

# JEFFERSON EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

## Quick, Timely Reads On the Waterfront

### *Cascade Park Club: Ghosts, Memories, Employment, and College*

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.*



*Today's Cascade Park Club features a beautiful full-wall neighborhood mural.*

*"Pin boys were usually rowdy street kids, picked up from the very roughest parts of town. Not known for their integrity, reliability or work ethic, they would sometimes work slowly or not show up at all."*

– Kevin Hong, *The Bowling History Book*



*Old-time pin boys carefully place pins in the “exact” spots where they belonged.*

Rowdy? Street kids? Rough part of town? Me and my friends? Guilty, I suppose.

Almost every one of my Bay Rat buddies worked at the Cascade Club at one time or another. The venerable westside establishment served as an employment emporium for lots of us who toiled as pin boys there. The money was pretty good, sometimes paying as much as \$6 per evening plus the occasional tip. And while the hours may have been less than ideal, working until midnight on school nights simply made morning classes challenging. Sometimes I wonder if I should include it on my current academic vitae since I learned so much there.

Long before automatic bowling alleys with cleverly designed, robotic mechanisms, which returned the bowler’s ball, cleared away fallen pins and then precisely replaced the ones that had been knocked down, there were pin boys. At first pin boys manually picked up pins and “attempted” to place them exactly where they should be in the familiar, 10-pin triangle. The responsibility of the pin boy was to be as innocuous as possible in a pit area behind the alley where the pins stood at the end of a bowling lane. After waiting for each ball to arrive, he quickly sprang into action as soon as a ball arrived. The pin boy grabbed it, sent it back to the bowler, and then cleared the fallen pins.

Pin boys were responsible for technological advances in bowling. Neither bowling alley owners nor bowlers liked them. Some were far less-than-invisible and could be a distraction when bowlers were about to roll a ball. A few did it on purpose. Early on, and before the appearance of semi-automatic pin-setting machines, they often made small but important “adjustments” in pin placements that could result in unfairly high or low scores. Moving the critical, central three-pin a few inches, for example, could increase the likelihood of a bowler leaving the dreaded seven-10 split. There were occasional reports of pin boys who “helped” select bowlers, making sure that extra pins fell, from “time to time.” That sort of thing could be accomplished with the assistance of a bent coat hanger. There were a few accusations of pin boys who had been bribed to “help” extra pins fall.

The first major technological innovation in bowling was developed by Brunswick Company when it introduced the semi-automatic pinsetter during the 1920s. The revolutionary semiautomatic system eliminated the old problem of properly placing pins. Semiautomatic systems included an over-alley rack that held the pins and could be activated by engaging a huge lever (improved later models could be activated by pushing a single button). If the first ball did not knock all the pins down, the pin boy would return the ball, pick up downed pins, and place them in appropriate rack spaces immediately above the missing ones. After the second ball was thrown, pins that were knocked down on that throw were added to the rack,

which was activated so that a new set of ten pins was ready for the next bowler.

Observers of modern bowling alleys would have no recollection of pin boys or the “less than fully” automatic pin-setting machines that were “state of the art” decades ago. In the new world of bowling, disreputable pin boys (like me) have been displaced by automation. The process of pin setting has become automatic and seamless. Modern bowling alleys have not only evolved to places where pin setting has become automatic, but they have taken over other peripheral aspects of the sport, beginning with the scoring, which is done continuously as the bowlers continue. Scores are presented on large high-tech scoreboards.

The process of pin-setting automation represents an example of one of the most stunningly bad business decisions of all time, a failure that is now studied in the word of strategic business case analysis. When inventor Gotfried Schmidt began with a Brunswick semi-automatic pin-setting machine and created the first prototype, fully automatic system, his invention was rejected. He took his idea and a working model to Brunswick but the company that had dominated a geometrically growing market was not interested. Frustrated, the inventor took his invention to AMF Corporation, which fully funded, perfected, and launched the new system in 1946. Almost overnight, Brunswick became a secondary player in the bowling market while AMF grew and then leveraged its new “invention” to become one of the leisure industry’s most dominant businesses as it diversified into additional markets.

The first fully automatic machine was announced by AMF in the 1940s but World War II distractions prevented the wide distribution of automatic systems until the 1950s. By the time that my friends and I were working at the Cascade Park Club in the mid-1950s, however, the “handwriting was on the wall.” Erie’s newest and most popular bowling establishments were using automatic lanes. They had freed themselves from the “tyranny” of needing to schedule pin boys in order to offer public bowling times. As a result, the bigger, newer bowling emporiums were able to reduce prices and offer discounted lane times. Meanwhile, we toiled away, realizing that our days in the “pit” were “numbered.” By my last year at the club, league bowling was falling off, tips from happy bowlers were becoming less generous, and there was a rumor that our regular pay rate of 10 cents per line was about to be reduced. From the perspective of the pin boys, it seemed almost impossible that a venerable neighborhood institution like the Cascade Club (Cascade Park Club), which had been in existence almost forever, could ever disappear but we knew that it was going to change.

