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Quick, Timely Reads
On the Waterfront

Ollie and Thelma Brown:
Country Music, Lots of Children, and a Communist Plot

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.

Ollie and Thelma Brown

The story of Ollie and Thelma Brown is a gift to all of us. Their life was an amazing love story that spanned an astonishing 64 years, not counting a courtship in Cambridge Springs, Pennsylvania. It is a unique local story that includes the beginning of television in Erie, Pennsylvania, the halcyon days of country music,

and the lives of the almost 100 children whose identities were shaped by two incredibly generous people. My maternal grandmother introduced me to Ollie Brown who she knew from her church, “Tenth Street Methodist” on Erie’s east side. I vividly recall my grandmother’s glowing descriptions of Ollie followed by her insistence that I watch him on television during the early 1950s. She sat with me many times in front of a portable black and white television set. She tuned it to Channel 12, and we watched “Let’s Go Dancing” on Saturday evenings. I loved country music and was terribly impressed that my very own grandmother actually knew a television star.

Coincidence? Karma? Fate? The Ollie and Thelma Brown story parallels the birth of Erie television, the northern movement of “Traditional American Music” from Appalachia, the evolution of children’s adoption services and the frightening McCarthy era. The story begins at the turn of the century in Toledo, Ohio, where Edward Lamb was one of 10 children born to a Lake Erie commercial fisherman. Lamb grew up helping his father on his fish tug, where he developed a powerful work ethic. After graduating from Dartmouth, Lamb went to law school at (Case) Western Reserve University in Cleveland and then built a successful legal practice in his hometown. He developed a specialty in defending working men and unions, and ultimately won a famous 1945 Supreme Court victory (Anderson v. Mt. Clemons Pottery).

After building a reputation for being America’s leading labor attorney, Lamb decided to step away from the “heat” of intense battles with large organizations and concentrate on his very successful investments. Sensing new opportunities in the emerging field of television, he applied for and was awarded a VHF broadcasting license in one of the highest-potential geographic areas in North America – Erie, Pennsylvania. There were to be a limited number of VHF licenses and Lamb could see an obvious “hole” in existing broadcasting areas. There were powerful stations in Pittsburgh, Wheeling, West Virginia, Cleveland, and Buffalo, as well as both London and Toronto, Ontario. But the vast geographic area in the center of existing stations was virtually without coverage.

Ed Lamb in Erie studies plans for his new State Street broadcasting station in 1947.

After being awarded a license to begin broadcasting from Erie, Edward Lamb purchased the Erie Dispatch-Herald newspaper and a powerful (5,000-watt) AM

radio station, WKKK. As he was planning for the new television station, Lamb moved to Erie and began to study his new market. The huge geographic area that he would be reaching with Channel 12 included hundreds of square miles of rural countryside in Pennsylvania, New York, Ohio, and most importantly, southern Ontario. Lamb's engineers assured him that television transmissions crossing Lake Erie would provide a stronger signal in much of Ontario than any existing Canadian stations. Bucking convention, Lamb refused to affiliate with any one broadcasting network (not the norm) and used his legal skills to win the battle to make that happen. He affiliated his new station with NBC, ABC, CBS, and Dumont, the four major networks of the time. Without a single network affiliation, however, he realized he would have to develop extensive local programming and he began to prepare for that eventuality.

The new station was originally to be called Dispatch TV, after Lamb's Erie newspaper.

Lamb used the Dispatch-Herald newspaper to promote his new station and to prepare the regional market for the eventual 1949 opening of Channel 12. And he used his radio station to develop and test-market potential local programming. His radio-television connection was later cited as a genius marketing and operations strategy. It proved to be a forerunner of Moses Znaimer's "City TV" empire in Toronto, Ontario. City TV executives cited Lamb's combination of radio and television operations and shared staff in their original strategic planning.

