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Quick, Timely Reads On the Waterfront

'Kings for a Day' *Visiting the West Sixth Street Mansions*

By David Frew
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A lucky, unlucky woman is crowned "Queen for a Day."

One of the strangest radio (and later television) shows of the 1950s involved a contest in which women competed against each other to describe their lives as being the "most pathetic." While a stereotypical master of ceremonies did his best to crank up a live studio audience, several women took turns describing how awful their lives were. Sickness, horrible accidents, poverty, and other maladies were secrets of "success" for contestants who were goaded into telling their personal stories by host Jack Bailey. In a final insult to the contestants (as well as the audience), the winner was selected by an audience applause meter. The emcee

would summarize each contestant's tribulations near the end of the show and when he did the audience would vote by cheering.

The winning contestant was crowned "Queen for a Day" and placed in a velvet chair, where she was given a dozen long-stemmed roses as the emcee listed the amazing prizes that she would be receiving. A fancy dinner, a limousine ride, a hotel overnight, a vacuum cleaner, dishes, soap and much more.



With an audience applause total of only "2," this woman's story was probably not pathetic enough to win.

The unlucky losers were quickly ushered offstage while it was noted that they would each be receiving consolation prizes. There were the "lucky" ladies whose lives were not quite as pathetic as that of the "winner." Our mothers would be glued to the radio listening to this semi-sick drama as we kids laughed at it all. "We were better than that," we thought. Plus, we knew how to make ourselves into "Kings for a Day" without suffering the indignities of a national radio stage to narrate our terrible troubles – flunking history tests, having a heel fall off our shoe, stepping in dog poop or more.



The Watson-Curtze mansion is the anchor of Erie's West Sixth Street Historic District,

AKA Millionaires Row.

We could become “Kings for a Day” by simply walking east to the Mansion District, where our very own castle was the Watson-Curtze mansion, which at the time was Erie’s History Museum (now the central building on the Hagen History Center campus). The museum had free programs for kids in those days, and while we were somewhat less than “artsy,” we loved to visit and pretend that we were truly interested in the weekend arts and crafts programs. More exciting than the hours spent at tiny tables trying to paint butterflies and birds was the opportunity to wander about the building, imagining what life might have been like to be wealthy. We discovered servants’ quarters, an old elevator once used to carry guests to a ballroom, and a carriage house that held teams of horses. These accoutrements of wealth were all within a short walk.

Every once in a while, as a bonus, there was a kids’ film series. Using a creaky old projector and a small, weather-beaten, portable screen, program operators at the museum would run old black and white films for us kids and provide exciting and nutritious snacks. Red Kool-Aid and popcorn served with a side of really scary, ancient vampire films. What could have been better? We were being treated like rich kids. And if there had ever been a vampire in Erie, he probably hung out at a mansion just like the one that we were visiting.

The Watson-Curtze mansion, named after the building’s first two owners, H.F. Watson and Frederic Curtze, anchored the west end of the Sixth Street Mansion district, which has also been called “Millionaires Row” in more recent years. Watson and his wife Carrie Tracy Watson built it in 1891 in the years after the closing of the Erie Extension Canal that crossed West Sixth Street a few yards east of the building. The Watsons lived there until the Curtzes moved there in 1923.

The mansion district was born during the very early history of Erie at a time when the city’s commerce primarily centered on the waterfront and shipping. The most important community leaders at the time were the Reeds, who were Erie’s pioneer settlers from Connecticut. Seth Reed settled with his family in 1795 near the outflow of Mill Creek into Presque Isle Bay east of Parade Street and operated a trading post. He later moved to Walnut Creek (today’s Kearsarge) and left the operation of the trading post to his son Rufus.

It was Seth Reed’s grandson and Rufus’ son Charles who had the most significant impact on mid-19th century Erie. While his father, Rufus, was obsessed with buying, finishing, and operating the canal from Erie to Pittsburgh, Charles was quietly creating a steam-shipping empire and building Erie’s first railroads. As a wedding gift for his wife, Charles Reed built one of Erie’s biggest and best mansions, today’s Erie Club, which graces the corner of West Sixth and Peach streets. Over the next decades, Erie’s wealthy elite followed suit, erecting stately homes along West Sixth Street, which became the “place to be.”

The mansion district grew steadily, stretching west until development reached the canal, where it ended. The canal and its sailors were generally regarded as disease-spreaders, and many wealthy people were repelled by it to the point of building and using lake cottages during the summer. Thus, there were few homes near the location where it crossed Sixth Street. Beyond today's Chestnut Street was mostly farmland.

With West Sixth Street filling up, large stately homes also began to appear on the streets to the south, continuing all the way to West 21st Street, which became a secondary Victorian mansion district. But even as that was happening, West Sixth Street remained the preferred destination for new mansions. The 1871 closure of the canal created a new opportunity. Suddenly the West Sixth Street mansion district could be extended to the west. That was when Harrison Watson, an early local industrialist, commissioned a new Richardson Romanesque Mansion for his family at the corner of West Sixth and Chestnut (today's Watson-Curtze Mansion). Richardsonian architecture was the rage at the time and Watson used a Buffalo architectural firm (Green and Wicks) that specialized in the style to build his new home.

