

## Quick, Timely Reads

*Reading in the Time of Coronavirus*  
On the Waterfront

### Train Wars: *American Flyer, Lionel, and Marx*

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 a new series of articles for the Jefferson, the retired professor takes note of life in and around the water.*



*What could be more 1950s-Holiday-Iconic than an electric train circling the family Christmas tree?*

It was a Christmas tradition. Each year our family acquired a Christmas tree, decorated it, and then assembled an elaborate electric train layout underneath it.

For weeks before the actual arrival of Santa we would regularly plug in the transformer that electrified the tracks that circled the tree and send a pre-World War II era scale-model American Flyer locomotive chugging around it. Our train had a compartment that held grease pellets, which made actual smoke come from its smokestacks as it made realistic chugging sounds. For dramatic effect, the train had a headlight that illuminated the tracks as well as the virtual city of plastic, snap-together buildings that populated the area beneath the tree. My father had purchased the train set in 1942 for my twin brothers who died at birth, so our layout was older than most.



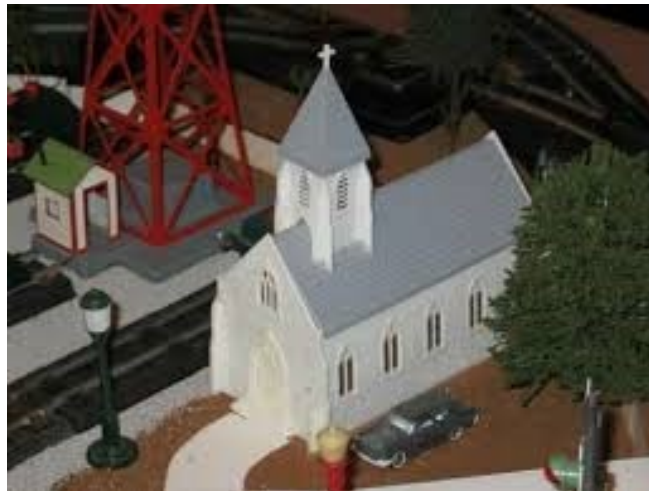
*My American Flyer locomotive looked just like this model.*

We were not the only family with an electric train circling a Christmas tree. Almost every one of my friends had a train, as well, but few of them had American Flyers. Most had Lionel sets, especially families with older boys, since the Lionel Company had been in business and successful longer than American Flyer. Lionel began in New York City in 1900 and achieved amazing growth and market dominance between the world wars. American Flyer began in Chicago just a few years later but did not become successful until later.

The distinguishing difference between the two brands was that Lionel trains ran on three-rail tracks, while American Flyers used more realistic two-rail tracks. Both were approximately the same size, O Gauge. And both used "Plasticville" buildings to create cityscapes that included churches, homes, commercial buildings, and various passenger and freight stations, as well as bridges, streetlights, billboards, and work buildings. Some Plasticville accessories could be connected to the tracks so they would light up.



*Typical Plasticville accessories*



*My personal favorite was the Plasticville Presbyterian Church. Note the authentic Victorian window shapes.*

As the holiday season approached, two powerful marketing forces inspired young boys in Erie, Pennsylvania to spend money on electric train layouts: (1) Electric train television shows and (2) the Boston Store. Both American Flyer and Lionel sponsored TV shows during the run-up to Christmas. These were 1950s era infomercials – thinly veiled, 30-minute advertisements for electric trains and equipment. Naturally, the layouts featured on the shows were permanent. Plywood bases allowed TV train “engineers” to fasten the tracks so they didn’t pull apart like they did at my house, where they were precariously positioned on a room-sized carpet. The professional TV layouts featured mountains with tunnels that the tracks disappeared into, bridges that crossed lakes and rivers with actual water, city streets with lighted lamp posts, and houses with lawns. Television trains would pull into working stations, where little men would load them with various products, coal hoppers that dumped phony coal into train cars, and plastic trees that lined both the streets and the mountains in the background.