The post-World War II era was a time of geometric growth for country music. Shedding the disreputable title, "Hillbilly Music," the popularity of the once-rural musical style was growing and shifting toward urban areas. Largely generated by Scottish and Irish immigrants who settled in Appalachia, the evolving musical style was greatly enhanced by the popular cowboy film stars of the 1940s like Gene Autry and Roy Rogers. After the war, it was spreading north into urban areas as rural people were moving to look for work. Country music was wildly popular in the rural areas surrounding Erie, including Waterford, Corry, and Jamestown, N.Y., as well as southern Ontario where signals from Lamb's 5,000-watt WKKK Radio (and eventually WICU Television) would be received. Between 1940 and 1960, the number of North American radio stations broadcasting country music grew from 500 to more than 2,000.

Corry, Pennsylvania was more rural than Erie in the 1940s, the kind of place where country music would thrive.

Lamb instructed his radio station manager to search for country music performers and to feature them on his WKKK. The first band that they found was the "Sunset Ramblers," a popular and talented group playing regularly in both Corry and Jamestown. They were enticed to come to Erie and began regular radio broadcasts from WKKK in the late 1940s. The Sunset Ramblers spent several years commuting in a seven-passenger car with their instruments, including a stand-up bass. They later said they were putting almost 100,000 miles per year on their travelling car (a full-sized Lincoln limo). While they were already successful and busy, they were enticed to Erie's radio station by the promise of a television show as soon as Channel 12 began to broadcast.

The group's lead guitar player and vocalist was Oliver Anson Brown, a 33-year-old man who was living in Corry. Brown, who was married and had two adopted children, was trying to reconstruct his life after the disruptions of World War II. Born in 1915 in Little Cooley, Pennsylvania, a tiny crossroad near Centerville, Brown spent his early years doing odd jobs and contract farm work, which was how he met his wife, Thelma Thompson. Thelma was born in Oil City in 1917 and moved with her mother to her grandparents' Cambridge Springs farm, where they lived for 15 years after her parents separated. When she was 13, she was introduced to one of the farm helpers who was working at several neighboring places. That young man was Ollie Brown and Thelma's grandmother explained to her that he was on his own, away from his family and sleeping in barns wherever he was working. Ollie Brown was a cheerful boy with a big work ethic who took every opportunity when he was not working to play a beat-up old guitar and sing.

The United Methodist Church of Little Cooley, Pennsylvania shaped Ollie Brown's religious convictions. He attended faithfully with his parents (Harry and Caroline), brothers (Tom and Ronald), and sisters (Blanche and Ellen).

By the early 1940s, Ollie Brown had grown to be a talented guitar player and vocalist. He was living in Corry, where he was playing locally with a friend, Hi Brewer. In 1932, he had married Thelma in Erie at the East Tenth Street Methodist Church. The large church, big city wedding, and licensing were necessary because Thelma was only 14 years old at the time. After the wedding, Ollie and Thelma moved into a home in Corry, where Ollie had a job at Berkeley Machine, a company that specialized in spot welding. The Corry plant was an extension of Berkeley's main facility in Danville, Illinois.

Ollie was a member of the Corry National Guard at the time of Pearl Harbor (December 1942) but instead of being sent to active duty, the Army asked him to move to Danville to help with wartime production at the company's main defense plant. Ollie played regularly in Danville and continued to play with Hi Brewer in Corry when he could get back home. After the War, Dick Winans, a fiddle player who had known and played with both Ollie Brown and Hi Brewer, talked him into returning to Corry, where they organized a new band called "The Sunset Ramblers." After progressing thorough several different members, the band eventually settled upon Brown (guitar), Winans (fiddle), Paul Packo (accordion), Doug Seymour (steel guitar), Fred Raszmann (bass), and Matt Proper (vocalist and square dance caller). Ollie Brown's young son, Corky, performed with the band as a cute child prodigy-violin player but his instrument was without strings since he did not really know how to play. Later, Corky Brown became a talented guitar player.

The Sunset Ramblers in about 1946: Ollie Brown is in the back row left with Corky Brown in the center.

