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Quick, Timely Reads
On the Waterfront

**Bay Rat Rhapsody:
*Riding the Bus to the Y***

By David Frew, Scholar in Residence
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Editor's note: Following is an On the Waterfront Classic by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence David Frew. It was first published in November 2020.



Erie's Downtown YMCA

My friends and I were cosmopolitan and well-traveled. For example, on winter Saturdays we would board the West Fourth Street bus and head east toward Erie's pre-mall metropolis, Downtown Erie, Pennsylvania. We would exit at 10th and State and make the one-block trek with kids from other buses to the YMCA (today's Downtown Y). We entered the Peach Street door that was marked, "Boy's Department." Carrying dimes and quarters for later, we would begin the morning's activities by playing an assortment of games that were stored in the main entry hall. Everyone's favorite was a spring-loaded basketball game, which allowed kids to propel a ping pong ball toward a hoop suspended from a cardboard backboard.

At the magic hour, Y-supervisors, wearing shorts, white T-shirts with YMCA logos, and a whistle on a rope, would split the kids into two groups. Half headed to the swimming pool while the others went to the two gyms. The descent to the swimming pool was mysterious. Lines of kids passed through heavy doors, continued through dark, narrow hallways, and descended lots of steps before finally being greeted by the familiar smell of chlorine. Our final stop was a small changing room where dozens of us were instructed to strip down (we swam in the nude back then) and find a place for our clothing. Then we paraded into and out of a large shower room, sometimes even getting wet, and filed into the pool. The final requirement at the door of the pool was stepping into a large box of strange liquid, which was said to instantly cure athlete's foot (it was later determined that the operation was more likely to give us a fungus instead of curing it).

Then everyone was told, via whistle, that we could jump into the water. Not everyone knew how to swim, so many of the kids were intent on leaping into the shallow end. The old YMCA pool, which is still there, seemed immense to all of us, but by contemporary standards it was tiny. Once in the pool we were instructed to perform various swimming-related exercises. Most involved holding onto the side of the pool while kicking, bobbing up and down, or stroking. Finally, there was the highly anticipated free period, which always turned into bedlam, as kids played tag, performed death-defying jumping and diving maneuvers from the sides of the pool (we were not allowed to use the diving board), or ventured into the deep end. Meanwhile, the regular Y lifeguards and the Saturday leaders who had taken us to the pool carefully watched so that no one got into trouble. Free period was punctuated by the screech of whistles that were accompanied by threats that "horseplay" could lead to being expelled from the Y.

When swimming ended, the hundreds (or was it dozens?) of kids would shower, dry off (often with their own T-shirts) and head for the gym, where we would replace the other group. Gym time featured gymnastics in one room and basketball in the other. Tumbling equipment, including pads and rings, dropped from the ceiling of the the first gym, while eight-foot basketball backboards were

deployed in the second gym. The kids who played basketball (including me) were organized into several teams of five or six who played full court (the width of the gym), shirts versus skins. Games of five points, winner stays on! There were usually six or more teams, which meant that several kids were loitering in corners as they waited to play.

While waiting in the losers' area, we noticed strange, sharp sounds reverberating from somewhere above us. The percussions persisted for the entire time that we were in the gym and continued each week. Finally, curiosity made us investigate. When the Y coaches were distracted, we'd sneak through the gym doors and follow the mysterious sounds up several flights of steps where we found handball courts. Suddenly, a strange new world opened, as we found our way to viewing decks above the courts.

There were four men in each court. They wore white trunks and shirts, and we watched in awe as they took turns propelling a small black ball at astonishing speeds, smashing it against the front wall and sending it at high speed off the back wall like Jai-alai players without the baskets. It was three-dimensional, two-handed tennis, only faster. As we watched, we noticed several other men, all wearing white and holding small, jet-black balls. Several men lined the viewing deck, observing the game below us and I still recall one of them explaining what we were watching. It was handball -- the greatest game in the world! As if to cement my destiny, he gave me an old ball and told me to practice with it.



