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On the Waterfront

The Goosewood

A Land Deal that Profoundly Changed Erie's West Bayfront

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 bay rat, I gradually explored my "territory" by wandering a bit farther from home each year as I became older and more mature. My first exploration was traversing the block across the street (north) from my house, which led me to the exciting ball field at West Third and Cascade streets. That was the first field that I "discovered" – a place where countless, exciting athletic events took place. From the ball field, my friends and I eventually wandered north to a place that kids called Second Field. I now realize that it was so named because it was located at Second and Cascade, directly across the street from the ball field. Second Field was a wonderful adventure land and seemed enormous in those days. It was actually a vacant lot, current site of the Laura Wallerstein Apartments. But for us back then it was an amazing wilderness with trails, hiding places, secret caves and a tree swing. The most exciting thing about Second Field was its northern border, which was a bluff overlooking railroad tracks, Presque Isle Bay, and the Cascade Docks. We would sit on the top of the grassy bluffs, gazing north and wondering what might be "out there," quite like early sailors pondered what they might find when they crossed oceans.



Before it became an ordinary city lot, containing the Laura Wallerstein Apartments, it was Second Field, a mysterious wilderness and jungle.

Eventually, the big kids filled us in. Directly north, beyond the rows of coal cars lined up on the tracks below us, and to the left (west) of the docks, there was the “Goose Woods.” And from what we learned when we asked, the Goose Woods was the ultimate paradise and a final explorer’s objective for bay rats. We had to go! A few days later, we assembled at the north edge of Second Field, descended the bluffs to the Cascade Street railroad crossing, and headed for the docks. Our point of entry to the Goose Woods was to be a wooden suspension bridge on the west side of the docks (the bridge is still there) that spanned the dangerous, broiling currents of Cascade Creek. We found it precisely where the big kids had predicted. Confidently stepping across the bridge, we came to a circuitous path that continued up and over the bank west of the creek. We immediately began our dangerous ascent.

Moments later, a vast field of grasses, mature trees, and pathways appeared. The big kids had been correct. It was paradise – the largest tract of wilderness that we had ever seen. The next hours were consumed by wandering the edges of this wonderful new place and gathering at openings that dotted the north edge of this new and mysterious place. From any of those spectacular outcroppings we could see across Presque Isle Bay to the peninsula and even over the top of Presque Isle to Lake Erie, itself. We were proud explorers.

The most amazing thing in the center of the Goose Woods was a large baseball field. Apparently, neighborhood kids had carved out a nearly professional quality ball field over several years and had even manicured the ballpark by cutting the outfield grass and creating base paths that were worn down to sand. We didn’t appreciate it at the time, but there was also an amazing grove of mature American chestnut trees on the northeastern edge of the field.

At dinner that evening I tried to casually mention to my parents that “the boys” and I had hiked to the Goose Woods that day. After a sanitized explanation of how we got there, my mother asked why it was named Goose Woods. I offered a limp discussion of how it was a wilderness wildlife sanctuary where rare creatures, including geese, were common. Even though we had not spotted a goose. Just crows. My father snickered. When my mother asked what he was chuckling about he suggested an alternative explanation, having to do with something that teenage boys might do to girls that they took there. I did not

fully understand but laughed anyway. Meanwhile, my mother admonished me for going to the Goose Woods.

Fast forward 70 years. I am digging through records of St. John's Finnish Lutheran Evangelical Church on West Second Street, and reading old logbooks from the Finn Yacht Club. For the first time ever, I come to a written reference to the "Goosewood." It was the mid-1930s and the ladies of the parish were pondering the question of where to have a summer picnic. They have been complaining that the trek to Frontier Park (today's LEAF), carrying baskets and paraphernalia was too far (not many of the Finns, or for that matter other westside bayfront residents had cars). The men from the Finn Yacht Club offered a suggestion: the Goosewood on the top of the hill south of their club. It was the first time I had seen an actual reference to the place that we had called the Goose Woods as kids. For all that I knew before finding the note Goose Woods was just a slang term used by neighborhood kids; a reference whose etymology was, at best, questionable. But there in writing and for the first time the women of St. John's began referring to the Goosewood as a preferred parish picnic grounds.



The whaleback tanker ship, Meteor, discharges fuel oil at the Cascade Docks for United Oil in the 1950s. United's storage tanks are visible at the top of the image. (Photo provided by the Gebhardt Family)

Prominent local banker J.C. Spencer was holding the land at the time, waiting for the right commercial opportunity. Absent a Bayfront Parkway to make it accessible and given the steady decline of both the Cascade Docks and the bayfront railroad lines during the Post World War II years, the property seemed doomed to lie fallow. The period was, however, a boom time for automobiles, trucks and delivery services and one neighborhood business was doing quite well. The Gebhardt Family's United Oil Company (not United Refinery) was growing. United began at West 14th and Myrtle streets, where they were in the odd-lot coal delivery business and dependent on the Erie Extension Canal. They had moved to the 1000 block of West Third Street, shifted to oil sales

and delivery, and needed to expand (United was taking bulk deliveries of oil at the Cascade Docks and needed additional storage fields). United purchased the Goose Woods from J.C. Spencer in 1952 and began to build oil storage tanks there.