Inevitably, the layouts on television would have three or four trains running in various directions, crossing each other on bridges or encountering switches where they changed from one track to another. There were various kinds of trains, as well. Freight trains, passenger trains, and the occasional electric streetcar, all chugging back and forth.



*The Boston Store, Erie's shopping mecca*

The most exciting electric train experience, however, was a visit to the Boston Store in the heart of Erie's downtown. Back in the pre-mall days, Erie's Boston Store was an amazing experience that began with entering the huge retail space and either taking the escalator up to the Toy Department, or using one of the elevators situated on the north side of the building. Not just any elevators. They were staffed by uniformed elevator operators trained to announce each floor's shopping departments when they opened the doors. "Fourth floor: Furniture, dry goods, and household appliances!" But the very most exciting Boston Store elevator stop was "Fifth Floor: Toys, Santa Claus, and Electric Trains."

Each holiday season, the Boston Store's Toy Department would feature an enormous train layout and, through clever organizational magic, half of the elevated train deck display would exclusively be dedicated to American Flyer, while the other half would feature Lionel. Beginning at some magical hour in the afternoon, the layout "engineers," who wore official railroading caps, began to run the trains. From time to time, they would turn off all the overhead lights so that train headlights, as well as the individual lights in the train layout, would illuminate the magical world of the trains. It was awe-inspiring for a kid as well as an aspirational vision of what a home layout could look like, if a person had enough money and a place to create a permanent plywood deck. One of the peripheral attractions at the Boston Store's holiday train display was the opportunity to pick up American Flyer or Lionel catalogues, which listed all of the amazing accessories, including Plasticville stuff, that wonderful virtual city.





*This typical department store train display was at Macy's in New York.*

A few of the neighborhood kids had Marx electric trains. We felt sorry for them (a huge mistake that I would learn about later). Marx trains seemed “cheaper” and less authentic than American Flyer or Lionel. Some were made from stamped tin sheets and had to be cut out and assembled using tabs and slots. They ran on the same three-rail tracks that Lionel used, but they were less stable and weighed less than the traditional brands. Marx was made locally. Their entire electric train line was originally manufactured in nearby Girard. Unlike Lionel and American Flyer trains, which were only available at high-end department stores or hobby shops, Marx trains were sold everywhere, including Sears.



*A typical Marx train set usually came complete in one box.*

Unlike American Flyer and Lionel, which marketed electric trains as starter items designed to motivate customers to add more of everything -- track, cars, and accessories -- Marx trains were promoted as “complete” train layouts. Everything needed came in one box. That strategy was directed toward the low-end consumers who were attracted to the Marx brand. The Marx trains were originally called the Joy Line when they were produced in Girard.

Louis Marx was a New York distributor who understood the opportunity to exploit the low end of the Lionel-American Flyer market when he purchased the company in 1935. He was already established in Erie when he purchased the Girard electric train company that year. In 1921, he had purchased a toy company on West 18th Street, which he used to manufacture the tin toys that were popular in East Coast cities. He liked Erie's non-union environment, which helped him to decide to expand here. The most popular toy built at the 18th Street company was a tin monkey that climbed up and down a wooden stick, thus the Erie factory was called the “monkey works.”

Because of his diversification, Louis Marx approached the electric train market in a fundamentally different way from American Flyer or Lionel. And that diversity helped him outlast the train-only companies, which began to flounder in the 1960s as kids became more interested in cars than trains. By the late 1960s, both American Flyer and Lionel had bounced through bankruptcies, takeovers, and mergers and had reinvented themselves several times. But the era of model trains, for all but mature collectors of vintage equipment, had ended. Meanwhile, Marx had shifted production toward exciting new plastic products and found new success with toys like Rock'em, Sock'em Robots and Big Wheel.



