

JEFFERSON EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

Quick, Timely Reads On the Waterfront

Bay Rats Gained Early Education on Sports Fishing

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 this series, the JES Scholar-in-Residence takes note of life in and around the water.

*‘When it blows from the west, they bites the best,
when it blows from the east, they bites the least.’
– Fisherman’s Lament*

The poetic fishing advice above was taped to a counter in one of the shanties west of the Cascade Docks in Erie, Pennsylvania on the path that led from the bridge spanning Cascade Creek toward the Bierig boathouse compound on its west end. We crossed that bridge often during our regular fishing adventures and wandered the length of the pathway. One of our favorite Shantytown stops was a part-time, fishing equipment and bait business operated by one of the infamous neighborhood Finns. The Finns were legendary and ethnically mysterious characters, seeming to be an odd combination of Swedish and Russian. There were several Finnish institutions in the neighborhood, including a sauna, church, yacht club, and social club, but none of us kids actually knew a Finn personally. We did know the Finnish man who ran the shop in Shantytown, however, and that he not only knew all about fishing but also that he sold used tackle. He was our chief outfitter, and he was also patient. He was happy to repair rods and reels when they failed, willing to string new fishing line on reels when needed, able to give fishing advice and happy to provide soft drinks and snacks at a reasonable price.

Skilled anglers, we spent several evenings per week fishing and usually at the

western Cascade Dock where the fishing was best. We carefully selected spots on top of the field of debris – rip rap, rebar, and railroad ties – that covered the west edge of the pier. From those select spots we cast lines into the water in hopes of being able to bring a stringer of fresh fish home to our families. Mothers loved it when we were able to provide a fish meal. It had not been long since Lake Erie's famous blue pike era and most of us had grown up at a time when fresh fish was a traditional family food staple. Several of us regularly had basement laundry tubs filled with live blue pike waiting to be cleaned and eaten for dinner. And most of us were at least semi-adept at fileting fish.

The Western Cascade Dock of the 1950s was still an active shipyard where World War II Yard Ferry (YF) Class boats had been fabricated for the war. Perry Shipping was still busy with boat repair and winter layup work at the time so there was an almost constant buzz of welding and grinding. But we, like most of the fishermen who frequented the pier, were mostly nighttime guests, and authorities from Perry seemed to tolerate our presence. As we approached the south end of the dock, there was an elevated center-divider where the busy east side of the dock was separated from the western side. The east side was decidedly industrial and busy with fabricating work, but the west side was essentially unused. We turned left as we arrived and headed along the edge of the dock, looking for a “best” place to fish. There was a road leading along that side of the pier and several of the regular fishermen drove out onto the dock to park.



Our 1950s fishing emporium looked more like an ugly industrial site than a lovely fishing hole. Rusty pipes and beams, ancient boat hulls, derelict railroad ties, and other random detritus littered the area for decades.

The west side of the pier was magical. Unlike the ugly east side with its acrid smells of creosote and diesel, the west side was green and clean with a wooden suspension bridge, leading west and down into the Shantytown, where we bought fishing equipment and snacks. Sometimes we continued along the path, instead of fishing from the pier. One of our preferred destinations along the path was the old Strong Pond water input “island” that was just offshore. Getting to that concrete island was difficult and often involved wading and swimming with equipment and supplies, but once we had reached it, we thought that we had commandeered the best fishing spot on Presque Isle Bay.

We always harvested our own bait and learned early on that the night crawlers (dew worms) that were relatively easy and fun to catch on wet lawns at night were not the best fishing weapons. An early lesson from the Finn who ran the tackle

and bait stand was that red (stink) worms were much better. He even instructed us on how to find them. We would go to dump sites along the bluffs at the foot of Liberty Street, where people regularly tossed their garden waste over the edge. Once there we would sort through old wet and rotting leaves where the red worms were imbedded. We became so adept and confident at worm-hunting that we would stop on the way to the docks and find worms.

Red worm hunting skills eventually led to a side source of revenue. Local bait stores, including the one at the foot of State Street, would pay as much as 25 cents per dozen for fresh red worms. And we could easily find 10 dozen of the wiggling worms in an hour of sorting through the leaves, a virtual fortune.



The old bridge that crossed the creek has been replaced and the current structure has a “keep off” sign, but how else can a person get to the other side?

The once well-used path on the west side of the bridge is overgrown but it is still there and one of its branches allows hikers to follow Cascade Creek to its Presque Isle Bay outlet. Before Dave Bierig “convinced” the Niagara Point developers to create the road that now leads from their high-end real estate development on top of the hill, the path from the bridge was the only access to his sailmaking shop. To help with the delivery of supplies needed to do his work (heavy bolts of cloth and canvas) he moved an old VW Bug to his shop on a barge and used it to haul things back and forth along the old path for years before his new road was created.

We dreamed of catching blue pike when we went fishing and joined with other fishermen in listening to stories about the good old days. But we never caught one. We landed the occasional perch, along with blue gill and sunfish, but we never gave up hope. The elusive blue pike had to be out there somewhere.



The fabled blue pike, a walleye hybrid, was easy to clean. Perch-like in taste, it was endemic to Lake Erie.

In the good old days when fishermen caught “blues” by the dozen, the liveliest of the fish that came home in buckets were often preserved for later rather than cleaned (it was the ice box era). We would carefully place them in filled basement laundry tubs, wedge a garden hose into the bottom and let the water run slowly. Those improvised, live tanks would keep a few of the hearty blues alive for days. It was one of the earliest examples of fresh “farm to table” nutrition.



Before the advent of water meters, fishermen would often put a few live blue pike in their basement, cement laundry tubs and tuck in a hose with slowly running water.

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with

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The beautiful book on Presque Isle published by authors David Frew and Jerry Skrypnak – “**Accidental Paradise: 13,000-Year History of Presque Isle**” – is on sale at the Tom Ridge Environmental Center’s gift shop and through a special website, AccidentalParadise.com.

The book, priced at **\$35 plus tax and shipping**, can be ordered now through the website sponsored by the TREC Foundation, AccidentalParadise.com.

Presque Isle Gallery and Gifts on the main floor of TREC, located at **301 Peninsula Drive, Suite #2, Erie, PA 16505** will also handle sales *daily from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.*

For more information, send an email to aperino@TREC.org.

To watch "Accidental Paradise: Stories Behind The Stories" click [here](#).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Historian and author David Frew, Ph.D., is a Scholar-in-Residence at the JES. An emeritus professor at Gannon University, 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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