

JEFFERSON EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

Thomas B. Hagen: A Study in Leadership



Tom Hagen across the years

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Editor's Note

The following essay on Erie, Pennsylvania, businessman and civic leader Thomas “Tom” Hagen is part of the Jefferson Educational Society’s Tribute series, which examines the lives of extraordinary people who have had a profound effect on the Erie regional community and beyond. Prior installments in this series can be found at JESerie.org.

Written by JES Scholar-in-Residence Andrew Roth, this essay is in narrative style based on public and private documents, interviews, speeches, publications, photographs, and historical records. It follows The Associated Press writing style, and was edited by members of the JES’s Publications Division and was laid out by JES Support Staff Member Olivia Wickline.

Some Questions to Consider

How many effective leaders have you known?

Who is the most effective leader you know?

An effective leader is someone who gets projects done in an ethical manner that not only advances the leader's own agenda, but also makes positive and sustainable contributions to their organization and community. Leaders like Tom Hagen, who advance the interests of their community in addition to their company, are sometimes called "citizen leaders" and are frequently characterized as "servant leaders."

How do citizen leaders, servant leaders — leaders like Tom Hagen — do what they do?

And, maybe more importantly, how did they become leaders?

West Sixth Street, Historic Restoration, and Community Revitalization



House on the move

These questions occurred to me on a recent rainy September Monday morning while watching a livestream of the relocation of the 141-year-old Olds-Norman house from its historic West Seventh Street location in Erie, Pennsylvania, to a new site on West Sixth Street. You can see a stunning summary of the seven-hour move in a one-minute video on Gannon University's Facebook page. The move was the latest development and first building relocation in Thomas ("Tom")

Hagen's ongoing restoration project of Erie's West Sixth Street "Millionaire's Row." Sitting literally at the midpoint between Erie's port on Presque Isle Bay and its industrial corridor on West 12th Street, West Sixth Street earned that moniker because for over a hundred years it was the residential address of choice for Erie's economic elite.



Neighborhood restoration

As he mentioned to me, growing up as a child at 341 W. Sixth St., which is now known as "Thomas B. Hagen Way," young Tom Hagen could have scarcely imagined that he would one day be responsible for the remodeling and restoration of almost two dozen West Sixth Street properties. Jeff Kidder, of the Erie-based Kidder Architects and lead architect on the project, and Cal Pifer, President and CEO of the Erie County



Jeff Kidder and Cal Pifer

Historical Society's Hagen History Center, both said the project began “kind of spontaneously.” Hagen himself agreed, saying “that’s very accurate. ... It started with one building next door to the campus of the history center and seeing that the buildings were in such disrepair we decided to do something about it and one thing led to another and we developed a plan and created the Historic Erie Preservation Trust.”



Hagen History Center Campus

The buildings that provided the inspiration include two duplexes east of the Hagen History Center on West Sixth Street and the Wood-Morrison House, which is on the right edge of the accompanying photograph of the Hagen History Center. At the point where the duplexes now stand, in the 19th century the Erie Extension Canal crossed West Sixth Street. After the canal closed in 1871, these two Second Empire-style duplexes were built in the canal bed in 1875. They are now known as the Canalside Townhouses.

The Wood-Morrison House, however, was not simply another building in need of sprucing up because it sat next to the history center; it was a building of historical significance in its own right. Dr. William Wood, who built the house, was the first surgeon general of the U.S. Navy. William Morrison, whose family was the second to own the house, was the last captain of the USS Wolverine and the first superintendent of Presque Isle State Park. In the 1830s, the Erie Extension Canal ran next door and the house’s barn, which is older than the house, was built to stable the mules pulling the canal barges.

As a dedicated student of history, Erie City and County history in particular, Hagen knew that. Illustrating his philosophy of restoration, Hagen, like all effective leaders, saw an opportunity, took the initiative, and seized it.

What was the opportunity?

While the decision to renew the Wood-Morrison House itself was spontaneous, its seed had been planted several years earlier during a meeting at the Jefferson Educational Society when urban consultant Bruce Katz, co-author of “The New Localism” and “The Metropolitan Revolution,” told Hagen and a group of community leaders that Erie could still be one of the most exciting places in America because, among many other assets — the port and easy access to Lake Erie — Erie “had the bones of a great architecturally designed city.”



Bruce Katz

From that seed, Hagen saw the opportunity to preserve a piece of the past, but not to set it in amber as an object of idle contemplation. Erie’s historic assets could be put to work contributing to the life and future of the community. The Wood-Morrison House now serves as the Erie County Historical Society Education Center. That philosophy, among numerous others, led to the

restoration of the following gallery of projects, including one on State Street that was for a short time in the mid-19th-century the home of Horace Greeley, legendary American newspaper editor and one-time presidential candidate.



But the restoration mission didn't begin on either West Sixth Street or State Street. It began in the 1980s as ERIE Insurance began to consider plans for the physical expansion of its facilities. Blocked by Perry Square to its immediate west, Hagen realized "our growth as we got larger could only be eastward." This limitation, however, led to the opportunity to restore the neighborhood bordering ERIE Insurance's corporate



Crazy Horse Saloon and Erie Insurance HQ



Independence Hall-inspired

headquarters. As long ago as 1956 in the Independence Hall-inspired H.O. Hirt building (named for ERIE Insurance co-founder H.O. Hirt) the twin values of historic awareness and community building were fused. 1983's F.W. Hirt Perry Square Building (named for ERIE Insurance's second CEO F. William Hirt) revitalized the northeast corner of Perry Square replacing the deteriorated Crazy Horse Saloon with a modern office building yet preserving the saloon's four iconic iron columns. The columns provide a nod to the past, but the building speaks to the future of a dynamic company and the community it serves.

Publicly, the restoration project's most well-known achievement was the renewal of the Erie Armory at the corner of East Sixth and Parade streets. Hagen, however, told me it started earlier when the company saved five houses on East Fifth Street and then bought the entire block between Fourth and Fifth from French to Holland streets. This before and after picture of the house's main staircase illustrates Hagen's astute eye for a property's historic value. He knew it to be a Greek Revival House and thought it and several federal period townhouses in the area, whose decrepit, if not derelict, condition betrayed their true value. The house was the Tibbals House, once the home of a distinguished 19th century



Staircase restored

Erie family. The townhomes became Erie's Federal Row and are listed on the National Register of Historic Places.



Tibbals House



Federal Row Square

The Erie Armory project illustrates the power of a public-private partnership in both preserving a community's heritage and fueling its contemporary economic growth. The public portion involved Pennsylvania lawmakers that allowed the state to sell public property to a private company. The private portion was handled by ERIE Insurance, which used its own funds to restore the property. Thus, Hagen and ERIE Insurance saved a historic Erie property and put it to work as valuable office space. In doing so, it still preserves the building's heritage as the former home of the Pennsylvania National Guard 112th Infantry Regiment, which is a part of the famed 28th Division, the oldest continuous infantry division in the U.S. Army.



Erie Armory "Before" and "After"

What inspires a person to engage in historic preservation on a massive scale, but in a fashion that not only preserves the past but also ties it to the future by making the objects of preservation living contributors to a community's pride, sense of vitality, and economic potential? Hagen himself might have said it best in "The Historic Tibbals House 1842 Erie, Pennsylvania," the book he wrote about the Tibbals House restoration. In it, he quoted Daniel Webster, who said, "Those who do not look upon themselves as a link, connecting the past with the future, do not perform their duty to the world."

