hope that the statute of limitations has expired since I am about to admit to a major crime spree. As a youth, my colleagues and I often invaded the mysterious Strong Estate that defined the waterfront space between the United Oilfields (today's Niagara Pointe) and the Frontier Neighborhood bounded on the east by Monica Drive.

Our incursions were well-planned and executed, military-style maneuvers. We often invaded during early evening hours, wearing baseball hats, dungarees (not jeans) and faded white (gray) undershirts. Often there was burnt cork or mud under our eyes and we carried jack knives and canteens to ward off dreaded dehydration. Most importantly, we laced up our high-top sneakers so that when (not if) we were discovered we could flee effectively. There were dozens of incursions and a few frightening chases, sometimes by the police, but we were never apprehended. Why did we do it? I have no idea.

The Zion's of Erie's Gilded Age invested in land. William L. Scott, Charles Reed's protégé who ultimately became even wealthier than his mentor, systematically purchased much of the land between the old city limits (Cranberry Street) and today's Presque Isle Drive. His first acquisition extended from Cranberry Street to the western

boundary of today's Frontier Park (and Lake Erie Arboretum at Frontier Park). The southern boundary of the land was West Lake Road (today's West Eighth Street) and the northern boundary was Presque Isle Bay.

A believer in active investments, Scott created a large dairy farm on the property, and sold products at a profit. Scott's "East Farm" was developed before West Sixth Street. Later he purchased land that stretched roughly from today's Sommerheim Drive to Peninsula Drive and called it his "West Farm." During the 1880s, Scott became involved in two complicated enterprises, the development of a grand excursion hotel at the Head (near the location of today's Sara's Restaurant) called Massasauga Point and the creation of a horse breeding operation, Algeria Farms, at his West Farm. Originally, the West Farm was simply a place to raise feed for cows on the East Farm but Scott eventually lost interest in dairy farm and began to focus on horse breeding.



When William Scott died in 1891 his investments were passed to his daughter, Anne, and her husband, (Scott's son-in-law) Charles Hamot Strong. Annie was primarily interested in social and charitable pursuits and she left the "business" of operating the suddenly expanded family enterprises to her husband, who had previously demonstrated his entrepreneurial skills in several endeavors. The combination of the Scott and Strong family fortunes made Charles Strong the area's most wealthy and powerful person. With the East (dairy) Farm in decline, Strong used the added political power of his friends, the Reeds and Tracys, to extend West Sixth Street to the west. The city was experiencing growing pains and all of them could see the future

importance of real estate development in the west "suburbs," on land owned by the Reed and the Tracy families. The first step in that transition was the creation of the West Sixth Street Viaduct, which was needed to span Cascade Creek.

To sweeten the "deal," Strong contributed right-of-way land for the first extension of West Sixth Street, which bisected the dairy farm in a southerly, sweeping circle that intersected with West Lake Road and divided the property into two pieces: (1) Frontier Park on the south, which is today's L.E.A.F. Arboretum bounded by Monaca Drive on the east and Seminole Drive on the west, and (2) the Strong Estate, which was composed of the land between the new West Sixth Street extension and Presque Isle Bay from immediately west of the new viaduct.

With the exception of the original Scott dairy farm, the Reeds owned the property from Erie's western city limit (Cranberry Street) to today's Beverly Drive. Their interest in the extension of West Sixth Street was the opportunity to develop houses in the Frontier area and the Tracy family shared that motivation since it owned the land between Beverly Drive and Sommerheim. For Charles Strong, however, the motivation was more focused. He was hoping to develop a private retreat away from Erie's

downtown core and its infamously dirty sailors to satisfy his wife's inclination to travel away from Erie in the summer.

Charles and Annie Strong were aware of the Adirondack Movement of the late 1800s, a wave of interest in building luxury "camps" in the mountains west of New England. Wealthy people, anxious to escape sailor-carried diseases, infested port towns during the pre-antibiotic era, left city homes during summer sailing seasons in search of safe havens away from sailors and their diseases – viruses, social distancing, escaping the cities, sound familiar? And the Adirondack Mountains provided a popular retreat.



Like other locals of means, Strong recognized the logic of avoiding exposure to sailors and their diseases but he hated traveling and he had the means to create his own sanctuary. So his plan was to isolate himself and his wife on the 100 acres of waterfront property where he planned to develop a retreat compound. With a twist of humor and sarcasm, and knowing that every exclusive mountain retreat needed an appropriate name, he called his new camp "Someplace" and hired an acclaimed Adirondack cabin architect to design and build a rustic style cabin on the northern edge of the property so that he would be able to sit on the porch and see Presque Isle Bay.