The band landed its first regular radio show at Jamestown's WJTN, did live shows all over the region, and weekend broadcasts with Wheeling, West Virginia's WWVA, a super-station. In 1947, they began a regular WKKK program in Erie (Lamb's radio station) five days a week. The powerful Erie signal instantly transformed them into regional superstars, and they suddenly had all the gigs that they could handle, with many of the new opportunities happening in southern Ontario's small towns. Band members were able to make a living just by playing music and everyone gave up their day jobs. In 1949, when Channel 12-WICU completed its new State Street studios and began broadcasting, Lamb moved the regionally popular group from his radio station to the new television studio. When the Sunset Ramblers switched to television, their weekly program was called "Let's Go Dancing" or 'The Ollie Brown Show." In 1949, when Ollie Brown learned that he and his band were to be given a weekly television show, he and his family moved from Corry to Harborcreek to be closer to the new job. Thelma took a position at General Electric, which she held for eight years. The weekly show was scheduled on Saturday evenings at 7 p.m. and continued from 1949 until 1960.

The Sunset Ramblers pose in 1947 with their sometime-used 14-year-old female vocalist, Dolores Trautmer,

a schoolgirl from Spartanburg. The photo was taken just before Slim Seymour obtained the "Rickenbacker."

In this 1948 publicity shot, "Slim" Seymore shows off his steel guitar combo of an Epiphone eight-string while standing next to his double-necked Rickenbacker, a vaunted country instrument.

The Sunset Ramblers made a quantum step forward when their steel guitar player, Doug "Slim" Seymore, acquired a double-necked Rickenbacker, the single most sought-after country band instrument. It was the steel guitar that created the Celtic sound (musical note ornaments) characteristic of country groups. And the Rickenbacker was the finest. For more than 10 years, Ollie Brown and his Sunset Ramblers performed to acclaim on their weekly television show. Eventually, however, the new media that had propelled them (and other bands) toward fame, proved to be their undoing. At first, TV broadcasts of Ollie Brown and his group resulted in so many opportunities to play throughout the Channel 12 broadcast area that they could not take them all. But then, and quite suddenly, the demand collapsed.

The insidious effect of television was to keep people home watching high quality, national programs. Instead of venturing out to local dances and concerts, people watched television. One by one, musical groups ranging from regional favorites like Erie's Sunset Ramblers to national "big bands" like Guy Lombardo and Tommy Dorsey, stopped touring. Their gigs had dried up. In Erie, Edward Lamb began to shift from locally produced shows like "Let's Go Dancing" to network favorites. This transition was accelerated when Lamb reluctantly became an NBC affiliate. By the mid-1950s, Ollie Brown and the rest of the band members found themselves returning to day jobs to make ends meet. Concerned for his television star, who had upended his life and moved to Erie, Edward Lamb used his influence to find Ollie a job with the Independent Grocers Association, a position that he held from 1955 until 1979.

During the early 1950s, the infamous Washington, D.C. McCarthy hearings found their way to Erie. The anti-communist political movement, which had previously been limited to famous media personalities such as Pete Seeger and Orson Wells, was in the hunt for a largely imagined enemy was suddenly focused on Edward Lamb. Could there have been an actual Communist in Erie or was it a return to an earlier dislike for a labor advocate? It had not been long enough for Lamb's

reputation as a supporter of labor unions and aggrieved workers to have been forgotten by America's corporate leaders. Suddenly, local headlines (from one of the two local papers) began to focus on Lamb and his "underhanded" control of local media. Edward Lamb, the accomplished capitalist and highly successful businessman, found himself accused of being a communist and defending his reputation. It was the stuff of newspaper headlines at a time when Lamb, himself, owned one of Erie's two papers. Offended and angry, Lamb, a talented attorney who had already won a case at the U.S. Supreme Court, defended himself successfully with the help of sworn testimony from dozens of people, including Ollie Brown. In a final deal with the Federal Communications Commission, Lamb agreed to sell the Dispatch-Herald newspaper as well as WKKK Radio so that he would not have a perceived communications monopoly in the Erie market.

