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# JEFFERSON

## EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

Quick, Timely Reads  
On the Waterfront

### Favorite Neighborhood Snack: Pepperoni Balls

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.*



*A plate of mouth-watering pepperoni balls*

Bayfront expeditions often required careful provisioning and our favorite 1950s-era, night-time supply posts were the neighborhood pizza shops. And there were several. In addition to offering pizzas and submarine sandwiches, they all sold our perennial favorite: pepperoni balls. Ordering a pizza took too long so the choice was

limited to either sandwiches or pepperoni balls. Submarine sandwiches were problematic. How do you split one sandwich three or four ways without fighting?

Pepperoni balls always seemed to be the very best alternative. Most of the pizza shops charged 25 cents each, or five for a dollar. Since we understood the power of a bargain, we always ordered in multiples of five. Another decided advantage was that pepperoni balls were almost always ready and warm. No waiting. The only problem was the arithmetic. How to devise order a number of five-pepperoni ball orders that could be equally divided by the size of the expeditionary party. For example, two Bay Rats could get two orders for only \$1 each (10 divided by two ... five each). But three Bay Rats could present a dicey math issue. Ten pepperoni balls divided by three. Hmm. Sounds like an irritating algebra problem.

Pepperoni balls, one of four iconic Erie foods (along with ox roast, sponge candy, and Greek hot dogs), can be traced to the commercial fishing industry. During the post-World War I era, the signature commercial fish species shifted from whitefish and cisco (herring), all large fish that were marketed whole, to blue pike and perch. For processors, this species change made fish filleting an important part of the business. In the history of Great Lakes commercial fishing, William Kolbe is generally credited with the introduction and popularity of filleting, an old European butchering technique that had previously been used for fine cuts of beef or pork. By the mid-1920s, fish filleting had spread across Lake Erie and into the northern Great Lakes, as well. Unlike modern filleting methods that usually remove the fish skin, original commercial filleting systems generally left the skin intact and used automatic de-scaling machines.

Each day when fish tugs arrived in the early afternoon after “pulling” fish from gill nets, a hurried production process began. When the tugs entered the harbor, they blew their steam whistles and each had a recognizably distinct sound. The whistles were a signal that sent dozens of women who lived near the waterfront on Erie’s east side to the particular processing houses that the fish tugs were going to. Individual whistle sounds signaled the processing houses that the women were to go to. As the tugs landed and unloaded, the ladies were there ready to receive and clean the fish. Any of the large fish, the few whitefish and cisco that were still being harvested, were separated and cleaned separately. Then the perch and blue pike were filleted. The women who were cleaning them were being paid by the “finished pound.”

In the history of freshwater commercial fishing, the art of filleting has generally been associated with Lake Erie and with the Kolbe Company in particular. But family patriarch William Kolbe had an idea of how to improve the fish delivery process. During the early 1920s, his youngest boy, Robert Kolbe, was sent to Rensselaer Polytechnic University in upstate New York with the specific mission of “inventing flash freezing.” The Kolbes had commercial fish processing businesses in both Erie and Port Dover, and William Kolbe understood that frozen

fillets would fetch high prices if they could be delivered to big-city markets, including New York and Chicago. Mild-tasting, freshwater fish could fetch a premium price in big-city markets. By his junior year at Rensselaer, Robert Kolbe had successfully developed a flash freezing process that he patented in both the United States and Canada. And by the 1930s, the Kolbes were freezing perch and blue pike fillets.

At the time, Rensselaer was considered the most advanced engineering and technology institution of the era. It was the “Stanford” of the time and a place where Robert Kolbe’s student colleagues included the inventor of television as well as the creator of the diode. It was big-time exposure for a kid from Port Dover, Ontario, where the Kolbe family lived.



*The flash of a razor-sharp knife and a chain mail glove characterized the typical filleting bench.*

The freezing process became a central feature for most of Erie’s fish processing houses. As soon as the fish cleaning ladies descended upon the processing houses, there was a wild flurry of activity. Perch and blue pike were filleted, flash frozen, and packed in ice-filled wooden crates for shipment. A railroad spur was extended to lower State Street so that the freshly cleaned and frozen fish could be sent to market as quickly as possible.

When the daily cleaning frenzy had ended and the fish were packed and sent away, processing house cleaning stations were littered with incredible piles of residual debris. Regardless of the skill and speed of the best fish cleaners, the cleaning process was always characterized by huge piles of scraps. And the scrap pieces of blue pike and perch, which would otherwise have been discarded as garbage, still contained large bits of fresh, tasty fish – pieces that did not warrant the time and effort that would have been required to include in the fillets, themselves, but that represented salvageable meat.