Fortunately for the neighborhood kids, the United Oil expansion program barely interfered with the use of the Goose Woods as an adventure land. The baseball field was bulldozed to make space for the oil tanks, but the edges of the property remained relatively untouched, allowing us kids to continue our expeditions. Unfortunately, the American chestnut trees fell victim to the United Oil development. Absent the ball field and the stately old chestnut trees, however, bay rat adventures, boat houses on the beaches west of the Cascade Docks, and the operations of United Oil continued in harmony. During the 1970s, however, the oil storage and sales business stalled with the oil crisis and United Oil closed, leaving the Goose Woods vacant again.

With the Bayfront Parkway emerging, real estate developers began to reimagine the potential beauty of the old Goose Woods, and, by the 1980s, a majestic waterfront development was being proposed as a 'best-use' for the once industrial property. The land was eventually sold to a developer and, as the surveying crew began preliminary planning, they were surprised to see a large propane tank positioned on the north bank of the property. Close inspection revealed a gas line running down the hill from the tank and into the back of Dave Bierig's sail making shop. Dave had carefully positioned the tank on top of the hill in a location that corresponded with the projected site line of a city street through the Goose Woods property.



This view of Niagara Pointe hints at the beauty of the old Goose Woods

When the property was sold by United Oil in the 1980s, Dave Bierig was made custodian of the deeds by the Finns who still owned water lots below the Goose Woods. The Finns realized that Dave would be a continued presence on the water below the Goose Woods and trusted him to defend their property rights. When developers began to show interest in the property on the hill above him, he carefully examined the original deeds from the 1920s, including the deeds to his own properties. Between him and the Finns, they controlled eight water lots and

their deeds called for protecting (not developing) the projections of city streets through the Goose Woods, both the east-west and the north-south roads. The old deeds insured that original projected street right-of-ways would always be maintained. That meant that a developer could not build anything on the projected locations of West Second Street, Front Street, Cranberry, or Raspberry. And Dave's propane tank was positioned on Front Street (or where it would have been if it had been where the original city street plan had located it at the edge of the bluffs). Even more disturbing to developers was a provision in the deed that any property development on top of the hill would have to include the provision of city water, sewer and electric to homes below the bluffs.

The "propane tank on the bluffs strategy" was invented by Dave Bierig and attorney John Wolford. Dave sought legal counsel as soon as he realized that a development above him was going to take place. The objective of the strategy was to force the developers to recognize and deal with Dave Bierig, the Finns, and other owners of water lots below the old Goose Woods. In addition to placing the propane tank on the edge of the hill they found old aerial photographs of the Goose Woods taken over the years that showed footprints in snow, indicating that people had regularly been traversing the area.



View of Niagara Pointe shows the circular drive.

Developers who thought that they were making a courtesy visit to the Bierig Sail Making shop to "inform" Dave of their plans for the old Goose Woods suddenly learned that their entire development was in serious jeopardy. If they had to build around all of the old projected city streets, the proposed circular lane surrounded by high end homes would not have been possible. When Niagara Pointe developers finally realized that they would have to make "a deal" with Dave Bierig and the Finns (several of whom still owned their old water lots), they proposed the creation of a new road down the hill from Niagara Pointe as well as the extension of municipal services.



The new Bierig-Finn road begins with an abrupt left turn from Niagara Pointe. (Photo by Mary Ann Frew)



The road makes a few scary hairpin turns on the way down the hill. (Photo by Mary Ann Frew)



The road ends at the Bierig Sail-Making Compound. (Photo by Mary Ann Frew)

In 1991, the final meeting of the Finn Yacht Club was called to order at Dave Bierig's sail-making shop. More than 30 years after the second clubhouse had been torn down, Dave, like his father before him, was acting as the resource person and coordinator. He reviewed the proposal to build a road from Niagara Pointe down to the water lots and led a discussion. There was resistance to the road design at first but, after a few days of considering the details, the Finns accepted it. As a result, Bierig's Sail-Making shop is currently accessible by road as opposed to the (now overgrown) footpath from the Cascade Creek suspension bridge.



Eventually, the new access road down the hill to Bierig's Sail-Making shop made it possible to build these three modern, waterfront homes.

As Bierig pointed out, instead of naming the development's main street Niagara Pointe Road, it should have been called Goose Woods Lane. And that if a person knew exactly where to look, the stone bases from the old baseball field are still there.

Photos:

Laura Wallerstein Apartments: <https://www.apartments.com/laura-wallerstein-apartments-erie-pa/t8l6zz8/>

Niagra Pointe: https://www.zillow.com/homedetails/298-Niagara-Point-Dr-Erie-PA-16507/67940898_zpid/?mmlb=g,1

Circular Drive: https://www.zillow.com/homedetails/253-Niagara-Point-Dr-Erie-PA-16507/67940921_zpid/?mmlb=g,1

Modern Waterfront homes: https://www.realtor.com/realestateandhomes-detail/280-Niagara-Point-Dr_Erie_PA_16507_M43555-55940

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.



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