

## Quick, Timely Reads

*Reading in the Time of Coronavirus*  
On the Waterfront

### Neighborhood Bars and Clubs: *Where Were Our Dads from 3:30 to 6?*

By David Frew  
December 2020

*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.*

Erie, Pennsylvania's first industrial zone was a west-side corridor that paralleled the old Erie Extension Canal. The canal, which operated between 1844 and 1871, ran south on a slight diagonal from the Canal Basin near the State Street causeway (West Slip) to about 15th Street, and then turned west, continuing along the path of today's West 12th Street to Girard, Pennsylvania. From there, it ran south to Beaver, Pennsylvania and the Allegheny River.

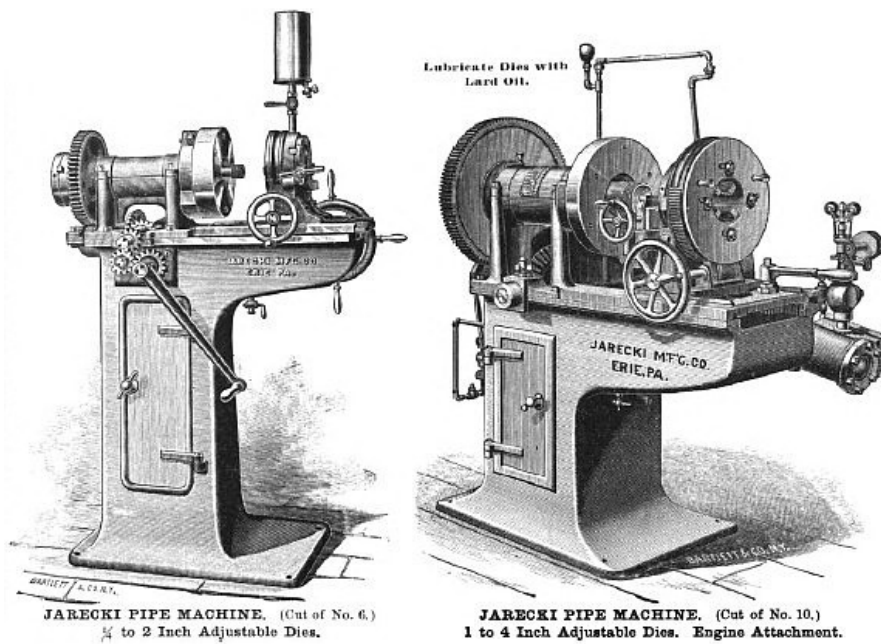
The canal was a business magnet, encouraging all kinds of manufacturing and commerce since it was such an efficient means of transporting raw materials and finished goods. After the canal failed, businesses continued to pack their way into the space between 12th Street and the railroad tracks that were built in the old canal bed and, by the post-World War II period, there were dozens of medium and large manufacturing businesses, and even more small support companies along that causeway. Machine shops, tool and die companies, and supply businesses filled in the spaces between major manufacturers. As automobiles and trucks appeared during the 1900s, West 12th Street emerged as the modern replacement for the old canal and the industrial zone spread north.

Some of Erie's most venerable companies trace their roots to this industrial corridor. The iconic occupants of the 12th Street Corridor included American Sterilizer (before it moved west), Bucyrus Erie, Erie City Iron Works, Erie Forge and Steel, Erie Malleable Iron, Erie Plating Company, Erie Press Systems, Erie Resistor, General

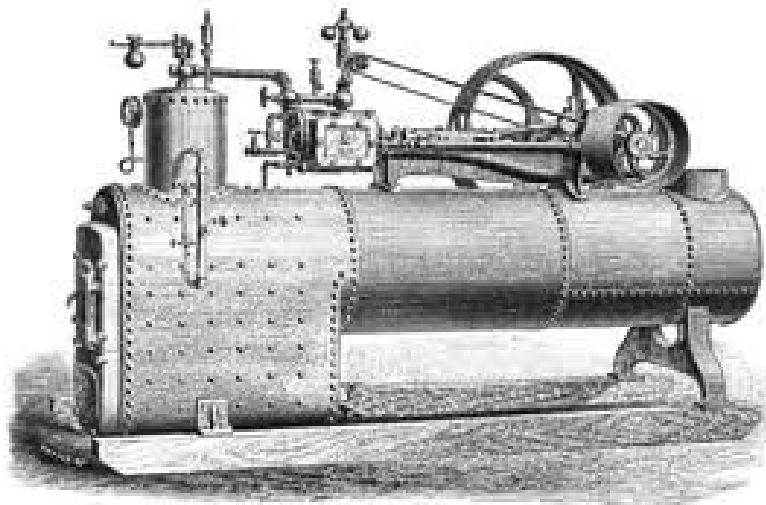
Telephone, Griswold Manufacturing, Jarecki Manufacturing, Lord Manufacturing, Nagle Engine and Boiler Works, and Reed Manufacturing.