A doubles handball match

When gym and swim groups reconvened in the main entry hall, we were served a nutritious lunch of two hot dogs, a bag of chips, and a Dixie cup filled with ice cream, which had to be pried out with a small wooden spoon. Lunch was 12 cents! The ice cream was the consistency of cement and did not come out of the cups easily. The inside of each cup lid had an image of a cowboy or movie star, which could only be seen after scraping a strange paste-like substance off the inner

surface. Some lid images were more popular than others and there was often a frenzy of trading for the best ones.



Dixie Cup lids: you had to trade three Judy Garlands for a Roy Rogers.

As years went on, I became a loyal YMCA member, playing basketball, swimming, and using the exercise equipment. On several occasions, I wandered into the handball courts to try my luck at hitting a ball around, but the complications of developing a left-handed shot were confounding. This began to change when I moved to Kent State University for three years to pursue graduate studies. As a teaching fellow, I was given a gym pass and faculty locker. The membership included fresh clothing and a towel every time I went, and I soon became a daily, lunchtime exerciser. One of my doctoral student colleagues was a paddle ball player (a crude early version of racquetball) and he and I began playing.

Then one day in 1968, the most amazing thing happened. One of my faculty members, the chairman of the Psychology Department, appeared in the upstairs viewing gallery where he watched us play. After class the next day, he corralled me to say that I was making a huge mistake by playing paddle ball.

I thought he was about to chastise me for wasting time in the gym. On the contrary, he told me he could tell from watching that I would be a much better handball than paddle ball player. And then he invited me to join him and his faculty colleagues in playing at lunch time. When I objected, saying that I was not good enough to be in a court with experienced players, he assured me that he would be my coach. We would play doubles and he would be my partner. All I would have to do would be to run around (which I could do) and return balls that he could not get to. He would be the power player and handle the offense. The Dean of the Graduate School, who was one of the regulars, had broken a finger and would be out for several weeks. They were desperate.

We played together for more than two years, as he became both an academic and a handball mentor, teaching me personality theory, discussing research studies in the locker room, and coaching handball nuances. An integrated education. I eventually improved (there was only one way for me to go), and after a year, we were entering tournaments. In hindsight, he was one of my most important faculty advisers.

In 1970, when I returned to Erie to teach at Gannon, the first thing I did was re-join the YMCA, Erie's handball Mecca and the place where I had first marveled at the game. Since then, I have faithfully played three or four times per week.

The beauty of the game is that it welcomes people of all ages, offering competition at every ability level. And it was enormously popular during the 1970s, boasting hundreds of regional players. As I continued, I made lots of friends. Fifty years of handball exposed me to wonderful guys from every walk of life who all shared a love of the court: physicians, plumbers, judges, pipe fitters, cops, and coaches with a common interest in slapping a ball about a four-walled room. A few years ago, then-U.S. District Judge Warren Bentz told me that I was one of only 10 contacts on his speed-dial list.

On March 15, nearly seven months ago, I enjoyed a regular game of doubles with three guys whom I have been playing with for years. I don't remember who won. It wasn't important. We said goodbye after the game, showered and left for the weekend. The following Tuesday, I parked behind the YMCA, walked to the front door and found it locked. A note explained that the Y was closed until further notice because of Covid-19. Phone conversations with colleagues reassured me that the Y was doing the right thing, and that in a month or so we would be back in the courts. Days turned to weeks. Weeks to months. But the Downtown Y remained closed. Meanwhile, other Y branches opened. The handball guys called each other and phoned the Y asking for updates. Answers were polite but unclear. By the fourth month, a scary rumor began to circulate: the Downtown Y might never open again. That was when some of us began to search for alternative playing venues. There are handball-racquetball courts at the Glenwood Y as well as the Eastside Y, but there are no special businessman's memberships there where we could have our own lockers filled with equipment: gloves, knee braces, extra clothing, and Bengay.

