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Quick, Timely Reads
On the Waterfront

Two Kinds of Hotels and Overactive Bay Rat Imaginations

By David Frew
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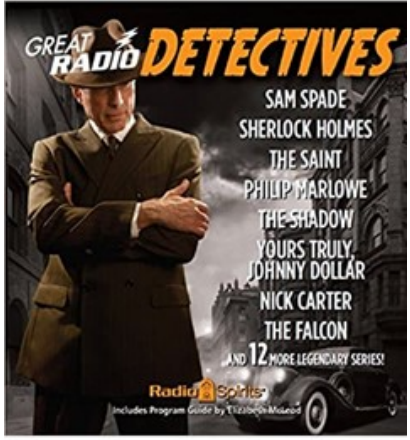
Dr. David Frew, a prolific writer, author, and speaker grew up on Erie's lower west side as a proud "Bay Rat," joining neighborhood kids playing and marauding along the west bayfront. He has written for years about his beloved Presque Isle and his adventures on the Great Lakes. In this series, the JES Scholar-in-Residence takes note of life in and around the water.

Private Detective Stephen Marlowe was the most popular radio detective of the 1950s. And he lived in our kind of neighborhood hotel.



Philip Marlowe was just one of many. Neighborhood hotels were full of detectives.

We knew all about hotels when we were kids. There were two different kinds, and they were very different. First there were the big fancy, exclusive places like the Waldorf Astoria in New York City. Hotels like the Waldorf were the places where extremely wealthy people stayed when they traveled. Some people even lived in the exclusive upper floors permanently or for extended periods. Not ordinary people, but kings, princes, and movie stars. Frank Sinatra lived at the Waldorf Astoria for decades. Every big city had these high-end hotels and we learned about them in newsreels at theaters and in newspaper headlines when they were used to host important international events. Presidents met European ambassadors for diplomatic discussions, and parties were held for visiting royalty. These events were often photographed and filmed, offering everyday citizens a glimpse of places like the Waldorf Astoria.

The Waldorf Astoria, a massive art deco structure, was the kind of hotel that wealthy people were attracted to both as guests and residents.

The big, exclusive hotels were interesting, but the second kind fueled our imaginations. They were mysterious places frequented by the dodgy people that we learned about on evening radio dramas. These smaller, residential hotels were the places where many popular radio detectives lived. Residential hotels were common in the big cities like New York, Los Angeles, and San Francisco where exciting nighttime radio dramas happened.

The two most popular detectives of the era were Philip Marlow and Sam Spade. Marlowe's author, Raymond Chandler, housed him in a medium-end Los Angeles residential hotel. He was not crammed into the prototypical tiny room without a

bathroom or shower, the popular but controversial urban SORs (single occupancy residences) of the era. Instead, he lived in a slightly larger unit with a desk and a phone where he could conduct business. Philip Marlowe also had a cabinet where he stored a few bottles of his favorite booze and at least two glasses. Sometimes a beautiful lady client (usually mysterious) visited his room, and he would always offer her a drink.

The Van Nuys Hotel in Los Angeles was one of the many residential hotels where Philip Marlowe lived.

Dashiell Hammett's fictional detective, Sam Spade, worked in San Francisco, where Hammett wrote him into a residential hotel. We now know that Sam Spades' residence was exactly the same apartment where Hammett lived while he was writing the early books in the detective series. Media scholars have speculated that the reason for locating so many of the early radio detectives in large, west coast cities was twofold. First, the American listening audience was fascinated by California and its allure. It was new and exciting and at the same time large and mysterious. A second and perhaps more compelling reason was that the epicenter of the entertainment industry was rapidly shifting west from New York to Los Angeles.

This San Francisco building is where Sam Spade worked, and author Dashiell Hammett lived. Hammett wrote the fictional Sam Spade novels.

Dashiell Hammett looked like one of the guys who we regularly saw in our neighborhood hotel.

Both popular radio detectives were intelligent and articulate, important characteristics since they often (especially Marlowe) served as their own narrators. As they drove through the streets of west coast cities, they described the landscape, buildings, and people, using a strange internal dialogue that revealed exactly what they were seeing as well as their ways of thinking about the mysteries they were solving. They were playing human chess and describing their strategies.

Living in the center of the cities where they worked as private detectives, especially in the vintage residential hotels where they resided, helped place them at the epicenter of mysteries that they were perpetually being drawn into. The deskman, doorman, newsy and street people just outside their buildings became instant informants and participants. When Philip Marlowe or Sam Spade left their buildings, they found themselves immediately immersed in the gritty problems that characterized their cities; human dramas that often required the skillful intervention of private detectives.