*Griswold Manufacturing, maker of world-famous cast iron pots and pans, began on the Erie Extension Canal at West 12th and Raspberry streets. They received barge shipments of pig iron, dug from the west end of Presque Isle Bay, and shipped products south on the waterway.*



*Jarecki Pipe Machines were world leaders in the piping industry.*



Nagle Portable Boilers

*Nagle portable boilers drove the petroleum industry in Titusville.*

During the 1950s, there was so much work near 12th Street that any willing person with a grade-school education and a work ethic could quickly find employment there. And the jobs paid well. It was hard work, but steady. Someone with a high-school diploma, especially a graduate of Erie Tech (where boys learned drafting, machine shop practices, and other technical skills), could quickly become an industrial “rock star.” During those “happy days,” a high-school graduate could be working at a great job by June, which would enable him to buy his own cool car. Then instead of hiking to Y-Co and other popular, summer teenage dances, he could be driving a late 1940s or early 1950s Ford, Chevy, or Mercury. And if a boy had his own car, which could be purchased for less than \$300, he would probably customize it. The first thing was to remove the hood and trunk ornaments and fill in the holes. I’m still not sure why. Really cool kids would remove door handles and chrome trim and replace the standard muffler with a glass pack so that everyone could hear them coming. If the car came with blackwall tires (not cool), “porta-walls” were available at Keystone Auto Parts on Parade Street for about \$10. A spotted (pinto) car announced that the car was not “the family ride.” You owned your own car.

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Why would anyone go to college when all of this was beckoning? Four more years of annoying classes versus the American Dream? With a customized car, adorned with flat, gray primer in all the places where amateur bodywork had been done, it was possible to "bug State Street." That was an odd, local custom that involved repeatedly driving from about 12th Street to the Public Dock at the foot of State, while repeatedly revving the engine at each stop and sometimes peeling out when a traffic light turned from red to green. Finally, when patches of gray primer began to overtake the original color, there was the trusty Earl Scheib, \$29.95 paint job (sometimes on sale for \$19.95).



The 1950 Mercury convertible. Can you say, “Chick Magnet?”

My West Fourth Street neighborhood was “developed” during the late 1800s. Naturally, there were very few driveways and less than half of neighborhood families had cars. Why put up with the expense when you lived in a walkable neighborhood adjacent to a seemingly infinite supply of good jobs? As I moved to high school, however, it became common for families who had never owned cars to have a teenaged son who had purchased one. A few days ago, I drove to my old block and re-imagined the people who lived there. There were 26 buildings on the street plus two small houses built at the rear of lots. Of these 28 buildings, three were stores with upstairs apartments, and one was a hotel. There was also a bar with three apartments and a four-unit apartment building. In total, there were 35 housing units plus the corner hotel.

To support these dwellings, there were only 10 driveways, and a few of those had been cobbled together by removing curbs and cannibalizing side yards. As the 1950s progressed and the older boys found jobs on West 12th Street and began purchasing cars, a new problem emerged: where to park the “explosion of automobiles.” West Fourth Street was a major public bus route, and the increasing onstreet parking made driving into an obstacle course. But with gasoline prices hovering near 20 cents per gallon, and post-World War II automobile production resuming, young people were eager to become mobile. The city government tried to solve this problem by creating a (confusing) system of one-way street traffic, which eliminated the issue of cars converging from two directions.

Meanwhile, the established neighborhood workforce, dads who had been employed for decades, resisted automobile ownership. Thus, a walking parade of neighborhood men departed each day at 6:30 a.m. with lunch buckets and headed north for West 12th Street. Since they had to punch in by 7 a.m., they left promptly each day. We kids knew that a regular work shift was eight hours long, but we never wondered why they did not come home until 5:30 or 6 p.m.

To reward themselves for suffering long, hot days in the bowels of noisy, smelly factories, they left work and headed north most days. Not for their homes, but for their favorite bars, taverns, and clubs. There were an astonishing number of such establishments in the neighborhood; places like the fictional “Cheers,” where everyone knew your name. These very real clubs offered the opportunity to drink at a discount. A small annual fee assured that a beer would cost 15 cents rather

than a quarter and that there would also be good food. As a bonus, clubs offered family-style dining so that men could bring wives and children on weekends. They also often featured adjunct entertainment, including bowling, slot machines, card playing, and the infamous daily and weekly drawings in which one lucky member, who had to be present, could win a jackpot of \$30. The daily drawing happened at 5:30 p.m., just before almost everyone hurried home for supper. Ethnic clubs offered the added opportunity to commune with fellow Italians, Portuguese, or Finnish.

