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Quick, Timely Reads
On the Waterfront

The Places Where We Worked
Erie's Canal-Side Industrial Corridor

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.



Erie Resistor Corporation building shown in a deteriorating state

These days a ride along West 12th Street is often described as an embarrassment to the modern city that is taking shape both on the waterfront and on lower State

Street, though many of the spaces are filled with thriving small businesses. But 70 years ago, during the Bay Rat heyday, visuals were almost exactly the opposite. The waterfront was a dirty, debris-filled strip of deteriorating land, looking as if its best days had been well behind it; in a long gone and unimaginable past. The best overall descriptor of the edge of the bay during the 1950s might have been the word “rust.” West 12th Street, on the other hand, was bustling with manufacturing businesses, both primary and secondary facilities. Thousands of people worked on the 12th Street corridor, where the rush of delivery trucks was a fact of life. There was even a railroad on the street delivering and picking up from manufacturing firms.

Erie Resistor Corporation, for example, occupied a large and expansive brick building on the south side of the street and had expanded to the north side of West 12th adding an overhead foot bridge for employees who were moving back and forth. A half-dozen small businesses occupied nearby space between 12th and 20th streets, where they were doing subcontract work for Erie Resistor as well as other large neighborhood companies.



This 1870 lithograph depicts the path of the extension canal from the bay toward 12th Street.

Erie’s 12th Street industrial corridor emerged as a result of, and along the banks of, the Erie Extension Canal, which connected Presque Isle Bay to the Ohio River just west of Pittsburgh.

Decades before major employers General Electric and Hammermill came to the area and during the birth of America’s manufacturing era, Erie’s founding industries sprouted along the local canal-way. The canal used a series of locks to lift mule-driven canal boats from the site of today’s Bayfront Convention Center up and over the bluffs and to Fourth and Sassafras streets. From there the manmade canal headed south and past West Sixth Street until it crossed today’s 10th Street, turned west, and headed for Girard. The long and nearly straight canal run from Myrtle Street to Girard quickly became a magnet for new manufacturing

businesses, especially the eastern portions of the canal that were close to Erie's center.

The canal served as Erie's first commercial transportation system. Decades before the development of railroads and intercity roadways, the canal provided an efficient delivery system for raw materials and finished goods. The downtown waterway began to fail during the Civil War period when railroads appeared and began to demonstrate their superiority. One advantage of the new rail systems was their ability to deliver goods during winter seasons when canals froze solid and could not be used. In many instances the new train systems purchased canal right-of-ways and converted them to track systems, saving the time and costs of surveying. The long east-to-west straightaway between Erie and Girard was a natural site for Erie's earliest railroad systems, which had started on the east side where they connected with Buffalo. Eventually new railroads crossed Erie and stretched west toward Chicago and south to Philadelphia.

By the late 1880s, several railroads as well as spur lines had emerged just south of 12th Street, where they took over delivery work that the canal had once provided. As that industrial area evolved, West 12th Street also developed, serving the area's raw material and finished-goods transportation needs. Between the turn of the century and the 1950s, the 12th Street manufacturing corridor reached its prime. When General Electric and Hammermill arrived, they set new higher standards for wages and benefits and companies that remained on 12th Street became Erie's second-level employers. Some were successful and made important contributions to the manufacturing economy of the 1950s, but the cramped nature of the location resulted in the most prosperous of the businesses being landlocked and needing to seek bigger and better suburban locations or additional areas where they could add second locations. One example of this evolution was the growth of the former American Sterilizer, which began on West 12th Street but later moved to its larger, more familiar West 20th Street location.

For families from my West Fourth Street neighborhood, the 12th Street industrial corridor was a rich source of employment. During an era when half of families did not have cars, it was possible to walk to work. Most weekday mornings there would be a procession of men carrying lunch buckets and heading south toward the shops on West 12th Street. And when older kids graduated from high school, friend or family contacts almost always assured a job in one of the many shops that lined the southern border of the neighborhood. In a familiar sequence of steps, boys would make applications during the winter of their senior years of high school and begin working immediately after graduation. One of the "promises" of employment in the companies along West 12th Street was the ability to earn enough cash to buy a car; the siren call of the 1950s.



Pinstripe decals could be purchased inexpensively from the J. C. Whitney Catalog.