Raymond Chandler had a brilliant way of using the internal narrations of his detective creation, Philip Marlowe, to efficiently paint pictures of the problems that his detective was solving. Marlow's narrations were hyper efficient mechanisms for avoiding what might otherwise have become clumsy, ham-handed scene-setting descriptions. Chandler became renowned among screenwriters for these clever internal character dialogues.

Here is Marlowe describing LA as he drove out of the city: "*It was about 10 o'clock in the morning, mid-October with the sun not shining and the look of hard, wet rain in the clearness of the foothills.*"

Here is Marlowe meeting a client at a bar: *"I'm an occasional drinker. The kind of guy who goes out for a beer and wakes up in Singapore a week later with a hangover and a full beard."*

Here is Marlowe describing his arrival at a client meeting: *"Neither of the two people in the room paid any attention to the way that I entered the room, although only one of them was dead."*

Raymond Chandler's style of using pithy, self-narrating comments to efficiently describe circumstances was famously adopted by the television writers of Magnum P.I. in the 1980s. Magnum's famous remark, "Now I know what you're thinking," became a classic narration tool.

By the 1950s, Chandler's work had become endemic. It spread like wildfire from pulp magazines to books, radio, and film. Eventually Chandler's detective, Philip Marlowe, spread to movies, television, and theater. Some of America's most esteemed actors portrayed the famous detective, making him seem even more real. And many of our homes had Philip Marlowe books lying around.

As our imaginations worked overtime, we began to wonder if Erie, like Los Angeles and San Francisco, could have been populated by a combination of big fancy hotels, as well as the smaller and grittier, Philip Marlowe-type establishments. We did not have to look far. Big luxurious hotels were part of Erie's downtown landscape. With two (almost) on the regular route of the West Fourth Street bus, we passed them regularly. Erie's answer to the Waldorf Astoria was the dual presence of the Lawrence and Ford hotels. Both were large, sophisticated operations that were featured regularly in the newspapers. For grit and mystery, however, there were three places that were far more interesting – residential hotels just like the places where Marlowe and Spade lived. On the end of our block, at Fourth and Plum, there was the Adams Hotel (later change to Star Lite). Several blocks east was the Vernon Hotel, and at Fifth and State streets was the Gage Hotel. Philip Marlowe's LA hotels had nothing on these establishments when it came to sleeze and mystery. The Adams Hotel, which was built as a rooming house in 1932, added a full-service bar that featured meals, and eventually shifted to a residential hotel. We could tell from watching the characters who entered and exited the rooms and the bar that there were lots of shady things going on there.

The Lawrence Hotel was a fixture at the corner of 10th and Peach in Erie. It qualified as "big and fancy."

Before it morphed into the Richford Hotel and the current Richford Arms, Erie's Ford Hotel was a big fancy place right on Perry Square.

The Star Lite Hotel and Lounge during slightly better days.

The current Star Lite Hotel building, complete with bullet holes, is out of business, boarded up, and suggesting that the anti-neighborhood hotel movement of the 1970s wasn't a bad idea.

As the 1970s unfolded, the "American" vision of home ownership shifted. Politicians began to preach the gospel of individual home ownership as the only way toward better cities. More automobiles, suburban development, commuting long distances to work, and a new dream of ranch houses in the suburbs shifted attention form inner cities to outskirts. As that was happening, there was a knee jerk reaction against residential hotels, and especially the large SOR (single occupancy residences) that populated big cities. Suddenly, there was pressure to eliminate old inexpensive hotels that had provided homes, albeit meager, for so many people. Given the traditional SOR design, which features one small, 8-by-10 foot private room with limited furnishings and access to a shared public bathroom, it was possible to house enormous numbers of people in a very small geographic area. And the relatively low price of such units created affordable living spaces in big cities, which was where the jobs were.

The resultant population density paved the way toward efficient urban mass transit, further reducing the economic "load" on infrastructure. The alternative that was unfolding as people rushed to the suburbs and created traffic nightmares on undersized roadways, enormous dependence and waste of fossil fuel, and a need to spread infrastructure. But the anti-residential hotel movement managed to eliminate hundreds of thousands of affordable living spaces within a three-decade period between 1970 and 2000. The loss of SORs was particularly hard on immigrants, especially the identifiable ethnic groups who tended to congregate in big cities. They were slowly forced to live in unsustainably large family groups in tiny rooms, or to move to the streets.