How does one become both a leader — a person like Tom Hagen who says, "We can do this!" — and someone committed to building his company and his community's future by linking that

organization and community's future to the energy of its past so that the past infuses the present with vitality and a spirit of, to coin a somewhat clunky phrase, "can-do-it-ive-ness?"

How does one become the person who spontaneously says, "We can do this?" kickstarting the West Sixth Street restoration and then taking that initial vision and transforming it into a sustainable plan for a community's enrichment?

How does one become a citizen leader serving both his organization and his community?

How does one become Tom Hagen?

Some Notions of Leadership



*ERIE Insurance Co-founder
H.O. Hirt*

Before attempting to answer the question "How does one become Tom Hagen?" it is necessary to answer several other questions, such as what is a leader and what is a citizen leader? In a profile of ERIE Insurance's co-founder H.O. Hirt, whose protégé is his son-in-law Tom Hagen, I wrote Erie's fighting chance to overcome its "Rust Belt blues" is due in no small part to the legacy of service H.O. Hirt created. Maybe I should have written that "sERvIcE" (Hirt gave ERIE its motto, "Above all in sERvIcE," emphasizing Erie's role in that by capitalizing the e-r-i-e in "service.") That is true because both H.O. Hirt and Tom Hagen are leaders, and leaders are always in demand and always in short supply.

Leadership is first and foremost about character. Leadership is not about, or not only about, balancing a spreadsheet, manufacturing widgets, or selling insurance. It is all about knowing who you are and what you value. Those qualities emerge in how you either illustrate (or don't) what I think of as leadership's four cardinal principles:

- #1 Nothing happens until someone makes it happen – leader know thyself.
- #2 No one does anything alone – it's all about the team.
- #3 It's amazing what you can accomplish if you don't care who gets the credit.
- #4 A leader must be a risk taker, must possess ingenuity, and openness to new ideas.

Those four principles arise from two foundational characteristics that all effective leaders possess: vision and optimism. The optimism emerges from a core belief that there is no such thing as a problem; there is only an opportunity in disguise. The challenge, the problem, confronting Tom Hagen and Erie in the 21st century is how to transcend its "Rust Belt blues" and emerge a vibrant, future-oriented city. The vision was having the imagination to see a path forward by embracing

the past as an economic engine for the future. But not simply as a museum, but as a working part of an energetic city's economy. Daniel Burnham, the great architect, once said, "Make no small plans; they lack the imagination to inspire others. Dream big, build high." As Ferki Ferati, president of the JES, the nonpartisan think tank promoting civic engagement and education headquartered in Erie, Pennsylvania, told me, "Tom, one of the founding board members of the JES, likes big ideas. ...He thought the JES was a big idea. ... He always dared us to dream bigger."



Jefferson President Ferki Ferati



*Erie Insurance President
Tim NeCastro*

Leaders like Tom Hagen know who they are. Knowing who they are, they have the fortitude and self-confidence to say, "We can do this!" It is having the vision and confidence to "dream bigger" attempting to regenerate Erie's historic civic pride by restoring its core buildings and turning them into catalysts for Erie's economic revival. It isn't really about buildings or only about buildings. It is about accepting one's responsibility to be of service to one's community. Nurtured and prepared by his family, his education, and his naval career, Tom Hagen's insight grew out of a set of core values inherited from his grandfather, Commander Frank Bailey, U.S. Navy, Retired, from H.O. Hirt, and from ERIE Insurance's corporate philosophy. As Tim NeCastro, president and CEO of ERIE Insurance, noted "It wasn't that Tom had to embrace these values; he was validating them. ... He and H.O. Hirt were/are all about service and people thinking and doing the right things. ... They share that value system." NeCastro continued, "As he told me when we discussed me becoming CEO ... his No. 1 goal for the next leader was to do two things: one, bring back pride in the organization, and, two, to recognize we are now the leader in this community" and to accept that responsibility.

Leaders also know that no one does anything alone — it is all about the team. As Kidder conveyed, "Tom builds a team with trust. ... He is a part of the team ... but does not set himself aside. ... He gets good people and lets them do their job. ... He asks open-ended questions ... discusses options ... and then the team makes a decision after everyone has participated in the discussion. ... He never forces the issue ... he listens."

"He listens" might be the ultimate compliment a team member can pay a team leader. As Hagen himself said, accepting his Pennsylvania Society's 2024 Gold Medal for Distinguished Achievement award, "I have learned ... that you don't accomplish things alone or in a vacuum. It takes the cooperation and dedication — the love of those around you — to make things happen."

Leaders also understand it is amazing what you can accomplish if you don't care who gets the credit. As Pifer said, "Tom leads by example." When I asked Hagen how the Historic Erie Preservation Trust came about, he shared the credit with Jeff Kidder and Cal Pifer. In fact, he gave

them the lead roles. As Hagen related, “It was Jeff who found this Newport restoration foundation and then talking with him I got Cal involved because Cal lived in Newport ... so the three of us went up to Newport to visit the foundation and find out what they did ... and that’s how our trust came into existence modeled after Doris Duke’s Newport Restoration Foundation.”

Not only do leaders build teams and share the credit, they must also have the self-confidence to take risks, possess ingenuity, and be open to new ideas. As Pifer said, “Tom took a risk personally backing me, a young guy, to lead the Erie County Historical Society.” As NeCastro noted, Hagen took risks leading ERIE Insurance’s geographic expansion, most noteworthy 51 years ago our expansion into Ohio.

What is a Citizen Leader?

Peter Alduino writes in “The Citizen Leader: Be the Person You’d Want to Follow,” “A citizen leader is an active participant in their world. ... They choose to be engaged ... because they care deeply about the people and places that stand to benefit by their actions.” He continues, “For the citizen leader, character is what comes first! Character is the essential material of which a citizen leader is built. ... Character: it’s the embodiment and the expression of our guiding principles and values. It is who we are on the inside, and what we show on the outside. Our values: they’re the promises we make to ourselves about how we will behave, both in private and in the world at large.”

Citizen leaders lead by example; they “walk their talk.” Like servant leaders, they listen, they care about others, they are persuasive, they possess foresight, they see themselves as stewards of the resources they’ve been graced to possess, they are committed to the growth of people, and they believe in building community. Citizen leaders are people of principle. They understand what Ralph Waldo Emerson meant when he said, “As a means there may be a million and then some, but principles are few. The man who grasps principles can successfully select his own means. The man who tries means, ignoring principles, is sure to have trouble.” In addition to a commitment to Erie’s future, one of Hagen’s foundational principles is a belief in people. As Ferati said, “One of the things I admire the most about Tom is that he pushes young people and wants to give young people the chance to make mistakes and grow.” Hagen not only understands that leaders have a responsibility to their community, but he also understands that you win with people.

How do you become a person of character?

How do you become Tom Hagen?

In Tom Hagen’s case, it began with family, proceeded to education, then military service, over 70 years of corporate service at ERIE Insurance, and a lifetime of community engagement and contributions.

