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Quick, Timely Reads
On the Waterfront

The Penn Club:
A Neighborhood Italian Society

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.



The old Penn Club at 940 West Fourth St. has become a church.

The most beautiful building in our immediate neighborhood was the Penn Club, a one-story red brick building that stood on the north side of West Fourth Street in the 900 block. Not only was the building itself spectacularly attractive but during the 1950s, the heyday of social clubs in Erie, it was impeccably maintained. The lawn was cut and edged, shrubbery was meticulously trimmed and weeded, and the backyard where members regularly lounged during warm summer months was golf-course like in appearance. We were constantly trying to sneak into the back to play football, but we were almost always caught and thrown out. The people who ran the club did not want young ruffians chopping up the pristine lawn or destroying the flowers and shrubs that adorned the edges of the lawn. Naturally, that did not keep us from trying.

One of the most obvious reasons for the beauty of the building was that it was relatively new. While most of the homes on the block had been built in the late 1800s when the Cascade Docks were being developed, the Penn Club was constructed in 1938 after the Great Depression had mostly ended. The club exuded the optimism and hope of the pre-World War II years when many were working again and free time was increasing.

According to its “official nonprofit charter,” the place that neighbors called the Penn Club was officially named the Pennsylvania Piedmont Society in honor of the northwestern Italian province that stretches from the French Alps south almost to the seacoast cities of Genoa and Monaco. The literal translation of the provincial name is foothills (pied monte), and the district is famous for its wine growing as

well as its capital city, Turin, location of the “shroud of Turin,” the cloth that is said to have been the burial shroud in which Christ was wrapped after his crucifixion.



The Piedmont District identified on a map of Italy (Italia)

A large number of Erie’s Italian immigrants came from Piedmont and many of them settled in the northwest corner of town where they formed one of four local Italian neighborhoods (along with the lower eastside Calabrian district, the East 32nd Street group and the familiar West 18th Street Little Italy). Like many other immigrant groups, friends and family followed each other to America, seeking opportunities. And a large enough number of Piedmont people who came to Erie settled near the northwest edge of town to motivate the creation of a social club.



The northern section of Italy’s Piedmont District borders the Alps.



Turin, Italy, with the Alps in the background

As West Fourth Street's Penn Club continued into the 1940s and 1950s, it became a popular neighborhood oasis. Like other clubs, its chief advantage was cheap drinks and inexpensive bar food. And while it may have seemed, on the surface, to have been a specialty Italian social club (focused on the local northern Italian community), there were no actual distinctions. The club welcomed all Italians as well as other neighbors who were interested in joining. It was not a dark and ominous Italian social club like "Modica's" just a few hundred feet to the east, but a happy place with music, dancing, and conversation.

The existence of the Penn Club helped to fuel an interesting geographic bias that I did not fully understand until years later after I met my wife-to be, Mary Ann, whose family emigrated from southern Italy. Calabria to be exact. Mary Ann grew up in a home where English was not spoken. When she began grade school, she could only speak Italian; not classical Italian but a dialect characteristic of Calabria and Sicily. After we were married, we began visiting Italy regularly and eventually traveled from the northern provinces to her home town in the South, where she still has relatives. When we first visited, we were warned that while almost everyone in the big tourist cities of the North (Rome, Florence and Venice) spoke English, we would not find English-speakers in the South. But I was not worried since I knew that Mary Ann's Italian skills would help us to get along.

One of the most powerful lessons that came from our travels in Italy was an understanding of the North-South bias that permeates the country. Italy is young, having only been unified as one country since 1861. Its relative youth contributes to the palpable cultural feeling that the North is superior to the South. The bias was exhibited in the northern regions where people scoffed at Mary Ann's dialect. Amazingly, given the passage of time since her parents left Italy, when she spoke in the northern parts of the country people immediately recognized her dialect as "Calabrian." But when we traveled south, either to Calabria or Sicily (a favorite destination), there was no such reaction. People understood that she sometimes struggled for words (her vocabulary suffered from long stretches between speaking Italian), but they complimented her on her language skills.

