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Quick, Timely Reads
On the Waterfront

GE's Erie Works:
Some Kids Seemed 'Lucky'

By David Frew
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A fanciful postcard view of Erie's GE plant

Kids whose parents worked at General Electric's Erie Works seemed luckier than most. Erie's huge, eastside company operated in a benign, paternalistic way that provided enormous benefits for employees, including the highest wages in town, great benefits and more. Erie's Transportation and Appliance division grew steadily between 1910, when it was established at Lawrence Park, and in the 1950s. The company was also sophisticated in planning its expansion into Erie from upstate New York.

In 1908, GE commissioned famous American urban planner John Nolan, who traveled to Erie, to survey the land that the company hoped to purchase at a site near the mouth of Four Mile roughly between today's East Lake Road and Buffalo Road and created a detailed plan for the prospective industrial site. In addition to laying out the new factory compound, Nolan was to create a city plan for the prospective town of Lawrence Park, where GE hoped to provide housing for employees. The company asked Nolan to do an overall evaluation of the entire Erie and Millcreek region, including municipal strengths and weaknesses in hopes that an understanding of the overall metro area would help in planning for anticipated growth. Nolan would later produce Erie's first and signature plan, "Greater Erie 1913."

At the time that Nolan was thinking about locations for both the factory and new companion town, Lawrence Park, the prospective town location was part of the eastern extension of Millcreek. Originally, Millcreek Township wrapped around the city, extending well to the east of Erie. It was Nolan's recommendation that Millcreek give up its Lawrence Park section and allow that new city to become a self-governing, independent town, a change that finally happened in 1926. GE had avoided locating its new operation within the borders of Erie in an attempt to remain autonomous, resist unionization, and save money.

With the assistance of GE and following the plans of John Nolan, Lawrence Park was established in 1910, the same year that the first factory buildings were opened, and production commenced. The Lawrence in Lawrence Park was named for Captain James Lawrence, naval officer after whom the flagship of Perry's Lake Erie fleet was named. And the "Park" in Lawrence Park was named for John Nolan's insistence that individual building lots in the new community would each be large enough for new owners to plant a garden.

Before he became an urban planner, Nolan was a landscape architect and he strongly believed in communities with trees, green spaces, and open areas. According to Nolan's plan, each Lawrence Park building lot was 40-by-124 feet, modest by today's standards but much larger than average inner-city lots in Erie. GE built, financed and sold 106 single family homes between 1910 and 1913. More than 1,000 trees were planted in Lawrence Park prior to the sale of individual lots and pressure from GE convinced the streetcar company in Erie to extend service to Iroquois Avenue. World War I changed the complexion of housing in Lawrence Park as row houses were rapidly constructed to help alleviate a growing housing shortage.

GE's attention to the development of its companion town was the beginning of a long series of larger benefits that would eventually be provided for employees. Additionally, the company created a centrally located building dedicated to employee recreation and education. Eventually the company opened a day camp

for employees' children who would be dropped off as parents arrived for work and picked up when they left for the day. GE's camp was not a day care or babysitting service. It was a full-service summer camp experience led by resident recreational manager Dave Coryell. Participants signed on for a week of activities that included arts, crafts, sports and recreation. Mr. Coryell subsequently went to work at Presque Isle as a park ranger.

In 1919, GE purchased additional land on the north side of East Lake Road. Two years later, the company worked with an employee group that was interested in golf to build a nine-hole golf course on property overlooking Lake Erie. In 1942, the company partnered with the golfers to expand the course to an 18-hole layout. During the post World War II period when blue pike were running just offshore and east of Erie, GE built a boat launch and dry storage area for employees who were fishermen. The boating facility included a picnic area and green space that was shared by the golfers as well as the boaters. In 1967, the area was sold and made into a private golf club, Lawrence Park Golf Club, that thrives today.

Today's Lawrence Park Golf Club

Success and continuous growth continued for GE at its new Erie facility for almost a half century. Between the opening of the factory in 1910 and the early 1950s the number of employees grew to more than 23,000, an astonishing size for a local workforce. But when labor issues began to affect the previously tranquil relationship between the company and its employees after World War II, corporate planners in Fairfield, Connecticut made a strategic adjustment. GE decided to move its Appliance division from Erie to Louisville, Kentucky. The Louisville labor market was less expensive than Erie's and, to add to the workforce issues, GE executives decided that the growth of their Erie facility had exceeded the capacity of the local labor market to supply workers. In 1950, GE Corporate in Fairfield announced it was launching Appliance Park in Louisville. The "official explanation" was that geometric growth of consumer demand for appliances had overwhelmed the ability of the Erie facility to keep up. Appliance production had

already spilled out of the Erie plant and to several other sites, and the Louisville move would allow the company to consolidate its appliance manufacturing in one modern facticity.