Early Life and Education

Born in Buffalo, New York in 1935, Hagen and his mother Isabella moved to Erie, Pennsylvania, in 1943 when he was 7. They accompanied his widower maternal grandfather, Commander Frank J. Bailey, a retired Naval officer, who was recalled to active duty for World War II. A veteran of World War I and prominent military figure in Buffalo, Commander Bailey was assigned to Erie as a Naval adviser with the War Production Board. Raised at 341 W. Sixth St. by his mother Isabella Bailey Hagen and his grandfather, Tom and his family liked Erie so much that they decided to make it their permanent home.



Isabella Bailey Hagen

As Hagen said, “Growing up I was truly blessed to have had the loving support of my dear single mom, Isabella Bailey Hagen, and the guidance and wisdom of my maternal grandfather, both of whom raised me.” A single mother in an era when that was not common, according to Hagen’s daughter, Sarah Hagen McWilliams, “my grandmother spent as much time with him as she could. ... She was a very engaged mother who exposed him to as much as she could.” In addition to longevity — Isabella Hagen lived to be almost 91 — Hagen inherited from her two of his defining characteristics: curiosity and an endless work ethic. Sarah, who knew her grandmother well, said of her, “She just never stopped doing things. She told me, ‘Life’s too short, and there’s too much to see and too much to do.’ Her idea of relaxing was to quench her curiosity. And I think that my father is the same way. ... He feels like his way of blowing off steam or relaxing is doing what he is very interested in, which right now is historic preservation. He’s having a ball doing this. He got that energy and curiosity from his mother — my grandmother.”



Sarah Hagen McWilliams

Mothers, as they will do, tend to worry. As Hagen told me, whether scoping out Presque Isle Bay with his friend Charles Brock for German U-Boats during the war years or playing "kick-the-can" with the neighborhood kids in the middle of Liberty Street, or, visiting relatives and taking a rowboat out by himself onto a lake, “my mother would get a little uptight sometimes if I were late or whatever, but my grandfather calmed the waters. He was always wise and caring; he spent a lot of time with me.”

(For younger readers, in the pre-electronic gadget era “kick-the-can” was a kids game of “hide-and-seek” or “tag” in which the pursued, if they could get back to home base — a tin can in the middle of the street — and “kick-the-can” before being tagged, they were home free! I suspect you had to be there, but it was a lot of fun.)



Grandpa and grandson

What are the two things a child wants from a parent or grandparent? Children want time. Not just quality time, but time; if the time is quality, that is a bonus. Children want to feel cared for, they want to feel secure. That caring instills a sense of security and self-confidence a child carries with them throughout their life. In his grandfather, Hagen found that time and that caring. As he told me, “my grandfather was always there, and I spent a lot of time with him.” Time watching the Senate McCarthy hearings on this new thing — TV — in the early 1950s or just hanging out together. Hagen continued, “He would take me everywhere when I was a kid, when I was 5, 6, 7 and older

...wherever he went visiting friends. We went to Amsterdam, New York, where my mother graduated from high school and to Buffalo. In Buffalo, where we had family, most of his friends were retired military people, and I would kind of just sit in the background and listen. ... I just took all this stuff in like a sponge ... I was greatly influenced by my grandfather. ... I was so glad I had him as a father figure, and he trusted me. He gave me some freedom, but he knew I would never do anything to question his faith in me.”



Former Longfellow School

he’d crack a smile, but he was tough and good.” Or Miss Kohout, who taught German; Miss Charlotte Thomas, who taught English; and swimming coach Harold Kramer. When asked what influence he took away from them, Hagen replied, “They were organized, they were dedicated, and they had discipline in their teaching.”

Hagen is a proud product of Erie’s public schools. He went to Longfellow Elementary and Gridley and Roosevelt Junior High Schools. In 1953, he graduated from Strong Vincent High School. He has clear memories of his teachers at Strong Vincent, who he praised as “really high quality.” Like Leo Armagost, who taught physics and chemistry. Hagen recalled “that he was tough, expressionless. Once in a while



Former Strong Vincent High School

Dedication, organization, discipline — key elements in a future leader’s tool kit.

Speaking of dedication, organization, and discipline, from a variety of part-time jobs, starting as a paper boy for the Erie Dispatch Herald and later working part-time as a file clerk at ERIE Insurance, Hagen paid for his own college education — first at Penn State Behrend and then at The Ohio State University, from which he graduated in 1957 with a bachelor’s degree in Business Administration with an emphasis in insurance.

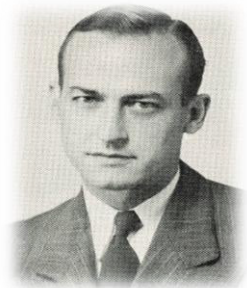
Hagen was one of the earliest students at Penn State Behrend. In his lifelong association with the school, he is probably the only person who knew all of the provosts and chancellors. As Ralph Ford, Behrend’s chancellor and dean of Electrical and Computer Engineering, said, “The

relationship between Tom and Penn State Behrend is a really special one, and it goes back a long ways. First and foremost, Tom is an alumnus of Behrend. It is hard to underestimate the level of his impact. ... He is truly an exceptional individual. We have a very important research center on campus known as the Susan Hirt Hagen CORE, and CORE stands for something — it means ‘Community Outreach and Research Evaluation’. What he and Susie have done for Behrend is transformational.”



But all of that came later. Working weekends and living at home, Hagen attended Behrend from 1953 to 1955. What he remembers about Behrend, besides camaraderie with fellow students and working his way through school, is similar to his experience at Strong Vincent High School. He remembers teachers.

One of his Behrend professors ignited an interest that has lasted a lifetime. As Hagen related, “I had a great professor there, one of the greatest I’ve ever had. Tom Turnbull. Tom was a little guy. He looked like an accountant, wore glasses like Mr. Peepers (a teacher in an early TV sitcom.)” Hagen continued, “Turnbull had been a major in the airborne during World War II. He was in the Battle of the Bulge, and in all of the major engagements in Europe. He didn’t talk much about it. Tom was a history professor. He brought history alive. And that really sparked my interest in history. I’ll never forget him telling the story about the European revolutions of 1848. ... He talked about how during a riot in one of the German states a mob came into the palace chasing the prince, who jumped out a window into a dung pile. ... I remember that after all these years. He was really a good teacher.”



Tom Turnbull



Hagen’s experience at Ohio State was similar to his Behrend experience. He paid for his own education from his earnings at part-time jobs and by securing a free room by cleaning a house near campus. Then, he pledged Kappa Psi fraternity, became its treasurer, which meant he got a free room in the fraternity house. He paid for his board by waiting on tables. An excellent student, Hagen was made a Griffith Scholar, which had a scholarship attached to it helping fund his education.

And, just like at Behrend, he met a professor who became a lifelong influence. Majoring in business with an emphasis on insurance, he met Professor John S. Bickley, who created the Insurance Hall of Fame and made Benjamin Franklin its first inductee: insurance and history meet, which was right in Hagen’s wheelhouse. Later in life, Hagen would be on the Insurance Hall of Fame Board of Trustees. Bickley was an outstanding teacher, who, like Tom Turnbull at Behrend, could tell great stories but also ask demanding questions that made his students think. Hagen tells



John S. Bickley

how, on one occasion, Bickley did both. In a senior insurance class, Bickley told the story of driving around Europe the previous summer visiting insurance companies and how impressed he was with Italian automobile insurance policies. They were simple and precise. So, as their final exam, he asked the class to write an auto insurance policy covering all necessities but with as few conditions and exclusions as possible. As Hagen told me, “That really made you think. ... You had to know what the essential conditions, exclusions, and provisions were in an insurance policy, and try to boil them down. And there was no right answer, but boy, it was a thinking challenge.”

