

Quick, Timely Reads

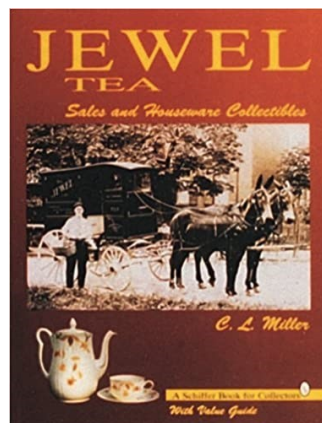
Reading in the Time of Coronavirus

On the Waterfront

The Jewel Tea Man Bay Rats Had Their Own Amazon Prime, Starbucks

By David Frew
March 2021

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.



Decades before Amazon Prime trucks, coffee bars, and baristas, my neighborhood was blessed to have a “Jewel Tea Man.” He came several times per week to deliver orders of everything from coffee and tea to general household supplies. As he made his rounds, he took orders for his next neighborhood visit. Customers placed orders by filling out order sheets for his next visit.

The Jewel Tea Man originated in Chicago in 1901 when Frank Skiff decided to improve upon the logistical failures of the India Tea Company. At a time when both brewed coffee and tea and were becoming enormously popular, Skiff,

who had just moved to Chicago, seized upon a classic marketing opportunity to deliver both products directly to consumers. Focusing upon personal relationships and service, he began to sell door-to-door, offering coffee and tea and other household staples. India Tea, the major seller of those products, was too large and ponderous to respond quickly to customer demand and by the time Skiff began selling they had developed a negative reputation by allowing products to sit in warehouses for months and become stale.

Skiff began with a rented horse and wagon, which was an expedient way for him to get into business since Chicago store rentals were so high. The son of an Iowa grocer, Skiff understood the business and had learned invaluable lessons of customer service from his father, such as “offer personalized service and always ask for customer feedback.” As he built his customer delivery base, he always asked what additional products his customers “needed” and then reliably delivered them a few days later. During an era when few people had automobiles and there were no supermarkets, his home delivery service was welcomed in city neighborhoods, and the fresh coffee and tea that he delivered was much better tasting and far less expensive than similar products at small local grocery stores.

The business grew exponentially from simple word-of-mouth advertising. In 1902, he responded to increasing demand by partnering with his brother-in-law and opened six new delivery routes. By 1915, Skiff had 850 routes as they expanded into the Chicago suburbs. After a few business bumps during World War I, volume accelerated geometrically and, by 1950, they had almost 2,000 routes and had expanded into 45 states, mostly operating in small to medium cities as well as the suburbs.

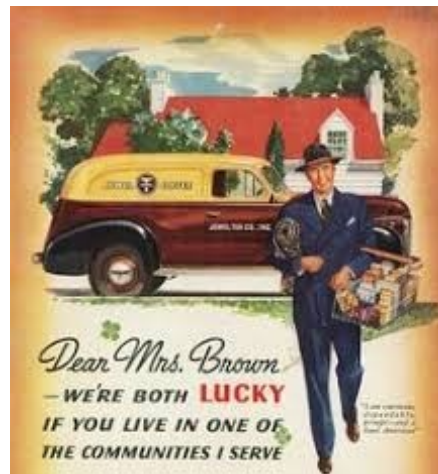
The business model began with home delivery of coffee and tea, combined with friendly, personable service and good prices. Most important, Skiff delivered fresh products unlike the India Tea Company, which often allowed bags of raw coffee and tea to languish in its warehouses for months before moving it to customers. As volume grew, Skiff shifted from operating the door-to-door sales to being a franchise owner and distributor. He built a large headquarters building in the Chicago suburbs, where prices were reasonable, and added a catalogue that was distributed to customers. The headquarters building contained huge roasting machines that assured the freshest possible coffee and tea.

The distinguishing aspect of Jewel Tea, however, was a system of “premiums.” For every dollar that a customer spent at Jewel Tea, he or she received a coupon, which could be exchanged for special prizes that were listed in the Jewel Catalogue. Skiff developed a partner relationship with Hull China and designed a special pattern that was molded into dishes, cups, and companion pieces like servers, pitchers, and platters. Jewel Tea’s recognizable chinaware pattern was called “Autumn Leaves.”



A Jewel Tea bowl features the Autumn Leaves pattern. Jewel china has become a collectable.

During the 1930s and 1940s, Jewel Tea customers began looking forward to the arrival of the Jewel Tea Man when he brought “free” dishes and other premiums with their orders. The premium program helped to increase business as customers purchased more and more products so that they could complete their dish sets and/or augment them with serving accessories. As this was happening, Jewel trucks increased in size and the catalog of available products grew. Jewel Tea never sold perishable products but systematically expanded its offerings into household staples, including flour, baking soda, sugar, and cleaning supplies.



A Jewel route owner-operator arrives with a sales kit.

Taking advantage of the growth of “Home Economics” as an academic discipline offered by land grant universities, Skiff added a new division in the 1920s. He hired a University of Illinois graduate, Mary Dunbar, to be in charge of Jewel’s Home Economics Division. Dunbar began the regular publication of Jewel Tea cookbooks that featured recipes, which were cleverly dependent upon Jewel products, including flour, sugar, and baking powder. In addition to recipes, Dunbar’s books included suggestions for storing staples and for saving money in ways that involved food preparation. The recipe books were given as gifts as they were episodically released.



Mary Dunbar's Cookbooks have become collectables.