*Rock'em, Sock'em Robots were enormously popular during the 1960s.*

When my son graduated with his MBA from Ohio University in 1990, he landed an exciting job in the marketing department at Tyco (matchbox cars). He had seen the Tom Hanks' movie, "Toy Story," and decided that working in that industry would be a life's dream. Midway through his first year at Tyco, he invited me to the opening of Toy Fair, the industry's trade show in Manhattan. With all the major toy companies in attendance, there was a celebration of the year's inductees to the Toy Hall of Fame on the first day.

I sat through the ceremony with my son and his colleagues and, after the induction, I wandered to the front of the hall to look at the list of inductees. There, to my shock and dismay, was the name Louis Marx. Mr. Marx was one of the most celebrated members of the industry. He had achieved "rock star" status for his innovations, adaptations, and strategies, and was the first inductee in the Toy Hall of Fame. The placard that described his contributions characterized him as the "Henry Ford" of the toy industry.



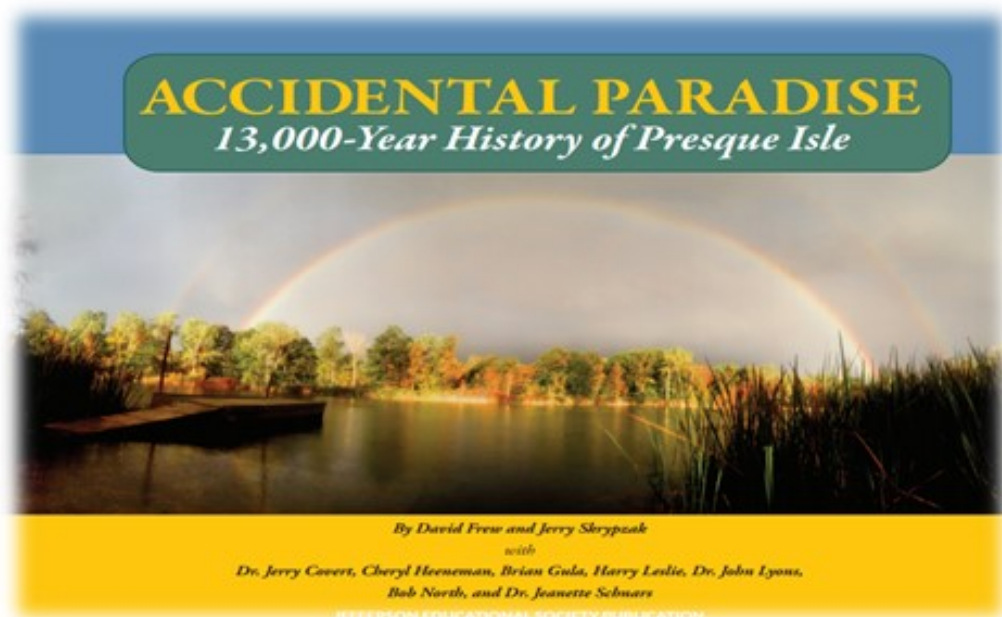
Years later, I met Bud Kovacs at the Erie County Historical Society. Bud was one of the most amazing people I have ever known. In addition to being a creative and talented designer, Bud was a committed Marx toy collector and had sponsored an exhibit at the State Street History Center. One day, he walked me through the exhibit, pointing out some of the special toys that were on display. When I proudly mentioned that I still had my 1942 American Flyer train set he chuckled, pointed to a vintage Marx train in a display case, and revealed its approximate value. That was when I realized that we should not have been making fun of friends who had Marx train sets!

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## Newly Published JES Book Available Now!

### *Accidental Paradise*

*by Dr. David Frew and Jerry Skrypzak*



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 exclusively through the end of the year 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 *Monday through Friday from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.*

Books also will be available in January at other locations, including the Jefferson Educational Society. 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 an emeritus professor at Gannon University, where 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

['Twas the night before Christmas...](#) written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence Dr. Andrew Roth

[New Book on Presque Isle Belongs in Every Home](#) written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence Dr. Andrew Roth

[Neighborhood Bars and Clubs: Where Were Our Dads from 3:30 to 6?](#) written by prolific author, historian, and Jefferson presenter, Dr. David Frew.

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