Leaders possess a number of vital ingredients: passion, a guiding vision, optimism, integrity, inquisitiveness, risk taking, a strong work ethic, people skills, intelligence, and persistence.

Which of these did Hagen gain from his educational experiences?

Perhaps “gain” is not the right word, because Hagen brought their seeds with him from his family background and experiences growing up. Nonetheless, from the need to earn his own way through college, he learned self-reliance, self-discipline, and a strong work ethic. You could say going from Erie, Pennsylvania, to Columbus, Ohio, in the age before interstate highways made travel convenient, that moving so far from home constituted a risk and was an early indicator that he was open to new ideas and possessed ingenuity. Regarding ingenuity, note how he managed to fund his own education.

From the example of his teachers, Hagen not only learned organization and dedication but also inquisitiveness. More to the point, from two he acquired two of his life interests and passions: mastering the intricacies of the insurance industry and developing a joy and passion for history. More importantly, he demonstrated his doggedness, his persistence. His “can-do” attitude. Of all a leader’s traits, persistence is the most important, for without it the others don’t count. In his determined pursuit of an education, Hagen demonstrated that he possessed a leader’s most valuable trait: persistence.

Naval Career

After graduating from Ohio State in 1957, Hagen, following in the footsteps of his grandfather, attended Navy Officer Candidate School in Newport, Rhode Island. Hagen was sworn in by his grandfather, who presented his grandson with his own sword, which he had received in 1909. Hagen later used the sword for ceremonial purposes during his own service. He was commissioned as an ensign on Nov. 1, 1957. After a six-month training tour of duty, Hagen was ordered to the Atlantic Fleet Destroyer USS Harwood as the sole Supply and Disbursing Officer and one of four department heads.



Passing the torch

The USS Harwood was a modern, post-World War II destroyer designed for anti-submarine and escort duties. Hagen's tour of duty occurred during the escalating tensions of the Cold War. The Harwood participated in Atlantic patrols, NATO exercises, and patrolling the North Atlantic to detect Soviet submarines.



USS Harwood

On May 1, 1959, while on board the Harwood, Hagen was promoted to lieutenant j.g. (LTJG). In late January 1960, he was transferred to the Naval Supply Depot in Newport, Rhode Island, as fleet liaison officer and issue control officer. On Oct. 2, 1960, Hagen was released from active duty.

He returned to Erie and affiliated with the Naval Reserve Training Center, then located at 19th and State streets. He performed his two weeks of annual active duty for the next few years at the Philadelphia Navy Yard and the Navy Pay Center in Cleveland. In early 1963, he became a "plank owner" in the then-new Naval Reserve Training Center on Old French Road near Erie's VA Medical Center. A plank owner is an individual who was a member of the crew of a ship or naval facility when it was first deployed.

During those early Reserve Training Center years, Hagen was promoted to lieutenant and lieutenant commander. A few years later, he transferred to the Inactive Reserve. After about five years in the Inactive Reserve, he reaffiliated and returned to a drilling status at the Naval Reserve Center. He was soon promoted to commander and affiliated with a Reserve unit in Erie serving the commander-in-chief of the U.S. Atlantic Fleet. On June 1, 1985, he was promoted to the rank of captain, one of the highest attainable posts in the Navy's reserve component. Recipient of several letters of commendation for "outstanding performance of duty," Hagen retired on Nov. 1, 1986, after nearly 30 years of service.



Naval Reserve Center

Hagen inherited from his grandfather his sense of service and civic duty to his community and country. His naval service cemented that while showing him the Navy's commitment to practical innovation. A perfect embodiment of Hagen's dual commitments to civic legacy and practical innovation is the Erie Armory Preservation Project, which, with no hint of intra-service rivalry also reflects a Navy ethos: restoring functionality while honoring tradition, adapting old strengths for new missions. An essential component of Hagen as a citizen leader is his ability to see in people or things their future potential.



Joe Pfadt

Nurtured by his naval experience, Hagen's vision informs his approach to civic development. As Dr. Joe Pfadt, president of Warriors to Washington, one of the veterans' programs Hagen supports, said "I think that some of the success he's had can be related directly back to his military service. Those values and the values of being an officer in the United States Navy I think defines the man. And when you have those conversations with him about his service and how important the nation is to him, you can tell he's been shaped by that experience."

Hagen rarely seeks public attention for his military service, preferring to emphasize the honor of serving. In speeches and interviews, he occasionally refers to his Navy experience as critical to shaping his professional identity. The values of punctuality, preparedness, and chain of command became foundational to his leadership philosophy at ERIE Insurance, in his public service roles, and in his philanthropic endeavors.

But as all exceptionally effective leaders know, it's all about the team. As Hagen told me when I asked what he learned in the Navy, he replied, "You take care of your crew first."

Public Service

Although this breaks the chronology a bit, Hagen's public service was not only in the Navy. From January 1995 through March 1997, he served as the commonwealth's Secretary of Commerce under Pennsylvania Gov. Tom Ridge. Following a department reorganization, he became the state's first Secretary of Community and Economic Development. As Gov. Ridge said, "Tom Hagen epitomizes what it means to be of service to this commonwealth. It's a commitment he has made for more than 60 years. Tom's impact extends well beyond northwest Pennsylvania." Hagen also co-founded the Team Pennsylvania Foundation serving as a board member for 15 years and its first chairman. While in office, Hagen was also a member of the Governor's Executive Board and chairman of the boards of directors of several state-related agencies. During his tenure in Harrisburg, Hagen became the first northwestern Pennsylvanian to serve on the Pennsylvania Housing Finance Agency. He continued to serve for the next 22 years under five governors.



Gov. Tom Ridge with Tom Hagen

Return to Erie, Family Life and ERIE Insurance



The Hagen Family

Hagen concluded his active-duty Navy experience in 1960. Married and once again a civilian, he returned to Erie to start a family and resume his career at ERIE Insurance. Although he was a Strong Vincent Colonel and she a “Hilltopper” from Academy High School, Hagen married his high school sweetheart Susan Hirt in 1958. The daughter of ERIE Insurance co-founder H.O. Hirt, Susan Hirt Hagen was a longtime director of the company and was active in numerous philanthropic activities in Erie and at Chautauqua Institution near Mayville, New York. They had two children, Jonathan Hirt Hagen and Sarah Hagen McWilliams, and three grandchildren, Neena, Annika, and Erik Hagen. To his family, Hagen was simply “Dad.” His son Jonathan added, “He’s a great dad ... not just to me but to my sister, my wife as well as a terrific grandfather to his three grandchildren.” As his daughter Sarah recalled, “As a kid, I knew he went to the office ... came home at night, had dinner, watched the news, and I curled up on the couch with him, and that was the highlight of the day.”



Susan and Tom



The “office he went to” was at ERIE Insurance, which constituted the central experience of his professional and public life. Hagen began work there in 1953 when, as a 17-year-old Penn State Behrend student, he took a part-time job as a file clerk. When he returned to Erie after the Navy, H.O. Hirt talked him into coming back to ERIE Insurance, although Hagen later discovered his starting salary was less than what the Navy paid him. Nonetheless, over the next 65 years he would become CEO and later chairman of the Board, a position he still holds in 2025.

