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Quick, Timely Reads
On the Waterfront

Swimming Lessons: Strange 1950s Customs

By David Frew
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Strong Vincent High School has been replaced by a middle school.

One of the benefits of living in Erie during the 1950s was a free, year-round swimming program, seemingly designed to teach neighborhood kids how to swim and to be safe in and around the water. Promoters of the lesson-based program argued that since Erie was a “water city” it was important to protect its children from the dangers of drowning. For kids in my neighborhood the epicenter of this

swimming program was Strong Vincent High School, where boys and girls alternated days and times to use the pool for lessons. Summer sessions were divided by age and organized into two-year brackets with 9- and 10-year-olds in one group, 11- and 12-year-olds in another, etc.

Lessons began with big crowds of kids gathered outside at the school's back doors, waiting to be admitted. Once the doors opened there was a huge crush as the previous lesson group exited. Then the next group crammed its way into the locker room. Most of the "supervision" for the mobs of kids who were there for lessons was provided by high school swim team members who met us at the door and herded everyone into the locker room. From there we all began a mad rush to peel clothing off and find a dry place to "store" it until we were done. There were a few lockers but not enough for the crowd of swimmers, so we had to find creative places to stash precious outfits: dungarees and yellow-gray undershirts. Corners of the tile floor, benches, or tops of low-level lockers were some of the preferred nooks and crannies. As we were rushing to disrobe, the supervising swim team boys were yelling at us to hurry.

The big rush was needed to get everyone in and out of the mandated, pre-swimming pool shower. Everyone was required to shower before being admitted to the pool and as we filed into the actual pool an adult coach was standing at the end of the line to check. The apparent, metric for deciding if a kid had actually taken a shower seemed to be "wet hair." Boys with dry hair were sent back to the locker room for a second attempt at showering.

In retrospect the most astonishing aspect of this entire ritual, including the swim lessons themselves, was that the boys were all naked. In the buff! No swimsuits! Try not to visualize it. These days people who hear these stories are astounded. Their first instinct is to think that I am kidding when I describe no-suit days at the boys' pool lessons, but back then it was just the way it was. We were told that swimsuits could carry bacteria and that nudity was a health mandate. Older supervisors from the swim team were wearing Speedos, suits that were commonly worn during swim meets, but lesson kids were naked.

The next amazing part of the pool entry process was the "athlete's foot tub." A small, square vat of nasty looking liquid was placed at the head of the single file line that connected the locker room with the pool. Each kid was required to step into the tub with both feet, hesitating for a few seconds while whatever the mystery liquid was did its "chemical magic." Apparently, athlete's foot was a dastardly disease, the 1950s equivalent of COVID, since the foot dip was the only station worthy of supervision by one of the adult coaches. A coach was perpetually stationed at the footbath where his duty was to be absolutely sure that every student stepped into the square foot bath and remained there for the requisite number of seconds. Coach contributed one more annoying inspection at the footbath. If he spotted a suspicious foot, he examined it carefully. Suspicious?

Apparently, the footbath inspector-coach was checking for signs of toe fungus and if he spotted anything that seemed untoward, the owner of the foot was sent to languish in the bleachers with other “infected” kids. That “swimmer” would not be going into the water.

The set of boys who flunked the fungus test would be required to sit on a bench for the duration. At some time during the lesson one of the coaches would come by with a dispenser of athlete’s foot medicine that would be applied (usually using a bucket and a ladle) to the feet, and a pair of funny plastic socks that the kid would be required to wear for the duration. In later years it was determined that the athlete’s foot baths were totally dysfunctional. They were much more likely to spread the dreaded fungus than to prevent it.

Once in the pool, most of the time was dedicated to swimming lessons, learning to do sequential breathing, kick the legs and practice proper arm stroking motions. Once the components of a steady swimming stroke had been drilled extensively, students were shown how to push off from the side of the pool and float the width. Then we learned to float and kick. And, finally, to float, kick, and add arm strokes. Eventually, each student was required to swim lengths of the pool, which involved diving into the deep end (very scary) and successfully making his way to the shallow end. This daring maneuver was the crowning achievement for students and in combination with lap swimming speed sometimes led to a promotion to the next lesson level. Not every student was advanced and promotion to advanced levels was done without regard to age. Advanced lessons were smaller so that proper attention could be delivered to individual students. And while the preliminary lessons ended with “free swim” time during which kids were allowed splash around as they wished, upper-level lessons were no nonsense and entirely focused upon skills.

Advanced lessons included instruction in the competitive swimming strokes, including butterfly, breast and back. After teaching those advanced techniques there was a focus upon speed with coaches using stopwatches to time students as they swam lengths of the pool. Lap swimming eventually led to races in which heats of four swimmers competed against each other. For the competitive lap swimming (multiple lengths of the pool) kids were sorted into heats in which those with equivalent times competed against each other. Lap racing included instruction in how to use the starting blocks as well as flip-turning techniques.