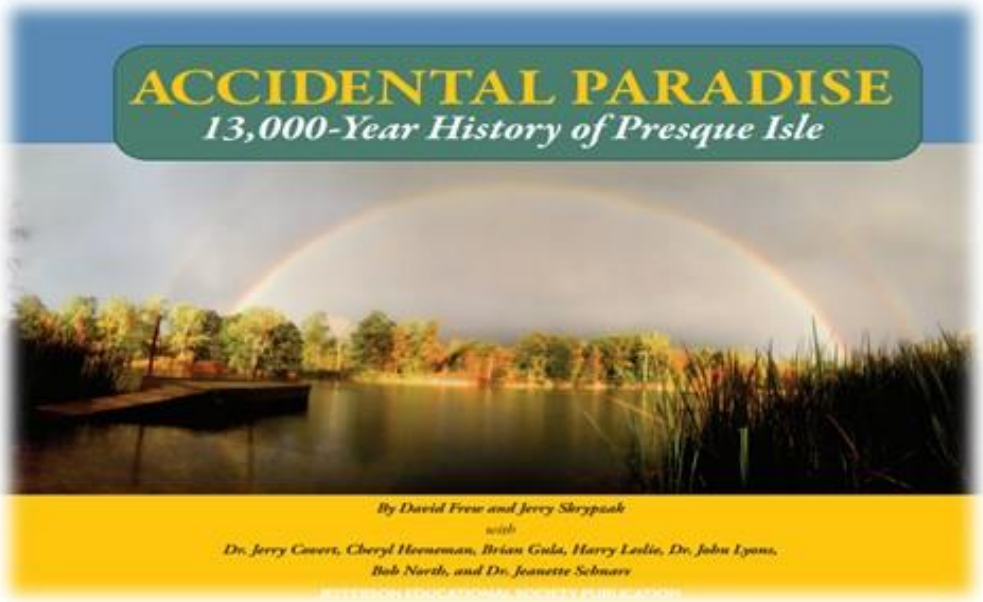
A 1952 GE labor demonstration.

Meanwhile, at St Andrew School, my educational world was about to be rocked. Schoolmates and friends were suddenly disappearing. For the entire early history of St. Andrew, which was positioned on the western edge of town where there had been continuous growth, the school had operated without geographic competition from other parochial schools. There were more students each year. Lower grades were each larger than the upper ones, and most years there would be a few new students added to all the upper grade classes. Prior to the layoffs at GE, the total number of St. Andrew students simply increased each year. Eventually, St. Andrew's student population reached dysfunctional levels with 40 or 50 kids occupying almost every classroom and young cadet teachers struggling to control classrooms. The parish responded to this geometric growth by building a new building designed for the lower grades with short water fountains, small desks, lower blackboards and more. They called the new building the "Little School." And the growth continued.

While bigger demographic issues were to unfold years later when Our Lady's Christian School (OLCS) opened in 1959, the first hint of change at St. Andrew emerged in 1952 when thousands of GE Appliance employees were eliminated. The company offered workers the opportunity to transfer to Louisville, but wages there were significantly lower than in Erie and inside the company there was a scramble by existing employees to use seniority to bid into local Transportation

Division jobs, which were remaining in town. For the next few years, the unthinkable happened at St. Andrew. The traditional September return to school was greeted by missing friends whose parents had moved down south or to other parts of the city after they made the decision to remain in Erie and search for different jobs. The "other jobs" almost always paid less than the GE jobs that they had lost. Missing friends and empty classroom seats created more trauma than might be imagined. Kids of the 1950s were not used to such changes and the sudden disappearance of school friends created psychological insecurities. Where had our friends gone and were they miserable now? Could we be next? Suddenly, the children of GE employees who had seemed so lucky by virtue of the "great jobs" that their parents had did not seem to be fortunate at all.

From the vantage point of the modern, mobile world where people change jobs often and travel extensively, the trauma that we experienced as children when friends suddenly disappeared makes little sense. But during those simple 1950s-era days, people were more likely to maintain permanent roots, especially in working class neighborhoods like mine. Fathers often had just one job for a lifetime, after which they retired and continued to live in already-established family homes. Neighborhoods and neighbors were much more stable than they are these days, with people living in familiar homes for decades. And from the very short-term perspective of young children, a few years was a lifetime and seemed like forever. Are "place and stability" important to psychological development? Has the dynamism of modern society robbed children of something important?



The beautiful book on Presque Isle 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.

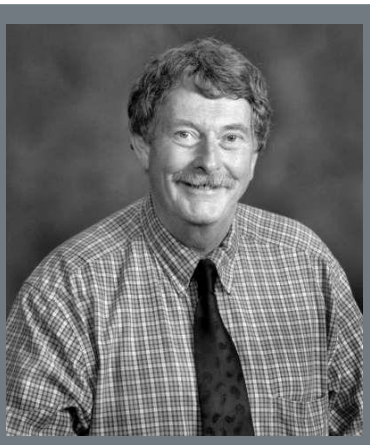
The book, priced at **$35 plus tax and shipping**, can be ordered now through the website sponsored by the TREC Foundation, AccidentalParadise.com.

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.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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In Case You Missed It

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