In keeping with the trend in Adirondack style cabins, the quaint, woodsy exterior that he built belied the opulence of the interior. There was a large living room, formal dining room, library-reading room, huge master bedroom with a view of the water, several bathrooms and four guest rooms. Two of Strong's greatest interests were fine wine and reading, and to that end he built a tower on the grounds that housed an enormous wine cellar. The tower building had a rooftop observation deck where he and his guests could enjoy wine and watch sunsets. The upper deck was high enough to be able to see the sun setting over the top of Presque Isle. The reading room in the main building boasted one of the area's largest private libraries.



Charles Strong's 1895 Adirondack Cabin

The new viaduct allowed the Strongs to travel from their mansion at Sixth and Peach streets (Gannon's Old Main) and for servants and groundskeepers to travel to work. There was a servant path at the western edge of the viaduct that allowed the help, who had traveled via the Eighth Street Trolley, to walk to the estate. Early on, the Strongs traveled by horse and buggy but, as soon as automobiles became commonplace, Charles began commuting in his personal car. At peak there were four groundskeepers, a main gate keeper, and six house servants at the estate. The entire compound was bordered by concrete walls topped with barbed wire to prevent trespassing. An extensive interior roadway system was lined with mortared stone, creating an overall mountain ambiance.

Sadly, the development of the property with its beautiful walking paths, lookouts, gardens, and outbuildings was wasted on Annie Scott Strong. Quite the opposite of her husband, who was a loner and designed the property as a way of "getting away from people," Annie was a socialite who longed for parties and grand events. "Someplace" bored her. She began traveling to New York City with her daughter and spending more time entertaining at the downtown mansion, which became the epicenter of her substantial charitable work. She was the primary driver in the establishment of a School of Nursing at Hamot Hospital, a major organizer of and contributor to drives that fed Erie's destitute and homeless, and eventually the person who donated enough of her father's western farm land to provide an entry road for Presque Isle when it became a state park.



The spacious porch at Someplace faced Presque Isle Bay.

Meanwhile, Annie's general absence led to her husband's estate becoming a male-oriented retreat with billiards, cigar smoking, and duck hunting. It was said that some of Erie's most important business deals were transacted at Strong's Someplace. Among the many features that he added was a private dock and landing space for his luxurious motor yacht, Mystic, which was purchased in New England and brought to Erie via the Erie Canal. Mystic was the largest yacht in Erie. Among his many business interests, Charles Strong was President of Erie's electric company and when the downtown generating station became inadequate in the early 1900s, he sold his company a few acres of unused land on the south side of the estate (outside the walled borders), where he built an electric generating station fired by coal that was delivered from the adjacent

Cascade Docks. The Strong Electric Station was built in stages between 1909 and 1919, and it operated until 1944. Both Presque Isle Bay and Cascade Creek were used for cooling water. The two concrete structures in the water north of the Strong Estate were cooling-water intake ports. In addition, Cascade Creek was dammed just west of Cranberry Street and the large pond that was crated was also used for cooling. Strong's Pond was emptied in the 1950s following a tragic drowning.

Charles Strong died in 1936 and but his estate remained in its original configuration until the late 1960s. At first his daughter, who had returned to Erie from New York City, managed the property. During the late 1960s, however, it was divided and sold in pieces, becoming a corporate headquarters for Zurn Industries as well as a luxury condominium complex (South Shore Place). At about the same time that Strong's beautiful Adirondack cabin was demolished, the Strong Electric Plant was also taken down.

Meanwhile, back to the 1950s and the exciting Bay Rat military maneuvers. Since we had probably watched too many World War II movies, our incursions into the Strong Estate were executed like fine-tuned tactical operations. Plans were carefully scratched in dirt with a sharp stick. The point of entry was always the east wall that paralleled a path leading to the bay. A part of the wall was low enough to climb and the barbed wire had been cleared away. There was a full-time caretaker, but he was unable to run fast enough to be a serious threat.

It was said, however, that he had kennels with dogs that he would set loose on intruders, so we always tried to sneak in and out ... very carefully. On several occasions, when crows gave our location away, he loudly threatened to "set the dogs on us." We assumed that the dogs would be able to outrun us and we had heard frightening "stories" about other kids being bitten and maimed, but we never actually saw a dog. The more important threat was the irregular police patrol. Car #104 would cruise through the grounds and there were a few younger cops who might have been able to catch us. Police capture meant a trespassing fine levied to make up for all of the vandalism that had taken place over the years, not to mention a serious smudge on a Bay Rat's reputation. We never vandalized anything and were never apprehended. I'm still not sure why we went there. Once or twice a pesky police patrol forced us to exit via the west side of the property or by scrambling over the north wall and running through water to get away. But we were never captured by the authorities.

