

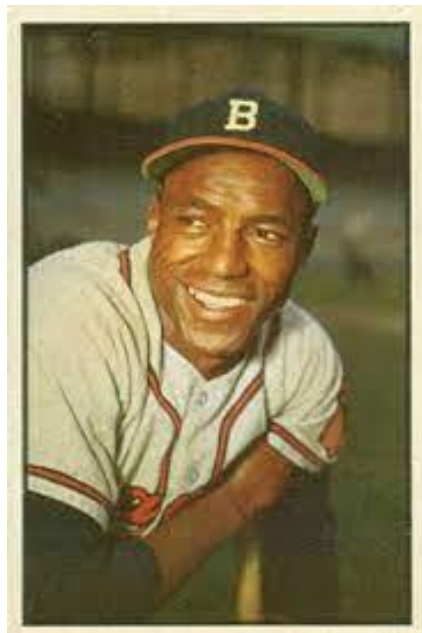
# JEFFERSON

EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

Quick, Timely Reads  
On the Waterfront

**Sam Jethroe**  
*Rock Star Appearances at Bayview Field*

**By David Frew**  
**February 2023**



*Sam Jethroe baseball card in a Boston Braves uniform from the early 1950s*

My friends and I attended many Bayview Field baseball games during the 1950s, enjoying the opportunity to watch relatively high-quality contests for free. During that period, however, the most exciting games were those that featured former major league star Sam Jethroe. Rumors of his likely appearances would ripple through the neighborhood and on those occasions, Bayview Field would have standing-room-only crowds. And Sam Jethroe never failed to disappoint. Sometimes when he played, he would arrive late and be inserted into the lineup after the third or fourth inning. The rumor was that he was sneaking away from his second shift GE job to play for a few innings.

No one was sure of his exact age. There were stories. While he had “officially” been born in 1922 according to early Major League Baseball records, which would have made him about 35 in 1957 when we were watching him, some insisted that he was actually seven or eight years older. If those rumors were correct, Sam Jethroe would have been 41 or older when we were watching him. Ancient by our standards or by typical Glenwood League age averages.

Regardless of his age at the time, Sam Jethroe played like a man among boys when he appeared at Bayview Field. He was the best hitter, a fearsome home run slammer and clearly the very fastest player either in the field or on the base paths. He could and would steal bases at any time. When he came to the plate he was greeted by whistles and cheers and when he made one of his patented, brilliant defensive plays he was loudly applauded. Spectators could not say enough good things about him or get over the discussions of how his big-league career had been cheated by fate.

Sam Jethroe was born sometime between 1915 and 1923 in Columbus, Mississippi and grew up in East St. Louis, Illinois. From 1942 to 1948, he played for Cincinnati, which became the Cleveland Buckeyes of the American Negro League, where he led the league in stolen bases three times. In 1944, he won the league batting title with an average of .344. In 1945, he hit .393 as his Cleveland Buckeye team won the Negro League championship. Jethroe broke into the majors in 1948 with the Brooklyn Dodgers’ AAA International League team in Montreal. In 1950, his contract was purchased by the Boston Braves of the National League, and he became rookie of the year. A switch hitter, he played center field. He hit .273 that year and led the league in stolen bases with 35, an accomplishment that earned him the nickname Sam “The Jet” Jethroe. In 1954, he was traded to Pittsburgh but only played in four games before being cut. His seemingly rapid decline was attributed to his age since it was already suspected that he was much older than “advertised.” He was also criticized for having a less than accurate throwing arm.

During an era that preceded multimillion-dollar baseball salaries, Jethroe, like most major leaguers, had to find an offseason job to make ends meet. His time with the Cleveland Buckeyes in the Negro Leagues had brought him to the attention of Erie entrepreneur Ernie Wright, who recruited Jethroe to work as a

greeter and celebrity resident at his infamous Pope Hotel at 11th and French streets. Later, Mr. Wright used his influence to help Sam Jethroe get a job at Erie's General Electric plant. Jethroe settled in Erie and eventually raised a family. After working for several years, he opened a steakhouse on Parade Street and eventually moved to the site of the former Arbiters Club near 18th and Parade.

In 1994, Jethroe sued Major League Baseball for discriminating against him by not providing a pension and won a small judgment. Sam Jethroe died at Erie's St. Vincent Hospital in 2001. He was survived by his wife, four daughters and 10 grandchildren.

---

*I had two personal connections to Sam Jethroe. Both involved the Downtown YMCA. The first was at the Men's Health Center, where he had a locker just a few feet from mine. Sam, who was always welcoming and friendly, became a friend and he invited me to visit his restaurant. I did so on several occasions. A second connection was created by Tom Lee, perennial lunchtime YMCA basketballer whose girth disguised his talent as a point guard and shooter. Tom, the uncle of current civic leader Gary Lee, recruited me to play for his Glenwood League team one day while we were playing basketball. Like several of my friends, I had played Boys Baseball at every level and presumed that I was pretty good at the game. But I was about to have a rude awakening. My role with Tom Lee's 1960 team was to sit on the bench, waiting for one of the regular players to be moved to the pitcher's mound, which opened up a position in the field. Only then did I enter the game. In a half-dozen contests, I had about 10 at bats and managed to get two hits. Not very impressive. Pitchers in the Glenwood League threw curveballs that really broke and fastballs that bordered on 95 miles per hour. Most also delivered "trick pitches" that I now realize were varieties of sliders.*

*In contemplating how good those Bayview players were (with respect to my skills) and recalling how much better Sam Jethroe was when I watched him play long after the end of his career, I realized how good "Sammy the Jet" really was. And how bad I was. I never played baseball again.*



*Sam Jethroe's grave*

Subscribe to JES Publications  
Mailing List!

Support JES | Donate

## ***Accidental Paradise Available at TREC!***

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

### **ACCIDENTAL PARADISE** *13,000-Year History of Presque Isle*



*By David Frew and Jerry Skrypzak*

*with*

*Dr. Jerry Covert, Cheryl Heeneman, Brian Gula, Harry Leslie, Dr. John Lyons,  
Bob North, and Dr. Jeanette Schwarz*

www.trec.org/pubs/jespublications

---

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](http://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](http://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@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.*



## In Case You Missed It

[Be Well | How Do You Measure Up?](#) written by health and wellness expert **Debbie DeAngelo**

[Book Notes #130 | Happy Groundhog Day!](#) written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence **Dr. Andrew Roth**

[Andrew Carnegie's Gift: Erie Won by Losing](#) written by Jefferson  
Scholar-in-Residence **Dr. David Frew**

Jefferson Educational Society | [jeserie.org](http://jeserie.org)