When he joined the firm as a full-time employee in the early 1960s, it was a growing but narrowly focused company. Today, it is a nationally recognized, technology enabled, customer-centric Fortune 500 company. A key phrase in the previous sentence — “customer centric” hails from the firm’s co-founder, H.O. Hirt. In the mid-1920s, when he and O.G. Crawford founded ERIE Insurance, Hirt said its mission was “to provide its policyholders with as near PERFECT PROTECTION, as near PERFECT SERVICE, as is HUMANLY POSSIBLE, and to do so at the LOWEST POSSIBLE COST.” The capital letters were intentional. He added that The ERIE would do that by a total commitment to service, which he spelled with the letters signifying Erie in capital letters. It is a mark of the company to this day, that The ERIE is in “sERvIcE” to not only its policyholders and team, but to the city it still calls home.

A great part of Hagen’s career was and is devoted to seeing that The ERIE does not deviate from that commitment. In his “Introduction – The ERIE Remembers” to the sixth edition of **H.O. Hirt in His Own Words, 100th Anniversary Edition**, Hagen, as editor-in-chief, quoted Ralph Waldo Emerson’s observation that “an institution is the lengthened shadow of one man.” Which is true,

as far as it goes. But what constitutes the shadow? It is the people who follow, the people who carry the leader's vision into the future. H.O. Hirt understood that completely. In 1976, as he prepared to turn over leadership of The ERIE to the next generation, he exhorted them to "Hold Fast To That Which Is Good." It has been displayed in the office of The ERIE's president and CEO ever since. There are 18 items; 11, or almost two-thirds of them, have to do with people. Hirt understood that leadership is about people.

- "Hold Fast to That Which Is Good"
- The success of one manager cannot be left to a successor.
- But the Successor can hold fast to that which is GOOD. Fields to explore and develop -
- Avoid Rules!!
- Advertising
- Marketing
- Recruiting of Agents
- Inventory of Employee Capabilities
- Policy Updating
- Education
- Insist upon THINKING
- New Agent Schools
- Adjuster Schools
- Refresher Schools
- Explore New Territories
- Recruit Brains
- Plan New Building
- NEVER LOSE THE HUMAN TOUCH
- Retain a Human Complaint Department



A great part of Hagen's career was and is devoted to "holding fast to that which is GOOD" seeing to it that The ERIE does not deviate from its foundational commitment to be in "sERvIcE." For Hagen, it began at the beginning when, as he said in his Pennsylvania Society acceptance speech, "my late father-in-law H.O. Hirt, the founder of our 100-year-old ERIE Insurance ... took

an interest in a 17-year-old-kid and instilled in him a dedication to be 'above all' in service and to treat others as you would like to be treated in everything you do." Over the decades, as he rose in the organization, Hagen provided strategic guidance centered on core principles: integrity, customer service, innovation without recklessness, and reinvestment in community and people. As a result, his career at ERIE Insurance embodies continuity, stewardship, and a belief in long-term institutional strength over short-term market gains.

What is this ERIE Insurance to whose values Hagen has been so dedicated? Beginning in 1925 as an automobile insurer from an idea sketched in pencil on a 10-cent tablet by H.O. Hirt, today ERIE ranks #378 on the 2024 Fortune 500 list. As it says on its website, "rooted ... in the principles of honesty, decency, service, and affordability ... for nearly a century ... prioritizing customer service first has helped us become one of the largest U.S. insurers for homeowner, auto, and business insurance."



In answering the question "what is this ERIE Insurance?" we could take a purely instrumental approach identifying its products and services, its growth in market share, and its ever-increasing net margins. We could analyze Hagen's role in the development of new products and services, such as homeowner's insurance, commercial lines (small business), and other diversification strategies like the geographic expansion and the gradual transitioning to an online but still customer-centric customer service platform current President and CEO Tim NeCastro mentioned to me.

That approach, however, misses the essence of both the company and the person Tom Hagen became, for, having been involved with The ERIE for over 70 of its 100 years, the company and Hagen's identities are mutually reinforcing and reflections of one another. As George Lucore, an

ERIE retired Executive Vice President and member of the Erie Indemnity Board of Directors, said, “Tom has been with Erie Insurance, it sounds kind of odd to say this, for 70 years. And there probably aren’t any other boards in America where the chairman of the board has been around for 70 years. It’s amazing. It’s a blessing to have Tom as our ‘chair’ because Tom has not only been a CEO of ERIE Insurance, he also had and worked with the other eight CEOs we had in our history, including H.O. Hirt the founder.”

Or as Sean McLaughlin, the retired federal judge and former general counsel at ERIE Insurance told me, “Tom honors his roots.”

What are those roots?

Of course, they extend back to his mother and grandfather, to the lessons he learned at school and university, and during his naval service, but those roots are also deeply planted in ERIE Insurance’s corporate culture. According to Forbes, a “corporate culture is an organization’s shared values, beliefs, and behaviors shaping how the organization’s members interact with one another and the public they serve. A strong corporate culture ... is characterized by open communication and mutual respect.” Just as at The ERIE, companies with a healthy corporate culture often experience multiple times the revenue growth of those with a weak culture.

In discussing why attempts at organizational change frequently fail, management and leadership guru John Kotter notes eight different factors. It is the eighth on his list, however, that frequently undoes even apparently successful projects. He says organizational change efforts are often unsuccessful because of a failure to embed the change in the organizational culture. One can, however, reverse that analysis and say that the decline and fall of even longtime successful organizations is because they forgot who they were — they forgot their roots: the fundamental values and behaviors that made them successful. Long-term, sustained organizational success often results by being true to the organization’s foundational values. Some fortunate few organizations succeed by remembering, as McLaughlin says Hagen does, their roots.



What are the organizational roots Hagen remembers and uses as his touchstone in pursuit of what he describes as “continuity, stewardship, and a belief in long-term institutional strength over short-term market gains”? A large part of that is recognizing a sense of place-based identity and commitment to the notion that if “Erie flourishes, ERIE Insurance flourishes, and vice versa.” That began at the beginning with H.O. Hirt’s vision of in “sERvIcE.”

It is a vision that Hagen is determined to see maintained, passed on to, and sustained by ERIE’s next generation of leaders. As he told me, “Our company culture is extremely important.” A large part of that vision and mission is being good corporate citizens. As Hagen describes ERIE

Insurance's sense of itself as a member of the Erie city and county community, it "means that if you're a citizen, if you're part of something, then you're going to want to do all that you can to make that something good and worthwhile and maybe even better ... so to the extent that you might have a leadership role in that community you want to make or keep that place a good place."

How does ERIE Insurance do that?

In addition to prioritizing customer service to drive growth in home, auto, and business insurance, ERIE Insurance says on its website that, "We're part of the community. Our 7,000-plus employees and 14,000 agents ... give back in different ways — from delivering Meals on Wheels and coaching Little League, to helping rebuild after a catastrophe — and we're proud to help our customers when they need us the most." The company celebrates inclusion and belonging because "since our founding, our leaders have worked to treat others as they would like to be treated. That guiding principle continues to influence us today. We know that by committing to this work, we will develop a greater understanding of our communities and address the business challenges and opportunities that lie ahead."