For Ollie and his wife Thelma, however, a new obsession had emerged. Children! The Browns had learned, to their great disappointment, that they were not able to have their own children. But instead of being discouraged from creating a large family, they turned to adoption. They began adopting before they moved from Corry to Erie to work at WICU and eventually adopted 16 kids. The Browns were colorblind in their relentless mission to find and take in children. Their adopted family eventually included black children, mixed-race kids, Korean refugees, and Native Americans. In 1965, with their home in Wesleyville becoming too small for the growing family, they found a huge house in Waterford and moved. Ollie learned about the home from friends in the grocery business and sent Thelma and the children to look at it.

The Waterford house was an enormous old mansion that had been built by a Pittsburgh family that ran a detective agency (Perkins) and, by the time the Browns learned about it, two remaining spinster daughters were still living there but hoping to move into a smaller, simpler place. Rumor had it that Perkins had done detective work from its "country home" in Waterford and that the two now-elderly ladies had actually been active detectives. Thelma was convinced that they would not be able to afford the grand old home when she saw it, but the Perkins ladies were smitten by the Browns and their story and offered the house at a ridiculously low price. After Ollie and Thelma agreed to the purchase, the Pekins sisters "threw in" furniture, lamps, dishes, accessories, and linens.

Vintage Perkins Detective Sign from 1920

Suddenly the Browns had 14 bedrooms and several bathrooms, more space than their family required at the time. And that was when they adopted more kids and began to take in foster children. In all, the Browns hosted more than 90 children from social service agencies and orphanages. Some stayed for weeks, others for years. All were cared for and loved. In addition to being color blind, Ollie was inclusive in the sense of religious training. One of his pet peeves was parents who simply dropped their kids off for church on Sundays. And while the Browns were committed Protestants, attending either Methodist or Baptist services themselves, when their Waterford home began to include Catholic children from Erie's St. Joseph's Orphanage, Ollie expanded his theological horizons. On Sunday mornings he would lead a troop of kids on what neighbors described as a "kid parade" to the town churches. He dropped children off at the Baptist Church, the Methodist Church, and the Roman Catholic Church each Sunday and then doubled back to one or more of them, himself, for services. Neighbors joked that Ollie Brown attended more church services than anyone. Shortly after purchasing the old mansion, Ollie erected a sign on the front porch that read, "Always Room for One More."

Some of the kids gather in front of the Waterford mansion.

As the 1960s wore on, Ollie continued paying but his appearances became part-time gigs rather than a full-time occupation. Slowly Ollie Brown and his "musical house of children" became minor television celebrities. The largest, first-floor room in the Waterford mansion (the former detective agency office) was dedicated to music and contained a piano as well as countless stringed instruments. Ollie served as band director, teaching his children, and playing with them almost every day. He and his musical family appeared at countless regional programs to advocate for adoption throughout the year, and at holiday time the Browns became television regulars, singing Christmas songs to the delight of all as they grew into a Waterford and Erie tradition.

Ollie and Thelma were never wealthy. They often struggled to provide food and clothing for the crowds of children that they raised. They shopped carefully, finding places near Waterford to purchase half-cows and barrels of milk rather than buying in supermarkets. Somehow, they also managed to travel, exposing their children to places like Washington, D.C. and Michigan's Mackinaw Island. One summer they took all of the kids to South Dakota so that their Native

American children would be exposed to their Indian heritage and their relatives.

As he entered his 60s, Ollie had a series of heart attacks. He gamely returned to work shortly after each episode until he suffered a major attack that caused significant damage in 1979. He was 64. At about the same time, he was also diagnosed with Parkinson's disease. His physician advised him to leave the harsh northern winters and to move south. Ollie called his old bandmate, Dick Winans, and asked if he could visit him in Florida to see if it might be a good place to move. The trip convinced Ollie and Thelma that they should go south and, reluctantly the Browns sold their Waterford home, retired and moved to Florida with the last few children who had not yet graduated from high school.