The most exciting thing that we ever saw at or near the Strong Estate was a chauffeur-driven limousine that arrived a few times each summer. It was a 1940s-era, black Packard with continental wheels tucked into the front fenders. The mysterious limo would come to Erie for a few days, drive slowly around the Bayfront neighborhood, and also tour the estate several times. Usually several days in succession. News of its summer arrival would spread like wildfire among the kids and we would congregate at the Erie Day School waiting for a close-up look (Erie Day School was carved out of the Strong property in 1929 and still occupies the southern edge of the estate).

That limo was an ethereal vision from an old-time movie. The chauffeur wore a black suit and hat, and a small, white-haired lady sat in the rear wearing a huge hat, gloves, and silk scarf. The rumor was that she was Annie Scott, wealthy owner of the property who lived in New York City. The mystery lady would wave as her car slowly passed through the streets on the way to the estate.



The limo was an almost mystical vision from the 1950s.

The lady in the limousine was not Annie Scott. It was her granddaughter, Matilda Thora Scott Ronalds McElroy. Socialite Annie had introduced her daughter, Thora Scott, to New York society, where she met Reggie Ronalds who was an adventurer and a member of Teddy Roosevelt's Rough Riders. The Erie wedding of Thora Scott and Reggie Ronalds was a major social event after which local media followed the exciting lives of Anne Strong's daughter and son-in-law, reveling in each adventure that the couple lived. Thora and Reggie had a daughter in 1907 and raised her in New York City. Thora divorced her husband in 1910, before he died in Mexico while on a scouting trip to inspect gold and silver mines that he had invested in. Thora Ronalds married again in 1917 to another New Yorker, Clyde Leasure, but she divorced him in 1921 and returned to Erie, where she lived with her mother, Annie, at her east side retreat (today's Brevelier Village). Annie Wainright Scott Strong passed away in 1928, eight years before her husband died. Her granddaughter, Matilda Scott Ronalds McElroy, remained in New York, where she married and lived until her death in 1990.

Field trip: It is a simple matter to explore the texture and size of the wonderful estate that Charles Strong designed and built. Drive west over the "new" Sixth Street Viaduct (the original bridge was replaced almost 25 years ago). Immediately turn right into the road that leads to both Erie Day School and the Regency at South Shore. Continue north on Top Road, so named because it was on the highest property ridge. You will see modern development that has taken place during the past 50 years since the estate was broken up and sold.

The physical flavor of the original estate begins to take shape as you approach the old gate house, where the roadway changes and beautiful stone barriers begin to define the roads on the north end of the estate. Drive toward LECOM, the third occupant of the beautiful building that sits overlooking the water. By continuing through the medical school parking lot it is possible to get a sense of the ambiance of the original place. The

modern LECOM building sits in almost the exact footprint where Strong's Adirondack cabin rested from 1895 to 1969.

An architect-friend who demolished the 74-year-old home said that it was in remarkable shape after all of those years, including three decades of neglect. As stunning as LECOM, Regency, and the new homes seem, they are all on just one part of the estate. The high-rise, South Shore Apartments and several additional new homes are all located on the west end. Road names, including Tower Lane and Strong Drive, continue as a homage to the past. And if you concentrate on the shapes and shadows extending from obscure corners of the property as well as the mature trees that were growing there during the glory days, you may even see ghosts from the past: Charles Reed smoking a Cuban cigar; Annie Scott Strong reluctantly visiting Someplace; or a pack of Bay Rats sneaking across an open field.

FAST FACTS

- Annie Scott Strong died in 1928. Charles Strong died in 1936.
- Their daughter, Matilda Thora Wainwright Scott Ronalds, lived from 1882 to 1939. Former Rough Rider Reggie Ronalds died in 1924 in Mexico.
- Thora Scott Ronalds McElroy lived from 1907 to 1990 in Westchester, New York.
- Charles Strong's "Someplace" retreat was built in 1895.
- Strong Electric Station was built in stages from 1909 to 1919. In use until 1944, it was demolished in 1969.
- West Sixth Street was extended to Pittsburgh Avenue in 1924.
- Charles and Annie Scott Strong's yacht was named "Mystic."
- Reed Manufacturing at West Eighth and today's Bayfront Parkway was built in 1896.

Photos:

Charles Hamot Strong: <https://www.goerie.com/news/20170224/look-back-feb-24-1906>

Annie Wainwright Scott Strong: <https://www.goerie.com/entertainmentlife/20191201/women-in-erie-history-you-should-know-annie-wainwright-scott-strong>

Charles Strong's 1895 Adirondack Cabin:

https://www.facebook.com/pg/eriehistorymemorabilia/photos/?tab=album&album_id=610575895649407

Spacious Porch at Someplace:

https://www.facebook.com/pg/eriehistorymemorabilia/photos/?tab=album&album_id=610575895649407

1950s Limo: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/rexgray/4609290617>

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.