At ERIE, they believe in investing in their communities and in the lives of others. The website points out that "Service has been part of our company's vision from the start. ERIE's founder H.O. Hirt had a passion for connecting people, ideas and resources to solve problems in the community. For instance, in 1945 immediately following World War II when H.O. learned about the foster parents' plan to help the War Orphans Fund, he encouraged employees to make small monthly donations to the

cause." Or, as I saw on a recent Saturday morning cycling on Presque Isle, groups of people in blue T-shirts proclaiming, "Above All In SERVIce" as they picked up litter keeping "the peninsula," as Erieites call it, the jewel that it is.

Detailing what ERIE and its teams does, the website continues, "The promise of service to our customers and the community continues to pass from generation to generation at ERIE. In 2024, 391 ERIE employees served on the board of a community organization, ERIE matched 33,061 charitable gifts from their employees, and 920 charities received donations from ERIE and its employees.

As NeCastro said, at "almost every employee meeting we have, whether it's a leadership meeting or an all employee meeting ... we always talk about things we're doing in our communities."

Or, on a grander scale, because of Hagen’s nurturance and sustaining of ERIE’s corporate values and commitment to its home city, NeCastro related, “Tom enabled me to found the Erie Downtown Development Corporation (EDDC) by putting \$5 million of company money into it that we knew was never coming back. ... It’s called ‘bleeding-edge money’ that enables me to use the company’s influence to raise nearly \$30 million of equity money to support and spur the renovation and rebirth of downtown Erie.” It began in 2014 at a series of meetings at the JES. As related to me by JES President Ferki Ferati, “(The meeting) was one of the most transformational days in our community’s history.” On Nov. 6, 2014, at a dinner just before Bruce Katz, urbanist and then-Brookings Institution vice president of its Metropolitan Policy Program, spoke at the Jefferson’s Global Summit VI speaker series, Hagen asked Katz “When is Erie going to get any kind of help from the federal government?” Katz memorably replied, “If you’re waiting for the cavalry to come rescue you, I’m here to tell you it’s not. ... You guys either have to rescue your own city or be ready to close it in about 20 years.”



Hagen is the kind of leader who didn’t need to hear those words twice.

In the years that followed, Hagen took an increased interest in the programming the JES was doing around place-based policy and urban renewal, especially as the think tank joined the Brookings Institution Metro Leadership Council in 2015, which led to the launching of the Metro 100. Co-hosted between the JES and the Erie County Gaming Revenue Authority, the Metro 100 was designed to gather the most influential civic stakeholders and leaders around a critical issue facing the region.

Hagen was, of course, there at the inaugural gathering led by Katz that focused on Erie’s advanced industries — those in which significant investments are being made for research and development. He was also there in 2016 when the Metro 100 turned its focus to “Erie Refocused,” the then-recently published comprehensive plan for the city of Erie.



It was at the Oct. 12, 2016, session, when ERIE President and CEO Tim NeCastro asked “Erie Refocus” lead consultant Charles Buki, principal at the then-Alexandria, Virginia-based planning firm, what should be done. Buki told NeCastro to consider launching a development corporation, and for inspiration for a model to replicate and scale to look to Cincinnati’s 3CDC (Cincinnati Center City Development Corporation). Because, like all visionary leaders, Hagen dares to think big and believes in transformational efforts that will yield sustainable, systemic results, out of all of that, as NeCastro noted, emerged the EDDC driving the revitalization of Erie’s urban core.

The positive impact and power of that commitment was underscored by Erie business leader Nick Scott, Sr. In announcing the construction of a new hotel on Erie's waterfront, Scott wanted to ensure that credit for Erie's new Erie City Revitalization & Improvement Zone (CRIZ Authority) lands where it should. He pointed out that "the ability to capture \$15 million a year is built on ERIE Insurance's willingness to allow the community to divert the increased state taxes that company pays on insurance premiums."

It's a philosophy of doing business that sees the success of the community as integral to the success of the company and vice versa. As Sister Joan Chittister, OSB, said, "Tom's the kind of businessman who makes business an art ... who wants more stature for the whole community than quick economic tricks to get ahead. Tom has not only understood, then, the impact of development in an area, but he has made our own society bolder in his ongoing pursuit for good for the next generation to come."



Sister Joan Chittister

When I mentioned to Hagen that the ERIE philosophy and culture run counter to the prevailing business philosophy espoused by conservative economist Milton Friedman and others that a corporation's only responsibility (and if not its "only" its "primary" responsibility) was to maximize shareholder return, he replied, "Look, you want to make money and you should make money because if you don't, none of this is possible. But you want to do it in a way that is welcomed by the community you're serving. ... After all, that's the best advertising you can have."

In short, as H.O. Hirt understood and his protégé Tom Hagen absorbed, if you do well by people, they will remember, and in remembering, they will return and renew their policies over and over again. In the process, ERIE Insurance became a rare example of a community-rooted company that scaled responsibly and profitably without sacrificing what made it trustworthy. Both Hagen and the company he leads understand that corporate culture is its key strategic asset because in the end, community investment is brand identity.

Hagen concluded, "I feel very strongly about it, and I tell management people we have an obligation as the 'big kid' on the block and the largest employer and the only Fortune 500 company based in Erie that we have a responsibility to contribute and give back to the community that we got our start in. We wouldn't be where we are if we hadn't had the Erie community behind us. ... We've grown in other places, and they've been great to us, but this is where our roots are."

If that is the underlying philosophy, as a leader how did Hagen lead?

As Jeff Kidder said about the West Sixth Street restoration, "whenever he talks about the project, he says it's the team. ... He never uses 'I', it's always 'we.'" Cal Pifer said, "He leads by example. For example, he sticks by Erie. This should not be undervalued. ... Who does this anymore? It's so rare." NeCastro said, "he has a great eye for detail ... catch things early, fix everything as you go, and keep it moving forward."



Sean McLaughlin

Sean McLaughlin got at the essence of Hagen as a leader. According to McLaughlin, Hagen is “animated by a number of driving forces. One is intense loyalty. Besides his family, which comes first, his three or four great loves are 1) ERIE Insurance, 2) a genuine and unwavering love and commitment to public service, and 3) a deep-seated sense of the importance of history and its preservation.” Undergirding it all is a rock-solid sense of who he is and what he values. As his daughter Sarah said, “he’s a very humble person ... a very normal person. ... He still lives in the house I grew up in. He was a Depression-era baby and those things come through. ... We have some funny stories about that, too. ... One time we had to drive around for quite a while before we returned a rental car because he had to find the cheapest gas. ... At the same time he’ll turn around and be more than generous about whatever it takes to get a cause underway, under control, completed, however you want to ... wherever you are in that process. ... He’s a ‘get-it-done’ guy.”

How does he get things done?



Tom Hagen leads work session

McLaughlin told me that, “Tom’s leadership style was very effective for a number of reasons. One, he is naturally intuitive about other people and in what’s needed at the moment. Number two, Tom never forgot to listen. ... He was genuinely interested in what other people had to say. Third, he isn’t the kind of guy that willy-nilly tosses out demands and insists that this or this or this be done, no matter how difficult, how steep the hill or difficult to climb, unless it was something he would have been willing to do himself. Next, this is maybe a little bit more nuanced point. A lot of people in Tom’s position become skilled at making the people they’re working with think they really care about them, as opposed to perhaps really caring about them. The difference with Tom is they not only think that he cares about them, he really does care about them. ... There’s a genuineness that, I think, people over time just pick up on about him. Lastly, he’s not a table banger. He doesn’t raise his voice. He persuades; he doesn’t shout, which is very effective.”

