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On the Waterfront

## Neighborhood Baseball: *Amazing History and Tradition*

By David Frew  
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*Bayview Field was renamed Pontiac Field to honor the memory of the historic Negro League as well as the African American team that played in Erie.*

The best baseball year of my life was 1954. The Cleveland Indians were sensational that season with a legendary pitching staff that included Bob Feller and Bob Lemon as well as league-leading third basemen Al Rosen, who came to town for a personal appearance after the season. The Indians won 111 games that year and easily clinched the American League Championship. Sadly, they lost the World

Series to the New York Giants (before they moved to San Francisco). The Indians were swept in four games.

It was every kid's dream to go to an Indians game but opportunities to do so were rare during the 1950s. During that pre-interstate era, a trip to Cleveland involved a train ride or hours of dreary driving along secondary roads and through countless small towns with traffic jams and red lights.

Fortunately, our "baseball habit" could be satisfied right in the neighborhood. Just a few blocks away, at West Second and Cherry streets, there was a "big time" ball field, featuring regular evening games. The definition of big time for us required a backstop, bleachers, and teams with uniforms. All of those were regular features of the Glenwood League, which played at Bayview Field. The Glenwood League was a local amateur circuit that played either at Bayview Field or a companion field near the Erie Zoo on Glenwood Park Avenue (thus the name). It still exists. Back then, there were several games per week at Bayview, usually on weeknights and beginning early enough so that they could be completed before dark.

We went for the baseball but inadvertently we were immersing ourselves in amazing local and national history. West Second Street, especially the area just east of the field, was the main thoroughfare through Erie's historic African American neighborhood. That part of town was generally known as New Jerusalem during the late 1800s and early 1900s. And Bayview Field was an integral component of the neighborhood. Its history and tradition had been linked to the old Negro Leagues and to one of Erie's founding teams, the Pontiacs. As kids, we had some inkling of the connections, but we were not sophisticated enough to have grasped the full social implications. From our naïve perspective, we were well aware of Black players in the Major Leagues, for example, but we were generally unaware of the struggles they had endured to get to the "Bigs."

By the mid-1950s when we were attending games, Black players seemed to be an ordinary part of the game. Willie Mays had emerged as a superstar center fielder, and the Cleveland Indians' right fielder was an awesome long-ball hitter named Larry Doby. It had only been a few years since Robinson joined the MLB Dodgers on April 15, 1947, and Doby became an Indian a few weeks later on July 5, 1947, but for 11-year-olds that was a lifetime.

It was incomprehensible to us kids that a star player like Doby, who had 126 RBIs during the 1954 season, could have been anything but a welcome team addition, or that he might not have played because he was a Black man.



*Larry Doby, at left, chats with Jackie Robinson. Robinson was the first and Doby the second African American men to break the color line in Major League Baseball.*

Our naïve understanding of issues involving race in baseball was influenced by the location of Bayview Field on the western edge of a decidedly African American neighborhood. Players as well as spectators included a large proportion of Blacks and from our perspective the people that we saw at the Bayview games were just baseball fans like us. We were essentially colorblind. The most iconic of the “regulars” was an elderly Black man named Moon, who “passed the hat” at each game. One of the Glenwood League traditions was to take up a collection at each game and then share the proceeds with the teams. The winning team was given a slightly larger portion of the collection, which was to be used to pay for team expenses, including bats and balls.

The Glenwood League was identified as a semi-pro operation, which meant that its players included recent high school graduates, college players, and a smattering of obviously older guys who were said to have been ex-minor leaguers. A wave of excitement always rippled through the crowd when one of the ex-minor leaguers came up to bat since they almost always smashed big hits, thrilling the crowd. Bayview Field had a short left field fence so there were a lot of home runs by right-handed batters. There was no fence in right field, which presented an alternative form of excitement. If a ground ball to right field happened to slip past the outfielders it would often turn into an inside-the-park home run with fans screaming their approval as the hitter raced around the bases, outfielders chased balls toward the playground that was more than 400 feet away, beyond right-center field, and a brigade of infield cut-off men positioned themselves in short-right field.

African American traditions connected to Bayview Field can be traced back to the old Negro Leagues, which played several games there and particularly to the Erie

Pontiacs, an all-Black team that called Bayview its home field from the late 1930s through the 1950s. Racism in the United States and particularly in Major League Baseball generally prevented Black players from participating at baseball's highest levels. In response, Negro Leagues formed and thrived from the end of the Civil War until the 1950s. There was a lull in Negro League activities during the Great Depression, but barnstorming games returned in the 1930s and, by the World War II era, there were a dozen well-organized teams touring the country and drawing big crowds.

