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Quick, Timely Reads On the Waterfront

The Park Fountain *Perry Square Offers Free Family Fun*

By David Frew
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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 March 2021.



The original Perry Square fountain was built in the west park in 1910. Old City Hall at Peach Street and South Park Row is in the background at left. (Jerry Skrypzak collection)

One of the great joys of a warm summer evening in Erie, Pennsylvania during the 1950s was a visit to Perry Square's park fountain. For folks from my neighborhood, it was a bus ride away, which was a lot easier in those days when the West Fourth Street bus was one of the city's busiest routes. Since the bus ran every 20 minutes, we didn't bother to think about schedules. Rather, we strolled to the corner, knowing that a bus would come by every few minutes. The ride downtown was followed by a short walk to the east park fountain. The original park fountain had been in the west park, but by the 1950s it was closed and replaced by a new one in the east park.

The Perry Square fountain was bigger and better back then. It really was! The water went higher, the magical changing colors were brighter, and the containment pool was much larger. While swimming was officially discouraged, it was not prohibited, and most kids were able to convince their parents to allow them to step in if they promised to limit themselves to wading. Once in the water, however, that promise was often forgotten, and most were soon diving into waist-deep (for kids) water and carrying on. It was big fun.

Our fountain was called the Edison Electric Fountain. It had been built in 1929 to honor the 50th anniversary of Thomas Edison's invention of the incandescent bulb. Edison was a familiar figure in and about Erie. He was a friend of local industrialist Charles Strong and had worked with him on the creation of Erie's first "Electric Company." Erie was one of the first American cities to have electricity, which spread in concentric circles from its point of origin, Niagara Falls. The memorial fountain was a cooperative local effort with Erie's General Electric plant and other companies contributing to the construction, plumbing, and electrical work. It was completed and dedicated two years before Thomas Edison died in 1931.



The Edison Electric Fountain in east Perry Square (Jerry Skrypzak Collection)

The fountain soon became a community centerpiece, marking the epicenter of the city during an era that preceded the Millcreek Mall. It was only blocks from the famous Boston Store and stood near the middle of Erie's major downtown park. City Hall, the Erie Public Library on South Park Row, the Greyhound Bus Station, and Gannon College surrounded the two parks. In addition, there was an ice cream store (Born's Dairy), the Do-Nut Shop, and a New York Lunch on the periphery – all the major food groups except for ketchup.



Kids happily play in the pond that surrounded the fountain. (Jerry Skrypzak Collection)

My wife Mary Ann had similar experiences with the park fountain. She grew up on the city's lower eastside in one of four local "Little Italy's." While the West 18th Street district has generally been considered to be *the* "Little Italy," there were actually four distinct Italian neighborhoods, and each was connected to a different Italian region. Mary Ann's lower Holland Street, German Street, and Parade Street neighborhood was Calabrian, and it was connected to a single town in particular, San Lucido. A steady flow of immigrants came from San Lucido, Calabria with the steady stream of men following each other to work at Hammermill. Her father, grandfather, and uncles all worked at Hammermill, as did several neighbors. Typically, the men established themselves here and then sent for their wives and children who followed later. For Mary Ann and her neighbors, entire families walked to the park to enjoy the magical fountain and its colors.



The Edison Electric Fountain shows off its magical lights. (Jerry Skrypzak Collection)

The other important park attraction was the popcorn-peanut-crackerjacks cart. There was almost always a vendor with a red cart stationed at the south end of the park who sold treats that we begged our parents to buy. Boxes and bags of popcorn were our favorites. With extra butter, or whatever that yellow stuff was. A sign on the side of the cart advertised “hot buttered popcorn.”

The actual cart was a standard urban food cart, a model that was present in many cities. It was equipped with a burner so that foods could be heated. In large cities, red cart operators sold hot dogs and roasted chestnuts from the same cart.



A red cart, like the one that used to be at Perry Square, is shown above in Sandusky, Ohio.

Nothing lasts forever, including the Edison Electric Fountain. By the 1970s, the plumbing was failing and electrical connections were in serious need of repair. The city of Erie did its best to keep the iconic fountain working for a few more years, but it finally had to be rebuilt. By that time, concerns had been raised about the octagonal concrete curb that contained the water, as well as the health risks associated with allowing standing water to accumulate, especially after the circulating systems had begun to fail. Eventually in 1988, the concrete curb was removed, eliminating the dangers of children tripping, and injuring themselves. The relatively deep reflecting pool was then replaced by a shallow catchment basin. The fountain was also rebuilt. The new fountain still sends water aloft and features multiple colors, but the ornamental spray does not go as high as it used to. It is still beautiful, however, especially on warm summer evenings. Mary Ann and I drive to the park to watch the fountain several times each summer, but when we go, we miss the red-cart popcorn man.



The modern park fountain features its evening water colors in pink to honor Breast Cancer Awareness Week. (Jerry Skrypzak Collection)

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