Economists and sociologists warned of the disastrous consequences of eliminating affordable housing, but city developers and politicians continued to apply pressure to modernize and or to turn older SOR buildings and resident hotels into condominiums. Or to remodel them into inner-city, boutique tourist hotels. It was gentrification on steroids. The warnings continued through the 1980s and 1990s as the number of affordable SROs in big American cities literally collapsed. Emerging housing research suggested that if the trend toward the loss of affordable housing persisted, the United States would eventually be facing massive homelessness, labor shortages, and a crisis of elderly people needing care.

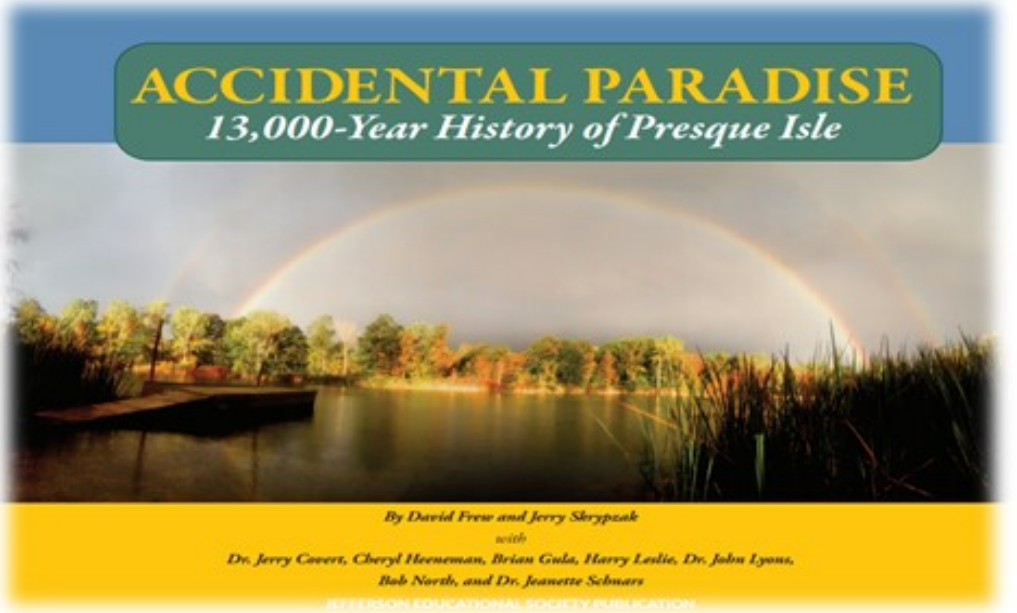
One of Chicago's surviving SOR buildings has added a storefront.

Issues of housing and poverty, which are very obviously connected, continue to present an enormous challenge as American cities, even mid-sized places like Erie, struggle. A cursory inspection of the old Adams Hotel (later the Star Lite) does not suggest the glamour of the 1950s or its radio detectives. It screams, "Ugly, tear me down." But it also symbolizes a major social problem that must be solved. Erie's other residential hotels are gone now. The Vernon became a part of Gannon University's expansion and the Gage became a parking lot. But were they replaced by modern development, including low-cost housing?

Current efforts to operationalize a "Cincinnati-Style" downtown development offer hope. As does the exciting work of soon-to-be Nobel Prize winner Dr. David Card. Professor Card, who was born and grew up just on the other side of Lake Erie near Guelph, Ontario, is a labor economist whose research data was gathered right here in Pennsylvania. His work offers an explanation for why there is a "Help Wanted" sign on the front door of almost every business. More on his ideas later, and after he is actually awarded the Nobel.

Accidental Paradise Available at TRECF

Accidental Paradise
by Dr. David Frew and Jerry Skrypzak



The beautiful book on Presque Isle recently 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.

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@TRECF.org.

To watch "Accidental Paradise: Stories Behind The Stories" click here.

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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.

In Case You Missed It

Book Notes #76: Shakespeare in a Divided America written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence **Dr. Andrew Roth**

Bay Rat Social Media: Rotary Phones and Party Lines written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence **Dr. David Frew**.

Erie's Diversity is the Path to Prosperity: Tackling the Teacher-to-Student Mismatch written by Sustainable Solutions Consultant **Court Gould, MPA**