

Quick, Timely Reads On the Waterfront

Pool, Booze, Cards *Remembering the Modica Social Club*

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.



The entrance to West Fourth Street's Modica Social Club was a set of steel stairs behind and below the black fencing on the southeast corner of this present-day apartment building.

I grew up amid a terrible neighborhood scandal. It was a story that was mostly obscure to me until years later when I met my wife, Mary Ann, and listened to her family stories about Italy. Like many countries, there is a distinct north-south

geographic bias in Italy. Italian “northerners” are culturally convinced they are superior to “southerners” somewhat like the way things work in this country. A well-known local Italian politician once referred to Erie’s Calabrian people as “Italian Hillbillies.”

My West Fourth Street neighborhood was one of four local Erie’s Italian districts. The first was the well-known West 18th Street “Little Italy” (with the former Hector’s Restaurant and St. Paul’s Church). The second was the East 29th Street (Lou Tulio, and Holy Rosary) area district, and a third was on Erie’s lower east side (Holland and German streets) – Little Calabria as it was called with its Caesar Battista Club. The fourth Italian district was in my neighborhood on West Fourth Street. Of the four Italian neighborhoods, the West Fourth Street district was, ethnically, the most northern. Most of our neighbors were from the Piemonte (foothills) district of Italy, a northern province nestled up against the Italian Alps. The unifying neighborhood club was the Pennsylvania Piemonte Society, a red brick building that neighbors called the Penn Club for short. Who could pronounce Piemonte?



Italy’s Piedmont (Piemonte) District feels like the Swiss Alps as compared with the dense urban environment in Sicily or Calabria.

The Jiuliantes were one of the neighborhood’s Piemonte anchor families. Well-known for producing highly educated attorneys and judges and elected officials (Jess Jiuliante, Sr. and Jess Jiuliante, Jr.), the Jiuliantes were an ongoing demonstration of the accomplishments of high-end Italian immigrants. That is, until their daughter, Celia, married Jimmy Modica. It was an awful scandal. Jim was Sicilian, from about as far south as an Italian can get. He had been born in West 18th Street’s Little Italy and as a young man was recruited to work with the Semple organization during Prohibition. Jim Modica’s primary job was to serve as “muscle” for the Semples, who needed to protect the international and local deliveries as well as the processing of the illegal alcohol that they “imported” during the 1920s. Once the booze reached the south shore of Lake Erie from Ontario, it had to be moved from various delivery locations, which shifted east from Six Mile Creek to Freeport (North East) during the era, to their neighborhood processing facility near Fourth and Cherry streets. After the raw Canadian alcohol reached the neighborhood, it was “expanded.” The Semples rebottled their imports, adding water, which was a standard Prohibition Era

business practice. After the rebottling, it had to be stored and then moved to retail customers. Each of these stages provided dangerous opportunities for Semple bottles to be intercepted by any of a variety of competitors.



My wife Mary Ann and I visited Modica, Sicily a few years ago. It is a typical Southern Italian hill town with ancient houses literally carved into terraced granite cliffs. The geography is as different from Northern Italy as the language, which is an Italian dialect.

Jimmy Modica's security work involved making sure that stored and delivered (both before and after processing) product was safe and he was good at it. As an added bonus, his Sicilian connections helped him stay in touch with both the Semple's Buffalo- and Pittsburgh-based competitors, who were Sicilian. "Westfield Jimmy" Salamone, who was destined to take over the Erie territory, was Sicilian. In addition to "muscle," James Modica provided "intelligence" as he was able to serve as a cultural translator for the Semple's, who were Hungarian. The scandal? James Modica met, courted, and married Celia Jiuliante. A "northerner" and a "southerner." Lawyers versus gangsters. It was, by 1920s standards, a mixed marriage. James and Celia Modica lived next door to me on West Fourth Street and had three wonderful children: (1) Jimmy, who was a famous local musician, playing saxophone for the Tune Topper Band on Channel 12, (2) Johnny, who left Erie after graduating from Edinboro and became the most celebrated high school football coach in the history of Delaware, and (3) Geraldine (Trixie) Trucilla, who became Judge Jess Jiuliante's court tipstaff. Gerry (Modica) Trucilla's son (Jimmy's grandson), John Trucilla, is an Erie County Court of Comm Pleas judge. Could becoming a judge be genetic?



The Modica home on West Fourth Street was just across the street from the social club.

After one of the Semple brothers was shot in the face during a Prohibition Era conflict with a rival gang, Joe Semple made the decision to get out of the business. He and his three brothers had made enough money during their time in the “business” to be financially comfortable, but he wanted to find a way to reward James Modica when the business ended. To this end, Semple, who still had a large storehouse of booze, offered to supply Modica if he were to open a club. Jim rented the basement of the large two-story apartment building on the north side of West Fourth Street, creating an under-the-radar drinking establishment and pool hall. While eight-ball pool seemed, on the surface, to be the primary activity, the regular card game was even more important. Modica’s Social Club served simple bar food and illegal alcohol. And it was generally ignored by authorities through the end of Prohibition and well beyond when it continued to serve alcohol but without an “official license.”



Jimmy Modica poses with his wife Celia and their three children, (from left) John, Jim, and Gerry (in her mother's arms).

The club could only be accessed by a steep and noisy metal stairwell on the east side of the building and since it did not have its own parking lot, it did not attract attention and was able to operate “quietly” for years. When Prohibition ended in 1933, Modica’s Fourth Street Social Club carried on in much the same way that it had during the late 1920s.

My father escorted me down and into the mysterious bowels of Jimmy Modica’s Social Club a few times. After descending the ominous steel steps into the basement of the building, there was a thick steel door with a buzzer. Ringing the buzzer was the signal for the doorman to open a slot so that he could see who was seeking admission. Then the heavy door unlocked with an ominous metallic thud. There were half-doors on the west wall of the basement room, which could be used to quickly stash illegal stuff if the wrong people were seeking entry. Visitors were greeted by a thick cloud of cigar smoke, under which several men sat at tables, playing cards. For an impressionable kid, the experience was somewhere between ominous and frightening. I distinctly recall pool tables where my father propped me up on a chair while I tried to hit a cue ball with a pool stick. The Modica Social Club had the general ambiance of the “Alverna Social Club” from the Sopranos television series.

The club closed after Jimmy Modica passed away in 1947. A few years later, however, the same basement space re-opened for a few years as the Submariners Club, a social club for U.S. Naval veterans who had served in submarines.

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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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