I resisted, hoping for the best, until October when I decided to give up and search for other places to play. I called and asked for permission to visit my locker so I could get my handball stuff. Arriving at the appointed time, I was escorted to the businessmen's side of the Y and my locker. Sporting a huge gym bag, I opened my locker for the first time in almost six months and extracted knee braces, handball gloves, balls, eye guards, gym shoes, and more. As I packed equipment, the attendant who was watching me was becoming impatient. I told him he could

leave if he wished -- that I had been there often enough to find my way out when I was done. He made me promise not to loiter or to use any of the facilities, like the showers. Finally, he left ... and I was alone.

Gym bag in hand, I turned to leave, perhaps for the last time ever, and the realization of impending loss began to sink in. My second home for a half century, some of my best friends, the fun and excitement of playing a game that I have grown to love – it all was slipping away. Instead of heading directly out the door (as I should have), I wandered across the darkened space toward the most popular location in the locker room: a large-screen color television set with a semi-circle of leather chairs in front of it. A sacred place where we sat talking before handball games and collapsed after we were done. Political problems, macro-economic policy, and sweeping global issues had been discussed in those chairs. We were there offering editorial opinions long before C-SPAN.

I turned the television set on, surely a violation of my instructions. As I stood, remote in hand, translucent forms of old friends who had graced the leather chairs began to materialize. Ghosts of the Downtown YMCA. They were sitting there talking, even though they had been gone for years. These legends of handball were talking to each other, oblivious to my presence. Lenny Tomczak, Vinny Flowers, Milt Simon, Pete Dione, Judge Warren Bentz, and Bob “Moose” Kaczenski. Probably arguing about a handball rule. I clicked the television off with the remote, let myself out, walked down the steps, passed the wooden board that lists the YMCA’s “50-year members,” and stepped out the door (for the last time?).



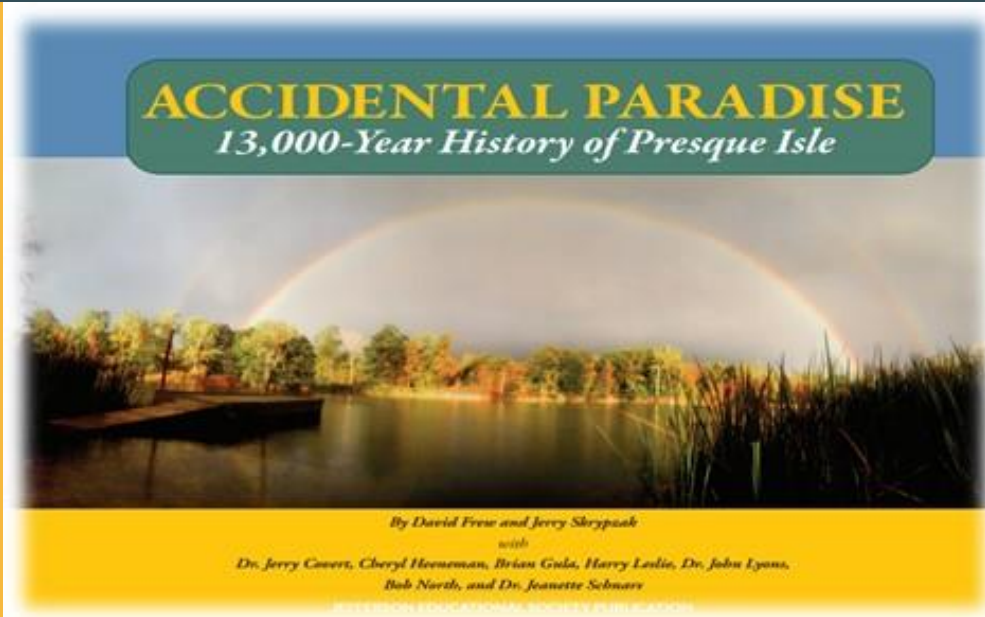
Ghosts of handball past: Lenny Tomczak, Warren Bentz, Milt Simon, and Moose Kaczenski

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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