The regular (non-club) bars started on 12th Street, steps from where everyone worked, and stretched north to Second Street. Each had its own identity and, like the clubs, they featured card games, specialty food, and pinball machines. A list of bars and clubs between 12th and the bayfront, and from Cranberry to Cherry streets follows. There were 16 in the neighborhood. Did we need them all? Of course.

### **The Bars**

Adams Hotel (Fourth and Plum)  
Barilla's (Ninth and Cranberry)  
Bayview Tavern (Fourth and Cascade)  
Biancardi's (12th and Cascade)  
The Boulevard (Fourth and Liberty)  
Chuck and Ginnie's (Fifth and Raspberry)  
Mentley's (Eighth and Cascade)  
Sophia's Tavern (Fifth and Cherry)  
Sophie's Tavern (Second and Plum)

### **The Clubs**

Cascade Park Club (Second and Raspberry)  
Danish Club (Seventh Street)  
Finnish Hall (Second and Plum)  
Gem Club (Fourth and Cherry)  
Holy Trinity Portuguese Society (1000 block of West Fifth Street)  
Jim Modica's Pool Hall (900 block of West Fourth Street)  
The Penn Club (900 block of West Fourth Street)

Between 5:30 and 6 p.m., men left the bars and clubs, still carrying the lunch boxes they had taken to work. They returned home, where dutiful wives had prepared their suppers, sat down and ate (often in silence), then moved to easy chairs where they read the newspaper or watched television. It is apparent, in hindsight, that these dads were "buzzed" most nights from drinking on empty stomachs. Families usually sat quietly with them until the dads nodded off, got up, and went to bed. In hindsight, the moms knew what was happening, but the kids did not. We were just thankful they were working to support us.



*The classic 1950s era lunch pail held a thermos of coffee or soup, two sandwiches and some cookies.*

This factory-worker, bar-behavior was not unique to Erie. Henry Ford noticed it at his auto plants during the late teens. When Ford questioned his plant foremen and supervisors about the daily exodus from factories to bars and clubs, they told him the workers seemed to be perpetually perched on the knife-edge of revolt. They added that workmen seemed to resent their jobs. They did not like being inserted in the repetitive cells of assembly lines.

Assembly lines were the efficiency measures that Ford had created at great expense, and he was astonished to learn that his employees were so resistant. Ford eventually decided that the roots of the percolating and escalating psychological revolt that supervisors were reporting were being nurtured at bars and clubs. "Why?" he asked, "would the workmen that he was providing for rush to taverns each day after work to complain about jobs, supervisors, and working conditions?" Perhaps it never dawned on him that he was witnessing a revolt against the lack of autonomy that his assembly lines were creating. Or, that if he had approached the workers instead of having blind trust in his industrial and manufacturing engineers, they might have made valuable suggestions that would have improved the manufacturing process. All he could think apparently was that while he had invented a system that seemed destined to revolutionize the national economy and the GDP, the bars surrounding his automobile plants were threatening his vision.

Ford's reaction was to go after the bars and what better way could there be to eliminate drinking. He began with a Detroit church campaign in which he made large contributions in return for pastors launching anti-drinking campaigns from their pulpits. But that did not work, so he solicited the cooperation of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) and then used his political power to launch a statewide prohibition movement. Ford's final dream came slowly, however. The statewide (Michigan) prohibition failed. The proximity of supplies of alcohol from Ohio and Indiana proved the Michigan-only prohibition dysfunctional. So, Ford moved on, finally launching a lasting national Prohibition in 1920. Was there a different way not pursued? Did Prohibition work? America's storyteller Ken Burns has recently argued that Prohibition was "America's Worst Idea."



*Henry Ford, architect of America's new economy, poses with one of his Model T's.*

What Ford and others were missing was that while their assembly lines were reducing the costs of manufactured goods such as automobiles, they were psychologically damaging many workers. The very same people who had grown up in a culture of American inventiveness and innovation were being asked to subjugate their creativity for cash. It was a deal that could not work in the long run. It was not the "Cowboy Way." Bars and clubs offered factory workers the opportunity to congregate in a place where they were accepted as valuable human beings with ideas. Once sequestered at favorite barstools and in the company of friends, they could say anything they wanted, bring up any topic, and comment on the stupidity of things at work. For many workers, hours spent at favorite bars or clubs were the highlight of each day; the one time they most looked forward to. It is so unfortunate that the scions of industry were deprived from the ideas generated in those places.