Italy is a long country, about the same length as California. The 736 miles that separate North from South have encouraged old-time regional language barriers to continue. Television and other media personalities speak in classical (northern) Italian but recently there has been a movement to restore the historic regional dialects by teaching them in the schools.

Traveling in Italy reminded me of an old neighborhood story that I listened to at the Penn Club. There was an infamous scandal on West Fourth Street involving something that was called a “mixed marriage” by neighbors during the 1950s. It was a terrible scandal that continued to be discussed for years. A neighborhood girl, whose family was from Piedmont, fell in love with and married a Sicilian boy from West 18th Street. Her Piedmont family, which was characterized by highly educated men, including lawyers, was forever scarred by the realization that one of their daughters had married a southern Italian. A Sicilian. It was the 1950s, West Fourth Street version of “Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner.”

Gridley School is gone. Our old PG ballfield has been blacktopped, fenced in, and changed to a parking lot. But when I pass by, I can still see the thrilling home run balls that were hit to left field and the close calls at second base. I see ghosts of old friends diving for fly balls. Running out singles when pitcher’s mound was out. And when I go to the beaches east of Charleston each winter, I feel the presence of George Gershwin, stickball player, at Folly Beach. These days when I hear “Rhapsody in Blue,” one of my very favorite musical pieces, my mind conjures up images of Charleston, Folly Beach, Gridley School, and PG ball.

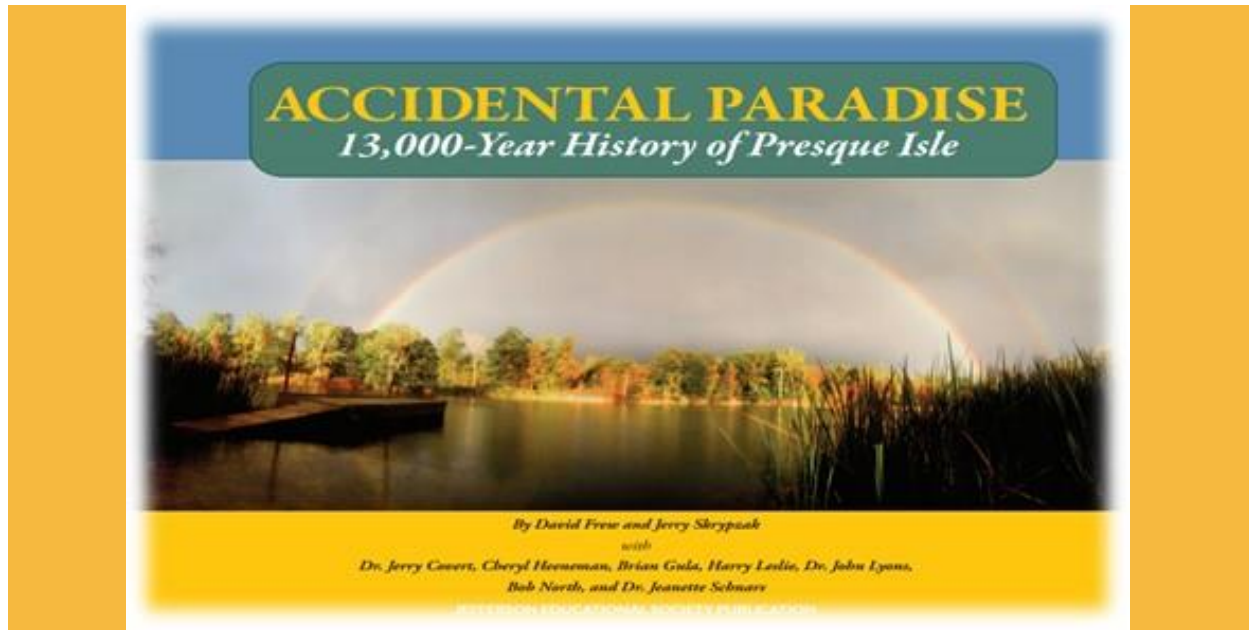
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Accidental Paradise

by Dr. David Frew and Jerry Skrypzak



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To watch "Accidental Paradise: Stories Behind The Stories" click [here](#).

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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