We were not sure exactly how long the club and its bowling lanes had been in business but there were rumors. Stories that waitresses and old members shared with us. The building had once been a Civil War soldiers and sailors’ home. And it had served as a clinic during an epidemic. The scariest stories, however, were about the ghosts that haunted the old building, frightening waitresses who sometimes slipped us gifts of about-to-be-thrown-away food toward the end of evening shifts. “Don’t ever be here at night,” they warned us. More than one of them described being afraid to be in the building after hours because of eerie moaning sounds as well as shrieking cries.

As the actual history of the club unfolded during this project, there were several surprises. The early club began as a boating and fishing society near the outflow of Cascade Creek. Members, who called themselves the “White Lilly Society,” were one of several groups that regularly gathered along the bayfront west of today’s Cascade Docks. When the westernmost of the three Cascade docks was built in

1864 and the Pennsylvania Railroad became focused on ridding the area of squatters who were occupying makeshift buildings near the creek, financial incentives were offered to individuals and groups to persuade them to voluntarily abandon the area. This step was important since railroad engineers planned to shift the location of Cascade Creek from the east to the west side of their new commercial pier, which would have flooded many of the “buildings” that were there.



*White Lilly Club members pose for a photo at their early bayfront location in the early 1870s.*

When they left the docks, the previously informal White Lilly Club moved to today’s Gridley Park and became official. The year was 1874. Members began by meeting at the park and simply enjoying the open green space. Eventually, however, the club purchased a house at 724 Park Avenue North (West Sixth Street) and officially took up residence. After purchasing their new headquarters building, the club renamed themselves. Since Gridley Park was officially called “Cascade Park” at the time, it was entirely logical that the club’s new name would become the “Cascade Park Club.” At first the club continued under both names, calling itself the White Lilly-Cascade Park Club in deference to its old identity from the docks. The larger, hyphenated name continued until 1906 when the club applied for and received official Pennsylvania articles of confederation under the shorted designation “Cascade Park Club.” *(Note: This historical nuance explains one of several old pin boy mysteries: “Why would a place located on Raspberry Street be called the Cascade Club?”*



*Club members enjoy a day at Cascade Park in the early 1880s.*



*The first official clubhouse at 724 Park Avenue West (Sixth Street)*

With a growing membership, club officers were motivated to find a larger space somewhere in the northwest bayfront neighborhood. In 1924, officers became aware of a potential clubhouse building that was being disposed of at a bankruptcy proceeding. The building was an ancient, wooden structure on the corner at West Third and Raspberry streets. Neighbors had nicknamed it the “Glory Barn.” The club continued at its North Park Avenue location as members worked to renovate their new building and moved to its current location in 1927. Situated on a large plot of land at the extreme western edge of Erie, the building was once a hay barn and had been converted to a temporary home for Civil War veterans before the opening of the Pennsylvania Soldiers’ & Sailors’ Home on East Second Street, and then a warehouse addition to the American Brake Shoe (and munitions) Company at West 12th Street and Greengarden Avenue. It also served as a short-term spillover clinic during the Spanish Flu Epidemic of 1918. Just before the building was purchased by the club, it had been owned by a materials company, which had been using it as a warehouse. *(Note: The building’s history as a home for Civil War soldiers as well as a Spanish Flu clinic may explain a second pin boy mystery: The continuing rumors that the club is haunted by the tormented souls of people who died there.)*

The name of the Glory Barn’s original owner as well as its exact age have been lost to history as well as its original purpose. Speculation suggests that it began as a barn on wilderness land that was originally built by William L. Scott during the 1860s as an extra storage depot for hay grown for his nearby Frontier Dairy Farm. That would explain the constant complaint about the bits of old, dirty hay that continually frustrated attempts to keep the place clean after it became the Cascade Park Club. Throwing themselves into the task of rehabilitating the old building, members organized work parties to change the dusty warehouse into a hospitable clubhouse between 1924 and 1926, and the new club was complete with a kitchen, bar and large common areas. The addition of the big new clubhouse was rewarded by increased membership as neighbors were drawn to a convenient club, which was not ethnically oriented. There were already neighborhood Italian, Danish, Finnish, and Portuguese societies but there was obviously a demand for a social club, which did not have ethnic roots. To this day, members refer to themselves as “mutts,” suggesting that the Cascade Park Club has appealed to members who were of mixed ethnic roots.

Membership continued to grow and there was so much room in the building that club officers began to consider adding bowling alleys. After the war and by the late

1940s, six relatively modern alleys were built inexpensively because instead of buying the latest, very expensive fully automatic pin-setting machines, the club purchased less costly semi-automatic machines, but the most hi-tech, button-activated version. Bowling added to the popularity of the club and it continued to grow, reaching a membership of more than 2,000 by the mid-1950s.