In those days, \$100 would buy a very cool used car that could be customized. With the assistance of elbow grease, touch up paint and a J.C. Whitney Catalog, it could be made into a showpiece. There were several neighborhood families whose parents did not have an automobile while their 18-year-old, newly graduated sons did. Saturday afternoons in the summer would often find those lucky boys in front of their houses, washing cars, vacuuming interiors, and adding exciting details like pinstripes. A boy who lived a few houses down the street spent hours applying white paint to the letters on his newly scrubbed tires, making them look showroom “new.”



The coolest car in our neighborhood was a jet black, 1941 Ford convertible made possible by a job on West 12th Street.

Before the late 1960s when Erie’s historic industrial corridor began to deteriorate, that small strip of industrial locations provided an incubator for several of Erie’s most important and historic businesses, companies that defined Erie’s role as a

manufacturing town. American Sterilizer, Bucyrus Erie, Erie City Iron Works, Erie Forge & Steel, Erie Malleable, Griswold Manufacturing, Lord Corporation, Nagle Boiler Works, Odin Stove, Skinner Engine, Zurn Industries, and other venerable Erie companies all shared this historic location. While their slow demise created the zone many still see as an embarrassing gateway to Erie's downtown and waterfront renaissance, there is a resurgence. Plans are afoot to revitalize the area, celebrate it, and return to its once-historic glory. Talented local entrepreneur Rick Griffith has led this trend with investments in several properties. In addition, Cathedral Prep, under the leadership of alumnus Dave Bowes, has built an athletic center and Mayor Joe Schember has rededicated the area by using a consulting firm to create a bright new rehabilitation zone. Aggressive development plans for the 600 block of West 12th Street by the Erie County Redevelopment Authority are further evidence of major change. It now seems clear that in the mid-term future, the 12th Street Corridor could become as vibrant as the new waterfront.



Erie entrepreneur Rick Griffith has been a tireless advocate for the 12th Street Corridor.

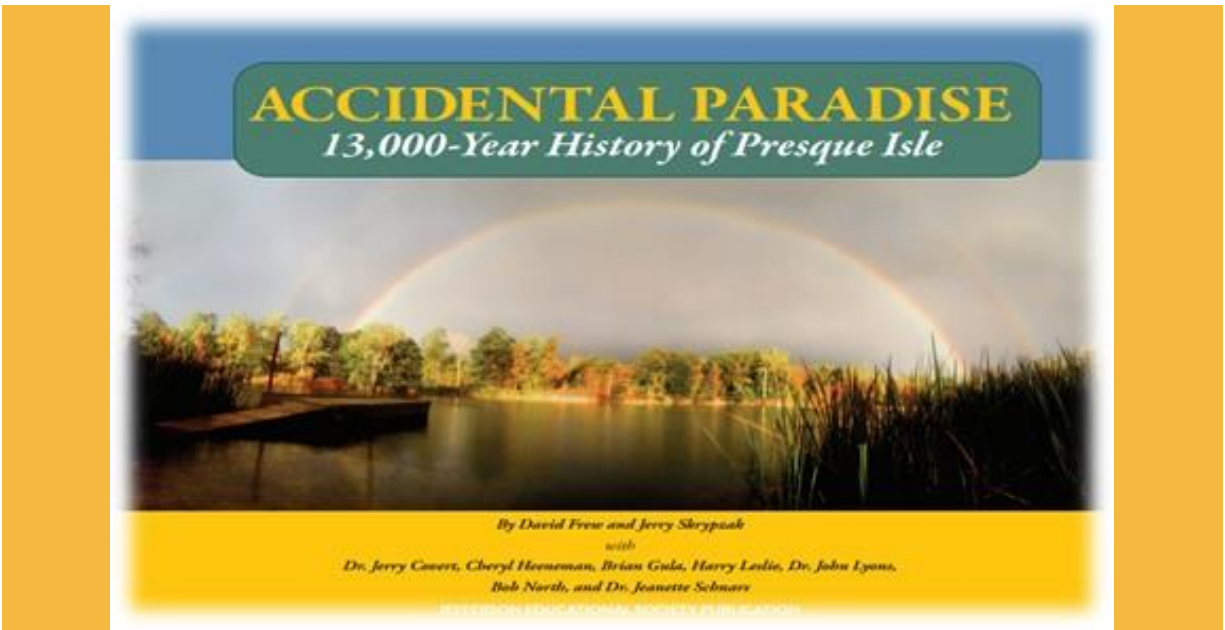
These days when I ride along West 12th Street, I see the ghosts of wonderful factory fronts that created good lives for people from the old neighborhood. And I remember old friends, kids from the 1950s who enjoyed the bounty of those places.

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by Dr. David Frew and Jerry Skrypzak



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For more information, send an email to aperino@TREC.org.

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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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