An astonishing thing happened in my Shenley Drive neighborhood during the early 1970s. We purchased a home there in 1970 after I went to work at Gannon and as I was meeting neighbors the across-the-street man turned out to be a person I had known in 1961 while working in construction. He was a mid-level supervisor at General Telephone's operations center on West 16th Street, where my construction company had a contract. As we were settling in, I watched him leave for work each morning, lunch bucket in hand. A semi-modern version of the men from my Fourth Street neighborhood, he departed each day by car, rather than on foot. Like so many of the phone company guys, he punched out at 3:30 and rushed to Biancardi's Tavern at 12th and Cascade, just a few hundred yards north of the phone company. Then after a few hours he dutifully left the bar, arriving at his house by 6 p.m. That daily schedule continued, for months until I learned that he had been retired for almost two years without mentioning it to his wife.

For decades, the best part of his day had been going to Biancardi's Tavern after work where he had a few beers, talked with the "boys," and played cards. The bar featured two perpetual card games, Poker and Euchre, and he was a legendary Euchre player. When it was time to retire, it was an easy matter for him to give up work. But how could he part with the very best part of his day, those hours at the bar? One of the tempting aspects of the bars and



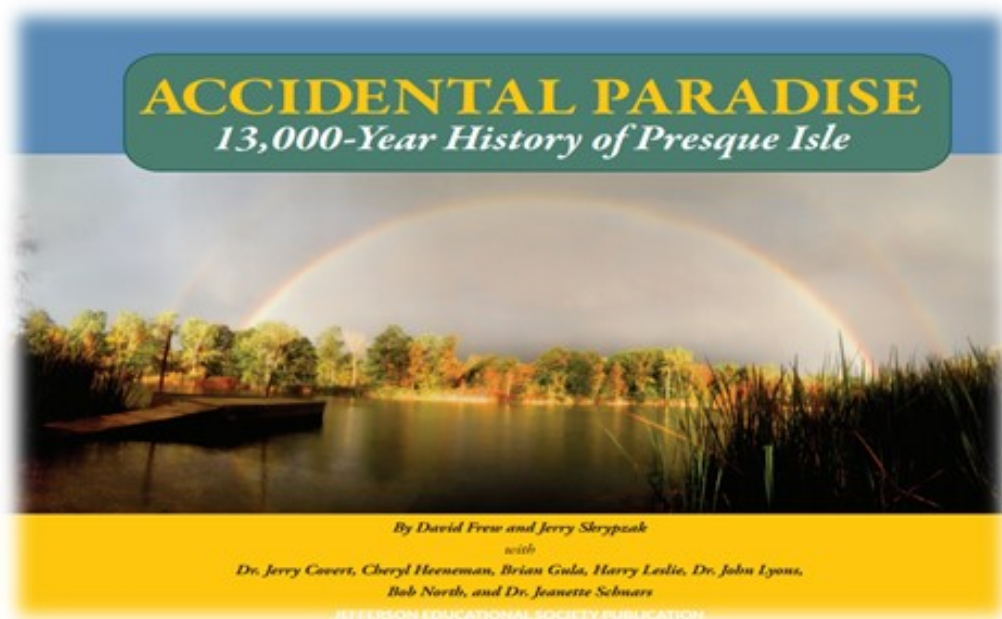
clubs for the regular working guys, was seeing the few lucky older guys who were able to hang out all day. They did not have to wait for 3:30 to rush to the bar or leave like automatons each day at 5:30 to go home. They could come and go as they wished. So as easy as it was for my neighbor to stop working, he could not give up his time at the bar, where he was a card-playing “rock star,” and a respected member of the gang. The added temptation was that he might now become one of the envied elders who could come and go as they pleased. So, each morning he took his lunch bucket, left home and drove directly to the bar instead of to his job.

When the reality of his retirement finally reached his wife, thanks to a comment at church one Sunday, she was not as understanding as he had hoped. Reluctantly, he quit the bar. As he later explained, on his retirement day he took the remains of a celebration cake from work to the bar and shared it with “the boys.” When they asked if he was going to stop coming each day, it caused him to ponder. The next day, he left home and drove directly to the bar, thinking that he would do that for the rest of the week and then tell his wife that he was done at work. That week became two, and then a month, and a year. Before he knew what had happened, years had gone by. After he was “outed,” he had breakfast with his wife each day and puttered around the house. Sadly, he died a few years later. Perhaps there is a social psychology lesson imbedded here, somewhere.

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## *Accidental Paradise*

*by Dr. David Frew and Jerry Skrypzak*



The book, published by the Jefferson Educational Society, is the result of a three-year project with co-authors Dr. David Frew and Jerry Skrypzak and delves into the natural history, personalities, and major events involving the peninsula over the decades -- and centuries -- combined with photographs, illustrations, charts, and maps. For further information click [here](#).

The book will be available for purchase in the coming days through the TREC Foundation at Presque Isle, co-sponsor of the book. For more information, including how, where, and when to purchase the book, please

## 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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