Things went well at the club until a fateful 1965 day when the neighborhood was suddenly illuminated by an enormous fire during the early morning hours. It was not the kind of fire that smoldered and smoked, providing a warning. Instead, it was a sudden, raging inferno. By the time rescue workers and trucks had reached the Cascade Park Club, the fire was totally out of control. The best that firefighters could do was to prevent the wall of flames and sparks from spreading to nearby homes. By daybreak, the Cascade Club was totally gone. In its place was a field of charred rubble with almost no identifiable remains. The ancient wooden building and its largely combustible interior, including bowling alleys and pins, had fueled one of the most devastating fires in the history of the city. Among the few items that did not disappear in the flames were the bowling balls, and legend has it that almost every neighborhood kid found his way to the ruins after the disaster to get one or more.

Undaunted, in late 1965, club officers contracted with Brennan and Brennan Architects to design and build a new and improved clubhouse. Construction began the same year. Loyal members returned after the reconstruction and grand opening to a club that included modern, fully automated bowling alleys, a full-service kitchen, large bar, dining area and outdoor recreational space for warm weather days. The new outdoor annex featured picnic shelters, gardens, horseshoe courts, and bocce.

Today's Cascade Park Club continues to thrive. Membership is more than 800 and the bar and kitchen are busy. Covid-19 took a toll on bowling and the alleys are not as busy as they once were. The club is actively seeking teams for league play. Since the closure of Erie's Maennerchor, the Cascade Park Club boasts that it is Erie's oldest club, and as we met to chat about club history it became clear that members still think of themselves as "mutts" – a rare social club without ethnic roots. As I sat chatting in the unfamiliar new building, I could not help but to ruminate on my time working there. For two years during the 1950s I meticulously saved five dollars a week in a bank account. When I began my program of saving, I was 14 years old, thinking about buying a car as soon as I turned 16. My dream vision was a black, 1949 Mercury two-door sedan. Somehow that dream shifted during my second year of pin setting. Shifted from a 1949 Mercury to a college education. Back in the days when a commuter could attend Gannon College for about \$1,000 per year, I found myself with a bank account of more than \$600. Enough for the fall 1960 semester. Thank you, Cascade Park Club!



*Inspiration for the documentation of this important component of Erie bayfront history is owed to Jefferson member Bob Kuhn, who wrote to suggest the topic. After I told Bob that I was planning to cover the history of the club but needed more information (and that I had worked there as a pin boy), he generously arranged a meeting at the club with himself, longtime member Bill Holmgren, and club manager Monica Braendel. While many of the club's early records were lost in the fire, surviving documents and old photographs were made available at the meeting. For example, I learned that in 2018 the club gave up its Pennsylvania status as a corporation and became a 501 C-3 nonprofit. My friend, Jerry Bien, who watched the club burn from his nearby bedroom window, provided stories of the 1965 fire and the strange post-fire popularity of bowling balls among neighborhood boys. Dave Bierig filled in the history of the old Cascade Creek club.*

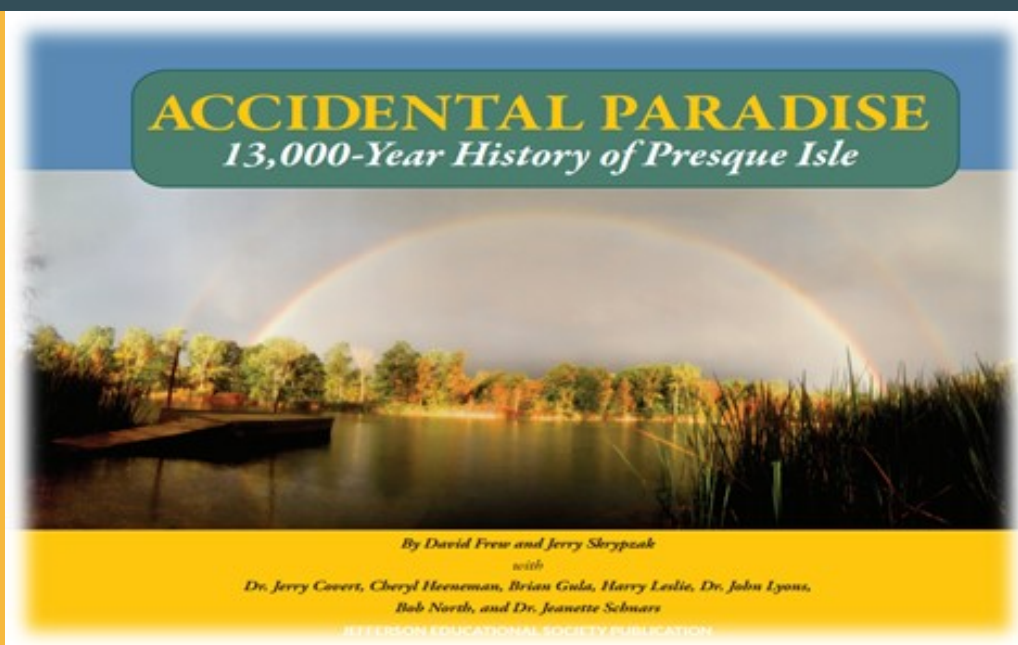
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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*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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