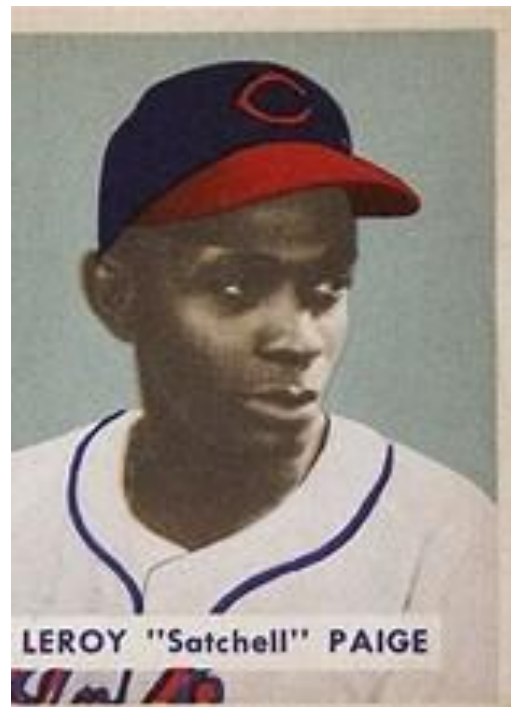
During the immediate post-World War II era, there was a call for playoffs between the Major League team that won the World Series and the best of the Negro League teams. Not surprisingly, the Major League teams were reluctant to answer that challenge. According to many observers, it was because they were not sure who would win. Eventually, the Major Leagues began to take advantage of the Negro Leagues by using them as a developmental or farm system for players, beginning with Jackie Robinson.

Sadly, as their best players, including Larry Doby, Satchell Page, and Erie's Sam Jethroe found positions in the majors, the Negro Leagues began to falter. Erie's "Pontiacs" were late to the game. They were formed in 1936 when Carl Longnecker, a local Pontiac dealer, sponsored an all-African American Erie team that essentially used Bayview as its home field. The Pontiacs' plan was to play in the Negro Leagues but their formation and success as a traveling team was interrupted by World War II and by the time that they had matured as an organization the Negro Leagues were almost done. Erie's Pontiacs benefitted from the demise of the Cleveland Buckeyes, which provided several players. In addition to barnstorming, the Pontiacs played in Erie's weekday Glenwood League as well as the weekend Lakeshore League, a regional circuit that included teams from Ohio as well as upstate New York. The Pontiacs were highly successful, partially because of the quality players they had inherited from the Cleveland Buckeyes.

In 2020, the field was rededicated, and a beautiful new mural was installed. It depicts Sam Jethroe and legendary Negro League pitcher Satchel Paige, who finally made it to the majors in 1948. Paige, signed by the Cleveland Indians, was 42 in his rookie year and continued to play in the majors as well as several minor and intentional leagues for decades. In 1965 at age 59, Paige pitched three scoreless innings for the Kansas City Athletics against the Boston Red Sox. His appearance was a publicity stunt, but it was also at the request of Paige, whose wife was expecting their eighth child. At one point, he retired six Red Sox batters in a row. Between innings Satchel Paige sat in an oversized rocking chair while a nurse stood next to him.

As the new Pontiac Field was being designed, the community committee driving the project as well as the artists who designed its mural decided to emphasize its

African American heritage by placing images of Satchel Paige, Sam Jethro and a modern-day Black player from the Erie SeaWolves on the mural.



*Satchel Paige's rookie baseball card*

Finally in 2021, the Major Leagues added the names, pictures and records of several of the Negro League teams and players to their "official" history. Prominent among those teams was the 1945 league champion Cleveland Buckeyes, which included both Satchel Paige and Erie's Sam Jethroe.



*The 1945 Cleveland Buckeyes. Both Satchel Paige and Sam Jethroe are standing in the back row.*

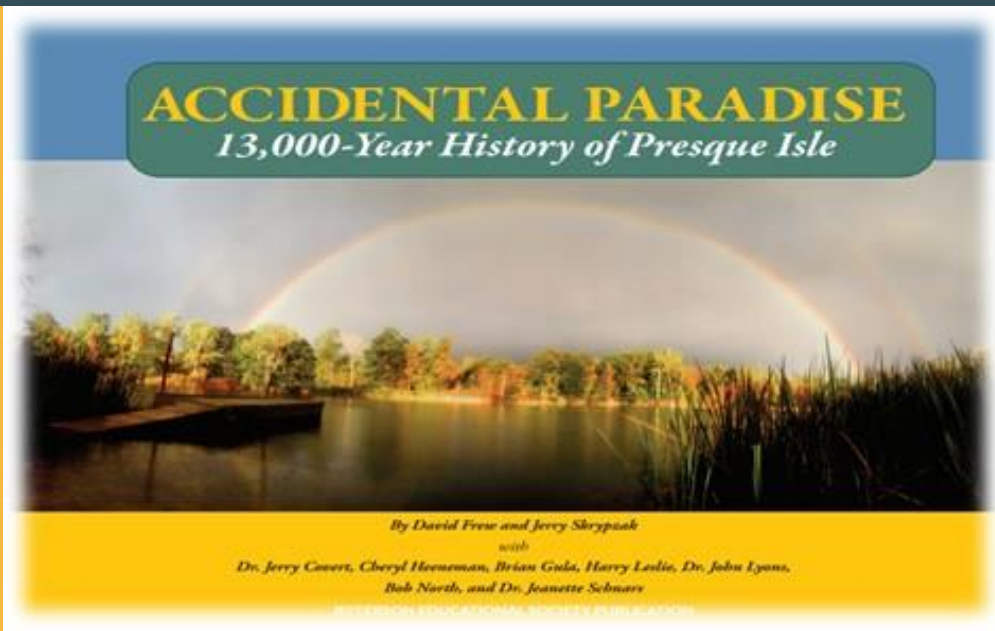


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**Accidental Paradise**  
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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*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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