*Erie's Kolbe processing company with fish drying nets circa 1930*

Eventually, the ladies who were doing the filleting asked for permission to take some of the scrap pieces home with them. From the processing house perspective, they were saving the trouble of disposing of the fish parts. This process led to large bags of blue pike and perch scraps finding their way into the homes of clever women who began to experiment with creative uses of leftover fish that could be hand-picked from fish bones. One of the most exciting and tasty uses of these pieces was to imbed them in dough and bake or fry them. Suddenly a new product was born.

The result was the “fish ball,” a delicious baked or fried mouthful, anchored by a tasty piece of fresh fish. Eventually, the inventors of this lower eastside delicacy began to sell them to the ethnic bakeries that graced the neighborhood and fish balls became a wildly popular treat. They sold especially well on weekends when bakeries sold them along with other treats to neighbors after church services. All was well until the 1950s when the blue pike began to disappear. Suddenly, the popular doughy treat that had been anchored by pieces of fish (free cutting table leftovers) began to disappear. And, by the mid-1950s, it had become apparent that fish balls were as endangered as the blue pike.



*The decline and eventual extinction of the Lake Erie blue pike was responsible for the creation of pepperoni balls.*

What to do? In a spirit of true innovation, the bakeries responded. Not wanting to lose the revenue stream that had been associated with fish balls, bakers began to search for an alternative filling – one whose supply chain would not be as fragile. Using fish was out of the question. They were too valuable and far too seasonal.

The answer was a small, inexpensive meat product that was easily acquired and available year-round: pepperoni. By the late 1950s, the fish ball was all but forgotten, replaced by pepperoni balls.



*Local entrepreneur Tom Spaegel has helped keep Erie's pepperoni ball tradition alive by developing a national retail program that includes several products.*

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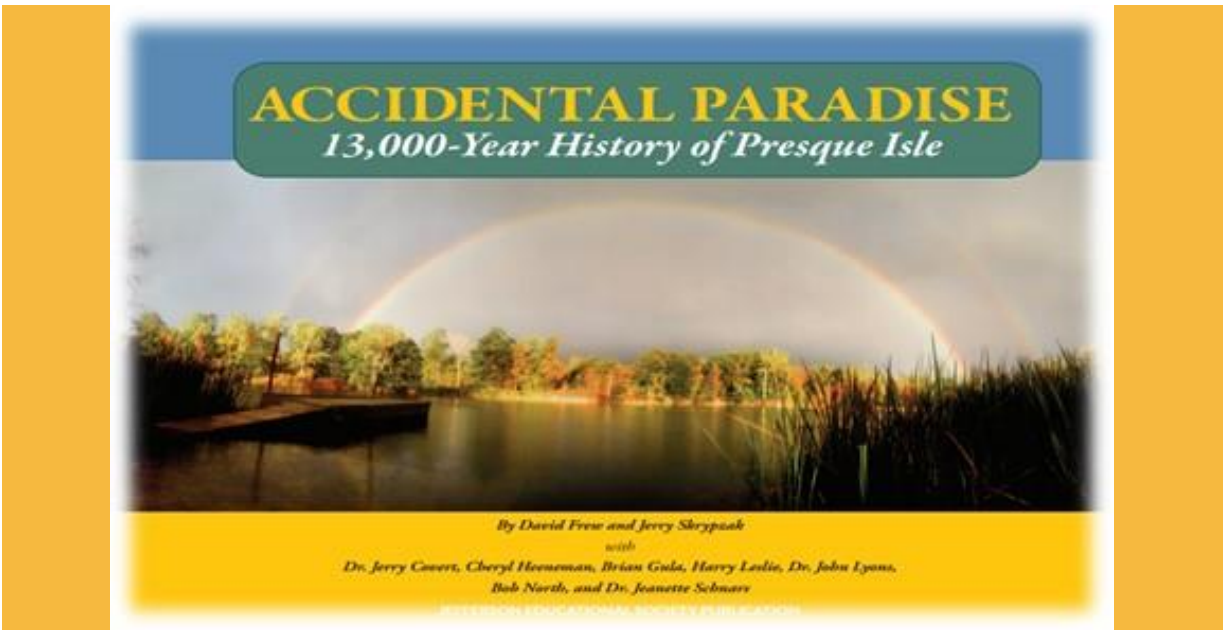
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***Accidental Paradise***  
*by Dr. David Frew and Jerry Skrypzak*



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The book, priced at **\$35 plus tax and shipping**, can be ordered now through the website sponsored by the TREC Foundation, [AccidentalParadise.com](http://AccidentalParadise.com).

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For more information, send an email to [aperino@TREC.org](mailto:aperino@TREC.org).

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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