Societal shifts after World War II brought three significant changes to Jewel Tea. (1) Big cities like Chicago became increasingly difficult to service using door-to-door marketing systems. Streets were crowded, traffic became problematic, and inner-city residents shifted away from middle class residents able to purchase Jewel products. Previous residents were replaced by people who were not interested in Jewel products or its premium gifts programs as Jewel's old customers began to move "out" to the suburbs. Jewel responded to that demographic change by focusing its sales in small towns and suburbs. (2) Sears and other large, national retailers drove new interest in catalog sales, and Jewel responded by shifting its attention away from door-to-door sales and toward catalog retailing. (3) People were buying cars and driving to the supermarkets that were beginning to appear throughout America. Sensing this important market shift, Jewel began to open its own stores, encouraging customers to travel to them instead of delivering directly to consumers. The new Jewel stores featured the same old premium programs using the reliable Autumn Leaves dishes and accessories. The dishes were displayed at Jewel stores and customers were encouraged to use combinations of coupons and actual cash to purchase the long sought-after china pieces. That shift added a new, and highly profitable, nonperishable product line to Jewel stores and helped to differentiate them from other retail supermarkets.



A Jewel Tea catalog circa 1940

As market shifts were driving the reengineering of the Jewel Tea

Company, a new legal issue emerged. A small Wyoming town named Green River passed a seemingly innocuous local ordinance against door-to-door sales in 1931. Outraged at the threat to their local business, the Fuller Brush Company (a story for a later article) challenged the legality of the town ordinance and propelled its legal fight all the way up through the court system until the Supreme Court upheld the rights of the town of Green River. Following that ruling as the 1930s and 1940s continued, an increasing number of American communities enacted their own “Green River Ordinances,” making it impossible for Jewel to continue operating in many of their markets. The irony of these new ordinances was that large urban centers did not have them, but unfortunately for Jewel, it learned it was impossible to operate inside big cities. The company was “stuck.”



The neighborhood Jewel Tea Man works from one of the latter-day, large delivery trucks.

In response, Jewel moved more directly into the retail supermarket business by purchasing several Chicago area Loblaws stores and changing their name to the Jewel Grocery Company. By the early 1950s, it owned more than 300 stores and its retail store business had become far more profitable than the original door-to-door division, prompting the move to a new headquarters building in downtown Chicago. Eventually, Jewel sold its surviving delivery routes to its employees and abandoned that part of its business, except for continuing to supply the new independent route owners. The remaining Jewel routes were located in small towns and suburbs where Green River Ordinances had not been established or Jewel managed to earn exceptions from individual city councils. The shift to owner-operated Jewel routes precipitated a shift in the selling approach of the individual route owners. The neighborhood Jewel Tea Men, recognizing that point-of-sale customers were the best opportunity to grow revenue (and profits), began carrying sales kits that featured promotional products. When the Jewel Tea Man made his regular deliveries, customers were invited to shop from the products that were featured in the sales kit. Drivers also shifted to larger delivery trucks, in which they carried sales kit items as well as popular staple products. If a customer needed a bag of flour or sugar, he would return to his truck and fetch needed items immediately. This sales approach helped balance the reality that as time passed the typical Jewel route had fewer individual customers, each of whom was spending more. Some of the most profitable owner-operated routes continued into the 1980s.



The current Jewel Osco store in Naperville, Illinois

Twenty years ago, my daughter moved to the upscale Chicago suburb of Naperville, Illinois. When we visited for the first time, we offered to go shopping and learned that her favorite store was Jewel-Osco. Since wife Mary Ann and I had both experienced the “Jewel Tea Man” as children, we immediately wondered if there could be a connection. And there was! The Jewel Grocery Company merged with Osco Pharmaceutical Company in the 1980s as Jewel was expanding into the store-based grocery business. The Wegmans or Giant Eagle-like chain that emerged as Jewel-Osco and currently inhabits the Chicago suburbs is a direct descendant of the old Jewel Tea Man. But without the venerable Autumn Leaves dishes.



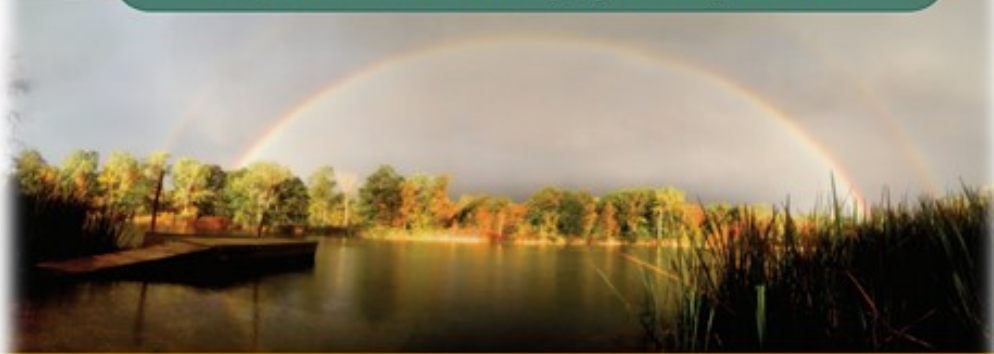
As a lasting homage to the importance of the Jewel Tea Man, toy companies began producing scale models.

Accidental Paradise Available at TREC

Accidental Paradise
by Dr. David Frew and Jerry Skrypzak

ACCIDENTAL PARADISE

13,000-Year History of Presque Isle



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with

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The much-anticipated new book on Presque Isle 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.

The book, priced at **\$35 plus tax and shipping**, can be ordered now through the website sponsored by the TREC Foundation, 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 *Wednesday through Sunday from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.*

For more information, send an email to aperino@TREC.org.

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

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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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