In McLaughlin’s description of Hagen as leader, there are almost all of what I call leadership’s vital ingredients: he has great people skills, he listens, he leads by example, he is authentic (comfortable in his own skin: what you see is what you get), and he cares about his team. It’s a fundamental axiom of leadership: if your team knows you care about them, it is amazing what they will do for you.

You collaborate with the team, and they will build a culture.

As McLaughlin added, “That is absolutely the word. ... If I heard it once, I heard it 50 times. ... The thing that Tom was perhaps most invested in at ERIE and making sure that they did not lose was the Erie culture, the company culture. He would be the first to say that cultural seed was actually planted by H.O. and watered by H.O. over the years, and Tom just took it and ran with it.”

So, Hagen knew who he was, what he valued, and valuing it made it happen by having a team and sharing credit with the team. Along the way, as risks arose, he met them with ingenuity and openness to new ideas. In a highly personal way, showing that he cares and that he shares, and that he remembers, one of those new ideas was to create two funds to ensure that the commitment to company and community would extend into the future. We’ve already mentioned the Historic Erie Preservation Trust; the other is The Susan Hirt Hagen Fund for Transformational Philanthropy: A Vision for Civic Renewal established in 2015 in honor of his late wife who passed away that year.



Susan Hirt Hagen Center

Hagen said the Fund for Transformational Philanthropy is intended “to honor the work that my wife, Susie, had done over her lifetime.” The fund’s goal is to be a cornerstone in efforts to rebuild Erie’s social fabric, improve public education, and create long-term systemic change. It reflects not only the values of the corporate culture, but how those values mesh with the Hagen family’s deeply held personal values around community and lasting stewardship. The daughter of ERIE Insurance co-founder H. O. Hirt, Susan “Susie” Hirt Hagen and Tom Hagen were married for nearly six decades. Known for her intellectual curiosity and commitment to youth development, Susan was herself a major figure in the Erie community.

As her daughter Sarah related, “My mother had a master’s degree in counseling from Gannon University. She had a particular passion for adolescent behavioral health and character development. Herself a graduate of Erie’s public schools, Susan believed in the power of education to transform lives.” Active in numerous civic organizations, Susie Hirt Hagen was deeply interested in the welfare of all members of the Erie community. A long-time supporter of the United Way of Erie County, she was the first woman to chair the nonprofit’s board.

Her legacy of quiet but persistent advocacy helped shape the direction of the Hagen family’s philanthropic efforts. Key to understanding that focus is the word “transformational.” According to her daughter Sarah, her mother wanted to focus on large-scale projects that hadn’t been done before and for which there was no or very limited seed funding. She wanted to fund big ideas and sustainable projects that could impact generations. As her daughter related, Susan wanted “to change the temperature in Erie about how things happened and to move Erie to a new and better place.” In pursuit of that vision, Hagen and his family



Susan Hagen

established the fund with an initial \$10 million gift to the Erie Community Foundation. The fund's stated purpose was to support transformational, system-wide initiatives in three key areas: 1) Public Education Reform and Support; 2) Health and Wellness Access; and 3) Integrated Social Services for At-Risk Youth and Families.

Launched in partnership with United Way of Erie County and the Erie School District (now Erie's Public Schools), the fund's flagship initiative is its support of the Community Schools model in Erie. According to the United Way, "At its most basic level, the Community School Model brings resources into the school building to remove non-academic barriers that local low-income children attending public schools face every day. Non-academic barriers range from basic needs, such as clothing, food, and school supplies, to mental and behavioral health challenges, to unmet vision and dental needs, to lack of family engagement." All of this grew from Hagen and his wife Susie's belief that a community will never be the best version of itself unless everyone is included and contributing not only to its economy but also to its cultural well-being.

Through the fund's support, United Way helped embed this model in some of Erie's most vulnerable elementary and middle schools, starting with Diehl and Edison elementary schools and East Middle School. In the 2024-25 academic year, it was extended to Erie High School. The goal is to remove non-academic barriers to learning, so that schools can become hubs of community development. The United Way reports that schools with community support funded through



Donny Orlando

Hagen's and others' philanthropy have seen increased attendance, improved family engagement, and lower disciplinary referrals, all indicators of growing school stability and student success. According to Erie High School Principal Donny Orlando, "The Community schools program at Erie High has been a pillar of our commitment to supporting every student. Through partnerships with local organizations and tailored resources, it creates a dynamic inclusive environment where students can thrive." By 2025, the number of designated community schools in Erie had grown to more than 16, all aided either directly or indirectly by the Susan Hirt Hagen Fund for Transformational Philanthropy.

Hagen has repeatedly emphasized that the fund is not intended for "Band-Aid" solutions, but for structural change. Pifer said, "Hagen's approach to philanthropy is strategic." As Hagen told the Erie Times-News in 2018, his goal is to "fund efforts that permanently fix broken systems," particularly where poverty, education, and social fragmentation overlap. In addition to education, women's health is a major focus of the fund, which supports UPMC McGee-Women's-Erie in a partnership with Penn State Behrend. It particularly focuses on cancers that affect women.

Hagen and his family also engage in broader philanthropic activities, including support for the Erie Art Museum, Erie Philharmonic, Experience Children's Museum, and several significant projects at Chautauqua Institution. Hagen is also a long-standing supporter of his alma mater Penn State Behrend.



*Archbishop
Dwayne Brock*

Hagen and his family also support the Eastside Renaissance, attempting to impact the welfare of the community centered on Parade Street, but also the Youth Mentorship and Workforce Training programs aimed at career readiness for high school students, including internship pipelines into local businesses and trades. As Archbishop Dwayne Brock, one of the leaders of the Eastside Renaissance and the pastor of the Victory Christian Center, who affectionately calls Hagen “the big guy,” said, “He’s a visionary. He can see things others refuse to see and in talking with him

that becomes his motivation. The partnership the Eagle’s Nest has with the ‘big guy’ is absolutely phenomenal and absolutely a necessity for the welfare of those who have been marginalized and disenfranchised within our city.”



Hagen’s efforts demonstrate that philanthropy can move beyond charity to become a lever for systemic transformation. Instead of endowing institutions to continue old models, he has challenged Erie’s public systems to reinvent themselves for the 21st century. Through this lens, the fund’s work is not a side note to his corporate career. It is an extension of the same community-focused philosophy that shaped ERIE Insurance.

Tom Hagen: Citizen Leader; Concluding Remarks

T.S. Eliot said in “Four Quartets”,

“We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.”

We began this biographical essay about Erie citizen leader Tom Hagen on a rainy September morning watching a 150-year-old house be moved as part of a restoration project renewing the past as an investment in Erie’s future. Watching the house’s achingly slow progress toward its future site, we asked how does one become a leader, how does one become a citizen leader, how does one become a 90-year-old man with the energy, passion, and excitement of someone not only years but even decades younger? A man of whom noted journalists James and Deborah Fallows said, committed to “redeveloping (Erie’s) downtown and business base ... through investments of hundreds of millions of dollars ... Hagen’s youthful vigor and informal, easy, generous manner is a model of what many people would hope to be.”