At the time of the lessons, Strong Vincent had distinguished itself as a powerhouse swimming school. They perennially fielded one of the best swimming teams in the city and had managed to win several championships. And by the end of the advanced summer lessons, several new adult faces began to show up at the pool. The newcomers, obviously Strong Vincent varsity and JV coaches, wandered about the pool, watching the swimmers and asking questions: “What school are you attending now?” “What grade are you in?” “How old are you?” As the informal

interviewing process went on it became apparent that Strong Vincent was using the free community lessons as a feeder system for its athletic programs.

Being big for my age and a naturally talented swimmer I managed to catch the attention of Sam Cramer, legendary Strong Vincent coach. Near the end of the summer between my seventh- and eighth-grade years, three of us from the advanced swimming class were invited to a meeting at Gridley Middle School. Each of us was geographically eligible to attend Gridley as opposed to Strong Vincent, both of which included Grades seven through nine at the time. We three had a few things in common in addition to the location of our homes. We were big, reasonably good at swimming, and interested in playing football. At the meeting we were told that if we were to enroll at Gridley in the fall, we would be scheduled for a last period study hall that we could skip and walk to Strong Vincent where we could play on the JV Football Team as eighth graders. When we asked about the four years of eligibility we were told that rules regarding eighth grade kids on JV teams were “murky” and that we would probably be able to play for a total of five years if only four of them were on a varsity team.

It is noteworthy that we were invited to that Gridley meeting by ourselves. There were no parents. Does that suggest a significant shift in parenting? It is almost impossible for me to understand, from a modern perspective, how Strong Vincent coaches could have imagined that they could appeal directly to schoolboys, and for two of us that appeal included shifting to the public school system from a parochial school. Interestingly I now count six friends who removed themselves from Catholic schools and transferred to the public system between seventh and 11th grade. Long before the days of helicopter parenting.

The parents of the one neighborhood kid who followed Sam Cramer’s advice and played football for Strong Vincent as an eighth grader were eventually included in the decision. That kid was a generational, neighborhood talent. The strongest, and toughest kid that I knew. Not only did he play for the Strong Vincent JV team as a Gridley eighth grader, but he started and was clearly the best player on the team. He was moved to the varsity team as a ninth grader and began the season as a starting lineman. Sadly, he suffered a career-ending injury in the middle of his freshman year and never played again.



Sam Cramer

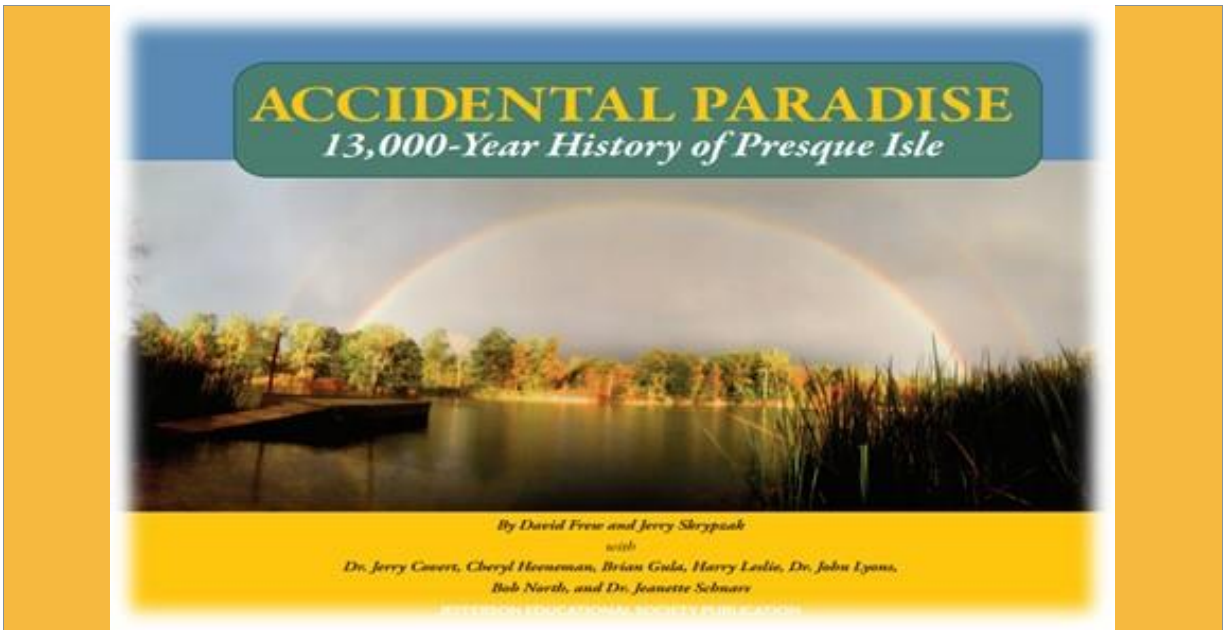
While I was flattered to have been invited to Gridley, to be recruited as a “young athlete,” I did not have whatever it might have taken, psychologically, to break away from the crowd where I was matriculating along with friends through Catholic grade school. I often wonder what might have happened if I had made the switch. It was my “road not traveled.”

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