The new mansion helped to define Erie's now-famous "Millionaires Row." Since the creation of that building, the district has been bookended by the Reed Mansion (Erie Club) on the east, and the Watson-Curtze mansion on the west end. The grand buildings that stretch between those two defining buildings define a residential architectural portfolio that has delighted historians for decades. Countless people tour the Mansion District each year, studying the various styles of historic buildings that define West Sixth Street.

The only problems with the district's historic legacy have been associated with the passage of time. As the flight to the suburbs accelerated and realities of life in very old buildings became difficult, some of the mansions suffered. Not everyone is willing to live in an old building that suffers from the antiquities of steam heat, knob and tube wiring, tiny Victorian era closets and too few bathrooms. Slowly some of the wonderful old mansions were leveled and replaced with ugly modern buildings, chopped up into apartments, or converted into fraternity houses.

Then just as it was beginning to look as though Erie's mansion district was doomed, a savior appeared. Tom Hagen, chairman of Erie Insurance, began to take an active interest in West Sixth Street. Part of the reasons explaining his restoration activism was that he grew up spending a lot of time at his grandfather's house across the street from the museum and later decided to make it his personal mission to restore the district to its former glory. His work began at the Watson-Curtze Mansion complex, where he became involved in restoring the mansion, building new buildings, and eventually rehabilitating the building next door, the historic Wood-Morrison house. The restored Wood-Morrison house has become an integral part of the museum complex as did the old mule

barn behind it, which once served as the home of the animals that towed the canal boats.



Tom Hagen, in front of a historic lithograph showing the canal that crossed West Sixth Street

With the museum campus in the midst of a beautiful restoration, Hagen began to consider the near-by homes and one-by-one he began to buy and restore them. Hagen has been moving steadily through the district, rehabilitating one home at a time. As his beautification program has progressed, other building owners have been inspired to follow suit. Restoration is contagious. Slowly but surely the once glorious Mansion District is returning to its former glory.



The now restored Canal-Side Apartments, east of the Watson-Curtze mansion, were built in the former canal-tow path right-of-way



The Selden House was stripped of ugly coats of peeling paint and its brickwork restored as part of its preservation project.

These days a trip along West Sixth Street is as good or better than it was during the 1950s when my friends and I wandered along, wondering what it might have been like to live there during Erie's earliest days, and enjoying Saturdays at the Watson-Curtze Mansion. A few of the best old mansions have disappeared, but on balance Millionaires Row is better than ever. Anyone can be king or queen for a day. Just take a stroll along West Sixth Street and imagine the horse-drawn carriages.

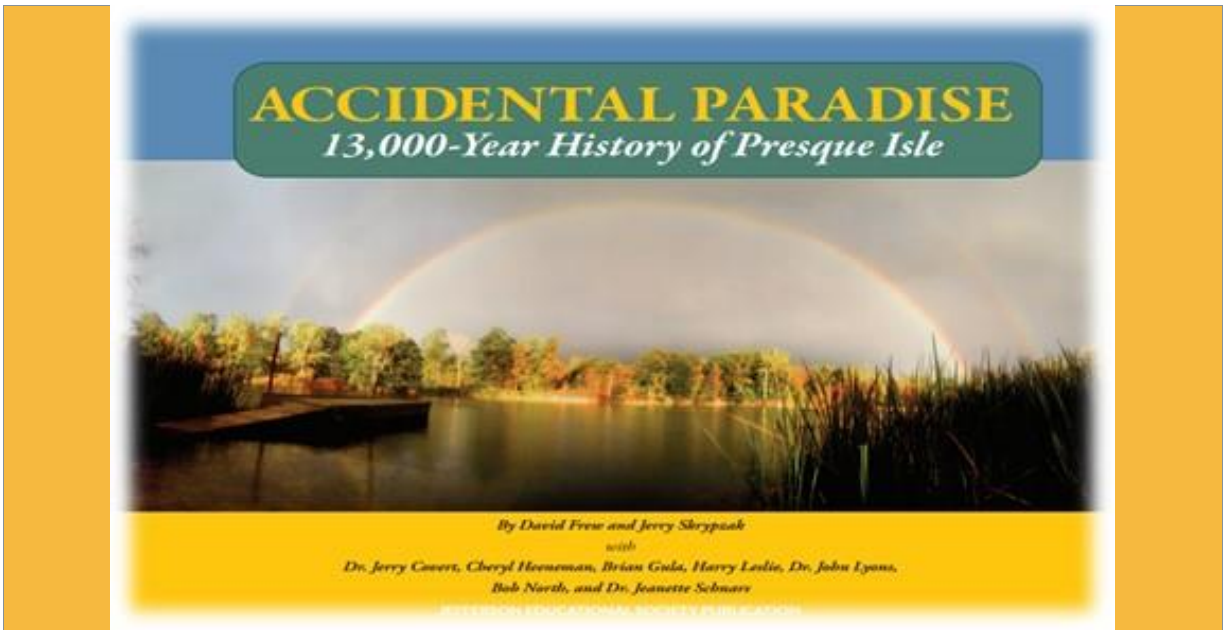
And thank you, Tom Hagen!

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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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