Using Eliot’s insight as a guide, looking back over this essay, this snapshot of a life well-lived, we see that the answer, as it always is with effective leaders, is a question of character. And that character grows from those who nurtured it.

In my experience, effective leaders, of whom I have been blessed to know more than one, always — always — as does Tom Hagen, “honor their roots.” Hagen credits, first and foremost, his mother and grandfather — Isabella Bailey Hagen and Commander Frank J. Bailey, U.S. Navy Ret. He then cites his wife, of 57 years, Susan Hirt Hagen and his father-in-law, H.O. Hirt. H.O. Hirt co-founded ERIE Insurance, and Tom Hagen is, in many ways, his living embodiment. Although he does not publicly speak of it often, Hagen values his naval service for teaching him that Job No. 1 is “to take care of your crew.” And, lastly, which should warm the hearts of any teachers reading this, Hagen remembers with respect and gratitude those who taught him.

A large part of that character is the simple joy of loving what you’re doing. As his daughter Sarah said about his preservation projects, “He’s having a ball.” When I asked Hagen why at 90 he doesn’t stop, go to Aruba, sit on the beach, and “chill,” he looked at me as if I had two heads. It reminded me of a story I read long ago about a reporter interviewing Picasso on his 90th birthday. It was a hot, humid day in the south of France. Picasso was hard at work in his studio. The reporter asked, “You’re already recognized as the greatest artist of the century. Why are you still working so hard?” Picasso replied, “Because it’s what I do and I’m not done.”

When he accepted the Pennsylvania Society’s Gold Medal for Distinguished Achievement, Hagen noted that he is often asked why he does what he does and when will he stop? A student of history, a man of character who mastered the art of living by understanding where he came from, where he is, and where he might be going, Hagen told the audience he has no intention of quitting because “Quite frankly, there is just so much more to do and I enjoy it so much. So, the best answer I can give, which seems appropriate for me, comes from a quote from a professor (Dr. Don Kamachek) that my wife Susie came across some years ago.” A framed version of it hangs in his home. It reads:

“A master in the art of living draws no sharp distinction
between his work and his play, his labour and his leisure,
his mind and his body, his education and his recreation.
He hardly knows which is which.

He simply pursues his vision of excellence through
Whatever he is doing and leaves others to determine
Whether he is working or playing.

To himself he always seems to be doing both.”
Don E. Kamachek

That his family moved to Erie in 1943, chose to stay, and that Tom Hagen seconded that by choosing to return to Erie in 1960 after completing his naval service is something for which all Erieites can be grateful. And they are. Hagen himself told me “People will be driving by on Sixth

Street and just stop their cars and say ‘thank you’. ... I go to breakfast at a local diner. I’ll be sitting there and somebody will come up ... you know, just folks, just a person, they’ll come up and excuse themselves and say something like, ‘Thank you for what you’re doing ... God love you and thank you.’” While it can be embarrassing, he said, he very much appreciates it.

Leadership – it is a question of character, and it is the work of a lifetime.

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Comments from Dr. Joe Pfadt, Sr. Joan Chittester OSB, Jonathan Hagen, George Lucore, former Pennsylvania Governor Tom Ridge, and Archbishop Dwayne Brock are from the tribute video honoring Tom Hagen at the 2024 Pennsylvania Society Gold Medal dinner available [here](#) Event Videos | United States | The Pennsylvania Society.

Thank you to Donny Orlando, Principal of Erie High School for his comments about the Community Schools Program at Erie High.

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Image of tree roots as metaphor for organizational success AI generated on A. Roth’s private account at OpenAI.

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About the Author



A Scholar-in-Residence at the Jefferson Educational Society, Andrew Roth delivers presentations about “The American Tapestry Project: We Tell Ourselves Stories.” In this series, Roth seeks to weave together America’s many stories into a tapestry of stories exploring what it means to be an American. The project includes The American Tapestry Project: a five-part series on the story’s major threads; American Holidays: an eight-part series on those things Americans love in common; Americans and Their Games: Sports in America History and Culture: a five-part series on the role of sports in American history; and The Birth of the Women’s Movement: an ongoing series on the 19th century women who challenged their times and shaped the future. The entire project began with America in 1968: The Far Side of the Moon and the Birth of the Culture Wars.

A frequent speaker at Chautauqua Institution and at other venues, Roth currently hosts The American Tapestry podcast series, which airs on the second Sunday of every month on WQLN PBS NPR, with episodes available at NPR and Apple Podcasts, among other platforms. Most recently, the series has been exploring popular music as a window into the soul of America.

In June 2022, the JES awarded Roth the first ever Ovid Award for the 100-plus Book Notes he has written for the think tank since March 2020. The series now numbers over 200 and counting. Roth’s Book Notes cover the subjects of the day, with emphases on American history and the art of poetry. All can be found on the Jefferson Educational Society website, JESerie.org. In addition to his Book Notes, Roth recently authored a book on leadership scheduled to be published by the JES in 2026. It draws on his numerous lectures and writings on the topic informed by his decades-long careers and service in various leadership roles.

Roth’s long career in higher education included serving at Erie’s Gannon and Mercyhurst universities. A nationally recognized expert in enrollment management, Roth authored *Saving for College and the Tax Code: A New Spin on the “Who Pays for Higher Education Debate”* (2001). From 2003 to 2014, Roth served as president of Notre Dame College in Cleveland, Ohio, which awarded him an Honorary Doctorate for his leadership and named him President-Emeritus. In 2016-17, Roth served as president of St. Bonaventure University, guiding the university through a sensitive transitional period.

When not working on his various projects, he enjoys reading and cycling on Presque Isle. He is married to retired banker Judy Owens Roth.

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About the JES

The Jefferson Educational Society, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, nonpartisan think tank headquartered in Erie, Pennsylvania, promotes civic engagement and education by examining the past, studying the present, and exploring the future. With a focus on creating local-level learning opportunities, the JES, founded in 2008, hosts more than 100 world-class educational events and produces more than 100 publications annually, highlighting the knowledge and expertise of local and regional scholars and practitioners, aimed at informing the public and bringing people who may not always see eye to eye shoulder to shoulder, and screen to screen, to engage in civil civic dialogue.

The think tank has garnered national attention for its annual fall speaker series, the Global Summit, which endeavors to import big ideas into the region to inform and advance dialogue and drive community progress. From former presidents of the United States and ambassadors to Pulitzer Prize-winning historians and politicians, to renowned scientists and medical professionals to bleeding-edge innovators and researchers, the Global Summit provides a series of thought-provoking events spanning a wide range of topics.

The JES also facilitates a Civic Leadership Academy, which immerses participants in a hands-on learning experience to explore the form and function of local government and its relation to state and federal governments. It also collectively works to address a critical issue facing the region with national implication by producing meaningful research and clear-eyed recommendations on how to address it. Scores of graduates, part of the JES's Civic Leadership Academy Alumni Network, have gone on to service in various leadership roles and have been elected to various political offices. Among its other various initiatives, the JES is a proud partner in the Heartlands Transformational Network, a transatlantic collaborative partnership between think tanks, universities, and NGOs dedicated towards closing geographic economic divides and reconnecting residents of rural and former industrial heartland communities to economic opportunity.



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JEFFERSON EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

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