While the Florida climate may have been exactly what Ollie needed, he and Thelma soon decided that they were too far away from the children they loved so much. Most were living in the Erie area. So, in 1986, they sold their Florida home and moved to Harborcreek, where they lived until Ollie's death in 1996. In addition to his 16 adopted children, he was survived by an astonishing 40 grandchildren and 19 great-grandchildren (four grandchildren died as infants). Thelma lived for another 13 years until 2009. In 1988, she wrote the book, "Bruised Blossoms," her story of life with Ollie and their children. The book was published by Erie's Sisters of St. Benedict from "The Mount" in Harborcreek.

Old friends and bandmates meet for the last time in Florida in 2005. Doug Seymour, at left, and Dick Winans are both gone now.

Author's note: My maternal grandmother, who moved to Erie from Corry and knew the Browns from there and also her Methodist church in Erie, introduced me to the Sunset Ramblers television show. She regaled me with stories about Ollie and Thelma Brown and their inspirational work with children. Years passed and I often thought about Ollie Brown but was never able to find detailed information about him. Then a few weeks ago a handball friend from the YMCA, Larry Morris, began talking about a person from his church named Brown. When I asked Larry if the Browns that he knew could be related to the Ollie Brown of television fame, he promised to find out. A few days later, Larry brought me a copy of Thelma Brown's book and put me in touch with Ollie and Thelma's daughter-in-law, Becky Brown. The story would not have been possible without the amazing series of coincidences that reintroduced me to Ollie Brown 25 years after his death. Thank you, Larry and Becky!

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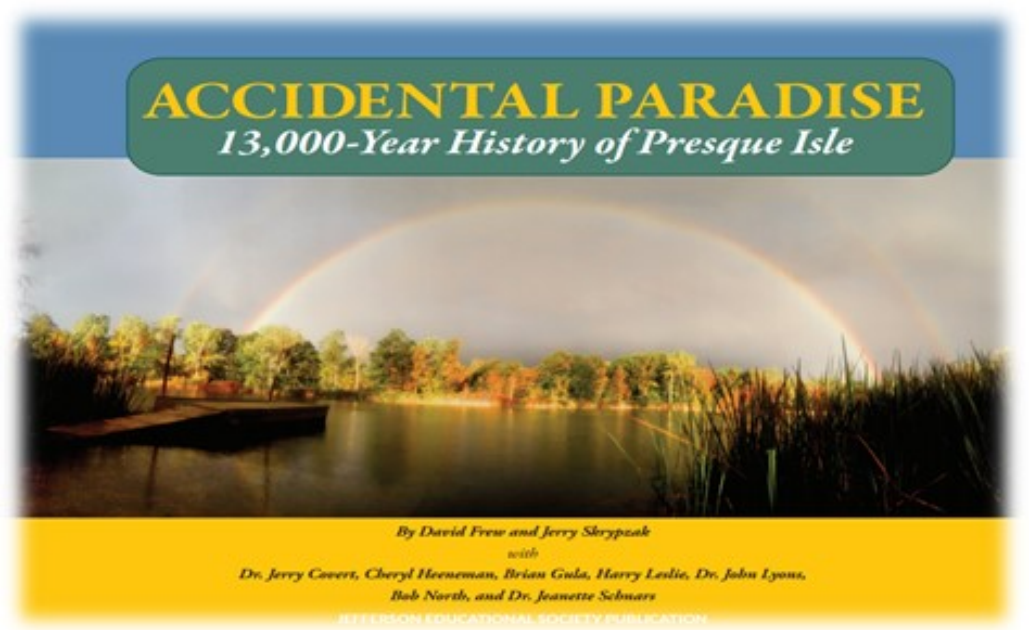

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The beautiful book on Presque Isle published by authors David Frew and Jerry Skrypzak – "**Accidental Paradise: 13,000-Year History of Presque Isle**" – is on sale at the Tom Ridge Environmental Center's gift shop and through a special website, AccidentalParadise.com.

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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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